

Street Children and Family Life

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This article discusses street children who live in Colombia, South America. The process for becoming a gamine, or abandoned child, is explained, as well as the economic and parental rejection factors which result in child abuse and subsequent street life. A successful rehabilitation program is described, along with implications for family life professionals in the U.S.

The Colombian term for runaway or abandoned children who live on their own and on the street is gamine. There are an estimated 5,000 gamines alone in Bogota, the capital of Colombia. They are mostly boys, and they live in small groups, controlling a territory where they sleep at night under cartons or sheets of plastic. They work hard each day, attempting to survive, by begging or stealing (Bikel, 1979). In a country with no real social welfare program, this is a significant concern.

Becoming a Gamine

There are different types of gamines, and a boy may sometimes progress from one category to the next. (1) Pregamine is a boy still lives at home but his mother works and is seldom there. So after school he spends his time on the street, occasionally staying away from home for two or three days at a time. (2) The Neighborhood Gamine is a boy who lives in the street but has not left the general area of his home and may visit his family from time to time. (3) The Street Gamine, the true gamine, is one who has left his home and is learning to live by stealing. (4) The Pre-delinquent is an older boy, after about age 14, who either will become a marginal unskilled worker (selling lottery tickets, etc.) or will become part of organized crime, stealing with other boys and/or involved in drug use and sales (de Nicolo et al., 1981).

Many gamines beg in the streets and on buses, and, with implied threats of violence, will intimidate the passerby into giving them some money. Ten pesos is considered the minimum that a gamine will accept, as that will buy a piece of bread (El Espacio, 1987).

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Key Words: Children, child abuse, abandonment

Why They Leave Home

But why do the boys leave their homes? There are many suggested possibilities: lack of love at home, child abuse, neglect of basic needs due to parental unemployment, too much free time and t.v., pornography, escaping overwork by parents for the freedom of the streets, etc. (de Nicolo, 1987). There is some truth in all of these ideas, but parental rejection is the chief cause, and the family dynamics are based on the stresses of economic poverty.

The gamine is the product of poverty, due to high unemployment, which leads to a rupture of the family (Bikel, 1979). To quote de Nicolo (1987), "Due to poverty it is impossible to hold the family together. He is a summary of the anarchy of the world today."

The predominate pattern resulting in a gamine appears to be as follows: A young man moves from the country to the city in search of a better life. But he does not find it. The Colombian economy is structured so that unemployment is consistently and extremely high, creating widespread poverty. He does fall in love with a young lady, and they get married. The husband cannot find work, becomes depressed, acts irresponsibly and eventually leaves his wife and children. They can have sex, but they cannot eat (de Nicolo, 1987).

Another man moves in with the childrens' mother. This "stepfather" (informally so, as divorce and remarriage are rare in Colombia) is not interested in the fruit of a previous union and pushes the boys away, generally when they are 8-12 years old. Almost half (47%) of all street urchins have stepfathers. The child feels rejected and leaves for the street. The mother, because she fears her new husband, does not try to bring her sons back (Bikel, 1979).

Examples of Abuse

The following interview with some gamine children illustrates the pattern of rejection and abuse:

Daniel, how old are you? Twelve.

Umberto? Fourteen

Enrique? I was just nine.

Daniel, when did you leave your house? Four years ago.

Why? Because my stepfather beat me a lot. He came home drunk and threw me in the well, because my mother complained that we didn't obey her.

Umberto, what was life like in your house? My father liked to drink, so he spent everything he earned on drinks. And he fought a lot with my mother. Then one day my mother told him to leave the house, so he

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left. We never saw him again. Then one night my mother refused to give me food. She said I could sleep, but she refused to give me food. So I had to leave.

Enrique, why did you leave your house? Because by father beat me a lot.

And your mother? She? No. She was as helpless as we were. My father worked in the police.

And you don't miss your mother? Yes, I miss her. I miss my mother.

And your father? No. Him, no. But my mother, yes.

Ernesto, how old are you? Twelve.

Why did you leave your house? Because my mother and brothers beat me.

Why did they beat you? Because they didn't love me.

How do you like living in the streets? I don't.

How do you live? I am ashamed to say.

Tell us. I beg with other kids, and we steal.

Does your mother worry about you? She? No. (Bikel, 1979).

To summarize, unemployment leads to poverty and desertion, which results in child abuse and neglect. This, in turn, creates the gamines.

A Rehabilitation Program

Father **Javier de Nicolo** is an Italian Catholic priest who has spent most of his life working with **the disadvantaged** youth of Colombia. Over the last fifteen years he has developed a **government** supported program for helping the street children. Recognizing that **the gamines** value their freedom and fear the juvenile detention centers, Father **de Nicolo** has developed a series of houses which offer acceptance and freedom of choice.

First, **he visits groups** of street children and invites them to a downtown building called El Patio. **They may come** and go there as they please and receive meals, medical attention and a **bath**. **Close by** is another house called Liberia. They may spend the night in a real **bed there but must** abide by certain rules for the privilege: no drugs or weapons permitted.

The next **stage is Bosconia**, a true orphanage with meals, dormitories, plus educational and **vocational training**. Finally, for those who desire it and will make the

effort, there is La Florida, a self-contained farm, school, living quarters, and metal mechanics workshop. It is estimated that de Nicolo's organization has rehabilitated over 1,000 street urchins (Segundo, 1983).

Father de Nicolo estimates that the average age for leaving home used to be about ten, but now it is about eight. If he doesn't get to them by the time they turn 14 or 15, it is generally too late to help them. The biggest problem for rehabilitation is the drug trade. First marijuana and now cocaine, the boys become both addicts and pushers, making a lot of money and needing a lot to support their habit (de Nicolo, 1987).

Casa Las Ninas

When I interviewed Father de Nicolo, he was visiting a home that he ran for girl gamines, called Casa Las Ninas (The Girl's House). There were 75 girls living there, ranging in age from five to fifteen. This is the only facility of it's kind in Bogota for girls, as they are less likely to leave bad situations for the streets.

Half of those living in the house were escaping sexual abuse by their "step-father". They generally left when they are 10-12 years of age. Tragically, the most likely survival path for girl gamines is prostitution. Girls are less likely to run away as the street life is more dangerous for them. Also parents are less likely to turn them away since they are generally more useful around the house performing domestic tasks than are the boys (de Nicolo, 1987).

As with the boys, the girls are responsible for maintaining their home. With adult guidance, they literally make their own furniture, as well as meals, etc. The facility was clean and impressive. Most impressive, however, were the girls themselves. They left their school rooms when father de Nicolo brought me out to meet them. They swarmed around him in his obvious adoration. He is the only positive male role model and father figure they have and they reciprocate the love he has for them.

The girls all seemed bright, friendly, and affectionate. There were no obvious signs of emotional pathology, a real tribute to the program when you consider their childhood experiences.

At about age 16, Father de Nicolo must send the children out on their own. While he now spends most of his time looking for employment opportunities for his gamines, they are essentially being returned to the economic structure that created them. The odds are that as adults, they will recreate the poverty-to-abuse cycle resulting in more gamines.

Implications

This information on street children is presented for several reasons. First of all, it is important to indicate the impact poverty and stepfathering have on childrearing in other societies. In at least macho cultures, they form a disastrous combination, often resulting in child abuse and abandonment. In folk tales, the stepmother is often singled out as an evil force in family life, but perhaps it is the stepfather who deserves a closer look by family researchers and counselors in other cultures as well.

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Secondly, it seemed useful to outline how a serious family life problem is dealt with in a culture outside of Anglo-North America. It is particularly important because there is no government agency or organization of family scientists to provide guidance and support in the Colombian culture.

Lastly, it also appears that family life experts could be helpful in a situation such as this one. To start with, we probably can learn from the efforts of father de Nicolo, whose program for winning children's confidence and then providing for them an environment of safety, education and self-respect is exemplary. Even more could be done for these children, however. One possibility, in addition to normal adoption efforts, would be the creation of a "weekend family" program, where carefully screened U.S. families could "adopt" a girl to provide occasional visits and positive male role models. More family scientists are needed who have cross cultural training. Knowledge of a second language and experience living outside of North America would help qualify professionals to deal with the family related problems of many people beyond white, middle-class America.

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