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AFRICA >

Being a street child in Tanzania: 'The police chase and beat us — there's nothing good about this life'

Over 120 million children around the world are homeless, and 30 million are in Africa. Thousands are in this African country



John (not his real name) is a 14-year-old Tanzanian who sells sugarcane on the streets of Dar es Salaam.
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Just like any 14-year-old Tanzanian boy, Emmanuel (not his real name) enjoys eating fried chicken with rice, beans, and fruit juice. He is also a big fan of soccer, which is hugely popular in this country. “I want to be like Van Dijk, who plays for Liverpool. Or Sako, who’s from [Tanzania](#).” But Emmanuel is not like other Tanzanian kids his age. The boy, who is wearing a worn-out and dirty pink T-shirt turned inside out, shorts and flip-flops that show his dirty feet and cracked toenails, lives on the street. For nearly two years, he has been sleeping in shop arcades where shopkeepers and merchants discard pallets that serve as makeshift beds for him and his friends. He washes in rivers or in public bathhouses when he has some money. “They charge around 500 shillings [\$0.20], so I don’t go there often.”

Emmanuel confesses to having stolen things in the past but claims that he now earns a living by begging. On better days, he can get about 6,000 shillings (\$2.40), although most days it’s less than 4,000 (\$1.60). His story mirrors the experiences of countless children in similar circumstances. “So, one afternoon, while I was playing with a friend, I accidentally hurt his arm. I was scared to go home because I thought my father would beat me. He would always beat me when I skipped school or didn’t go to the mosque to pray. So, I made a decision right then and there — I wasn’t going back home. I left and ended up in Dar es Salaam.” In Tanzania’s largest and busiest city, Emmanuel teamed up with a bunch of other kids living on the streets.

Emmanuel’s friends say they all left home fleeing violence or extreme poverty. Tanzania isn’t a good place for a child of any age. UNICEF’s most recent report on [The State of the World’s Children](#) shows that 106,000 Tanzanian children under five die each year — only six other nations have worse numbers in absolute terms. The UNICEF report also present other grim statistics for Tanzania: the secondary school dropout rate is 84% for boys and 88% for girls — also some of the highest rates on the planet.

Emmanuel says he hasn’t gone to school since he began living on the streets and admits to having only completed the fourth grade. The Kariako part of the city where he lives is a busy area with shops and people, which is better than other parts of the city for making a little money. But life is hard. “The

older kids, they treat us really badly. They force us to do drugs, and if we don't, they won't let us sleep in the good spots. And then there's the police and security guards, who are always on our backs. They chase and beat us, and even threaten to throw us in jail... There's nothing good about this life."

Emmanuel says there are some local social workers who genuinely care about them. They take the kids to shelters and aid organizations, but Emmanuel says he doesn't like all the rules and restrictions. It's difficult to establish how many children live on the street in Tanzania. In 2021, the government conducted a study in the country's six main population centers and counted at least 5,732 homeless children (4,583 boys and 1,149 girls). But these numbers may not fully measure the scope of the problem. Globally, approximately 120 million children spend over 80% of their time on the streets. In Africa alone, the [International Labor Organization \(ILO\)](#) and [UNICEF](#) estimate the number of street kids to be around 30 million.

In Tanzania, poverty is a significant factor in the problem of homelessness. Nearly 50% of the country's population (just over 64 million people) live on less than \$1.90 a day. John (not his real name) is a young teenager who was left in the care of a poverty-stricken great aunt. "When my parents split up, they left me with her. But she couldn't really provide for me, so she had to take me to this organization to look after me. I didn't really like that place — they were way too strict. So I ran away." John and a friend went to the city with a plan: they would clean car windshields at traffic lights to earn money for food. At night, they would look for shelter on the streets of Kariako. "One day my father spotted me and got angry. He took me back to my great-aunt, but I ran away again! Only this time, I didn't go back to Kariako where he could find me."

John spends his days in an area of Dar es Salaam bustling with passenger cars and merchant trucks. He tries to find other ways to make money since he's ashamed to beg. Right now, he sells bags of sugarcane at a busy crossroads. He usually sells six or seven bags per day for 1,000 shillings (\$0.40) each, half of which he pays to his supplier. He gives 500 shillings to the owner of the truck he sleeps in with a bunch of other kids. John says he's lonely and sad about his life. "I've only been here for a short time, so I don't really have anyone to chat with and share what's going on with me. You know what? When I grow up, I want to be a driver. Trucks, buses... I don't really care."

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