



Street children sleep on a veranda in Kampala on Christmas Day last year. PHOTO/IBRAHIM KAVUMA

Street children: A problem that simply won't go away

Many children leave home not in rebellion but in response to conditions they can no longer endure—abuse, neglect, hunger, or loss.

BY MUDANGHA KOLYANGHA

At sunrise, the city stretches awake—shops roll open, taxis honk into motion, and sidewalks begin to fill. Among the early risers are children. Not in uniforms, heading to school, but in worn-out clothes, clutching bottles, scraps, or nothing at all.

For them, the street is not a shortcut or a playground. It is home. Their journeys here are rarely simple. Behind every child on the pavement is a story that began somewhere else—often in a place that was meant to be safe. For 13-year-old Musa [name changed], the turning point came quietly. What began as occasional arguments at home slowly turned into a daily conflict. Food became scarce, and school became a luxury. One night, after a violent confrontation, he walked out and never returned.

Musa's story is not unusual. Many children leave home not in rebellion but in response to conditions they can no longer endure—abuse, neglect, hunger, or loss. A great deal of them end up being caught in the crosshairs and drive crime in the country, either wittingly or unwittingly. The 2025 Annual Crime Report tallied 8,064 child-related offences. While this represented a 14.3 percent drop from the 9,408 cases registered in 2024, the general consensus is that there is work to be done. Musa's case of child disappearing/missing is probably among the 2,092 cases reported in 2025. In 2024, there were 2,237 cases reported.

The previous years in 2023 (2,208) and 2022 (2,530) also managed to breach the 2,000 mark.

In harm's way

The 2005 Annual Crime Report noted year-on-year decreases in child-related crimes of child neglect (3,023 from 3,663); child disappearing/missing (2,092 from 2,237); child desertion (1,205 from 1,597); and child abuse/torture (710 from 787). Drops were also registered in child trafficking (555 from 597); child abduction/kidnap (118 from 159); and abortion (47 from 68). There were, however, marginal increases in child stealing (263 from 252) and infanticide (51 from 48).

"North Kyoga registered the highest number of child-related offences in 2025, with 682 cases, followed by KMP North with 662, Wamala with 461, Elgon with 396 and KMP South with 371.

At the district/divisional level, Busia registered the highest number of child-related offences with 282, followed by Mityana with 273, Jinja with 219, Old Kampala Division with 212, and Hoima Central Division with 172," the 2025 Annual Crime Report discloses, while describing the distribution of the offences by region and district.

Street children contribute significantly to crime in Uganda through a toxic mix of survival-driven desperation, exploitation by adult criminal syndicates, and social marginalisation. The children end up on the streets through a number of ways.

There are those, like Musa, who choose to disappear. Some lose parents and find themselves passed between relatives who cannot afford another mouth to feed. Others are pushed out by step-parents or guardians struggling under economic strain. What remains is leaving home is rarely a choice made lightly.

In many households, poverty doesn't arrive dramatically—it settles in slowly, tightening its grip over time, meals shrink, and school fees go unpaid. For some families, sending a child to the city feels like a desperate strategy rather than abandonment. The hope is simple: maybe the child will find work, earn money, and survive better than they could at home. The reality, however, waiting in the city or urban settings is usually far harsher than imagined.

Not what it seems

Cities are known to carry an image of opportunity. Yet without education, connections, or protection, the city quickly becomes overwhelming. What begins as a search for work often turns into days of wandering, nights without shelter, and the slow realisation that survival itself is a full-time struggle.

Some children start with small tasks—washing cars, carrying loads, collecting scrap. Others turn to begging. Over time, the line between temporary hardship and permanent street life begins to blur.

Ironically, many children who leave broken homes find a form of belonging on the streets. Groups form—small, informal "families" bound not by blood, but by shared experience. The older children teach younger ones how to survive: where to find food, which areas are safer, how to avoid trouble. These street networks can expose children to drugs, petty crime, and exploitation. What begins as support can evolve into dependency on harmful coping mechanisms.

To the public, street children are often seen only passing—asking for money, darting through traffic, sleeping in corners. What remains unseen are the daily risks they face, hunger is constant, illness goes untreated, and violence—whether from peers, authorities, or strangers—is an ever-present threat. Girls, in particular, face heightened vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

Cases of defilement registered in 2025 were 10,492, down from 12,312 the previous year. Aggravated defilement cases in 2025 totalled 3,473.

"Out of these, 4,886 cases of defilement were taken to court, 713 secured convictions, 27 acquitted, 355 dismissed and 3,791 are still pending in court, 1,932 were not proceeded with, while

3,674 cases are still under inquiry. A total of 4,999 suspects of defilement were arrested and charged in court, out of whom 740 were convicted, 332 discharged, 27 acquitted, 3,900 are under-going trial, and 332 were discharged," the 2025 Annual Crime Report reveals, adding that the victims of defilement constituted 10,328 female juveniles, 128 male juveniles and 37 female adults.

The beat goes on

As a result, many street children have learned to develop sharp survival instincts in order to navigate a world that offers them little protection. Experts say efforts to address street childhood often focus on removing children from the street, while well-intentioned, they overlook the deeper reasons children left home in the first place. If poverty, violence, or neglect remain unchanged, returning a child home can, the experts contend, feel like sending them back to the very conditions they escaped.

The cycle continues, not because children resist help, but because the help does not always reach the root of the problem. It is easy to speak of "rising number" but numbers flatten reality.

"Poverty and family disintegration are often overlooked," Mr Damon Wamala, head of the Uganda Child Rights NGO Network, tells *Weekend Monitor*.

Each child carries a story shaped by loss, survival, and difficult choices. Some dream of returning to school. Others hope to reunite with family under better circumstances. Their presence on the streets is not just a personal tragedy. It reflects, Mr Wamala opines, wider social fractures: economic inequality, gaps in child protection, and communities under strain.

"Breaking the cycle of street childhood requires more than short-term solutions. It calls for a deeper, more sustained approach through strengthening families so children are not forced to leave, making education accessible and affordable and also providing safe shelters and long-term rehabilitation," he says.

"Most importantly, it requires listening—to understand not just where these children are, but how they got there," he adds.

Sticky issue

Globally, the scale is staggering. Estimates suggest there are more than 150 million street-connected children worldwide, living and working in urban centres under harsh and often dangerous conditions.

Closer to home, Uganda has seen a steady rise. Reports estimate around 15,999 street children across major towns, with thousands concentrated in Kampala alone. In one survey, nearly 38 percent of street children cited poverty and hunger as the main cause.

"These children don't just come from Karamoja, as many may think; they are from different regions. Many flee abuse at home, only to be absorbed into street gangs. These gangs become their families, with traffickers taking the role of caregivers while exploiting them," Mr Wamala says.

The Elgon Police spokesperson, Mr Rogers Taitika, explains that the trend of increasing numbers of street children on various urban streets is mainly attributed to family breakdown.

Mr Shafiq Matanda, an official from the Gender ministry, under the Department of Child and Family Protection, challenges leaders at different levels to decisively address the rising crisis.

"The number of children coming on the streets is becoming a serious concern, and this is attributed to a breakdown in families," he says.

14%

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