HASHTAG Gulu

POLICY BRIEF

October, 2026



Strengthening Prevention, Protection, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Street-Connected Children and Youth in Gulu City

Executive Summary

Street-connected children and youth (SCCY) in Gulu City face interconnected challenges involving family breakdown, poverty, violence, neglect, school exclusion, substance use, inadequate shelter, unemployment, stigma, mental-health difficulties and limited access to coordinated, adequately resourced protection and social services. Key informant interviews conducted with government officials, probation and social welfare officers, police, health workers, civil society organisations, caregivers and SCCY indicate that street connection is rarely caused by a single factor. Rather, it is commonly the result of accumulated and interacting vulnerabilities within families, communities and service systems.

Participants identified poor parenting, lack of parental affection, domestic violence, conflict with parents or step-parents, neglect, poverty, death of parents, family separation and inadequate supervision. The prolonged effects of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict were also reported as continuing to shape family relationships and household economic vulnerability. Participants further reported that Gulu has several organisations providing street outreach, family tracing, psychosocial support, rehabilitation, health screening, education, spiritual support, life skills, shelter, sports, arts, income-generating activities and family reintegration services. However, these response remains fragmented and heavily dependent on civil society and donor funding. This creates a gap between the long-term nature of

children's protection and reintegration needs and the project-based financing on which many services depend.

Participants emphasised that simply taking a child from the street and returning them home is insufficient. Successful reintegration requires preparation of the child and family, counselling, family mediation, economic strengthening, education or vocational skills, safe accommodation, follow-up and case management. Although referral pathways involving probation, police, local councils, health facilities and CSOs exist, they are inconsistently used. The policy gap is not just the absence of policy but an integrated system linking identification, assessment, referral, treatment, family tracing, reintegration and post-reintegration monitoring. While existing child-protection and youth programmes may benefit SCCY, they do not consistently identify them as a priority population. Gulu City needs a coordinated SCCY strategy and implementation framework with clear institutional responsibilities, minimum service standards, financing arrangements, monitoring indicators and mechanisms for meaningful participation of SCCY.

The 10 priority actions proposed are: establishing a dedicated multisectoral SCCY coordination mechanism, developing and financing a Gulu City SCCY strategy, strengthening family prevention capacity, expanding safe temporary accommodation and rehabilitation services, institutionalising child and family-centred reintegration and post-reintegration follow-up, expanding education and livelihood pathways, strengthening mental-health and substance-use services, establishing a coordinated referral and case-management system, improving data and cross-district sharing of information, and meaningful participation of SCCY. Gulu City must reduce the conditions that push children into street situations, protect those who are already there, strengthen the families to which children may safely return, and provide sustained pathways into education, skills, livelihoods and community life.

1. Introduction and background

Children and young people who live or spend significant amounts of time in street environments are exposed to multiple and overlapping forms of vulnerability. These include violence, exploitation, substance use, unsafe sexual behaviour, poor health, homelessness, food insecurity, educational exclusion and contact with the justice system. At the same time, children in street situations should not be viewed only as victims or sources of insecurity. International child-rights standards recognise them as rights holders with agency, resilience and the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2017).

The term street-connected children and youth is increasingly preferred because it recognises that children have different relationships with the street. Some sleep on the street; some work there during the day but return home at night; others have been separated from their families for long periods; and some move between households, institutions and street environments. A rights-based response therefore needs to understand each child's individual circumstances rather than applying a single intervention to all children.

Uganda's National Child Policy establishes a broad framework for protecting children from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence and promoting their survival, development and participation (MGLSD, 2020). The national child-protection framework also recognises the importance of family and community systems in protecting children. However, the existence of national policy does not automatically guarantee effective services at the local level. The interviews conducted for this study indicate that Gulu City faces significant implementation challenges. Stakeholders reported inadequate financing, limited shelter capacity, shortages of trained social welfare personnel, weak coordination, difficulties tracing families, limited transport and inconsistent follow-up. These statements are from the stakeholder consultations and should therefore be distinguished from findings established by the national policy documents.

The issue is particularly important in northern Uganda because the region continues to experience the social and economic consequences of prolonged conflict, displacement and poverty. Participants linked some current family difficulties to conflict-related trauma and the weakening of traditional systems of collective childcare. These accounts should be understood as stakeholder perceptions rather than as evidence that current street connection is directly attributable to the LRA conflict. Existing research on Aguu in Gulu also traces historical links between street youths,

conflict and displacement, while emphasising the complexity and changing nature of these relationships (Divon & Owor, 2021). The current evidence therefore suggests that SCCY in Gulu should be understood not as an isolated "street problem", but as a child-protection, family-strengthening, education, health, livelihood and urban-governance issue.

International evidence similarly suggests that interventions for children in street situations need to combine protection, health, education, psychosocial support and pathways towards social and economic inclusion. However, the evidence base remains limited, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, highlighting the importance of locally generated evidence and continuous evaluation (Coren et al., 2016).

2. Methodology

The policy brief draws on a combination of desk review and stakeholder consultations. The review considered relevant child protection policies and legislation, international standards on children in street situations, available research on street-connected children and youths, and relevant programme and service delivery evidence.

Primary qualitative evidence was generated through key informant (KII) stakeholder interviews with stakeholders involved in the prevention, protection, rehabilitation, health, social welfare, policing, livelihoods and reintegration of street-connected children and youth in Gulu City. Interviews included representation from civil society organisations and service providers, Gulu City and local government, probation and social welfare, police and child protection structures, health services, youth leadership, disability and elderly person's services, caregivers and representatives of street-connected children and youth (SCCY).

The consultations were intended to validate and contextualise existing evidence rather than constitute a representative population survey. Findings from KIIs are therefore presented as stakeholder perspectives and reported experiences rather than estimates of the prevalence of a problem. The analysis also incorporates the perspectives of SCCY themselves. These perspectives are particularly important for understanding why children leave home, what makes street life difficult, why some children resist reunification, which services they trust and what conditions would make reunification/reintegration more sustainable.

The qualitative findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all SCCY in Gulu City. They nevertheless provide contextual evidence on recurring service delivery, protection, family and institutional challenges identified by stakeholders working directly with SCCY. Where participant's accounts are used to explain the causes or trends, the brief distinguishes these reported experiences from findings that can be established through representative quantitative data. This distinction is important because the study did not estimate the prevalence of street connection or independently verify all stakeholder accounts.

3. Current Situation of Street-Connected Children and Youths in Gulu City

The interviews indicate that SCCY's are present across Gulu City and surrounding rural areas. Importantly, the phenomenon is not restricted to children who permanently sleep on the streets. Participants described children and youth moving between streets, families, rehabilitation centres, schools and communities. A City government stakeholder described the situation as serious and noted that rehabilitation centres are too few relative to the need. Another government stakeholder observed that SCCY are found not only in urban areas but also in rural communities.

Participants also noted that some SCCY's may originate from neighbouring districts such as Pader, Kitgum, Lamwo, Agago, Amuru, Nwoya and Omoro. This movement across administrative boundaries creates difficulties for identification, family tracing, referral and follow-up. A child may be found in Gulu but require services or family reunification in another district. The SCCY representatives described life on the streets as characterised by physical violence, unsafe sleeping conditions, hunger and inadequate nutrition, lack of access to healthcare, sexual violence and exploitation, particularly affecting girls, substance use, theft and other survival-related behaviours, stigma and discrimination, lack of education and vocational opportunities, fear of returning home and rejection by families or communities.

One important finding is that girls and boys experience some risks differently. Girls were reported to face heightened risks of rape, sexual exploitation, early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Boys were described as more frequently being perceived as criminals or being exposed to physical violence, arrest and detention. Participants also highlighted the vulnerability of SCCY's with disabilities. Children and young people with disabilities may face barriers in accessing services because of lack of mobility support, inaccessible communication and limited specialised programming.

3.1 SCCYs are not a homogeneous population

The interviews demonstrate considerable diversity among SCCYs. Some have families that can be traced while others do not know where their families are. Some have dropped out of school; others have never attended. Some have substance-use problems, others do not. Some want to return home, others fear returning because of violence, neglect or rejection.

This diversity has important policy implications. A single "rescue and return" model is unlikely to work for all SCCYs. The Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasises that responses to children in street situations should be based on individual circumstances, children's rights, participation and their best interests rather than punitive approaches (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2017). Accordingly, assessment and planning should precede decisions about reunification, alternative care, rehabilitation or other forms of support. Family reunification should not be treated as an automatic outcome, where returning home would expose a child to further violence, neglect or other harm.

3.2 Cross boundary movement between Gulu City and the surrounding areas

Stakeholder consultations indicated that street connection in Gulu City cannot be understood solely within the administrative boundaries of the City. Government and youth stakeholders reported that some SCCYs found in Gulu City may originate from neighbouring districts, including Nwoya and Omoro, while others move between rural communities, Gulu City and surrounding areas.

This movement creates practical challenges for identification, family tracing, referral and follow-up. Stakeholders from the police departments reported cases in which children provided inconsistent information about their place of origin, while limited transport and operational resources made repeated cross-district tracing difficult. In some cases, children could not be successfully reunited with their families because their identity or place of origin could not be established. The policy implication is that Gulu's SCCY response should therefore include a cross-district information-sharing, referral and family tracing mechanism involving neighbouring local governments rather than treating street connection as exclusively a Gulu City affair.

4. Key Drivers and Emerging Trends

4.1 Family breakdown, neglect and poor parenting

Family-related factors were among the most consistently reported drivers. Government officials, probation officers, caregivers, CSOs and SCCYs all referred to; inadequate parental supervision, lack of parental affection, domestic violence, conflict between children and parents, conflict with step-parents, neglect, parental separation, death of parents, failure of extended family members to assume responsibility and family poverty. A caregiver explained that some children experience emotional and physical distance from parents and consequently seek safety, acceptance or survival opportunities elsewhere. SCCY representatives similarly identified mistreatment by step-parents and conflict with parents as important reasons for leaving home.

The experiences reported by SCCYs suggest that children may leave not simply because they want freedom, but because home can become a place associated with conflict, mistreatment or rejection. These findings are consistent with evidence from Uganda showing the widespread occurrence of violence against children and the serious effects of violence on children's development and well-being (MGLSD, 2015). The policy implication is significant: family strengthening should begin before a child becomes permanently connected to the street, with particular attention to households showing early signs of violence, neglect or economic stress.

4.2 Poverty and household economic vulnerability

Poverty emerged as another major structural driver. Participants described families struggling to provide food, education, shelter, clothing and healthcare. Some organisations reported supporting households with livelihood activities because children were more likely to remain at home when families could meet basic needs. One service provider emphasised that household economic strengthening is essential because some children leave homes where parents cannot adequately provide for them.

Economic vulnerability also affects reintegration. A family may accept a child back but lack sufficient resources to provide food, education, healthcare and safe accommodation. Therefore, reintegration without household economic support may simply return the child to the conditions that contributed to street involvement. Economic strengthening should therefore be integrated into case plans where household poverty is identified as a barrier to safe reintegration. Such support should complement, not replace, child protection, education and family support interventions.

4.3 Domestic violence and family conflict

Domestic violence was repeatedly identified as a pathway into street life. Probation officers and government officials reported that family conflicts, violence and land-related disputes can make the home environment unsafe. The findings also indicate that children may internalise conflict and lose trust in caregivers. The Uganda Violence Against Children Survey demonstrates that violence against children is a significant national concern and that prevention requires action across families, communities and institutions (MGLSD, 2015).

4.4 School exclusion and educational disruption

School dropout was identified by government officials and service providers as both a cause and consequence of street connection. Many SCCYs have missed substantial periods of education. Organisations are therefore providing accelerated learning and non-formal education to prepare children to re-enter formal schooling. This is particularly important because education can provide structure, social belonging and future livelihood opportunities. One organisation described schooling as effective because it helps children regain routine and temporarily distance themselves from street-related problems. However, education programmes need to be accompanied by family and livelihood support. A child who returns to a household unable to pay school-related costs may drop out again. The policy response should therefore focus not only on school re-entry but also on retention, affordability, flexible learning pathways and support for children who have experienced prolonged educational disruption.

4.5 Peer influence and street socialisation

Peer influence was identified by several participants. Some children reportedly come to the streets after seeing peers already living or working there. Once on the streets, peer networks can also provide protection, information, income opportunities and access to substances. This may make leaving the street more difficult. The findings therefore suggest that interventions should not simply remove individual children from street environments. They should also address the social networks and conditions that make street life attractive or necessary.

4.6 Substance use and mental-health challenges

Substance use was repeatedly mentioned, including alcohol, cannabis and other locally available substances. A service provider described a comprehensive rehabilitation model involving detoxification, psychotherapy, group counselling, individual mentorship, psychiatric assessment, spiritual counselling, nutrition, medical care and aftercare. The interviews indicate that substance use can both contribute to and result from street connection. Mental-health concerns were also prominent. Service providers described trauma, emotional distress, hopelessness, isolation and, in some cases, suicidal thoughts. Evidence from low- and middle-income countries suggests that multidisciplinary approaches combining psychosocial and practical support may be beneficial among children in street situations, although the evidence base remains limited (Watters & O'Callaghan, 2016). This supports the need for Gulu's SCCY response to treat mental health and psychosocial support as a core service rather than an optional component. Where suicidal

thoughts or other immediate mental-health risks are identified, services should have clear safeguarding and clinical referral protocols rather than relying solely on general counselling.

4.7 Gender-related vulnerabilities

Girls and young women were reported to face unique risks, including sexual violence, exploitation, early pregnancy and sexual and reproductive health challenges. Participants also highlighted gender-based violence within families as a driver of street connection. At the same time, some stakeholder discussions framed changing gender roles and women's empowerment as contributing to family conflict. This vulnerability should not be presented as an established finding. Women's empowerment should not be characterised as a cause of family breakdown. Instead, programmes should promote gender equality, respectful communication, shared decision making and positive relationships within households.

4.8 Technology and social media

Several participants raised concerns about excessive use of platforms such as TikTok and WhatsApp, particularly where young people are exposed to harmful content or spend substantial amounts of time online. However, the consultations did not establish technology use as a driver of street connection. Participants also suggested that radio, podcasts, social media and other communication platforms could be used for: awareness, counselling, peer mentorship, referral information, youth engagement and follow-up. The policy response should therefore emphasise digital literacy and safe technology use, rather than simply restricting access.

5. Existing Responses and Service Gaps

Gulu already has a broad range of interventions. The challenge is less the complete absence of services than uneven coverage, fragmentation, inadequate resources and limited continuity.

5.1 Existing interventions. The KIIs identified the following interventions:

Health and rehabilitation • HIV testing; • Malaria and hepatitis screening; • Basic healthcare; • Medical referrals; • Detoxification; • Psychotherapy; • Psychiatric assessment; • Substance-use counselling; • Nutritional support; • Sexual and reproductive health education; • Spiritual counselling; and • Mental-health support.	**Psychosocial and protection services** • Trauma counselling; • Individual counselling; • Group counselling; • Mentorship; • Case management; • Child protection; • Legal referrals; • Family mediation; • Home visits; • Family tracing; and follow-up.
Education and skills • Accelerated learning; • School reintegration; • Sponsorship; • Vocational training; • Life skills; • Work-study programmes; • Apprenticeships; • Entrepreneurship; • Agriculture; and • Start-up support.	**Creative and recreational approaches** • Theatre; • Dance; • Painting; • Games; • Music; • Drama; • Storytelling; • Peer mentorship; and • Forum theatre.
These approaches are important because they give SCCY opportunities to express experiences that may be difficult to communicate through conventional counselling. *"Creative activities give SCCY's a platform to tell their own stories, build confidence, work together and identify their strengths."* Such approaches align with children's right to participation and expression (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2017).	

5.2 Shelter remains a major gap

SCCY representatives described sleeping in boxes, under polythene sheets and in other unsafe locations. Some organisations reported that children who participate in programmes during the day return to the streets because they have nowhere safe to sleep. This creates a major contradiction: programmes may successfully provide counselling, education or skills training, but the child returns each evening to the same environment that places them at risk. Safe temporary accommodation should therefore be considered part of an integrated protection response, rather than a standalone solution. Shelter services should be child-friendly, voluntary where appropriate, non-punitive and linked to case assessment, family tracing, health, education and reintegration planning.

5.3 Inadequate treatment duration and continuity

A service provider reported that some beneficiaries receive treatment for shorter periods than recommended because of financial constraints. Other organisations reported that children may be rushed through programmes because funding is limited. This creates a risk of premature discharge or incomplete rehabilitation. Evidence from systematic reviews shows that there remains limited high-quality evidence on the long-term effectiveness of interventions for street-connected children, particularly regarding reintegration, education and employment outcomes (Coren et al., 2016). This strengthens the case for longer-term case management and monitoring rather than short project cycles alone.

5.4 Family participation is inconsistent

Many organisations attempt to involve parents through family meetings, home visits and counselling. However, stakeholders reported that some parents do not attend sessions, are unwilling to accept children back or do not disclose the circumstances that contributed to the child's departure. This finding is particularly important because reintegration is not simply a physical transfer from an institution to a household. It is a process of rebuilding relationships and addressing the reasons that caused separation. A family-level scoping review similarly identifies family functioning and household conditions as important considerations in successful reintegration of street-involved children (Goodman et al., 2020).

5.5 Coordination and referral systems are incomplete

Most stakeholders acknowledged that referral systems exist, involving probation and social welfare, police, local councils, community development officers (CDOs), health facilities, service providers, legal-aid providers and community and cultural leaders. However, stakeholders also described coordination as inconsistent. Problems include, organisations not attending coordination meetings, inadequate knowledge of available services, unclear responsibilities, different organisational priorities, weak information sharing, inadequate case documentation, insufficient transport, limited funding and weak follow-up. A City government stakeholder described the referral pathway as a channel that should work from community level upwards, but noted that cases can stall when one actor does not fulfil their role. This indicates the need for a functional case-management and referral system rather than simply a directory of organisations.

6. Policy and Institutional Challenges

6.1 Absence of a dedicated SCCY framework at City level

Government stakeholders reported that SCCY may appear within broader child-development plans but are not consistently supported through dedicated budgets. A City government stakeholder specifically identified the need for a policy addressing SCCY. This does not mean that Uganda has no child-protection policy. Rather, the concern is that existing national frameworks are not sufficiently translated into a coordinated and adequately financed City-level response. While the National Child Policy provides an important foundation, including protection from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence (MGLSD, 2020), Gulu now needs an operational framework that translates these principles into specific services for SCCYs.

6.2 Inadequate financing

Funding emerged as one of the strongest cross-cutting issues. It affects family tracing, transportation, fuel, shelters, treatment, rehabilitation, outreach, follow-up, education, livelihood support, staffing and coordination. The result is a system in which organisations often depend on short-term donor funding to provide services that require long-term continuity. This creates a mismatch between short project cycles and long-term child-protection needs. A City-wide response therefore requires not only additional funding but more predictable and coordinated financing, including clear public sector budget responsibilities and mechanisms for aligning partner investments with the City strategy.

6.3 Limited human-resource capacity

Government stakeholders reported inadequate numbers of trained probation and social welfare personnel. This affects the capacity to conduct assessments, trace families, prepare children for reunification, monitor reintegration, manage cases and coordinate referrals. The shortage is particularly serious because SCCY cases often require multiple visits and cross-district coordination.

6.4 Weak data and identification systems

Participants repeatedly reported difficulties determining where children come from. Some children provide inconsistent information about their identity or place of origin. Others have no birth certificates or documentation. Without reliable data, it is difficult to estimate the magnitude of the problem, identify repeat street involvement, monitor outcomes, track referrals, plan budgets or determine whether interventions are working. A City-wide SCCY mapping and case-information system is therefore urgently required, with appropriate safeguards for confidentiality and data protection.

6.5 Justice and policing concerns

Stakeholders from the police department described SCCYs as being exposed to crime, violence and exploitation. At the same time, SCCY representatives reported that they may fear or distrust police because they associate police with arrest and punishment. This creates an important protection gap. Child-sensitive policing should distinguish between children who need protection and children who may have committed offences. Police, probation and social welfare actors should ensure that children are referred to appropriate child-protection and justice processes rather than treated primarily as security threats. The response should also include training and practical referral protocols so that police officers know where and how to refer children requiring protection, health, psychosocial or social welfare services.

6.6 Insufficient inclusion of SCCY in government programmes

Stakeholders identified programmes such as youth livelihood initiatives, PDM, UWEB, GROW, Emyooga and grants for vulnerable groups as potential entry points. However, eligibility requirements such as age, group membership, documentation and national identification may exclude some SCCYs. The policy challenge is therefore not necessarily the absence of government programmes, but the limited adaptation of existing programmes to the circumstances of highly vulnerable young people

7. Key Findings

- Street connection is fundamentally a child protection and family support issue. Interviews consistently identified family neglect, violence, poor parenting, conflict, poverty and loss of caregivers as pathways to street situations
- SCCYs face interconnected risks. Protection, health, education, mental health, substance use, shelter and livelihoods needs cannot be addressed effectively in isolation.
- Gulu has significant service capacity, but services are fragmented. Stakeholders provide a wide range of interventions, but coordination, financing and referral systems remain inconsistent.
- Reintegration is less likely to be sustainable when underlying household problems remain unresolved. Returning a child to a household without addressing the poverty, violence, neglect, family conflict and educational exclusion may contribute to renewed street involvement.
- Safe accommodation is an immediate protection priority. Children cannot reasonably be expected to leave unsafe street environments when there is nowhere to sleep.
- Family economic strengthening can support reintegration. Where poverty is a barrier to safe family care, appropriate livelihood support can help households meet children's basic needs.
- Mental health and substance use services require strengthening. Trauma, substance use, emotional distress and hopelessness were frequently reported.
- Girls face specific protection and health risks. Sexual violence, exploitation, early pregnancy, and sexual and reproductive health concerns require targeted services.
- SCCYs with disabilities require specific inclusion measures. Physical accessibility, communication and support, disability sensitive case management are needed.
- SCCYs should participate in decisions that affect them. SCCYs identified practical priorities including safe shelter, vocational skills and trusted adults, counselling, fair treatment and family support.
- Gulu City needs to move from project-based interventions to a coordinated and institutionalised City-wide system. Sustainable change requires government leadership, CSO expertise, predictable financing, case management and accountability.
- Prevention requires greater emphasis. The most sustainable response is to prevent children from becoming deeply connected to the street environment through family strengthening, violence prevention, education support and early intervention.

8. Policy Recommendations

8.1 Develop a Gulu City SCCY Strategy. Gulu City should develop a dedicated SCCY strategy aligned with Uganda's National Child Policy and child-protection framework. The strategy should define who qualifies as an SCCY, age categories, prevention approaches, protection procedures, referral pathways, rehabilitation standards, reintegration procedures, post-reintegration follow-up, the roles of different actors, minimum service standards, data-management requirements, and financing arrangements. The strategy should be developed through the meaningful participation of SCCY themselves.

8.2 Establish a dedicated SCCY coordination mechanism. Gulu City should establish a formal multisectoral SCCY coordination platform bringing together City authorities, probation and social welfare, police, health facilities, education authorities, CSOs, children's homes, cultural

leaders, local councils, youth representatives, disability representatives and SCCY representatives. The platform should meet regularly and maintain a current service directory and referral map.

8.3 Create a dedicated SCCY budget line. SCCY issue should be explicitly reflected in City and district budgets. Funding should cover outreach, family tracing, transport and fuel, temporary shelter, counselling, rehabilitation, education, vocational training, family economic strengthening, follow-up and coordination. Public budgeting for children should prioritise adequate resources for the realisation of children's rights (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016).

8.4 Strengthen family prevention and parenting programmes. Family-strengthening interventions should include positive parenting, non-violent discipline, communication between parents and children, conflict resolution, domestic-violence prevention, caregiver support, adolescent-parent dialogue, family mediation and economic strengthening. These interventions should target both families of SCCYs and households considered at high risk.

8.5 Make reintegration a structured and long-term process. Reintegration should include five stages: Child assessment and preparation, family tracing and assessment, family mediation and preparation, supported reunification, and post-reintegration follow-up. Follow-up should continue for a defined period after reunification rather than ending when the child physically returns home.

8.6 Expand safe accommodation and rehabilitation services. Gulu needs safer and child-friendly spaces where SCCYs can sleep safely, eat, bathe, receive health services, access counselling, participate in education, obtain legal and protection support and undergo family tracing and preparation. Facilities must comply with safeguarding standards and should never use violence, humiliation or corporal punishment.

8.7 Expand education and vocational pathways. Education responses should include accelerated learning, school re-entry, scholarships, vocational training, apprenticeships, entrepreneurship, agricultural skills, digital skills, and employment linkages. Training should be linked to realistic local market opportunities.

8.8 Strengthen mental-health and substance-use services. Every major SCCY programme should have access to trauma-informed counselling, psychosocial support, substance-use screening, rehabilitation, psychiatric referral, suicide-risk identification, peer support, family therapy, and aftercare. Evidence suggests that multidisciplinary psychosocial approaches can be beneficial for children in street situations, although further research is needed (Watters & O'Callaghan, 2016).

8.9 Strengthen gender-responsive services. Programmes should provide safe accommodation for girls, sexual and reproductive health services, menstrual health support, HIV prevention and treatment, protection from sexual violence, pregnancy support, gender-based violence referral pathways, and counselling. At the same time, boys should not be overlooked. Protection systems should recognise that boys also experience violence, exploitation and mental-health challenges.

8.10 Establish a City-wide SCCY information and case-management system. The system should record identification, age, sex, disability status, family information, place of origin, reason for street connection, services received, referrals, reintegration status, follow-up outcomes, and repeat street involvement. Data protection and confidentiality must be central to the system.

8.11 Strengthen child-sensitive policing. Police should work closely with probation, social welfare and CSOs to ensure that SCCYs are protected from violence, referred to appropriate services, not unnecessarily criminalised, protected from exploitation and supported when they are victims of crime. Community sensitisation should also address misconceptions that all SCCYs are criminals.

8.12 Give SCCYs a formal voice in policy and programming. SCCYs should participate in programme design, service evaluation, youth forums, City planning, awareness campaigns, and monitoring of reintegration programmes. Their participation should be safe, voluntary and age-appropriate. As the interviews demonstrate, SCCYs possess knowledge about what makes services accessible and what makes reintegration difficult. Their perspectives should therefore be treated as evidence rather than anecdotal additions.

9. Implementation framework

Priority action	Lead actors	Key partners	Timeframe	Core indicator
Establish a SCCY coordination platform	Gulu City	Probation, police, health, education, CSOs, SCCY representatives	0–6 months	Platform established and meeting regularly
Develop a SCCY strategy	Gulu City/ MGLSD	Districts, CSOs, SCCY representatives	0–12 months	Strategy approved and costed
Establish a SCCY budget allocation	Gulu City/ District/MGLSD	Development partners	Annual	SCCY allocation reflected in approved budgets
Map SCCY's and services	City/Probation	CSOs, local councils, neighbouring districts	0–12 months	Updated SCCY and service map
Strengthen referral and case management	Probation/Social Welfare	Police, health, education, CSOs	0–18 months	% of identified cases with documented case plans
Expand safe accommodation	City/CSOs	Health, probation, development partners	0–24 months	Number of safe accommodation places available
Strengthen family prevention	Probation/ Community Development	CSOs, cultural/ community leaders	3-6 months	Number of high-risk families receiving support
Expand education pathways	Education authorities/CSOs	Schools, vocational institutions	6–36 months	Number of SCCYs entering/re-entering education or training
Strengthen MHPSS and substance-abuse prevention services	Health/CSOs	Rehabilitation providers	0–36 months	% of assessed SCCYs receiving appropriate MHPSS/referral
Institutionalise post-reintegration follow-up	Probation/Social Welfare	CSOs, community structures	0–18 months	% of reunified children followed up according to protocol
Establish a SCCY participation mechanism	Gulu City	Youth leaders, CSOs, SCCY representatives	0–12 months	SCCY participation mechanism established and functioning

10. Priority Actions for Different Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Priority Actions
Gulu City Council	Develop and cost the SCCY strategy; establish coordination structures; allocate resources; integrate SCCY issues into City development planning.
District Local Governments	Strengthen probation, community development and social-welfare capacity; support family tracing and cross-district referrals; provide transport and operational support.
Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development	Provide national guidance, standards and technical support; strengthen child-protection systems; support financing and accountability.
Probation and Social Welfare	Lead case management, assessment, family tracing, family preparation, reunification and post-reintegration follow-up.
Police	Strengthen child-sensitive policing; protect SCCY's from violence and exploitation; improve referral to child-protection and social services.
Health facilities	Provide accessible physical and mental-health, HIV, sexual and reproductive health and substance-use services.
Education authorities and schools	Support school re-entry, accelerated learning, retention and flexible pathways for SCCYs.
CSOs and service providers	Provide specialised services; document outcomes; strengthen referrals; participate in coordination; share relevant information safely.
Development partners	Provide longer-term financing for integrated programmes, systems strengthening, research and evaluation.
Families and caregivers	Participate in counselling and reintegration planning; provide safe, supportive care; address violence and neglect.
Cultural and community leaders	Support family mediation, community acceptance, prevention and mobilisation of local resources.
Youth leaders	Promote positive peer networks, mentorship, skills development and youth-friendly communication.
SCCY representatives	Participate in programme design, peer support, advocacy and service monitoring.
Private sector	Provide apprenticeships, internships, employment opportunities, mentorship and market-linked skills pathways.

11. Conclusion

The evidence from Gulu City study demonstrates that street connection among children and youth is not simply a problem of children occupying public spaces. It is a manifestation of deeper weaknesses in family protection, household livelihoods, education, mental health, child protection, social welfare and community support systems. Gulu City already has committed organisations and professionals providing a wide range of interventions. These efforts have created important opportunities for children and youth to access counselling, rehabilitation, education, health services, vocational training, shelter and family reintegration. However, the current response remains fragmented and vulnerable to funding shortages. The most important gap is therefore not simply the absence of another programme. It is the absence of a coordinated, adequately financed and accountable system that connects prevention, protection, rehabilitation and long-term reintegration.

SCCYs themselves described the dangers of street life but also identified what would help them leave it: trusted adults, counselling, practical skills, safe accommodation, education, family support and opportunities to become independent. Service providers similarly emphasise that reintegration succeeds when the reasons that pushed a child onto the street are addressed. The policy priority for Gulu should therefore shift from removing children from the streets to preventing street connection, protecting children while they are on the streets, strengthening families, and supporting sustainable pathways into education, livelihoods and safe community life. A successful response will require government leadership, CSO expertise, community participation, family commitment and the meaningful involvement of SCCYs themselves. Ultimately, the question is not only how Gulu can remove children from the streets. It is whether Gulu City can create families, communities and institutions to which children can safely return and remain.

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Acknowledgements

Hashtag Gulu Initiative thanks Restless Development for funding the Voices of Resilience Project through the AU-EU Youth Voices Lab – Power of the Collective.

Hashtag Gulu Initiative produced this policy brief. Its authors are Ojok Michael, Opio Isaac, Loum Bernard, Wilfred Opobo and Aber Marrion. The contents are solely the responsibility of Hashtag Gulu Initiative and do not necessarily reflect the views of Restless Development or the AU-EU Youth Voices Lab.

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About Hashtag Gulu Initiative (#Gulu)

Hashtag Gulu Initiative is a registered, youth-focused, and youth-led non-profit organisation based in Gulu, Northern Uganda. We work with children and young people in street situations and those in conflict with the law, supporting them to transition from survival to stability, and from vulnerability to opportunity. We were founded on the belief that every member of our community deserves to be seen, heard, and supported, especially those often labelled as troublemakers. Our work focuses on building trust, restoring confidence, and working alongside communities to understand the root challenges faced by children and youth living and working on the streets, rather than relying on assumptions.

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