Lack of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to reintegrate street-connected children

There are a range of interventions to improve the integration and well-being of street-connected children, yet no studies measure integration, education or employment outcomes. There appears to be no effect on and mixed evidence for mental health. There may be reductions in substance abuse.

What is this review about?
Millions of street-connected children throughout the world are at risk of exploitation, violence, substance abuse, and health problems, and are not receiving skills-based education. Interventions to promote access to education, healthy and settled lifestyles, and reduction of risks are intended to give this group a better chance in life and prevent marginalization from society.

What does the review study?
This review investigates the effects of interventions for street-connected children to promote integration to the society, skills-based education, prospects of employment, and health risk reduction.

What studies are included?
Eligible study designs compare outcomes from interventions for street-connected children and young people aimed at reintegration, education, employment, improving health and/or harm reduction, and provision of shelter, versus a comparison group (e.g. shelter/drop-in service as usual). The review identified 13 studies evaluating 19 interventions. All studies were conducted in the USA except one (South Korea).

What are the main results in this review?
The outcome for integration was not measured in included studies. The same was the case for education and employment related outcomes - none of the included studies measured literacy, numeracy, or participation in education or skills-based employment. Several studies measured health-related outcomes.
Five studies investigate the effect of interventions to encourage safe or reduced sexual activity (e.g. numbers of partners, frequency of sex, HIV knowledge, unprotected sex, condom use and rates of abstinence). The results are mixed, lacking enough evidence to support any of the interventions.

Eight studies report outcomes of interventions promoting safe or reduced substance use. The outcomes used a variety of measures in different studies at various times making it difficult to get a clear overview. The overall effect was mixed; some studies report positive effect and the others reported negative or no effect. Three studies investigate the effect of family therapy on substance abuse and report improvements in some of the measures.

Eight studies investigate the effect of therapeutic interventions to improve mental health (including self-esteem and depression) in street-connected kids. In general, there is no significant improvement in the intervention group compared to the control group. In some instances, both groups improved from the baseline. Finally, two studies investigate the effect of family-based approaches on family functioning. No differences were found between intervention and control conditions on most of the outcome measures used.

What was the quality of the evidence?
The quality of evidence was from low (i.e. for risk reduction in sexual activity and family therapy) to moderate (i.e. mental health improvement, harm reduction in substance abuse).

What do the findings in this review mean?
There is a dearth of evidence from controlled trials on interventions to improve integration of street-connected children and young adults into society and providing skills-based education. The evidence from health interventions aimed at engaging in safe sexual practices, and at improving mental health vary widely and are inconclusive as to their effectiveness. Some of the interventions aimed at reducing the risk of substance abuse may be effective. Further research in this area will be useful in understanding the effectiveness of these approaches and validating the effect of some of the interventions that are supported by moderate evidence.