

The Social and Economic Factors Influencing Child Street Begging: Evidence from Probolinggo, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the social and economic conditions of families who become street beggars in Probolinggo City, East Java, with particular attention to poor households facing significant life challenges. Children who engage in street begging in Probolinggo often come from families marked by severe poverty, unstable family structures, and restricted access to education. These circumstances drive them to beg as a survival strategy. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this research collected data through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis of a family headed by a single mother and her two children involved in begging activities. The findings indicate that poverty and family instability are the primary factors pushing children onto the streets. Moreover, street beggar children are exposed to multiple risks, including exploitation, violence, and the loss of access to proper education. The study also highlights the social stigma attached to beggars, which exacerbates their social isolation. Despite these hardships, the mother and children in this study expressed aspirations to improve their lives, demonstrating notable resilience in the face of adversity. The research concludes that holistic social and economic interventions such as expanding access to education, creating job opportunities, and strengthening social support are essential to addressing the problem of child street begging in Probolinggo City.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of children working as street beggars has emerged as one of the most pressing social issues in many Indonesian cities, including Probolinggo. Life on the streets is not a choice freely made by children; rather, it is often the result of extreme socio-economic pressures that leave them with few alternatives. These children face an uncertain future, are vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation, and are frequently stigmatised as a “problem” not only by families and communities but also by the state itself. Despite their vulnerable condition, public and governmental attention towards the plight of street children remains inadequate and insufficiently solution-oriented, even though they are an integral part of society whose rights must be safeguarded to ensure that they can grow into useful and civilised adults with a brighter future (Bertus,

Hulukati, & Usman, 2022). Their visibility in public spaces at busy intersections, traffic lights, or commercial areas symbolises the persistence of deep-rooted social and economic inequality in urban Indonesia. For these children, the streets are not merely a workplace but also an environment that deprives them of education, exposes them to physical and psychological harm, and perpetuates their marginalisation (Yuniarti, 2012).

Several studies have emphasised that poverty is the central driver of child street begging. Families who are unable to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, and education often compel their children to work or beg as a means of survival. The situation becomes more acute in the case of children from broken families, where divorce or the death of parents leads to further instability (Jamil, Shah, & Bashir, 2019). Family dysfunction whether in the form of neglect, domestic violence, or lack of parental care often pushes children to the streets as a last resort (Zaradiva & Megawati, 2023). Compounding this reality is the phenomenon of child exploitation, where infants and young children are deliberately used by adults to elicit sympathy from passers-by in begging activities (Rochatun, Suprayogi, & Sigalingging, 2012). Beyond its direct impact on children, street begging generates broader social consequences, including public discomfort, the erosion of urban aesthetics, and the deterioration of a city's image in the eyes of tourists and investors (Setiawan, Mahsyar, & Mustari, 2023; Fatimah, Eskasasnanda, & Towaf, 2019). From the state's perspective, the Ministry of Social Affairs (2005) defines street children as those spending most of their time in public spaces, either working, begging, or simply wandering. Typically aged between five and eighteen, these children are characterised by unkempt appearances, high mobility, and prolonged exposure to the risks of street life, often more than four hours a day (Bertus et al., 2022).

While the relationship between poverty, family instability, and child street begging is well documented, recent literature highlights the need for a deeper examination of the socio-economic dynamics underpinning this issue. Thrane, Hoyt, Whitbeck, and Yoder (2006) argue that understanding street children requires a focus not only on poverty but also on access to employment, income distribution, and resource allocation within families. Moreover, although street begging is a widespread phenomenon in Indonesia, there has been limited empirical attention to smaller cities such as Probolinggo, where the persistence of child beggars reflects the structural weaknesses of local social and economic systems. This gap in knowledge necessitates a more context-specific analysis of how socio-economic factors interact with cultural, familial, and institutional dynamics to sustain the phenomenon of child begging. Furthermore, research that places children's voices and rights at the centre of analysis remains scarce, even though the rights of children are enshrined in Indonesian Law No. 23 of 2002, which guarantees every child's right to live, grow, develop, be protected, and participate fully in society (Purwoko, 2013).

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the socio-economic conditions of families involved in child street begging in Probolinggo City. By focusing on poverty, family instability,

and the lack of access to education as the main determinants, this study explores how such factors compel children into street begging as a survival strategy. At the same time, it seeks to highlight the risks and challenges these children face, including exploitation, violence, social stigma, and the loss of educational opportunities. The rationale of this research lies in the recognition that child begging is not merely an issue of poverty but also a violation of children's rights and a reflection of broader socio-economic inequalities (Lindawati & Rahman, 2023). Understanding these dynamics is critical for developing holistic and sustainable interventions, ranging from improved access to education and job creation for parents to stronger social protection mechanisms. By addressing these issues, the study aims to contribute to both academic discourse and policy development, offering recommendations that are relevant for tackling the root causes of child street begging in Probolinggo and beyond.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and socio-economic conditions of the family serving as the research subject. The fieldwork was conducted at a traffic light intersection on Jl. Abdurrahman Wahid in Probolinggo City, East Java. The location was selected because child begging remains a common phenomenon in Probolinggo, making it a relevant and significant site for investigation. The research focused on a single mother, referred to as IF, and her two children, HN and FB, who are actively engaged in begging activities. This family was purposively chosen as a case study because they represent households experiencing considerable socio-economic pressures while simultaneously being involved in street begging.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The interviews with IF provided detailed insights into the family's background, economic conditions, the underlying reasons for engaging in begging, as well as their hopes and perspectives on the future. Observations were conducted to capture the family's daily life, their routines, and their social interactions within the community. In addition, relevant documents such as the children's school records and administrative information were analysed to complement and verify the qualitative findings.

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained in writing from the participants, and strict measures were taken to maintain the confidentiality of their identities and personal information. The privacy and dignity of the participants were respected at all stages, and they were fully informed about the objectives of the study and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Through this methodological design, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic conditions that drive children into street begging in Probolinggo City. Moreover, it aims to shed light

on the implications of this situation for their everyday lives, well-being, and future opportunities

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The life of street children symbolises one of the darkest chapters in human development, as it reflects not only personal struggles but also the structural shortcomings of society. Instead of enjoying their childhood through play, learning, creativity, and familial affection, many are forced into survival in harsh urban environments. This phenomenon is not solely an economic issue but also one that is deeply interwoven with social, psychological, and cultural dimensions. Street children endure unsafe and unstable living conditions, often sleeping on pavements, under bridges, in traffic areas, or in other public spaces. They must engage in various forms of work, both legal and illegal, such as selling food, scavenging, busking, or even performing as clowns, while simultaneously enduring extreme weather, pollution, and the constant threat of violence (Putra & Lutfi, 2021; Nihayah & Legowo, 2016).

These children are thrust prematurely into adult roles, developing strategies for survival under constant threats and risks. The presence of street beggars in Probolinggo, as in many other urban contexts, is the outcome of both “push” and “pull” factors ranging from individual circumstances to wider social, cultural, and economic dynamics which perpetuate their continued presence in the streets (Kasus, Jalan, & Kota, 2010). Poverty remains the most significant driver. Children born into impoverished families often lack alternatives to support themselves, while parents unable to meet basic needs, including education, frequently push their children to earn income in any form. Inadequate schooling further entrenches them in precarious and exploitative forms of labour (Fadiyah, 2021).

Empirical cases illustrate how socio-economic hardship shapes the lives of street families. One example is IF, a single mother raising two school-aged children while working as a beggar. Having been abandoned by her husband, IF faced mounting economic pressures as her modest earnings from running a small food stall (approximately Rp30,000 per day) proved insufficient. She eventually turned to begging, which generated about Rp60,000 daily, albeit accompanied by deep feelings of shame and the stigma associated with begging. This choice highlights the dilemma faced by impoverished families who balance survival needs against the pursuit of dignity (Wibowo, Mentari, Chandra, Kuddah, & Putra, 2020; Putri, Calista, Jannah, Eva, & Yani, 2022; Suryati, 2023). While IF recognises the negative perceptions attached to her work, she cannot forgo this income while waiting for better employment opportunities. Her children, HN and FB, contribute to the household economy by begging after school, a routine that risks physical exhaustion, diminished academic performance, and psychological strain (Dea, 2023; Audina, Senjaya, Solihin, Hukum, & Karawang, 2022).

Another case is HN, a 29-year-old mother living in Randupangger, who has been engaged in begging for a decade. Her daily earnings of around Rp60,000

remain the primary income for the family, as her husband, a waste collector earning roughly Rp40,000 per day, suffers from physical disabilities after an accident. This imbalance of income and the accumulation of debt particularly loans for medical treatment exemplify how families become trapped in cycles of poverty. Such situations align with national statistics from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), which consistently highlight the inability of many households to meet basic needs due to insufficient and unstable income (Supeno & Sutrisna, 2018; Rizkiandi, Muktasam, & Rosyadi, 2022; Anjana, 2020). Despite living in poverty, their 10-year-old son PI continues to attend school, yet also assists in begging after school. This dual role creates psychological conflict between his identity as a student and his responsibility as a breadwinner. The shame he experiences resonates with Lewis's (1992) explanation of shame as a response to failing to meet societal expectations. Growing up in an environment where begging is normalised, PI risks inheriting a cycle of poverty that passes from one generation to the next. Nevertheless, his mother aspires to leave begging behind, hoping to save and eventually establish a small business to secure a better future for her family (Mendoza et al., 2020).

Beyond economic hardships, social isolation exacerbates the struggles of these families. Stigma and marginalisation often discourage them from seeking help, reinforcing feelings of exclusion. Wahyuni and Pramono (2021) note that shame and stigma associated with poverty contribute to withdrawal from community interaction, thus depriving families of potential support networks. Still, aspirations remain alive: mothers like IF and HN continue to dream of providing their children with better opportunities, reflecting resilience amid adversity.

From a structural perspective, street begging persists partly because of entrenched cultural attitudes and limited parental capacity to problem-solve economic challenges. Many beggars perceive poverty as an inescapable destiny, a resignation that weakens the drive for upward social mobility. This fatalistic worldview sustains intergenerational poverty and hinders proactive responses to economic difficulties. At a broader level, the persistence of poverty in Indonesia continues to be documented as a pressing national issue, one that is not easily resolved given the systemic nature of inequality (Nihayah & Legowo, 2016).

Location also plays a practical role. Around 80% of street beggars in Probolinggo choose traffic light intersections, particularly at Jl. Abdurrahman Wahid, as prime locations. These sites allow beggars to approach vehicles stopped by red lights, providing a window of opportunity to solicit donations. With high traffic volume during peak hours, the likelihood of receiving contributions increases substantially (Taslim et al., 2023).

Addressing the issue of street children requires comprehensive interventions. The Ministry of Social Affairs has outlined four strategies: street-based approaches, which involve direct engagement with children through counselling, discussions, and positive activities; community-based approaches, which empower families and local communities to prevent children from

entering street life; social guidance, which reshapes attitudes and behaviour through value-based mentoring; and empowerment programmes, which provide education, skills training, capital support, and alternative employment opportunities (Zunita, 1983). These strategies are further reinforced by the Child Protection Law No. 23 of 2002, which guarantees every child's right to live, grow, develop, and participate. Implementation of this law is rooted in three foundations: philosophical, drawing from Pancasila as the nation's guiding values; ethical, requiring professional integrity and accountability in child protection work; and juridical, mandating integration across relevant legal frameworks (Tocqjun, 2019).

Taken together, the experiences of street children and their families in Probolinggo underscore the complexity of child begging as a social phenomenon. It is simultaneously a product of poverty, family instability, cultural resignation, and structural inequality. Addressing this issue therefore demands not only economic support but also transformative interventions that break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, reduce stigma, and safeguard children's rights to education, protection, and dignity.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the phenomenon of child street begging in Probolinggo, Indonesia, as a manifestation of complex social and economic challenges. The findings reveal that poverty, family instability, and limited access to education and social protection are the primary drivers pushing children into street life. Under these pressures, children are forced to engage in begging or informal street work, often at the expense of their safety, education, and psychological well-being, while also facing heightened risks of exploitation, violence, and social stigma.

The research underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address both the immediate and structural causes of child begging. These include enhancing parental skills and access to employment, expanding social protection mechanisms, and formulating child-centred policies that prioritise education, health, and welfare. Such holistic approaches are essential not only to mitigate the socio-economic vulnerabilities of families but also to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty that sustains the presence of street beggars.

From a child rights perspective, this study highlights the importance of ensuring that the rights of all children are protected and fulfilled, in line with Indonesia's Child Protection Law No. 23 of 2002, which guarantees every child the right to live, grow, develop, and participate fully in society. The strategies employed by the Ministry of Social Affairs ranging from street-based engagement and community empowerment to social guidance and skill development represent important steps toward this goal. However, their effectiveness depends on consistent implementation, adequate resources, and strong collaboration among government, communities, and civil society.

In conclusion, tackling the issue of child street begging requires not only economic and social interventions but also a broader commitment to justice,

dignity, and child welfare. By addressing both the structural roots and the immediate realities of this phenomenon, Probolinggo and other cities in Indonesia can move closer to creating a safer, more supportive environment where children are no longer compelled to beg on the streets but are instead given the opportunity to realise their full potential.

Implications for Policy and Future Research

The findings of this study provide several important implications for both policy and future research. From a policy perspective, addressing child street begging requires integrated and multi-sectoral strategies. Local governments need to strengthen economic empowerment programmes for vulnerable families, particularly through skills training, job creation, and accessible social protection schemes. Education policies must ensure that children from low-income households not only have access to schools but are also supported with scholarships, nutritional assistance, and safe learning environments to reduce the likelihood of dropping out. Furthermore, public campaigns to reduce stigma and discrimination against street children are essential to foster community support and reintegration. Collaboration between government institutions, non-governmental organisations, religious leaders, and local communities is crucial in building sustainable and child-centred solutions.

For future research, this study highlights the need for more extensive, comparative analyses of child street begging across different urban and rural contexts in Indonesia. While this research focused on a single case study in Probolinggo, further investigations could explore variations in socio-economic drivers, coping strategies, and resilience factors across diverse settings. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining how street involvement shapes children's long-term educational, psychological, and economic outcomes. Moreover, research that integrates children's voices more directly can deepen understanding of their agency, aspirations, and experiences, thereby contributing to more effective and rights-based interventions.

By aligning future research agendas with evidence-based policymaking, it will be possible to design interventions that not only alleviate the immediate hardships of child street beggars but also dismantle the structural inequalities that sustain this phenomenon.

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