

Final Report on the Results and Findings of the Fieldwork on  
"The Study of the Current Situation of Girls and  
Adolescents of and on the streets of the  
City of Belize".

Country: Belize

Period: August 1988 - March, 1989

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INTRODUCTION

This study looks at young women between the ages of six (6) and eighteen (18) surviving in the streets of Belize City, Belize. It is made possible through the support of Childhope and was begun in August, 1988. This present paper is the final report on the study. It gives general background data on Belize, particularly Belize City, the objectives and methodology of the study, results and difficulties encountered in the field, and the future aspects of the study.

The girls were divided into three age ranges: six (6) to nine (9), ten (10) to fourteen (14), and fifteen (15) to eighteen (18). One (1) girl was interviewed in the first age range, three (3) in the second, and twenty-nine (29) in the last age range.

One overriding conclusion of this study is the pressing need for facilities to rehabilitate these girls in Belize City, and indeed, in the country of Belize.

BACKGROUND

The country of Belize has a population of approximately 180,000 people. Of these some 80,000 live in Belize City. The population is evenly divided between the sexes, and about 58% are below the age of 20. This gives us a figure of some 20,000 young women under twenty years old living in Belize City, and another

25,000 potential migrators to Belize City from the same age range.

Belize has a diversity of ethnic groups. The population is ethnically divided as follows: Creoles 39.7%, Mestizo 33.1%, Garifuna 7.6%, Maya 6.9%, Whites 4.2%, Ketchi 2.7%, East Indian 2.1%, and not specified 3.7%. Belize City consists of about 75.1% Creoles.

Unemployment levels go as high as 25% and this is particularly amongst women and youth. A third of the present population of the country reside in the United States. They leave behind children who are taken care of by grandparents, relatives or friends. These families subsist largely from remittances from the U.S. which arrive periodically.

Belize City is presently a product of the classic rural-urban drift. This phenomenon places intense pressure on limited services and resources. The city is characterized by poor housing and limited housing facilities, over-crowded schools, hospitals and limited job opportunities.

#### OBJECTIVES

The following are the objectives of this study:

- 1) To generate data on the general characteristics of girls who

seek refuge in facilities set up by Government and non-Government organizations.

- 2) To gather information on girls who do not seek refuge in the facilities set up by organizations. Information sought include their living conditions, belief systems, aspirations, socio-economic situation, and factors supporting and against them.
- 3) To gather the views of individuals who associate with or come into contact with the girls, e.g. social workers, police, pimps, family members.
- 4) Explore ways to help the girls get off the streets if they wish to do so.
- 5) Recommend strategies of action that will give direction to the betterment of the conditions of life of the girls (e.g. health, education, protection from abuse or exploitation).

#### METHODOLOGY

The collection of data was done from a participant/observer method, and interviews on an individual basis. The girls were located and observed in their own environment. Pimps were befriended and questioned on various aspects of the lives of the girls, and older girls volunteered information. A workshop was held at which the results of this study were presented and recommendations sought from the participants of the workshop.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The following was accomplished since the study began on 3 August, 1988:

1. Selection of the researchers
2. Preliminary design of questionnaire to fit the Belize situation
3. Checking of the questionnaire with a street person
4. Planning the strategy of the study
5. Selection of the area to be focused on
6. Observation of girls
7. Gaining the confidence of a pimp
8. Inventory of Institutions
9. Filling out of questionnaires
10. Analysis of the results of the questionnaires
11. Explore innovative alternatives to help the girls get off the streets
12. Recommendations

1. Selection of the Researchers

The researchers were selected based on their disciplines and interests. Two are anthropologists and one is a social scientist. In addition, two of the researchers have done work on women in Belize, and one is active in a women's organization and the Belize National Women's Commission.

The women's organization is committed to the betterment of the quality of life of women in Belize and is thus ideally suited to be able to implement the results of this study for the empowerment of the young women with which this study is concerned.

By way of continuous consultation, researchers were able to obtain feedback about the relevance of such research for work that was on-going in various communities in Belize City. Such networking will ensure that the findings of the research will be used.

## 2. Preliminary Design of Questionnaire

Appendix I is the questionnaire. This was designed bearing in mind the guidelines set out by Childhope at the meeting held in Guatemala City on 1 - 15 February, 1988.

## 3. Checking of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was given to a street person to see what the reaction would be. This person felt that the questionnaire was too detailed and that it tried to dig too deeply into the privacy of extremely reticent people without first forming a bond between the girls the questionnaire is aimed at, and the interviewer. The girls are very secretive and private and keep certain information even from their

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friends. Some of these are exactly the type of questions we have in our questionnaire.

4 & 5 Planning the Strategy for the Study / Selection of the Area to be focused on

Keeping in mind the difficulties we foresaw, we decided to begin by observing the girls in their workplace and at the same time work on creating friendships between us and the girls. It was decided that the two male researchers would begin the process and test the girls with the female researcher at a later date. Of a dozen locations in Belize City, we decided to look at four: Upstairs Cafe, The Pub, Fort George Hotel, and the Bellevue Hotel, and to concentrate on the Upstairs Cafe since this was found to be the place where most girls hung out. Observation would include making friends. This would then proceed to informal interviews, filling out the questionnaires bit by bit. Making a directory of institutions would be left until after we had a greater insight into the lifestyles, aspirations and fears of the girls.

6. Observation of the Girls ✓

From our observations several things became apparent. The girls fifteen (15) to eighteen (18) make their living predominantly by prostitution. The clients are mostly

British Soldiers, both English/British and Nepalese or Ghurkas. The girls come from Belize City as well as other districts e.g. Roaring Creek Village and Placencia Village in the Cayo and Stann Creek Districts respectively. The girls are predominantly Creoles but there are also Garifuna, East Indian and Mestizo girls on the street.

Having sex with a client is called a "Break". There are three classes of Breaks which are determined by the quality of the girl. The lowest Break costs the client \$20.00 to \$30.00 Bze (\$1.00 Bze = \$0.50 U.S) The girl in this category may go with up to six clients per night. The second category Break costs \$40.00 - \$80.00 Bze., and the number of clients per night are variable. The highest category is \$100.00 - \$150.00. The girl in this category will take one client for a couple of hours only per night. When the cost of Breaks are compared with what these girls would make as a good secretary, then the difficulty of providing them with alternative sources of income becomes apparent. A good secretary makes about eight hundred dollars (\$800.00) per month. The lowest category break can make this in eight days. A domestic worker makes fifty dollars (\$50.00) per week, a sum that the lowest category break makes in three (3) breaks.

Pimping in Belize takes a different form than in the United States of America. The pimp does not "own" the girls and he collects no money from them. Instead he arranges with the client after the client has decided he would like to go with a particular girl. The pimp adds his price onto that of the girl. He usually arranges for the hotel room, and escorts the girl and the client to and from the hotel, thus providing some form of protection for both.

The girls do not consider themselves as prostitutes. This is perhaps because a girl would typically have one or more soldier as a "boyfriend". This soldier will be given preference whenever he is around and the relationship would last for up to six months. This is because the British army changes its personnel every six months. Each girl also hopes that one of the soldiers would marry her and take her back to England with him. This has already happened to some girls and the others have seen this, thus keeping their hopes alive. The hope of marrying a soldier is one reason why the girls do not consider themselves prostitutes. ✓

In the same way that the girls do not consider themselves as prostitutes, they do not think that they are stealing when they actually do. If a client is too drunk to notice, the girl will take money from his wallet. She sees this as getting what she deserves. ✓

The girls drink quite a bit of alcohol. This is usually, but not always in the context of socializing with the client before the business transaction. It is thus a necessary part of prostitution since the soldiers drink a lot as well.

Girls between the ages of ten (10) to fourteen (14) made their living by begging, stealing and when necessary, and to a lesser extent by prostitution. These girls usually go around with slightly older boys who actually do the stealing while the girls provide a diversion. The mode of operation is to go to a residence and distract the person there if there is only one person at home while the boys steal whatever they can. If there is more than one person at home, the group moves on to another residence.

One girl has been located between the ages of six (6) and nine (9). This is due to the fact that the girls who make their living of the streets usually live with an aunt or grandmother and therefore cannot get out of the house as readily as older girls. They therefore do their hustling when they are sent on errands. Thus it is difficult to differentiate between girls who are the concern of this study and other girls of the same age range.

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7. Gaining the Confidence of a Pimp

It was felt that a pimp could help a lot in this research. As a result an individual was chosen and befriended. He provided the information on the costs of "Breaks" and helped by introducing us to some of the girls.

He made some interesting observations about the girls' experiences in prostitution. Although he could analyze many aspects of their subjugation, he could not suggest or identify ways in which they could emerge out of it.

8. Inventory of Institutions

There is only one facility for girls in Belize City and indeed in the country of Belize. This is the Gwen Lizarraga Girls Centre located at No. 11 Fredrick Street, Belize City. This is a Government institution and can hold from 12 to 16 girls. The girls are committed to the Centre by the courts after they have been tried for breaking the law. The offenses are mostly uncontrollable behaviour or stealing. Most of the problems of these girls stem from the fact that they come from single-parent homes, where they live only with their mothers. As such, one problem is neglect by the mother. Some of the problems stem from child abuse, either from the mother or step-father, which causes the child to

leave home. There are also groups of people around Belize City who encourage young girls to steal.

The youngest girl placed in the Centre was nine (9) years old, and girls should be there until they are sixteen (16) years old. Because of lack of space however, girls were released from the Centre before they were sixteen (16) years old. All girls who enter the Centre are placed on a three month probation period to determine the needs of the girls. If a girl is of school age i.e. under fourteen (14) she is sent to school. The school is carefully chosen, one of the criteria being teachers who are in sympathy with the girl. If the girl's educational level is not as high as it should be for her age, she is given remedial classes at the Centre.

Girls who enter the Centre are given a structured rehabilitation programme. This is done along with the Social Development Officer who does liaison work with the Centre. The girls are treated as a family, with the Centre as their home, and the person in charge of the Centre as their parent. They do craft work, the products of which are sold, and the money derived from the sale is used by and for the girls.

Some of the girls used drugs but were committed to the Centre for other offences. The use of drugs was discovered

while they were at the Centre and drug rehabilitation was built into their programme.

9. Filling out Questionnaires

Thirty-three questionnaires were filled out, some in more detail than others. This was because the girls were left to respond to the questions they wanted to. When asked why they didn't respond to some questions the answer invariably was because they didn't want to.

10. Analysis of the Questionnaires

Name: Twenty-three girls gave their first names only, while ten (10) gave their surnames as well. With such a large percentage of the participants responding in this way, it suggests that the last name is not valued or recognized in the process of identification.

Origin: Twenty-eight girls were from Belize City, two (2) from the Cayo District, two (2) from the Corozal District and one (1) from the Stann Creek District. Since this study was done in Belize City, and since the largest concentration of population in the country is Belize City, it is no accident that most of the girls come from Belize City. If this study was done in the town of Orange Walk, it would

have been expected that most of the girls on the streets would have originated in Orange Walk Town.

Ethnic Group: Twenty-nine of the girls interviewed were Creoles, three (3) were Mestizo and one (1) was Garifuna. This again is indicative of the fact that the study was done in Belize City, since 75.1% of the population of Belize City is Creole. The predominant ethnic group in Corozal is Mestizo, in Stann Creek, Garifuna and in Cayo, Creole and Mestizo are about even.

Address: Twenty-nine girls gave an address and four lived on boats behind the fire station in Belize City. One of these is an eight year old girl whom we will call Eve. (Questionnaire #12 attached.)

Dwelling and Family: Of thirty-three (33) interviews nine (9) girls lived with parents, four (4) with relatives, sixteen (16) alone or with friends and three (3) gave no response. One additional person gave two different addresses. This is indicative of one of the problems of this study - the preference to tell lies rather than to tell the truth.

Of the nine (9) girls who lived at home, six (6) had no fathers living at home with them, two (2) had step fathers

at home with them and one (1) gave no response but indicated that she lived alone with her mother. Eight (8) of these are in the 15-18 age group; one (1) in the 10-14 age group who lives without a father or step-father but with her mother and brother and sisters.

Four girls lived with relatives. One lived with her step-father and brother because her father was dead and her mother was in the U S. Two lived with their grand-mothers, one because her mother died, the other because her father left home when she was 7 years old and her mother is in the USA. These 3 are in the 15-18 age range. The fourth is Eve. She lives with her sister, does not know her father, and ran away from home with her sister. She and her sister live on the boats behind the fire station in Belize City, unless her sister is on good relations with one of her boyfriends. In this case she lives with her sister at her boyfriends home.

Sixteen girls lived alone or with friends. Three lived on the boats behind the fire station. Eight lived by themselves either by renting a room in a hotel, boarding house or rented house. Five lived with their boyfriends in a rented house or hotel. Fourteen of these girls were 15-18 and two were 10-14.

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Education: Five (5) girls have never been to school, eleven (11) never finished primary school, nine (9) finished primary, six (6) went to secondary school and two (2) lied about their schooling. Of the six (6) who went to secondary school, two (2) got kicked out because they got pregnant, one (1) would like to continue, one (1) finished high school and is still going and three (3) are still going to school. Of the five (5) who never went to school, three (3) are eighteen years old, one (1) is thirteen and Eve is eight years old. Two of these girls said they would like to go to school, one to learn to read and write and Eve wants to learn everything. Eve is the eight year old, a very bright girl who was never sent to school. Four of the nine (9) who finished primary school would like to continue. Three (3) of the eleven (11) who never finished primary school would like to continue school.

Looking at the education of these girls brings home the fact that the educational standards of girls on the streets are very low. Twenty-five girls got no further than primary school in their education. In Belize, a high school graduate gets between \$500 and \$800 per month. This means that twenty-nine (29) of these girls would command a salary less than \$500 per month, based on their education. They can make this in three to five days doing what they do now with no education.

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8. Survival Activity: One person sold drugs to maintain herself, Eve was maintained by her older sister, one (1) gave no response. Four people responded that they were maintained by their mother. Three of these were still going to high school and this might be the reason for their response. Two girls were maintained by their man. One of these was in the 10-14 age range. One person maintained herself by prostitution and conning people. Twenty-three people maintained themselves by prostitution. Two of these were in the 10-14 age range.

Both the selling of drugs and prostitution pay considerably more than traditional jobs these girls would be able to obtain. Law enforcement officers generally leave the girls who are into prostitution alone. This might be one reason why prostitution is the major means of survival activity.

9. Health and Sexuality: Of the girls interviewed, twelve (12) of them had been sick, eight (8) had not been sick and there were thirteen (13) non responses. Of those who were sick, six (6) of them did not indicate what kind of illness they had, two (2) had influenza, one (1) person had asthma, one (1) person had bronchitis, one (1) had epelepsy, one (1) person had mumps and measels. These illnesses were experienced between the ages of 8-18 years.

The longest time a person was ill, was six weeks and the

shortest time period was one week. Most girls went to the hospital and received care from medical professionals. Only five (5) people paid for medical care. Twenty-six (26) of the girls had had their menstruation. There were four non-responses. Three girls were not yet menstruating - one was 8 years of age, another was 17 years old and the third was 13 years old. Eighteen of the girls felt that their health was normal, eight (8) felt that it was good, two (2) felt that they had poor health and five (5) did not respond.

Drugs - nine (9) of the girls admitted to taking drugs. This was mostly Rock coke, coke and marijuana. Twenty said that they did not use drugs and four (4) did not respond. Girls who took drugs said they did it because it made them feel good, get high, get through the day. Some felt that it made them free of worries. Seven girls bought the drugs from a seller or dealer. They took drugs with friends. This was done at home, on the base or on the boat. Those on drugs generally took it every day.

Sexuality - Twenty-six of the girls said they had had sex. Four said they did not have and three (3) did not respond. Six of them admitted to having had venereal disease. Six said no they had not experienced VDRL and eleven (11) did not respond to the question.

Abuse - Eleven of the girls had been abused. Six did not respond and sixteen (16) said that they had not been abused. Of these who admitted to abuse they described it as being mostly physical and sexual. These incidents occurred at home, on the streets, on the base and in hotels. They were done by many people, step-fathers, uncle, brother and other men.

Pregnancy - Sixteen of the girls had been pregnant, seventeen (17) had not been pregnant. Five of them had children, nineteen (19) did not have and nine (9) of them did not reply to the question. Those who had children had one each, except for one person who had two. The ages of the children ranged from 7 months to 2 years. They were taken care of by relatives such as mother or aunt. One girl took her child to the nursery and one took care of her child herself.

10. Knowledge of Family Spacing

Twelve girls knew how to prevent pregnancy, nine (9) didn't. Twelve others did not respond. Those who knew had found out mostly from mother, friends and others. Only one person had read about it. Another person had learnt from a nurse and one person only had learnt from school.

Even though the girls had the knowledge most of them did not

use it. This was the case, because they did not know how or did not like the methods. The few who used the knowledge, did so because they did not want to get pregnant. One girl said that she used the condom because she did not want to catch disease. Another girl said that she did not want to have anymore bastard children. All girls bought their form of contraception.

Abortion: Five girls admitted to having had abortions. Fifteen of them said no. Thirteen girls did not respond to this question. One girl had had 4 abortions. One person had 2 and the others had 1. The reason given by two (2) girls was that they didn't like children. Three girls said that they didn't want children. Two girls only indicated where the abortion was done. Only one (1) girl did not get help. The others were helped by a woman. All had to pay and the cost ranged from \$80-\$300.

Caring: Eleven of the girls indicated that if it was possible they would prefer to get support and health care from their families. Fifteen girls did not respond to this. Two girls wanted their boyfriend and five (5) wanted medical professionals.

Childbearing: Twenty-four girls indicated that they wanted to have children. Six of them said no and three (3) girls

did not respond. Those who wanted children preferred to have only 2. Most of them thought that the mid-twenty's was a good age to start having children.

Relations: Twenty of the girls had boyfriends and eleven (11) did not. Only two people did not respond.

Self Esteem: Generally speaking the girls felt that there was something good about themselves. Their impressions of each other were very negative. Very few could indicate good things about themselves. They were generally very bitter about the world, particularly male abuse. One girl indicated, for example, that the nicest thing that had happened to her was going out with a man who didn't want to have sex with her. Another indicated that the worst thing for her was being raped by her brother.

11 & 12. Recommendations

The Gwen Lizarraga Girls Centre is too small to house even the girls who are sent there by the courts, let alone the girls who manage to evade the courts. Because it can only house sixteen (16) girls, some girls are released before they are properly rehabilitated. This leads to the situation where about 40% of the girls who pass through the

Centre end up back in the courts. The Centre lacks adequate space, not only for dormitories but for recreation as well. In addition, there needs to be follow-up work with the girls after they are released from the Centre. This is presently not being done. There also needs to be instituted a system whereby the parents of the girls are counselled as well for in some instances, girls were released who ended up in the same home environment that caused them to get into trouble with the law, and the courts.

The present situation of political intervention needs to be carefully assessed. This is because one could easily end up with a political appointee in charge of the Girls' Centre who does her job in such a manner that it is detrimental to the goals of the Centre i.e. the rehabilitation of the girls.

One way of helping the younger girls would be to find families who would be willing to take in girls as members of the family. This might best be done in conjunction with the Social Development Department.

A recommendation that was made at the workshop was to get about 5 to 10 acres of land just outside of Belize City and build facilities there for girls. The buildings would be two storey structures with dormitories on the upper floors

to house about 50 girls. The lower floors would be used as workshops and counselling and other services. The workshops would be to teach the girls to become plumbers, electricians and other high-paying professions.

It was also suggested that more public awareness programs be held to obtain support from groups and individuals to address this problem. Findings of this report will be circulated to concerned groups for their consideration.

#### DIFFICULTIES

One of the main difficulties of this study has been to get the girls to speak to us and to befriend us. The girls see anyone who is not a pimp or a soldier as an outsider whose interest in them may be linked to police action. They have no confidence in outsiders since this might bring police harassment. The girls have at some time in their lives already been in the courts because of the police.

Girls between the ages of six (6) and nine (9) were very difficult to find and to date we have identified only one from this age range who live on or off the streets of Belize City.

CONCLUSIONS

This final report gives an insight into the life of the girls who live of and on the streets of Belize City. Because of their lifestyles, it was difficult to gain the confidence of these girls in the time period of this report. Alternative strategies for employment will have to be high paying and preferably geared to self employment.

The time frame of this study was insufficient to get the girls themselves to contribute in a meaningful way to the betterment of their lives. This is because of the suspicious nature of the girls. A time frame should thus be used as a guideline rather than an immutable structure, and the pace determined by the trust the girls gain in the goals of the study.

Lastly, it was noted that there are about four (4) times the number of street boys as street girls. A future aspect of this study should be to look at street boys as well.

The presence of British soldiers in an ongoing basis provides nourishment for streetgirls/prostitution. Most of these young men are unaccompanied by their wives or girl friends on these six monthly missions in Belize. It would be interesting to find out how the increasing threat of aids internationally will affect these relationships. Many of the girls had some knowledge of

contraception but were not using this. Only one girl indicated using the condom.

The military tries to ensure medical safety of men as far as possible by having potential prostitutes the men will liaise with checked regularly. However, it needs to be ensured that soldiers coming and leaving the country are checked as well.

In looking at future aspects of this study one of the fundamental challenges will be to explore in greater depth, the root causes of this form of female oppression.