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## News

### 6,500 street, working children in Jamaica -- survey

Observer Reporter  
Thursday, February 27, 2003



A boy wipes a car windscreen in Kingston, a common form of child labour in Jamaica

THERE are more than 6,000 street and working children in Jamaica, according to a national survey commissioned by the Ministry of Health, and conducted by WORKERMANAGEMENT Services Centre.

The survey said that the number of street and working children in Jamaica ranges from a low of 2,818 to a high of 6,500.

Of these figures, according to the survey, boys represent the typical street child (and any other category of working children). It also said that boys out-number girls by a ratio of 70:30, are an average 13 years old and are usually from a female-headed household of five, where his parent or guardian is marginally employed as a vendor, domestic helper, self-employed or unskilled worker.

The survey added that the average age at which children commenced working is just before their 11th birthday, with the vast majority of them working with the consent of their parents or guardians.



TAYLOR... wants government to intervene and create an umbrella program that interacts with all NGOs and groups

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ALLEN-YOUNG...  
the health ministry  
is prepared to  
work closely with  
the education  
ministry in moving  
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current pilot  
programme to  
other areas

These findings, along with several recommendations, were presented at a "feedback" seminar organised recently by Ambassador Marjorie Taylor, special envoy for children and the Child Support Unit, Ministry of Health.

"We [Ministry of Health] had heard so many anecdotes and stories, some horrific, argumentative, sympathetic and others apathetic, about the state of children who we find on the streets," Taylor told the gathering at the Courtleigh Hotel in Kingston.

"Most of these were stories the ministry could not pin down to any particular data," she added.

Taylor said the decision to commission a survey "was taken before the ministry could realistically and holistically intervene into what was happening to children living and working on the streets". The ministry, she added, had to have some data and information, based on fact, about young people who work and live on the streets.

In addition, Taylor pointed out that a number of initiatives had been introduced over the year. However, she said that as a result of the ad hoc way in which some of these initiatives were implemented, they achieved limited success.

This situation, she added, also resulted in the over-lapping of efforts among groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in improving the plight of children.

In this regard, Taylor called on government to intervene and create an umbrella programme that interacted with all NGOs and groups.

But stressing that the feedback seminar was not the "end all" or the panacea, to correct all ills affecting children, Taylor reiterated that the survey shed some light on the subject, while allowing the ministry to take sensible decisions, influenced partially by feedback as the way forward in creating better solutions.

Meanwhile, Ruel Cooke, consultant with the WORKERMANAGEMENT Service Centre, who conducted the field survey last year, said that his team was guided strictly by the definition espoused by

Dr Claudette Crawford-Brown, lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Psychology and Social Work, at the University of the West Indies (UWI).

The definition of a working child, as defined by Dr Crawford-Brown, is all children under 18 years who work. International standards, Cooke said, attested that persons under the age of 18 were children.

He reminded participants that many street children could be on the streets and not working. "Quite often they are out of school because they cannot afford to go or do not want to go, but those are not necessarily working children," said Cooke.

By adhering to the definition, Cooke said interviewers went out and interviewed many children who were on the street and, this was after discerning the key areas where they congregated. This was in addition to, he said, checking with guidance counsellors at selected schools about absentee students, and locating these students.

"The team was not able to interview every street and working child as we hoped, because resources did not allow us to carry out an exhaustive census. So we did what we thought was the next best, which was attempt to register all working children we could meet and identify and interview many of them that resources allowed us to," Cooke continued.

Elaborating further on the findings of the survey, Cooke said that child labour in Jamaica remained primarily a part time activity, taking place outside of school hours, for the most part. However, notwithstanding this finding, he noted that many of these children tended to put in more than a full day's labour. He said market children, in particular, usually put in more hours, sometimes up to 15 hours.

With the model income being \$500 per day, and reported earnings ranging from a low of \$20 to a high of \$7,000, the survey also reveals that 43 per cent of child labourers spend their income on basic necessities such as food and clothes, implying that there was primarily a survival motivation for working.

The research team also put forward 14 recommendations, according to Grace Allen-Young, permanent secretary in the health ministry.

"The second recommendation for a holistic programme of preventative and corrective action in the worst affected communities requires a more collaborative effort among the organizations

represented here, as well as with the communities affected," Allen-Young said.

Citing one recommendation that called for the expansion of the LEAP (remedial education and skills training) to all communities with a heavy concentration of child victims, Allen-Young said the ministry was prepared to work closely with the education ministry in moving beyond the current pilot programme, to other areas.

Commenting also on another recommendation that called for improvements in the conditions of children's homes, the permanent secretary stated that, currently, this proposal was being addressed through the Review of Children's Homes and Places of Safety, that has been mandated by Prime Minister P J Patterson.

She added that although there were weaknesses in protecting the nation's children, the ministry had attained significant improvements overall in the area of child welfare.

"The implementation of a Child Development Agency, the preparation of the Child Care and Protection Act and the development of new standards and regulations for the operation of children's homes and places of safety being examples of such achievements," she said.

"These are solid foundations we can build on, as we seek to boost our efforts today to provide a better life for our children," she added.

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