



CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING WITH STREET-CONNECTED YOUNG PEOPLE

A case study of Railway Children Africa's work with street connected children and youth in Mwanza, Tanzania, conducted by the Contextual Safeguarding team from the University of Durham.



As part of the [Contextual Safeguarding Across Borders project](#), we partnered with Railway Children Africa (RCA) in Tanzania who support ‘street-connected’ young people (young people, aged 7-24, who live and work on the street).

RCA is part of the international NGO Railway Children, which uses transport hubs to reach and support street-connected young people in India, East Africa and the UK. In Tanzania, we learnt about RCA’s work in and around a bus terminal in the city of Mwanza.

This case study shares learning about how RCA draws on the existing resources and connections in these spaces to make them safer for young people, providing tangible examples of interventions to safeguard street-connected young people from harm outside of the home.



HOW IS RCA BUILDING SAFETY IN AND AROUND MWANZA'S BUS TERMINAL?

Hundreds of young people travel to Mwanza, often alone, to look for means of survival on the street. Many are forced to leave their homes because of economic hardship, or to flee experiences of abuse or violence. For many young people, Mwanza's bus terminal is the first place they encounter when they arrive in the city.

RCA workers engage them in this space and in surrounding areas where young people spend time. These are places where young people might be at particular risk of abuse, exploitation, or violence. RCA seek to protect young people in these places by establishing safe relationships and safe spaces around these young people.

The aim is to ensure young people are as safe as possible on the street and to support them to reintegrate with families or foster carers, or to build a safer life in the local community through finding housing and work opportunities.

ESTABLISHING SAFE RELATIONSHIPS AND SAFE SPACES AROUND YOUNG PEOPLE



Youth Outreach Programme

Outreach workers engage with young people in and around the bus terminal. Through developing trusting relationships by being continually and consistently present at specified times and places, RCA workers can begin to meet some of young people's immediate needs and offer further support through individual casework, youth work and family support and reintegration.



Child Support Desk

RCA have set up a Child Support Desk located at the bus terminal with the support of the government Social Welfare Office and the local police. It is open Monday to Friday with an out-of-hour number. RCA have received an increase in referrals since they set up the desk in 2022 and have highlighted this desk as playing a key role in the early identification of young people who arrive to the city and ensuring they can begin to access the support they need.

The majority of the referrals they receive are from young people referring other young people – an indication that these young people see the Child Support Desk as a safe and trusted space.

The Child Support Desk is used to identify young people, to provide immediate assistance where needed and to then move young people into the various programmes offered by RCA, which include support on the street and reintegration with families or foster carers.



Working with peer groups as a source of safety

RCA work with groups of young people through their Youth Outreach and Youth Association programmes. The Youth Outreach team goes daily to the streets to meet and build relationships with young people, and engages groups of young people in various activities such as awareness raising sessions or games and sport. In their discussions with groups of young people who spend time or live together on the street, youth workers encourage peers to look out for one another.

Through its Youth Association programme, RCA work with groups of older young people (aged 15-24) who live and work on the streets and who are not able to reintegrate with their families or live with foster carers. Youth Outreach workers bring them together to form 'youth association groups'. Youth workers then meet with the group for weekly sessions.

These sessions aim to upskill and support group members across a range of areas – such as awareness raising on health and hygiene, and technical and vocational training to support them to secure earnings from paid or self-employment. The programme usually lasts between 1 and 2 years. Once a youth association group completes a programme, group members have the option stay in touch with practitioners and to mentor new groups. The programme is grounded in principles of youth participation, rights-based and peer-to-peer approaches.

Through these two programmes, RCA facilitate and encourage a sense of solidarity and care between peers. Young people look out for one another and their peer group is nurtured as a source of support and safety.



Community champions

RCA support 'community champions'. These are adults in the local community who regularly interact with young people and are already looking out for them – for example bus and motorbike drivers or food vendors at the bus terminal. They are people that the young people themselves have identified as supporting them. RCA invite them to join their 'community champions' network, explaining to them the important role they play in safeguarding young people. Community champions are offered basic safeguarding training, and they can also join the Child Support Desk Committee, chaired by RCA (described below). Additionally, RCA brings community champions together for a meeting every three months to discuss safeguarding issues in the community.

When we visited RCA we met two champions, a man and a woman. The man worked at the bus terminal and the woman was a local vendor. They told us how the children will come to them and how they offer some direct support.

We reflected on how RCA's approach to guardianship goes beyond community champions acting as the 'eyes and ears' of RCA, the government Social Welfare Office or the police; instead developing trusted relationships of care with young people and offering direct support where they can.

For example, RCA shared with us examples of community champions directing young people to RCA's Child Support Desk or referring them as missing and reporting abuse they witness; but also of vendors giving food on credit to young people; or night watchmen caring for young people who were sick.



Child Support Desk Committee

This committee, led by RCA, brings together key stakeholders that are collaborating to keep young people safe in and around the bus terminal – members include community champions (such as bus drivers and local vendors), the government Social Welfare Office, the local police and local leaders.

The committee discusses safeguarding concerns and develops joint interventions. For example, following reports of several cases of abuse against young people at a bus stand, the committee coordinated an awareness raising campaign which included playing announcements on the bus terminal's PA system and putting up posters to prompt community members to report safeguarding concerns to the police.

Whilst this encourages reporting of concerns, it also contributes to a social norm whereby young people in the space are to be looked out for.

Community awareness raising

Through wider community awareness raising, RCA seek to alter misconceptions about street-connected young people.

They told us how young people were often labelled as 'thieves' or 'drug users', and how many people in the community are suspicious of them and have attempted to disperse them. For example, RCA deliver training to bus drivers to help them shift their perception of young people as a nuisance, instead encouraging a welcoming and protective response to young people.

RCA also conduct awareness raising with the general community to raise awareness about the reasons that lead young people to live in the streets.



WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT ABOUT CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING?

RCA's work offers us valuable examples of developing safe relationships and safe spaces for young people in the community in a way that aligns with the Contextual Safeguarding domains and values.

Crucially, RCA's approach isn't about dispersing street connected young people – and they actively resist calls to do this – but about building safety with people and in the places where young people are.

RCA's work around supporting community champions has shown us what caring relationships from adults in the community can look like, and how community guardianships can help to positively influence the attitudes and behaviour of other adults toward young people.

RCA's approach to bringing young people together and supporting them to care for one another is a powerful example of supporting safety in a peer group. In this sense, RCA's work goes further than what we often see in the UK, where 'peer work' tends to focus on the risks that young people pose to each other, or 'mapping' groups of peers to identify young people who might be harmed or harming others.

Through wider community awareness campaigns and collaboration with the government Social Welfare Office and the police, RCA also inform a more child welfare led local policy and practice climate and improved attitudes towards young people.

RCA's work also targets wider structural inequalities that can be a push factor for young people being on the street, and can make the street more dangerous; they provide economic support for young people and families through business grants and support young people to access education and training/employment.



HOW MIGHT CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING FURTHER SUPPORT THIS WORK?

RCA provide individual support and awareness raising to young people and to peer groups, and alongside this they work to increase safety, build guardianship and change perceptions in the community.

We helped RCA consider how they might connect these two aspects of their work. Increasing an understanding of how home, peer group and neighbourhood contexts can be sources of harm and safety for the young people could help RCA map out their interventions and to consider with young people which contexts pose the most risk and which contexts have the most potential for safety building, and how these spaces influence young people's behaviours and decisions. We have held a number of workshops together to explore the Context Weighting and Peer Assessment tools and how they could support RCA to capture the work they are doing to support safety in peer groups and locations, and to further understand the relationship between contexts and young people's behaviour and experiences of harm and safety.

Through mutual reflections with RCA we have identified areas where Contextual Safeguarding could further support the work.

- RCA told us that young people say their peers create the most safety for them on the street, but can also be a source of harm. Contextual Safeguarding could be used to capture and build on the work RCA do to understand and support safety with peers. RCA have begun trialing peer assessment tools to consider how the groups they work with function, what their needs are as a group and who is looking out for them.
- RCA would like to involve young people in co-designing services. In our work in England and Wales we have begun to engage young people in conversations about Contextual Safeguarding and in systems change work. We are seeing that NGOs are often well placed to do this because of their trusted relationships with young people and collaborative approach to working with them. By involving young people in the design of services, we are aligning with a core principle of Contextual Safeguarding, collaboration, and ensuring that our ideas are rooted in young people's experiences and views.
- RCA is also trialing the Context Weighting tool, to understand which contexts most inform risk and safety in the lives of young people, and where the range of interventions they provide can be best targeted. We supported RCA to apply the Context Weighting tool to one of the peer groups they work with.
- A challenge many services that we have worked with in England and Wales grapple with is measuring contextual outcomes – that is measuring how places themselves have become safer (beyond measuring outcomes related to the behaviour change of individual young people). We have worked with RCA to develop an outcome measure tool to support the organisation to capture and measure the impact of their work on groups and contexts, as well as individual children.

