



## Child Reunification Processes in Tamil Nadu: A Study on the Status of Children Protected and Reunified

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# About Railway Children India

Railway Children India (RCI) is the Indian entity of the Railway Children International with a vision of creating

**'A world where no child ever has to live on the streets'.**

RCI is registered in India under Indian Companies Act, 2013 of Section 25 (now section 8). RCI works with children who are in need of care and protection at and around railway stations and strives for sustainable changes in the lives of children who are alone and at risk on the streets as well as Railway Stations.

## Our Principles

1. We respect the dignity of every child
2. We always put the best interests of the child first
3. We build on the abilities of each child while being aware of his/ her limitations
4. We create an environment that encourages and values the voices and decisions of children
5. We know that children have evolving and resilient capacities
6. We have a zero-tolerance approach to neglect, abuse, and maltreatment of children in care and protection processes
7. We ensure that we do not re-traumatize a child
8. We have a zero tolerance to exploitation
9. We nurture the individuality of children by investing in diverse resources and opportunities
10. We form authentic and empathetic relationships with every child
11. We do not judge children
12. We believe that all children should experience permanence in shelter, health, education, achievement and relationships (as opposed to uncertainty and multiple transitions)
13. We use innovative processes, which are quality assured, to reach out to children.

## Our Approach

We work at three levels for long term change.

**At railway stations:** We aim to transform stations into 'Child Friendly Spaces'. This would involve a team of outreach workers (ORW) being based at the station 24/7, looking out for children as soon as they arrive alone. They then make sure the child is safe, fed, clothed, has water, medical help and whatever counselling support is needed. Each location operates a Child Help Desk, where the outreach workers are based, and can cater for every child's needs, referring them to shelter accommodation or care institutions where appropriate, and beginning the process of family restoration whenever possible.

**In communities:** We work in local communities, targeting the locations where large numbers of children are found to be leaving their family, to create a safety net to stop this happening. We believe in empowering communities and families and strengthening their resources so they have the responsibility and ability to properly care for their children and keep them safe.

**With governments:** Strengthening the existing government system and structures is key to ensuring long-term, sustainable change which is what we always aim for, and what allows us to have the greatest impact, where it is needed most.

# List of Abbreviations

BC	: Backward Castes
CWC	: Child Welfare Committee
CWO	: Child Welfare Officer
CHES	: Community Health Education Society
CP	: Child Protection
CSOs	: Civil Society Organisations
CSR	: Corporate Social Responsibility
DCPU	: District Child Protection Unit
DCPO	: District Child Protection Officer
DIC	: Drop in Centre
FGD	: Focus Group Discussion
FIR	: First Information Report
GRP	: Government Railway Police
HDI	: Human Development Index
HHL	: Household
ICPS	: Integrated Child Protection Scheme
IPs	: Implementing Partners of RCI
JJ Act	: Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act
JJB	: Juvenile Justice Board
MBC	: Most Backward Castes
NGO	: Non-Government Organisation
NSSO	: National Sample Survey Organisation
NUEPA	: National University of Educational Planning and Administration
POCSO	: Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act
PTAs	: Parent Teachers Associations
RD	: Rural Development
RTE	: Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act
RSEEDS	: Rural Self Employment and Educational Development Society
RCI	: Railway Children India
RPF	: Railway Protection Force
SJPU	: Special Juvenile Police Unit
SC	: Scheduled Caste
SMCs	: School Management Committees
ST	: Scheduled Tribes
SDGs	: Sustainable Development Goals
SPSS	: Statistical Package for Social Sciences
SW	: Social Welfare
TN	: Tamil Nadu
THH	: The Hope House
TV	: Television
UNCRC	: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	: United Nations Children Fund
VLCPCS	: Village Level Child Protection Committees



# 1. BACKGROUND

Children leaving homes are extremely vulnerable—the longer a child or adolescent is missing, the greater the risk they face<sup>1</sup>. Railway Children India (RCI) believes that 'children leaving homes or situations of abuse, violence and poverty use India's extensive railway network to get to the cities, where they hope to find a better life. Thousands of children arrive at India's vast, chaotic railway stations and find themselves lost, alone and scared, with no idea where to go or what to do—they end up living on the platforms'. Rescuing them at Railway stations and ensuring their safety is the highest priority.

The problem of children leaving homes is complex because of a multitude of factors – social, economic, institutional and administrative – responsible for pushing children out of their homes. There are at least three stages involved in restoring these children, namely, rescue, protection and prevention from risks; the process of reuniting the children with their families or placing them under long term care in case of inconducive situations within families, and thirdly, following them up to see that the conditions that were responsible for children leaving home do not occur again, implying family strengthening programmes. This study, based on a sample survey of children who were rescued and restored by partner organisations of RCI in three locations—Chennai, Villupuram railway station and Katpadi railway station in Tamil Nadu—tries to understand all the above three stages and the challenges faced within the processes of reunification and restoration of children.

## 1.2 The Problem

### 1.2.1 Tamil Nadu: A Background

Human development achievements in Tamil Nadu have largely been a result of its long tradition of formal schooling. Tamil Nadu is way ahead in the education field compared to many other major states of Indian Union. Tamil Nadu's Human Development Index (HDI) was 0.657 as compared to 0.571 for India as a whole. Increasing literacy levels in the state has also contributed to a positive demographic transformation in the state. Tamil Nadu has been ranked No. 1 by the Economic Freedom Rankings for the States of India. Possessing the fourth largest economy of \$ 98 billion among states in India, Tamil Nadu is also the second most industrialised state next to Maharashtra State. Unlike many other states, the economic resources are quite spread out, rather than concentrated in a small industrialised area<sup>2</sup>. Manufacturing and urban service sector growth

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<sup>1</sup> See, The International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC) (22 March 2015), available at [www.icmec.org](http://www.icmec.org).

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy\\_of\\_Tamil\\_Nadu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Tamil_Nadu)

is more diffused, drawing upon labour from adjoining rural areas. More people in Tamil Nadu have moved from rural to urban areas the last 10 years compared to other states, according to the 2011 Census data. Tamil Nadu tops the list of urbanised states with 48.45% of its population living in urban areas, followed by Kerala, Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Tamil Nadu has a good rail network as part of Southern Railway. Headquartered at Chennai, the Southern Railway Zone network extends over a large area of India's Southern Peninsula, covering the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry, small portions of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Tamil Nadu has a total railway track length of 5952km and there are 532 railway stations in the state. The system connects it with most major cities in India. Main rail junctions in the state include Chennai, Madurai, Coimbatore Erode, Tiruchirapalli, Salem, Villupuram and Katpadi (Vellore). Such vast network of railways enables easy mobility of people, so also children who leave their homes.

Notwithstanding these developments in the State, regional and social disparities in development pose a great problem for the people in so-called "backward" regions and socially excluded Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. Agriculture continues to be the mainstay of livelihood for more than 50 per cent of the population in Tamil Nadu. It contributes 12 per cent of Net State Domestic Product<sup>3</sup>. This implies low per capita income for those depending on agriculture. Given the sluggish growth in the agricultural sector and under employment for 50% of the workforce, people from the poorer sections are forced to migrate out in search of employment. Poverty drives many families, including children, to migrate to other districts and states in search of a viable livelihood. Girls are especially vulnerable to work-related exploitation, given their low social status and the prevailing negative societal attitude towards them.

Child Protection as understood in a holistic perspective is rather new in the state—there is a good response to creating child protection structures under the newly introduced Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). Tamil Nadu is one of the earliest states to respond to the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) in setting up child protection structures such as District Child Protection Units (DCPU), Child Welfare Committees (CWC), Juvenile Justice Boards (JJB), Juvenile Police Units and Child Help Line in all the 32 districts. (The term for the CWCs and JJBs are over and the same team continuing by extension for last three years). State level structures for ICPS are also set up along with establishment of State Commission for Protection of Child Rights. A full-fledged

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<sup>3</sup> Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development Studies (CARDS), Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, NATIONAL AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (NADP) STATE AGRICULTURE PLAN (SAP), TAMIL NADU, Volume-I, 2009

Juvenile Justice Committee is also set up in the Judiciary. While there is a good response mechanism established through all these above institutions, proactive and prevention measures are not effective. Response mechanism is also ridden with many operational and administrative issues because of the insensitivity of those who are involved in the response structures including police, judiciary and other structures.

### **1.2.2 Children Leaving Homes**

Deccan Chronicle (January 2017) reported that Chennai Railway police's special juvenile police unit had rescued 2,128 children in the past year (2016) with most of the rescues being from Central, Egmore and Katpadi railway stations. Of the rescued 2128 children in 2016, 1594 were from Tamil Nadu while the remaining 534 were from other states. Only a total of 20 of these children had FIR reports filed after they had been found missing. This implies that in most of the cases there is no one to even file FIR for children who are missing. Only 0.1 per cent of these children are reported missing by their care givers. This shows that the 2586 reported cases of missing children in Tamil Nadu between 2011 to 2015 (The Hindu, June 18, 2016, Chennai Edition) is only 0.1 per cent of the actual magnitude of the missing children and only the tip of the iceberg is visible.

Many studies show that the most children leaving homes are from families with single parents, many of those headed by women, and families with conflict between the care givers. 2011 census data shows that 16 out of 100 families in Tamil Nadu are headed by women. In absolute numbers 2.9 million households are headed by women. Out of these 1.7 million households are in rural areas and the rest in urban areas. Adding to the burden of women 8600 such families have at least 11 persons in each of the households and another 1.1 lakh households have 10 members in each and another 1.4 million households have three to six members. Their housing conditions show the poor economic conditions of families. 58 per cent of the female headed families have no exclusive room or just having one room in their houses. This is 63 per cent in the rural areas and 52 per cent in urban areas. This shows the situation of poverty in families as one of the biggest causes for children leaving their homes. Other than that, many other factors such as peer influence, situation within family, schools are also push factors.

This research study is aimed at understanding the reasons for children leaving homes in Tamil Nadu and the processes and challenges of reunification of these children with families.

### **1.3 The Process: Scope of the Study**

Railway Children India (RCI) has been working at Villupuram and Katpadi (Tamil Nadu) railway stations as well as Chennai (Tamil

Nadu-TN) government home for boys towards protection of children who have left home and to reunite them with their families with the objective of ensuring their all-round development. RCI is also working with the communities in Villupuram, Vellore and Chennai districts of TN, through partner organisations to understand and intervene on conditions that push children away from home as these areas are found to be the important source areas of children identified so far. It is stated that 12 to 15 children arrive at each of these railway stations every week. Majority of them leave their homes from urban and rural areas of the districts of Villupuram and Vellore. There are also several vulnerable pockets within Chennai wherefrom children move out of their homes in considerable numbers. Family environment, conditions in schools and social exclusion are the major push factors and the rural districts are source areas for child trafficking with the two railway junctions being transit points. Thus, RCI is involved in ensuring effective reunification of such children with their families. The present study seeks to understand the situation of such children reunified by the efforts of RCI through their implementing partners (IPs). The main purpose of the research is to get insights on the effectiveness of the interventions, functioning of the systems and the positive factors that contribute to children remaining at home and negative factors that push them out of homes.

#### **1.3.1 Objectives of the Study**

- (i) To understand the present situation of all the children restored to their families from the records of the IPs and understanding the current status of the children in terms of their well-being in the family, education, health care and adjustment to community/context through a sample study.
- (ii) To understand the present situation of children referred to long-term care homes– adjustment to the environment of the institution, engagement in education and other development activities and plan for future.
- (iii) To understand the process of referring children to their families– experience in terms of following procedures, engaging with key stakeholders, proactive or innovative approaches, challenges involved and time taken for sending children to child care institutions including the processes involved in tracing of families for restoration.
- (iv) To study factors that influence children’s continuity with family after restoration.

#### **1.3.2 Scope of the study**

RCI has been working in three locations, namely Chennai and in Railway stations of Katpadi (Vellore district) and Villupuram (Villupuram district) in Tamil Nadu State. All the three locations



are major junctions connected to various parts of the State as well the country. RCI's IPs in these locations include-CHES, a government home for boys in Chennai, Scope India and The Hope House operating at Villupuram and Katpadi Railway stations respectively. RSEEDS has been working at Katpadi railway stations before June 2016 as RCI IP. **The reference period of this study is July 2015 to June 2016.**

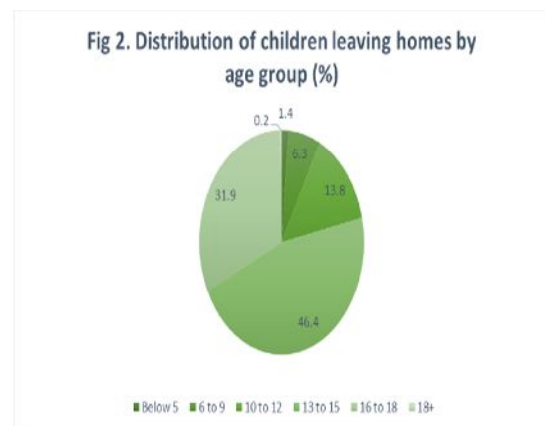
### 1.3.3 Universe of this study

Some major characteristics of children protected and restored by RCI and its partners was drawn on the basis of the child's place of origin, sex, age group and reason for leaving home. This is represented in Table 1.

State of origin	Number of children	% to total children
Tamil Nadu	1121	70.1
Bihar	108	6.8
N/A	77	4.8
Andhra Pradesh	71	4.4
UP	36	2.3
Pondicherry	32	2.0
Karnataka	31	1.9
Odisha	29	1.8
Jharkhand	21	1.3
Maharashtra	18	1.1
WB	16	1.0
Madhya Pradesh	13	0.8
Assam	7	0.4
Kerala	6	0.4
Chattisgarh	4	0.3
Haryana	3	0.2
Gujarat	2	0.1
Nepal	2	0.1
Delhi	1	0.1
Rajasthan	1	0.1
Total	1599	100

Children rescued are from 18 states including Tamil Nadu and from Nepal outside India. Out of 1599 children rescued, about 70 per cent are from within the State of Tamil Nadu, followed by Bihar from where nearly 7 per cent of the children hailed. Other than these two states considerable number of children are from Andhra Pradesh, UP, Odisha, Jharkhand, Pondicherry, Karnataka, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. Out of 1599 children only 145 were girls with 8.3 per cent of the total children. More than 100 of them are from Tamil Nadu followed by 20 girls from Andhra Pradesh.

As far as the age group is concerned, 1.4 per cent of the children were in the below 5 years age group and another 6.3 per cent were in 6-9 age group. In the age group 10-12 there were 13.8 per cent of children. The majority of children leaving homes are in the age group of 13-15 (about 46 per cent), followed by 16-18 age group with about 32 per cent.



The study identifies several factors or reasons leading children to leave the safety of their homes. Broadly, these can be categorised as (i) Family related reasons—have different attributes such as change in family dynamics, child deciding to leave home, disrupted family, children neglected in the family, parents' separation, bad health of parents, parents' mental and physical abuse of children, alcoholic violence at home, extra marital problems of parents, father/mother

deserting the family, father/mother's death, father remarried, frequent quarrels among parents, scared of punishment by parent for mistakes committed, and so on. (ii) school and education related—corporal punishment in schools, uninterested education, dislike for the school and pressure from teachers are reasons relating to schools due to which children might leave their homes. (iii) Over 400 children (25%) of all the children were either unaccompanied children or the came to the city for sightseeing on their own. (iv) Another 8 per cent of the children stated that they came to the city to meet/look for their relatives.

Prominently, the reasons for children leaving homes are family related (14.5%), poor economic conditions, poverty at home (9.5%), peer group influence (5.9%), Education and school related (4.4%), Child labour (3.9%), children missing or lost way (1.6%) and orphaned children (1.9%). The MR and special children without care givers are less than 1 per cent. There are also children reporting to have left homes to meet their friends, relatives, lovers; experiencing city life, forced child marriage, forced labour and sexual abuse.

It is easy to analyse from the data that most children leaving homes comprise of adolescent boys, for reasons varying between family issues, schools, peer group influence and child labour. The study is focused on children leaving from or found at railways stations in **Tamil Nadu. The universe for the study is 1121 children who are from various districts of Tamil Nadu, rescued by the four organisations.**

Reasons for leaving home	No. of children	% to total
Sightseeing and unaccompanied +157 +9.8	401	25.1
<b>Family related reasons</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>14.5</b>
Poverty at home	152	9.5
To meet relatives	127	8.0
Peer group influence	94	5.9
Education and school related pressures	71	4.4
Child labour	63	3.9
Orphaned children	30	1.9
Missing - lost way	25	1.6
Runaway	11	0.7
MR and special Children without care	9	0.6
Abandoned	7	0.4
Addiction among children	5	0.3
Begging	4	0.3
To meet the lover	4	0.3
Child marriage	3	0.2
Abducted and trafficked by broker	2	0.1
Sexual Abuse	1	0.1
Street kid	1	0.1
Information not available	357	22.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1599</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 1.3.4 Methodology of the study

Detailed discussions were held with the partner agencies about their scope and method of work and the list of children was collected. The total number of children protected by the four-partner organisation amount to 1599 cases of which only 1121 belong to Tamil Nadu. Out of these, for 21 children not all information could be ascertained at the time of the research and therefore, is not part of the universe. **For this study the universe is 1100 children belonging to Tamil Nadu rescued from the stations and other places who were mostly reunified with their families.** 10 per cent of these children are selected on a stratified random sampling basis for the field study. Telephonic

follow ups and interviews with stakeholders such as DCPU, CWC, RPF, GPF and Child helpline Station Superintendents, GRP and RPF representatives and community group members were interviewed during the study through structured questionnaires, focus group discussions and interactions. The study commissioned by Railway Children India was launched in February 2017 and finalised in July 2017.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE DEMOGRAPHIC OF CHILDREN LEAVING HOMES

Railway Children India (RCI) has been working in Villupuram and Katpadi (Tamil Nadu) railway stations as well as Chennai (Tamil Nadu-TN) government home for boys towards identification of children who are away from home and to reunite them with their families with the objective of ensuring their all-round development. RCI is also working with communities in Villupuram, Vellore and Chennai districts of TN through partner organisations to understand and intervene on conditions that

push children away from home as these areas are found to be the important source areas of children identified so far.

In this chapter, attempt is made, through a comprehensive analysis of data to understand the possible reasons for children leaving their homes- to see how socio-economic conditions and the vulnerability of communities space out as factors contributing to children leaving homes.

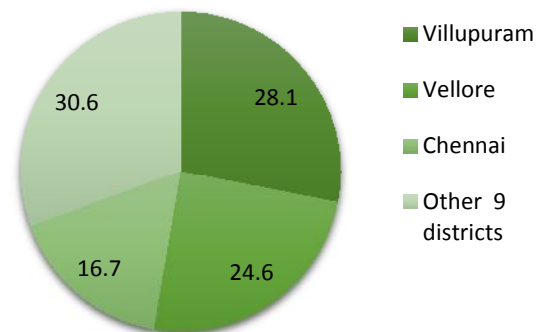
### 2.1 Percentage of children leaving homes in districts of Tamil Nadu:

As can be seen from Figure 4, most of the children protected are from three locations, namely Villupuram and Katpadi railway stations and in Chennai are from the same districts such as Chennai, Villupuram and Vellore. It can also be assessed that the children are leaving their homes in both urban and rural areas.

### 2.2 Classification by age group

Table 5 shows that only 10.5 per cent of the children leaving homes

**Figure 4: Percentage of children protected from districts in Tamil Nadu**



**Table 5 Distribution of sample children by rural/urban, gender and age group**

Description	Rural	%	Urban	%	Total	%
<b>Male</b>	53	91.4	49	87.5	102	89.5
<b>Female</b>	5	8.6	7	12.5	12	10.5
<b>Total</b>	58	100	56	100	114	100
<b>Age group wise classification</b>						
0-5	1	1.7			1	0.9
6-9	1	1.7	3	5.4	4	3.5
10-14	10	17.3	27	48.2	37	32.5
15-18	46	79.3	26	46.4	72	63.1
<b>Total</b>	58	100	56	100	114	100

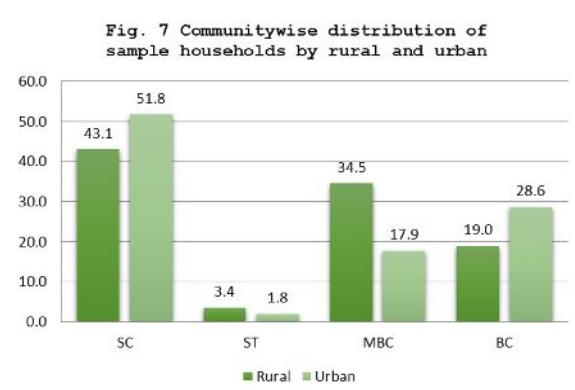
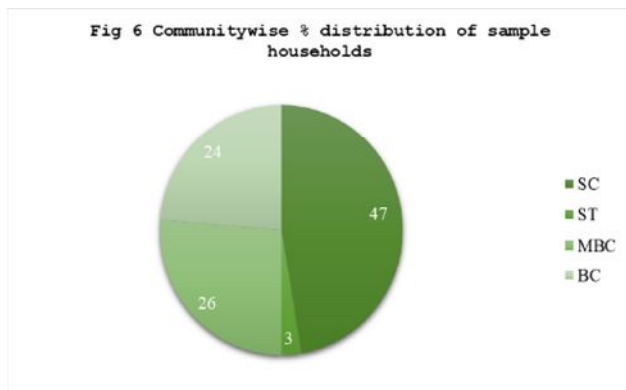
were female. This is slightly more in urban areas than the rural areas. Studies on trafficking and street children show that there are more girls than boys who are living on the streets and are trafficked. It is also found that most of children are above ten years. 5 children were below 9 years accounting for 4.4 per cent of the all the children (including one boy aged 5 years). Of the remaining children, while 32.5 per cent of the children were in the age group of 10-14 (10-12 and 13-14 are in equal proportion), majority of the children are from 15-18 age group accounting for around 63 per cent of the children. In rural areas most of these children, around 80 per cent, are in the age group of 15-18 years and it is about 17 per cent for the children in the age group of 10-14 years. It shows that most children in the age group of 15-18 years than 10-14 years in the rural areas are leaving their homes. Whereas, in urban areas the proportion of children leaving homes in 10-14 years and 15-18 years are almost equal. This could be because of the higher exposure of urban children to the outside world and easy transport facilities. While considering the children who are below 9 years, it raises the curiosity to see why such young children leave from their homes.

We can try to understand some of these reasons by studying the background of the children interviewed. For instance, in one of the case studies, a 5-year-old boy, Anup (name changed) living with his family in Katpadi and studying in first standard was found by RSEEDS NGO near Katpadi. The child claimed he had no interest in school. In another similar examples, Arun (7) and Devika had wandered away from home and were protected by RCI partner. All these were missing cases. It can be assumed that in cases of children below 10 years, are mostly cases where children are missing and have got lost instead of having intentionally left home.

### 2.3 Socio-economic and demographic background of the households

#### 2.3.1 Community background of the households

When we look at the community wise distribution of households,



majority of the sample

households, 47 per cent are from SC community. As per the 2011 census data, SC population in Tamil Nadu State constituted 20 per cent of the total population and ST population constituted 1.1 per cent of the State population. However, a very high proportion of children as shown in figure 6 show that children from SC community having left homes is highest. Similarly, the proportion of sample households among ST population is 3 per cent compared to proportion of 1.1 per cent to the State population. Thus, SC and ST households alone constitute 50 per cent of the households of children. Added to this is the most backward castes (MBCs) with another 26 per cent. It shows that most of the vulnerable children are in the households with the low social status. While SC households are majority in almost all the districts, ST households are found only in Vellore and Thiruvallur districts. MBC is the second major community in all districts next to SC community.

Figure 7 shows 52 of urban sample households belong to SCs community compared to 43 per cent in rural areas. ST households are nearly twice the proportion in rural areas compared to urban areas. MBC community children are more in rural areas (nearly two times as that of urban areas) where children are much less in rural areas compared to urban areas.

2.3.2 Demographic features of the sample households:

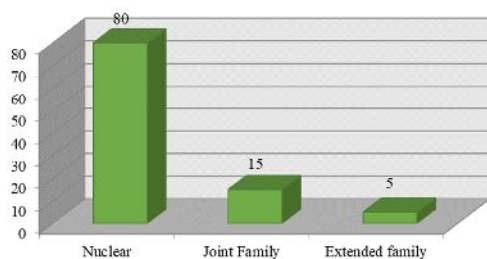
As per table 8, the total population of the 114 sample households accounted for 504 of which nearly 55 percent were rural and 45 per cent were urban. Male population constituted about 58 per cent and female population of 42 per cent. It can be concluded from the analysis that more (10%) number of children from rural areas as compared to urban households are leaving homes.

Rural / Urban	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Rural	158	31.3	118	23.4	276	54.8
Urban	133	26.4	95	18.8	228	45.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>291</b>	<b>57.7</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>42.3</b>	<b>504</b>	<b>100.0</b>

2.3.3 Family type of the sample households

Most of the studies on missing children, while discussing about the family factors, have not taken into account the family type. In general, most of the problems faced by children are due to breaking of joint families as shown in many studies on child protection issues. In our sample we found that a preponderant majority of the households are nuclear type families accounting for 80 per cent of the total households. While 15 per cent of the families are joint families and the rest are extended families where children living with care givers other than their biological parents as seen in our sample (see fig 9). Nuclear families with absence of either the father or the mother (and with step mother or step

Table 9 Percentage of sample households by family type



families and the rest are extended families where children living with care givers other than their biological parents as seen in our sample (see fig 9). Nuclear families with absence of either the father or the mother (and with step mother or step



father) children become vulnerable. A majority of the households being nuclear with other family problems is a great contributing factor for children leaving homes. This trend is similar in almost all the districts.

It is generally understood that children in women headed households

Marital status of heads	Male	% to total households	Female	% to total households	Total households	% to total households
Married	83	87.4	1	5.3	84	73.7
Unmarried	0		1	5.3	1	0.9
Widower/Widow	10	10.5	13	68.4	23	20.2
Deserted	1	1.1	2	10.5	3	2.6
Relatives	0	0.0	2	10.5	2	1.7
Child headed	1	1.1	0	0.0	1	0.9
	95	100.0	19	100.0	114	100.0

are more vulnerable compared to households where both parents are present. Out of 114 households in 84 households (73.7%) both parents were available (in one household as the male is physically challenged the female married with husband alive is the head of the family). Following

this in 23 families, 10 male heads are widowers and 13 female heads are widows thus, in 20.2% of the households, single fathers or single mothers are heading the family. As per the data, it can be concluded that children leave homes in majority of the cases even when both parents are alive. Only in one fourth of the cases children leave single male or female headed households (see table 10).

There are many studies showing that in India at present, with the demographic transition and home to the largest number of adolescents in the World (243 million out of 1.2 billion), adolescent children are at crossroads due to lack of programmes to address their needs. Adolescence is a stage in the life cycle when individuals undergo major physical and emotional changes. It is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood marked by a significant growth spurt (the second highest after the first year of life), accompanied by hormonal changes and sexual maturation. For adolescent girls, menstruation begins—preparing them for motherhood, which brings its own risks and complications, which adolescent girls are hesitant to discuss. Adolescence is also a period of psychosocial, cognitive and behavioural maturation. These are years of experimentation and risk taking, of giving into negative peer pressure related to substance use and sexual risk taking. Whether or not adolescents can achieve their development potential is determined to a large extent by their social environment, economic factors and environmental impacts.

Despite representing a large proportion of the population, adolescents are widely excluded from decisions that affect them, have limited access to information on issues affecting their lives, and have limited spaces and opportunities to acquire and share knowledge and to participate actively in decision-making processes. Adolescents are largely invisible as citizens. Further, there is a

lack of essential adolescent friendly services that could guide and support their development and transition to adulthood.

Thus, the large presence of adolescents in the sample population and their given poor socio-economic conditions, make them more vulnerable than the general adolescent population. In other words, adolescents with such socio-economic background are more likely to leave their homes than others. This is a result of unaddressed issues and lack of institutional mechanism to address them.

#### 2.3.4 Education

Out of 114 children covered in this study, we found that only around half of them were continuing their studies. All children in the age group of up to 9 years and nearly 95 per cent of children in the age group of 10-12 were in school. In the 13-15 age group around 69 per cent of the children were in school and in 16-18 years only less than one third of the children were continuing their studies. Though all the 114 children had been to school, 50% of them had dropped out of school at the time of the study. 6.3 per cent of the children in the 13-15 age group and about 30 per cent of the children in 16-18 age groups were working. Overall 16.7 per cent of the sample children were full time workers. Nearly 28 per cent of the children were found to be idle at home—neither in school nor in work. This is the most vulnerable category. If we take the age groups, nearly 40 per cent of children in 16-18 years are idle and it is 25 per cent for the children in 13-15 years and around six per cent in 10-12 years. Being older to go back to school, they all drop out and either work or keep idle. This is a very crucial issue for intervention in terms of providing opportunities for skill development and de-addiction counselling for older children to rehabilitate them to grow to their full potential.

Age	Currently what are doing for children						Total
	Working		Studying		Idle		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Upto 9 Yrs	0	0	6	100.0	0	0	6
10-12 Yrs	0	0	17	94.4	1	5.6	18
13-15 Yrs	2	6.3	22	68.8	8	25.0	32
16-18 Yrs	17	29.3	18	31.0	23	39.7	58
Total	19	16.7	63	55.3	32	28.1	114

Further findings on school related issues reveal that 50 per cent of the children who were studying had school related problems. Out of 63 children going to school, only 73 per cent could manage to attend school regularly. Remaining 23 per cent of faced issues of school pressure, etc.

#### 2.3.5 Occupational classification and income levels

Out of 114 children who were reunited with their families, 19 of them are now full-time workers. Of them 12 are working in industrial employment (on contract), two are in construction, two are in hawking, two in other services and one working as agricultural labourer.

Low literacy levels, poor housing and unstable employment is the characteristic feature of the sample households that are studied. However, this alone cannot be attributed to the phenomenon of children leaving their homes. Income and family stability influences the family stability and the way children are cared for. Inadequate parental care/abusive situation and the conditions in schooling are the reasons cited by children.

#### 2.3.6 Status of social protection by the government and other sources

One may wonder what is happening to the social protection schemes offered by the state for strengthening the poor families. According to performance budget 2017-18 of the Social Welfare and Nutritious Meal Programme Department of Government of Tamil Nadu, the total number of beneficiaries of various social security schemes of the State Government has come down over the last three years. From 36.24 lakh beneficiaries during 2013-14 it has come down to 29.75 lakhs during 2017 under various social welfare schemes. Not surprisingly, most of the sample households have not availed any social protection scheme in the given context. From our sample of 114 households, only less than one third of the households had availed any one of the social protection schemes. The lack of social protection for the poorer sections make them more vulnerable and push them to fend for themselves. NGO support is seen only in three cases in the sample towards family strengthening. Adding to this burden 11.4 per cent of the sample households did not have ration cards due to migration and nomadic nature of the households. Many of them complained that the officials did not respond properly to issue of ration cards. It is relieving to see that 88.6 per cent of the households have ration cards which helps them in getting subsidized food supply. Out of 114 households, 105 (92 per cent) have Aadhaar cards. This would be useful to link with them social benefits offered by the government.

The preceding account about the socio-economic conditions of the sample households clearly indicate that most of the families are in a poor background, mostly drawn from communities that are excluded. They lack access to institutional borrowing and social protection schemes, even lack of ration card in about one tenth of the households indicate their vulnerability. These are in a way contributing to the emotional disturbances within families. Any family strengthening programme should plan for creating access for these households for cheap institutional credit, social security and so on. Let us have a look at the perception of parents and children on various issues affecting their lives and factors that push children away from home.

## 3. FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILDREN TO LEAVE HOMES

In the previous chapter we analysed the socio- economic conditions of the sample households revealing most of them came belonging to poor or socially deprived sections of the population. Most of the family earnings come from informal sector work without any social protection or regular income. Both in urban and rural areas their housing conditions are very poor and especially in urban areas most of them live slum areas without any basic amenities or necessary space for living. Though many families are living in such conditions why in certain families with similar background children continue to leave their homes is the issue that this chapter is attempting to address based on the sample survey.

### 3.1 Parent's and children's perception

There is similarity in the perception of parents and children on why they have left home except in the case of family issues. While the parents and care takers said in 35 per cent of the cases that children left homes because of lack of attachment with families. Whereas the children have said that family environment was not conducive for them to stay back. Both parents and children reported that physical and emotional abuse at home because of alcoholic fathers, in households where there is single parent, father or mother deserting the household and so on. In other words, broken families and for children who have lost both parents there is a traumatic experience at home. Next major reason is the pressure in schools and the lack of interest in going to school. This is a common reason perceived by both parents and children. Almost one third of the children have reported the pressure in schools as the reason for leaving. While about 7 per cent of the children said they are forced to work full time/part time and this has forced them to leave home. This is not acknowledged by the parents to the same extent. While 5 per cent of the parents said peer group influence is the reason behind children leaving homes, only 2 per cent of the children have acknowledged this. In one case, for instance, a girl left her home because her parents had arranged for early marriage when she was studying in school. While these are the perceptions of vulnerable children and their parents, there are about 20 per cent of the children were out of home just for sightseeing and spending their leisure time. Two children were made to beg by their parents and they were taken away by the RPF and handed to CWC. One adolescent boy ran away to the city to become a film actor. A few of the children were searching for their family members and relatives. It is to be noted here that poverty is not cited even in a single

case as a perceived issue of children leaving home, though many of the problems in the family is triggered by poverty.

If we look at the perception of children across different age groups, majority of the problems related to family and school as well as work related pressure seems to be the problems perceived by the late adolescents in the 16 to 18 age group. Less than one fourth of the children in the age groups of 10 to 15 and less than one fifth of the children in the same age group perceived family problems and pressure in schools respectively as the factor for leaving homes. Only less than ten per cent of the children below the age of 9 years have perceived problems related to family and school. Reported cases of peer group influence are very high with 66.6 per cent among children in 16 to 18 age group and it is 33.3 per cent among children in 10-15. It is evident that factors like various disturbing issues in the family, physical and mental abuse, pressure of education and peer group influence affect the adolescents more than the younger children. Thus, any intervention for preventing children from leaving homes should focus more on the adolescent children.

### **3.2 Parents perceptions post reunification**

In 20 per cent of the families, parents were not happy about the children returning home. These are the cases where children were addicted to substances. In Chennai district, about 37 per cent of the families were not happy that their children were reunited. This proportion is again higher in Ariyalur and Cuddalore districts with about one third of the families are not happy with children returning home. The incidence of families not happy with children returning home is high in urban areas than in rural areas. Out of 114 households, one third of the households have reported substance abuse in the family both among adult males and male children, especially adolescent children. More than one third of the children reunited with their families have reported that they continued to face traumatic experiences at home. This is much higher in urban areas than in rural areas. The reasons cited by the children are frequent fight with the parents and between parents, father involves in alcohol related violence at home, problem with step mother, no quality food or freedom available at home, pressure of labour, forcing to beg and corporal punishment at home. This brings our attention to issue of listening to the children about their willingness to go home before reuniting them with their families. In the absence of listening to the voices of children, there is always the vulnerability of children leaving home again. This is also reflected in the current schooling status of children who are reunited.

### **3.3 Schooling Status of children before post reunification**



The study reveals that about 85 per cent of the children were attending school before they left home. However, after reunification only 55 per cent of the 114 children were attending educational institutions. While most of the children in less than 12 years are back in schools, out of school is a problem for older children. Once children leave schools because of dislike they don't want to go back to schools. It is also mentioned that now the children, especially the older children are attracted to consumerism—they want to possess modern cell phones and other gadgets and for acquiring them they want to earn money rather than going to school. Secondly, older children find it difficult to go back to school after a long gap. After reunification, there is a discontinuation in their studies. About 52 percent of the families said that they were unable to give quality time to children. Thus, it seems the major challenge is to see how to ensure children continuing their studies in general and in the case of older children how to ensure alternate opportunities. This also needs working with children who are addicted to substance.

## 4. FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILDREN TO STAY BACK

In the preceding chapters we have seen about the conditions of the families and the factors that push them out of their families. In this chapter it is intended to present the conditions that make reunited children to stay back in the families and pursue their studies or other occupations and the factors that do not bring any stability for the children to stay back.

### 4.1 Before analysing the factors responsible for children staying

back in their homes after reunification, it is necessary to have a quick look from the sample study to see what the current location of such children is. Our sample study reveals that 78 per cent of the reunited children are staying with their families and another 8 per cent of them are staying with relatives. 10 per cent of the children are referred to overnment free hostels meant for SC, ST and BC communities by their parents or care givers. Two per cent of the children are put in NGO run children homes. One per cent of the children is working outside and maintains regular contact with the families and two per cent of them left home again.

It is very clear from the case studies that the phenomenon of children staying with their families is related to the levels of vulnerability of the children. Most of the reunified children were out for sightseeing or missing, with less vulnerable situations at home, continued to stay back at home in a sustainable way.

The study analyses through case studies, the conditions in which the reunified children continued to stay back with families.

#### 4.2 Qualitative case studies were done to understand the factors

that make reunited children stay back at home in a sustainable way shows that when there are caring parents/relatives with a peaceful family situation are the factors enabling children to stay back. There are many factors for children to stay back at home including harmony in the family, affection and care and so on. Children with bad experiences away from home realize the negative impact and experiences outside home. Understanding among the parents and children, availability of attachment and care or supporting persons in the family or outside in the community, children satisfied with the available opportunities are the factors making children to stay back in their families. On the other hand, in families with unstable relationship the children suffer—though reunited, children are still vulnerable to leaving homes in cases where there is alcoholism in the family, lack of care and protection, lack of guidance, parents without quality time with the children (nearly 30 percent of the families in the sample said they don't have quality time to spend with their children). Mental health problems at family also make the life of children difficult. While poverty is not the main factor for children's status, our study shows that children's lives are more unstable in poor households. In these households, mostly there is a broken family with lack of time or skills for the parents to relate with their children.

#### 4.3 Our field research indicates that with or without family

strengthening intervention from outside, in 87 per cent of the families, children were to continue staying back. Here it is worth mentioning the new trends that are emerging in the society in today's context. Due to uneven development within the state and rapid urbanization, millions of people are flocking to the cities in search of employment. This includes both skilled educated people as well as unskilled poorer sections. The poorer sections settle down in expanding slums, mostly work in informal service sector works and with their meagre income they are not able to care much for their children. Children in slums, especially the adolescents, are influenced by peer groups and exposed to ever expanding information technology and consumer culture. Secondly the easy access to liquor and other substances makes them vulnerable. Added to this is the behaviour of the adult males in these families who are also alcohol addicts. This situation is true for about 13 percent of children in the study. This happens because children do not have a conducive atmosphere to grow physically and mentally in an advantageous situation. In the absence of any guidance and life skills education these children's future is in jeopardy.

Such families require a strong family strengthening support to make the children sustain in their families. The family strengthening programmes implemented by Partner NGOs are rather weak. For example, CHES provided family strengthening support in terms of income generating activities for 10 families. Six women were given sewing machines, 3 families were given push cart, and one family is given utensils for catering business. In addition to this one boy has been supported for education by identifying a sponsor. Scope India has provided de-addiction treatment for three children.

Secondly family strengthening is not just providing some economic relief. It requires bringing together multi stakeholders to intervene. The most vulnerable families require not only economic support but psychological and other counseling support. Children also need career guidance and life skills education. This is much needed for the most vulnerable children. Currently the implementing partners are engaged in vulnerability mapping of children rescued and reunited.

## 5. CHILDREN IN LONG TERM CARE

On the basis of the case studies, analysis has been drawn to see some emerging trends at long term care homes in Tamil Nadu.

- The administration of child care institutions and their influences on children differ on the basis of the number of children in such institutions, available funds, perception and behaviour of the management, the quality and extent of supervision, training of staff and monitoring measures.
- Children appeared to have collaborated willingly with their parents to join the institutions, that this was the only way to pursue their education. But as a result, they become passive recipients of institutionalized care services.
- It is necessary that the development of strategies and programs to resolve identified issues, with appropriate multi-disciplinary interventions, to attain the aim of a more holistic approach to child development. It is necessary to appoint and train case managers who can identify creative skills and abilities of children who can fulfil their potential to become productive citizens.
- The impact of the process of institutionalization creates an artificial style of living arrangements for children in institutions, away from their family and familiar surroundings.
- It is imperative to develop child friendly strategies to solve identified issues and search for a more multi-disciplinary child friendly practice.
- For those children with parents and relatives, especially for the poor families, strategies for social protection systems should be developed with community-based support mechanisms

that will enable and empower children to remain in families and grow and develop to their full potential.

## 6. STAKEHOLDER RESPONSES

Tamil Nadu state has been extremely responsive in setting up of child protection structures under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) and complying with the Juvenile Justice Act (2000) (later amended twice). District Child Protection Units (DCPU), Child Welfare Committees (CWC), Juvenile Justice Boards (JJB) and Special Juvenile Police Units (SJPU) are set up in all the 32 districts in the state. Child Help Line is also operational in almost all districts except one or two (there is none in Vellore district). The State Commission for Protection of Child Rights is established and Juvenile Justice Committee is set up. The process has started in full swing only in 2013 and the child protection structures are still evolving, though SOPs and Protocols are in place. While such structures and institutions are established, most of them are just reacting to the issues reported. Response mechanism is also ridden with many operational and administrative issues because of the insensitivity of those who are involved in the response structures including police, judiciary and other structures. Administrative difficulties include regular appointment of human resources for such committees. The State Commission for the Protection of Child Rights was running out of its term and continued without a chair for quite some time. CWCs and JJBs have also run out of their term for almost three years now and the new committees are yet to be in place. In all the districts the old committees are continuing and there is lack of full membership in the committees. For example, the Chennai CWC has no chairperson for last three years. Till last year the DCPUs had the existing government officials posted as additional charge of DCPUs. At present there are ad-hoc appointees to the DCPUs. Their terms are extended every six months. The existing child protection mechanism in the state is a great strength for children in need of care and protection. How far these structures are able to fulfil their mandate towards the best interest of the children, especially in the context of study in three locations is studied. Some of the key findings are:

- Within Tamil Nadu, 50 per cent of the children are reunited with their families within three days of their rescue. This also includes those who are reunited within a day and two. Another 21 per cent of them are reunited within a week. 13 per cent of them are reunited within two weeks to one month. In the rest of the cases they are sent to reception homes/children homes till their parents/ care givers are found. This reveals that most of the children are reunited at the earliest implying that the system is functioning

efficiently in terms of reuniting. However, it is to be mentioned that the quick reuniting is also made possible by the active support of the IPs of RCI project in these locations.

- 42 per cent of the children are reunited with their families by the IPs and another 38 per cent of them are reunited by CWC (by calling the parents /care givers). Among the remaining cases, child helpline and police have played a role. In about 8 per cent of the cases either the family brought the children back home or children themselves were sent back home. This reveals the active role played by IPs and the CWC as well police.
- In both Villupuram and Vellore, a network of stakeholders is established at the railway stations. In Villupuram it is called Railway Child Protection Committee and in Katpadi it is called Child Help Group. This committee is headed by the station superintendent and consists of GRP, RPF, CWC member, DCPO, RCI project co-ordinator and director, protection officer from DCPU, representatives of SJPU, NGO members of other NGOs, and representatives of Vendors, taxi and auto drivers. The IPs provide training and orientation for the group members and frequent meetings are conducted with the stakeholders like vendors in the station. Usually the outreach workers of IPs in Villupuram and Vellore (six in each station working in shifts) identify unaccompanied children or children at risk in the Katpadi and Villupuram stations and make engage with them by comforting them and finding out about their whereabouts. RPF also identifies vulnerable and unaccompanied children at stations. Outreach workers produce the children before the GRP and get daily diary done for producing them to the CWCs after taking them to the DIC located near the stations. Here, a child's needs of food, nutrition, medical, cloth, counselling, etc. are taken care of. Their profiles are taken in a format meant for that and they are subsequently produced before CWC. In some cases where children are found to have come to the station unaccompanied for sightseeing and other reasons, the GRP themselves call the parents and reunite them with families. While GRP files an FIR for all girls, they don't do the same for all the boys. The CWC then decides about reunification or in cases where there is no immediate response, the children are sent to reception home. There are also children who are orphaned and no one to take care. They are sent to long term care institution after sufficiently waiting for response from someone related to the child. Proper identification is done before handing the children to the parents or caregivers. Time taken for reuniting is already discussed.
- RCI and its partners engage with children through a well-designed structure including initial counselling and profiling



of children, meeting their immediate needs and regular follow up of children. There is a rights perspective in the entire process. CHES, however, is not working in the railway stations but all children brought to the CWC/Reception home located in boys' home at Royapuram in Chennai. They have set up their office in the same place. CHES works with all the children who are produced before CWC by Child Help Line, SJPU, DCPO, NGOs and parents themselves. They work towards family tracing, providing counselling to the children and also follow up. There is also an activity centre within this office to make children who are coming in feel comfortable.

## **Government Stakeholders and Reunification processes in Tamil Nadu**

### **6.1 Child Welfare Committee (CWC)**

As per the section 29(1) of the JJ (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000, CWCs have been established and functioning in all the 32 districts of Tamil Nadu. CWCs in general comprise of one Chairperson and four members of whom at least one should be a woman. The committees are vested with the powers of Metropolitan Magistrate or Judicial Magistrate of First Class as per the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973. They have the mandate to conduct the proceedings of CWCs in a child-friendly manner and not as judicial proceedings of court. The findings here are based on the interviews with CWC in Vellore, Villupuram, Chennai and Tiruvannamalai.

CWC- Vellore:

- It takes longer to reunite children coming from other states as they may or may not have identity cards available.
- Inter-state CWC response mechanism is slow. For instance, in Vellore, out of 250 children brought to CWC every year, for 10 children family tracing is difficult. Sometimes, when the CWC Vellore is asked by other states' CWCs to leave the child back at the station obtaining acknowledgement from the RPF. There is no such provision in the act or procedures.
- The CWC in Vellore sees about 400 to 500 children arriving at railway platforms. This has increased because of RCI and partner intervention, especially during summers.
- CWC uploads the details of all children in the Child Track website. This also includes the details of all children in children homes. But this is of no use according to CWC. CWC also gives this information to police. But there is no proper co-ordination on this. CWC inspect homes and participate in their management committees, checking for sanitation, infrastructure, food etc. CWC has not detected any corporal punishment in the homes.
- Many of the cases coming to CWC are child marriage cases. Most of the complaints are either made by the girls themselves or their lovers. To avoid marriage with somebody else, the girls

themselves call 1098, if they are in love with someone. In most cases the love marriages are discouraged by parents because of caste issue. Depending on the case CWC keeps them in the reception home for a few days. CWC counsels the parents as well as children and send them back with an undertaking that they won't marry the girls before they complete 18 years. Once in 15 days they are followed up till they become 18 years with the help of DCPO. If they are studying it is ensured that they continue their studies and if they are drop out suggest some vocational education and DCPO also follow up that. In the context of railway children and its partners, DCPO follows up post reunification for most vulnerable cases. THH wants the phone numbers and addresses of the children rescued and reunited. But the CWC can't give the details unless they get authorisation from the authorities. Most of the children produced before CWC are boys. Girls do come after prevention of child marriage cases and eloping cases. In eloping cases once they are produced in court first and then they are sent to CWC, and if their parents are not willing to take them back they are to be sent to the reception home and ultimately to long term care.

- Tracing the reunited children is very difficult in many cases. At times CWC is not able to trace the families that have adopted children through CWCs.
- CWC's main challenge is tracing the families of MR children. There is only one authorised home in TN for these children.

#### CWC Villupuram

- The process and procedures are same as that of CWC Vellore with regard to intake of children and reuniting. CWC sends monthly report to social defence and occasional reports sent to the court on demand.
- There are five members in the CWC including the chairperson. CWC member said that the Scope India has increased CWC's work load. Monthly at least 30 children are produced by them from the Railway station. CWC gets about 350 to 400 children per year. It also includes voluntary surrender of children from broken families. Most of them are boys. There are many cases of girls related to child marriage. Villupuram district has a high rate of child marriage. During the month of April this year 16 girls were produced in CWC after prevention of child marriages. Social Welfare, police and child help line jointly stopped the child marriage and produced the girls before CWC. CWC counsels them and parents and take an undertaking form them that they don't marry them till 18. CWC in Villupuram has a full time probationary officer, who follows up the cases.
- Children produced by railway children are mostly from within the state. Other state children come here mostly for labour

work. The local children leave because of family problems and education related issues. Local children are counselled and reunited with their parents. Children from other states are sent back with escorts and handed over with the respective CWC.

- While there is a good cooperation among the Intra CWCs within the State, it is very difficult among interstate CWCs.

#### CWC Chennai

- Only three members of the CWC are running the CWC in Chennai. Chairperson of the CWC resigned three years ago and no one appointed in her place. This CWC suffers from lack of proper infrastructures like computer, telephone, proper furniture and human resources.
- In Chennai CWC, about 80 children are produced every month and a considerable section of them are from other states. From 80 children about 30 local children are reunited with their families, while most others who are from other states are transferred to respective CWC. Only 3 or 4 children are sent to long term care. Children rescued by Child Line are not produced first to CWC but to police and DCPU. Only in certain cases they come to CWC.
- The main challenge is the children who come from other states, due to language problem and in certain cases children do not want to go back. CHES has been of great help in counselling children and tracing the addresses of many children.
- CWC faces a conflicting situation with the DCPO in Chennai. It is stated that he is a political appointee and overrules the decisions of CWC.

#### CWC Tiruvannamalai

- JJB, DCPO, Child Help Line, Police, SJPU, Social Welfare, SSA team and NGOs are working together for the best interest of the children in need of care and protection in Tiruvannamalai district. This serves as a good model to other districts. CWC procedures in rescuing and reuniting children are almost same in all the locations studied.
- Of the three locations of the study CWC is with full strength only in Villupuram and in the rest lack full membership. There is only difference in their approach to children. In Villupuram and Vellore the CWCs, though getting good co-operation from other CP agencies, are not willing to take up all the cases of children presented, avoid taking risky cases like special children, and work for quick disposal of children though in some cases children need long term care. Children's views are not respected. However, in

Chennai the CWC has more case load and taking up all the cases.

## **6.2 District Child Protection Unit (DCPU)**

DCPUs set up under the ICPS in all the districts are supposed to be umbrella organisations for protecting the children. DCPUs are mandated to prevent and respond to exploitation, abuse and violence against children. In all the three locations that are studied, the DCPUs are involved in capacity building and training of stakeholders on child rights issues, legal rights of children and so on. They are also responsible for ensuring minimum standards in child care institutions, including hostels for children. They are to create awareness in the community against the social norms (e.g. child marriage) and other harmful practices against children prevalent in the society. They are responsible for creating the CP structure at the village level, namely the Village Level Child Protection Committees and do an assessment in the district about child protection issues based on which they should prepare a child protection plan for the district. Some of the findings of the DCPUs in the state are:

- There is no child line in Vellore and most of the cases are rooted through Chennai and Tiruvannamalai. It takes time to locate the address of children, especially if the calls come in the night time, without access to any transport it is very difficult to reach the child (DCPO has no provision for a vehicle).
- VLCPCs in Vellore are formed but not functioning.
- Most cases of child sexual abuse are received by DCPOs in these districts.

## **6.3 RPR, GRP and Station Superintendents in Katpadi and Villupuram Railway stations**

- Stakeholders at the railway stations work according to the SOP agreed by the Railway authorities and the stakeholders are given thorough training on this. They follow the protocols and maintain proper records for all children rescued. They follow the protocols of being not in uniform and behave in a friendly manner with children. RPF, GRP and the station superintendent and other stakeholders like vendors, taxi/auto drivers work in close co-operation. They have monthly meetings of the child protection committees formed in the stations with the station superintendent at the chair. Both in Villupuram and Katpadi the RPF, GRP and the station superintendents appreciated the services provided by RCI programme that has reduced their burden to a great extent. Station superintendents expressed their happiness to support such noble cause in safeguarding the interest of the children.

- In Villupuram Station there are 15 RPF staff and 46 GRP staff working in three shifts. In Katpadi both together there are 60 staff working in three shifts. All of them are well trained on CP issues and the SOP.

## IN CONCLUSION

- Children are leaving homes in both rural and urban set ups.
- Unaddressed issues of adolescents in general and their mental health status seem to be one of the causes that push children out of their families. This is true in the case of urban as well as rural and across the districts.
- Among Reunited children only 55% were in school, 17% were working and 28% idle.
- A preponderant majority of the workers, both men and women in the studied families are not engaged in regular and protected jobs. 43 % of women in these households work as domestic workers with very low pay.
- Low income, high indebtedness and instability in families are the factors influencing children to leave homes.
- Inadequate parental care/abusive situation and the conditions in schooling are also contributing factors.
- One fifth of the families did not want to reunite with their children and most families did not register police complaints when their children were missing.
- There is a drastic reduction in children's schooling before and after reuniting. Before leaving homes, 85% of the children were in schools which came down to 55 per cent after reunification. Almost one third of the adolescent children had no aspirations about their future.
- Children in slums, especially the adolescents, are influenced by peer groups and exposed to ever expanding information technology and consumer culture. Secondly, the easy access to liquor and other substances is detrimental.
- Family strengthening programme and following the reunited children with a long-term perspective is lacking and is rather very weak and beyond the scope of IPs for a successful family strengthening and reunification of children. It is necessary to understand that family strengthening is not just providing some economic relief. It requires bringing together multi stakeholders to intervene. The most vulnerable families require not only economic support but psychological and other counselling support. Children also need career guidance and life skills education.
- In order to make the Families to fulfil the responsibilities towards their children they may need external support.

- In many families where both parents work, they do not have quality time to watch over their children and community resources for caring is very poor including the functioning of VLCPCs. It is seen that 17 per cent of the reunited children are made to work for lack of resources in the family.
- Unfriendly Education systems push children out of school and make them leave homes. There is often corporal punishment in schools (even in children homes for that matter) and the environment in hostels is not very conducive to children's likings. There is a need to work on education in a sustained manner with various stakeholders.
- Mental health needs of children need to be recognized and addressed. Parents neither have awareness about the mental health issues of children nor have the capacity to recognise it. In many cases of substance abuse, they require interventions in the form of treatment. The family may not have the resources and it requires a special strategy for addressing such mental health needs.
- Even when children continue to be with their families, their life possibilities may not turn out to be different than what was there before. Unless the contextual vulnerabilities are challenged, the lives of many children could continue to be the same even after reunification.



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