

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Social Services for Children at Social Risk in Türkiye: An Ecological Approach Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Türkiye signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, thereby assuming an international commitment to the protection of children's rights. Within this framework, Law No. 5395 on Child Protection and the 2024 Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Family and Social Services aim to strengthen preventive and protective social services. However, in practice, significant inequalities persist, particularly in access to social services in rural areas. This study evaluates the challenges faced by socially at-risk children in Türkiye and the effectiveness of existing social service interventions within the framework of the ecological approach. A qualitative research design was employed, and data were collected through document analysis. The findings indicate that children face multiple risks, including physical and sexual abuse, substance dependence, and involvement in delinquent behavior. Limited accessibility to social services in rural areas further increases the vulnerability of these children. The results suggest that improving the effectiveness of social services requires enhanced inter-institutional coordination, community-based interventions, and the development of technology-assisted early warning systems. In conclusion the study recommends adopting comprehensive social policy strategies that integrate all ecological levels to ensure the protection and social inclusion of children at social risk.

Keywords: Türkiye, Social Service, Social Risk, Protective Measures, Street Children

INTRODUCTION

Social work practices targeting children at social risk in Türkiye have been shaped by a protection- and care-oriented approach since the 1980s; however, with the process of institutional restructuring in the early 2000s, a preventive and protective services approach has increasingly come to the fore (Akkuş, 2016). Despite this transformation, the expected level of effectiveness has not been fully achieved due to shortcomings in continuity and monitoring mechanisms in practice. Recent field studies indicate that the majority of children at social risk come from low-income, large, and migrant families, and that multiple factors such as limited access to education, domestic violence, and social exclusion significantly increase social risks (Aktı, 2023; Alptekin, 2011; Çelik, 2019). In this context, it is emphasized that social services for children should be evaluated not only at the individual level but also holistically within family, school, and community contexts (Karaca, 2019; Yeter, 2019).

Children at social risk in Türkiye constitute a particularly vulnerable group requiring special protection and support due to neglect, abuse, poverty, migration, and related structural factors. Various social services are provided to protect these children and facilitate their social integration. By ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, Türkiye undertook international obligations to safeguard children's rights and well-being (UNICEF, 2020). Within this framework, public institutions particularly the Ministry of Family and Social Services along with non-governmental organizations, deliver social services for children at social risk and implement initiatives aimed at improving service effectiveness. These services are offered through a range of programs, including foster care, child homes, and child support centers, with the primary goal of enabling children to remain within a family-based care environment whenever possible (Doğan, 2022). Nevertheless, more comprehensive policies and resource allocations are required to ensure that

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these services reach broader segments of the population and adequately respond to the needs of all children. Within this extensive field, policies focusing on preventive and protective services should primarily target children at social risk.

Children at social risk face serious threats stemming from neglect, abuse, poverty, migration, and other social problems. As one of the most vulnerable groups in society, they require special attention and protection to enable their healthy development and future social participation. Although various social services are provided in Türkiye to protect and support these children, significant gaps remain in terms of service effectiveness, coverage, and the capacity to reach every child.

Social services designed for children at risk play a vital role in their protection, support, and healthy development (Örk et al., 2021; Şimşek et al., 2007). Strengthening children's social support systems and enhancing protective factors are therefore of critical importance (Atlı-Aslan & Sarıtaş-Atalar, 2020; Göçmen, 2024).

The aim of this study is to examine the existing social services provided for children at social risk in Türkiye and to evaluate their effectiveness and scope. The study specifically seeks to analyze not only state-provided protection, care, and support services but also the contributions of non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders in this field. Furthermore, the applicability and sustainability of policies developed to protect children at social risk and facilitate their social integration are assessed within the scope of this research.

Research on group work with children at risk and studies focusing on juvenile delinquency highlight the significance of scholarly attention in this field (Çoban, 2015; Koçtürk & Yılmaz, 2018; Turgut, 2021). This study analyzes the extent to which existing social services in Türkiye meet the needs of children at social risk, identifies areas requiring improvement, and evaluates the effectiveness of social work policies in protecting and promoting children's rights. The findings are expected to provide guidance for policymakers, social work practitioners, and civil society organizations, thereby contributing to the strengthening of practice in this field. Among children at social risk, the most visible and widespread group consists of children living and working on the streets, making this research particularly significant for child protection and social integration efforts.

Although it is not possible to determine the exact number of children living and working on the streets worldwide, estimates suggest that the figure is approximately 10 million. With rapid urbanization and population growth in urban areas, this number is expected to increase further. Children living and working on the streets can be found in all parts of the world, including major cities in industrialized and affluent countries (UNICEF, 2006, pp. 35-41).

Academic studies addressing this issue demonstrate the multidimensional nature of social risk. Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, Hennon, and Hooper (2006) found that children exposed to multiple risk factors are more likely to experience socio-emotional and academic difficulties during early childhood and school transition periods. Parental characteristics were identified as having a significant influence on children's reading, mathematics, and social skills, as well as behavioral problems. Children exposed to early risk factors exhibited lower academic performance and higher levels of behavioral difficulties.

Whitaker, Orzol, and Kahn (2006) reported that children exposed to familial risk factors experience higher levels of aggression, anxiety, depression, and hyperactivity compared to their peers. Maternal substance use, exposure to violence, and mental health problems were highlighted as factors that negatively affect child development and exacerbate behavioral problems.

Eminağaoğlu (2006) demonstrated that children living on the streets may display resilience and positive adaptation despite adverse living conditions. The study emphasized that incorporating resilience-oriented perspectives into social work and rehabilitation interventions could enhance policy effectiveness, suggesting that programs targeting street-connected children should aim to strengthen resilience while minimizing risk factors.

Başpınar (2007) argued that street children should not be viewed solely as a public security issue and emphasized the need for comprehensive and inclusive policies to reduce social isolation, protect social rights, and facilitate social reintegration. The study concluded that existing service models were insufficient to meet the complex needs of street-connected children.

Şimşek, Erol, Öztop, and Özer Özcan (2008) examined emotional and behavioral problems among children and adolescents in institutional care, identifying this group as being at significant risk in terms of mental health. Their findings revealed higher levels of internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, somatic complaints)

and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, oppositional behavior) compared to children raised in family environments.

Güngör (2009) highlighted that despite being of compulsory school age, many children working on the streets are deprived of education due to economic hardship and low parental education levels. The necessity of contributing to family income was identified as a major factor distancing children from education, reflecting broader social, economic, and structural deficiencies rather than solely individual or familial causes.

Bilgin (2009) emphasized migration and poverty as primary drivers of child labor and recommended interventions addressing economic hardship, educational access, women's education, and vocational training for adults. Rehabilitation initiatives aimed at mitigating the psychosocial impacts of migration were also emphasized.

Alptekin (2011) identified poverty, inadequate housing, parental unemployment and low education levels, health problems, and unplanned migration as key factors forcing children into street labor in Düzce. Economic challenges associated with rural-to-urban migration were found to be among the most significant contributors.

Kaplan (2015) reported elevated levels of anger and aggression among street-connected children with substance use disorders, highlighting the need for rehabilitation and intervention programs focusing on anger management and aggression control.

Güngör and Erdurak (2016) emphasized that child labor exploitation is driven not only by economic factors but also by familial and environmental dynamics, increasing children's exposure to risks such as substance use, delinquency, and involvement in illegal networks.

Akkuş (2016) stressed the necessity of making social services for children at social risk more effective and sustainable, particularly through expanding preventive services in rural areas and transforming project-based interventions into sustainable public services.

Recent studies underscore that social vulnerability reflects a dynamic interaction between individual resilience and environmental conditions (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). According to UNICEF (2023), community-based interventions that strengthen family resilience contribute to reducing long-term social risks, supporting the ecological framework adopted in the present study.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that the risks faced by children are multidimensional and require social services to be structured in a more comprehensive and effective manner. Although existing research on social services for children at social risk in Türkiye has made significant contributions, notable academic gaps remain. Most studies focus on specific subgroups particularly children living or working on the streets while the interaction between ecological levels has received limited attention. Furthermore, the predominance of urban-based research has resulted in insufficient data on rural social work practices. Consequently, social services for children at social risk should be evaluated not only in terms of short-term outcomes but also with regard to sustainability and systemic effectiveness. In this context, the present study aims to examine social work practices for children at social risk through a multi-level ecological framework (micro, meso, and macro) and to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement through a holistic analysis.

The introduction has outlined the purpose and significance of the study, as well as the general structure of the child protection system in Türkiye. The methodology section presents the research design and data sources. The theoretical framework summarizes the ecological approach and its relevance to social work practice, followed by a literature-based discussion of children at social risk and existing social service interventions in Türkiye. Innovative approaches including mobile schools, digital reporting systems, and play-based interventions are subsequently addressed. The findings and discussion sections provide micro-, meso-, and macro-level analyses, and the study concludes with policy and practice recommendations derived from the findings.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study was designed as a qualitative inquiry aiming to examine the effectiveness of social work practices provided for children at social risk in Türkiye within an ecological framework. The methodology section is structured to present the research design adopted in the study, the data sources utilized, the procedures for data collection and analysis, and the strategies employed to ensure validity and reliability (trustworthiness) in an integrated manner. This methodological structuring aims to strengthen the study's internal coherence and to enhance the traceability of the findings.

In this study, a literature review was employed as the primary methodological approach. Gash (1999) defines a literature review as the process of systematically and in-depth examining published works on a specific topic. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) argue that a literature review serves multiple purposes, including clarifying the boundaries of a research problem, identifying new research areas, eliminating previously tested but unsuccessful methods, determining potential topics for future research, and developing insight into applicable research strategies. In this sense, a literature review enables researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current knowledge base while identifying gaps within the field. In the present study, the literature review was further supported by document analysis. Document analysis involves collecting documents relevant to the research topic, examining them systematically, and synthesizing the resulting evidence (Karasar, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Accordingly, the study was conducted through document analysis within a qualitative research design.

Within the scope of the study, the Ministry of Family and Social Services' activity reports for the period 2020-2024, Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) child statistics, and UNICEF Türkiye country reports were analyzed. Similarly, previous theses on children living or working on the streets in Türkiye have also predominantly employed qualitative approaches (Aktı, 2023; Çelik, 2019). The data sources used in this research consisted of annual reports of Social Service Centers, activity documents of local governments regarding child-focused services, and previously published field studies. This multi-layered approach facilitated a holistic assessment of experiences and practices observed across different institutional and social levels (Alptekin, 2011; Erdoğan, 2022). While enabling a clearer understanding of the research problem, the selected method also allowed the integration of both historical and contemporary evidence on child protection and social services. The data generated through document analysis were examined in comparison with theoretical approaches in the literature, leading to a comprehensive assessment of the phenomenon under investigation.

Research Design

The study adopted document analysis as a qualitative research design. Document analysis is widely used in social policy and social work research, particularly for evaluating institutional practices, legislation, and field-based studies. This design enables the contextual analysis of the historical development, institutional structure, and operational functioning of services provided for children at social risk. The research process was implemented in line with the systematic stages of qualitative document analysis proposed by Karasar (2007) and Yıldırım and Şimşek (2016).

Data Sources

The data sources used in the study were organized under three main categories:

1. Official and Institutional Documents: The Ministry of Family and Social Services' activity reports (2020-2024), TurkStat (TÜİK) child statistics, and UNICEF Türkiye country reports were examined. These sources were used to identify the macro-level policy framework, institutional capacity, and regional distribution of services delivered for children at social risk.
2. Local Government and Implementing Agency Documents: Annual reports of Social Service Centers and documents produced by local governments concerning child-related service provision were analyzed. These sources enabled an assessment of the meso-level implementation of social services and the coordination processes across institutions.
3. Previously Conducted Field Studies: The study also drew on 14 qualitative field studies conducted in Türkiye focusing on children at social risk. These studies address themes such as children living and working on the streets, children in institutional care, substance use, delinquency/children in conflict with the law, family structures, and social exclusion. The selection criteria for these studies included being conducted in Türkiye, containing qualitative evidence, focusing directly on children at social risk, and allowing analysis across ecological levels.

Specifically, while Alptekin (2011) and Çelik (2019) examined the migration, poverty and social exclusion-based experiences of children living and working on the streets; Kaplan (2015), Eminağaoğlu (2006), and Başpınar (2007) provided in-depth analyses of psychosocial processes such as substance use, aggression, resilience, and social isolation. Güneş and Kalaycı (2004) and Bilgin (2009) offered comprehensive findings on family structures, barriers to accessing services, and risks associated with street life, whereas Kızmaz and Bilgin (2010) evaluated pathways into delinquency within broader social environments. Şimşek et al. (2008) focused on emotional and behavioral problems among children in institutional care, while Çoban (2015),

Koçtürk and Yılmaz (2018), and Turgut (2021) examined social risk, family relations, and processes leading to involvement in offending from a qualitative perspective. Finally, Erdoğan's (2022) field-based evaluation of Social Service Centers' institutional capacity made visible the structural dimensions of service delivery at meso and macro levels. Taken together, these studies enable an integrated analysis of micro-level child and family dynamics, meso-level interactions among schools, institutions, and local governments, and macro-level social policy processes within an ecological framework.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure was conducted in accordance with the methodological stages of document analysis. First, documents directly relevant to the research topic were identified. Subsequently, the timeliness, academic quality, and institutional credibility of these documents were assessed. The selected documents were then prepared for analysis by organizing them into codable units and reviewing them systematically. At this stage, evidence obtained from different data sources was compared to develop a consolidated dataset.

Data Analysis

The data sources were analyzed using content analysis. During content analysis, meaningful units in the texts were identified through open coding. These codes were then categorized across ecological levels, namely micro (child and family), meso (school, institutions, and local community), and macro (social policy and structural factors). Relationships among codes were examined to generate thematic patterns, which subsequently constituted the analytical basis for the study's findings. Throughout the analysis process, interpretations were continuously compared with the existing literature.

Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness)

To strengthen the scientific rigor of the study, several validity and reliability strategies were applied. Data source triangulation was achieved by using multiple types of data sources, and the findings from institutional reports were cross-checked against evidence reported in field studies. In addition, the analysis process was documented in detail to enhance transparency and replicability. Ongoing comparison between the theoretical framework and the coding/thematic structuring supported conceptual consistency.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted exclusively through open-access official documents and published academic studies and therefore did not include any individual-level data. For this reason, no data collection process requiring ethics committee approval was undertaken. Throughout the research process, academic ethical principles and citation rules were followed with particular care.

1. Theoretical Framework

The ecological approach is a perspective in social work that emphasizes understanding individuals, families, and communities within their environmental contexts. This approach conceptualizes social problems not solely at the individual level but also as outcomes of environmental, social, and cultural factors. It seeks to explain how individuals interact with their social environments and how these interactions shape life experiences and well-being.

The ecological approach posits that the environments in which individuals live physical, social, and economic have a direct and significant influence on behavior and quality of life. Accordingly, social work practitioners consider environmental conditions alongside individual and familial characteristics when aiming to improve life circumstances. Germain and Gitterman (1996) emphasize that the ecological perspective focuses on the continuous transactions between individuals and their environments and the implications of these interactions for human functioning. This understanding requires social work practice to move beyond a narrow focus on psychological or social characteristics and to incorporate living conditions, social support networks, and access to community and societal resources into assessment and intervention processes.

Theories provide a conceptual framework for understanding the world and help explain why individuals develop particular patterns of behavior by directing attention to specific dimensions of human experience. In order to understand the factors that push children into street life, it is necessary to consider both internal and external influences as well as life events as an interconnected whole. The ecosystems perspective is grounded in the principle of understanding individuals in interaction with their environments. As a bio-psycho-social being, the individual is in constant interaction with multiple systems. Therefore, any assessment of human behavior must take into account the systems with which the individual interacts (Koçak, 2020). The ecological

approach in social work is closely aligned with systems theory, emphasizing the interdependence of individuals and their environments.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualizes the ecological system as consisting of four interrelated levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. These levels represent different environmental influences that shape individual development and their dynamic interactions. For example, the microsystem includes the individual's immediate environment such as family, school, and peers while the macrosystem encompasses broader cultural values, social norms, and public policies. From this perspective, social work practitioners must assess factors present at each ecological level and design intervention plans that address these interconnected systems simultaneously.

Within the field of social work, the ecosystems approach focuses on complex and often disrupted interactions between individuals and their physical and social environments. This approach aims to resolve existing problems by enhancing individuals' coping capacities and identifying pathways for growth and development. By centering both the individual and the systems with which they interact, the ecosystems perspective facilitates the linkage of individuals to necessary resources, services, and opportunities, while also exploring possibilities for system-level change to better meet individual needs. The principle of "person-in-environment", a core concept of the ecological approach, conceptualizes service users as integral parts of broader systems and emphasizes reciprocal interactions between individuals and their physical and social environments (Zastrow, 2013).

The ecological approach explains human behavior by linking individual characteristics with the environmental systems in which individuals are embedded. Field studies conducted in Türkiye similarly demonstrate that children interact within interrelated systems at the family, school, and community levels (Karaca, 2019; Yeter, 2019). Consequently, it is considered essential to analyze the situations of children living or working on the streets through a holistic lens that integrates micro, meso, and macro level factors.

The central contribution of this study lies in illustrating how the accumulated vulnerabilities of children at social risk at the micro (child/family), meso (school/neighborhood), and macro (economic and policy) levels are produced and reproduced through interactions with service accessibility and service effectiveness. The ecological approach was selected precisely because of its capacity to explain these multi-level dynamics, thereby enabling the development of simultaneous policy-, institutional-, and practice-oriented recommendations based on the study's findings.

Moreover, by integrating multiple levels of analysis, the ecological approach offers a comprehensive perspective on complex social issues. In this study, particular attention is also given to post-2015 social work practices and the child welfare literature in the Turkish context, highlighting evidence on the integration of ecological perspectives with school-based programs, family support services, and local government interventions. Overall, the ecological approach provides a holistic framework in social work practice by recognizing the reciprocal relationships between individuals and their environments and the impact of these relationships on well-being. It enables social work professionals to remain attentive to environmental determinants of social problems and to develop strategies aimed at improving these conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Germain & Gitterman, 1996). In this regard, the ecological approach offers a robust conceptual foundation for enhancing the effectiveness of policies designed to protect children at social risk and promote their social integration, ultimately contributing to improved quality of life for this vulnerable population.

2. Definition and Scope of Children at Social Risk

According to TurkStat's Child Statistics 2023 report, the population of children aged 0-17 in Türkiye is 22,206,034, representing 26% of the total population (TÜİK, 2023). The report also indicates that the proportion of children declined from 27.2% in 2018 to 26% in 2023. In terms of educational indicators, the enrolment rate for children aged 6-13 at the primary and lower secondary levels is above 95%. However, it is emphasized that school dropout rates and absenteeism tendencies are higher in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions compared to other regions. According to the Ministry of Family and Social Services' 2023 Activity Report, the total number of children who benefited from child services in that year was 166,258, of whom 13,472 were children under protection. Furthermore, 1,099 Social Service Centers (SSCs) were actively providing services nationwide, delivering child-, family-, and community-support interventions (Aile ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı, 2023b). Taken together, these data suggest that the scope of services for children at social risk has expanded, yet regional inequalities and barriers to access remain persistent. While these

current statistics illuminate the demographic and educational profile of children in Türkiye, they also underscore the need to reassess policies and services addressing children at social risk.

The concept of social risk refers to a developmental process shaped by societal, familial, and environmental factors; it encompasses the consequences of relationships within the family and social environment that affect an individual's psychosocial well-being, school achievement, and adaptation during transitions across educational stages (Hablemitoğlu & Yıldırım, 2009, p. 9). Social risk may exert a substantial impact on children's welfare and development. Therefore, the existence of social services is crucial to support and protect these vulnerable individuals. Inadequate interventions may lead to long-term consequences that prevent children from full participation in learning and educational environments; this, in turn, requires social work and social services to address both immediate needs and broader systemic conditions that place children at risk (Bettencourt et al., 2017). Interventions should also be tailored by considering multiple determinants that influence children's socio-emotional competence such as family dynamics, socioeconomic status, and access to supportive resources because these factors play a critical role in shaping resilience and overall development (Knight & Hughes, 1995; Zahid, 2021). In addition, programs designed to strengthen social skills and provide emotional support should emphasize the importance of stable and nurturing relationships, as such relationships can buffer the effects of adversity and promote healthier developmental trajectories for children at social risk (Kurniasih & Alfrojems, 2021; Peth-Pierce, 2000).

Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines anyone under the age of 18 as a "child." The International Labour Organization (ILO), in contrast, refers to those under the age of 15 who work to contribute to the household budget or earn a livelihood as "working children" or "child laborers." According to the ILO's estimates on the number and global distribution of working children, 352 million children are engaged in economic activity (Güngör, 2009, p. 31). Globally, there are still approximately 100 million street children. Such children may be found in Brazil's informal settlements, Mongolia's underground caves, the London Underground, Greyhound bus stations in New York, and tin shacks in Kroo Town, Sierra Leone (Hinton, 2006, pp. 7374).

Children at risk are generally those from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are exposed to a range of adverse conditions. They may face risk factors that negatively affect health, development, and overall well-being. For instance, children raised in families with low socioeconomic status may be more vulnerable to health problems (Akça et al., 2015). Moreover, they are more likely to encounter harsh working conditions, neglect and abuse, and alcohol or substance use problems (Köse, 2019).

The category of children at social risk is broad and may include children who witness domestic violence, experience neglect and abuse, become children in conflict with the law, or are navigating loss and grief (Turgut, 2021). These children may struggle in domains of social skills, which can adversely affect their social lives, peer relationships, and participation in community life (Akyürek & Sipahi, 2022). For children under state protection, the absence of adequate stimulation and a consistent one-to-one relationship with an adult caregiver may constitute a developmental risk (Okur-Ataş, 2024). Children at social risk are also more likely to experience child abuse and neglect. Extraordinary circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic can further intensify these risks (Toraman & Kısa, 2022). Under such conditions, the importance of perceived social support, which can exert a protective effect against emotional and behavioral problems, becomes even more pronounced (Atlı-Aslan & Sarıtaş-Atalar, 2020).

It is frequently reported that children raised in institutional care experience higher levels of mental health and behavioral difficulties than children raised in family environments, suggesting that insufficient support for emotional and social development may emerge as a key problem (Çavuş & Çalış, 2021). In addition, strengthening children's social interaction skills and fostering positive peer relationships is particularly important, especially during the preschool period (Çotuk & Özdemir, 2022).

There are multiple pathways through which children may become at risk. Low socioeconomic status and reduced maternal functioning, for example, may contribute to vulnerability; in this context, secure infant-mother attachment is highlighted as a protective factor (Namiduru, 2024). Children at risk are also often associated with various health concerns. Infants under the age of one and children with serious illnesses, for instance, may be at heightened risk for specific health conditions (Çetin, 2020). Importantly, research on children at risk also foregrounds their strengths and capacity to remain resilient. Some studies show that children at risk can demonstrate resilience and sustain adaptive functioning despite adversity (Durmaz, 2023).

This suggests that assessments should not focus solely on vulnerabilities but should also consider children's internal strengths and resilience resources.

In Türkiye, internal migration and unplanned urbanization processes that began in the 1950s and continue today have contributed to the emergence of multiple social problems. Within this trajectory, the issue of children working and living on the streets gained public attention particularly in the 1990s. During this period, children from poor and migrant families began to be identified as children "at social risk," and solutions addressing street life and street work were increasingly developed. The Istanbul Children's Guesthouse, established in 1990, is noted as one of the first institutions in this field. It was opened to protect girls and boys aged 7-18 who had run away from home or were abandoned to the streets and exposed to multiple dangers. However, it has been reported that the service model delivered under a cooperation protocol among SHÇEK, the Ministry of Justice, and the General Directorate of Security did not achieve the expected success for various reasons (Güneş & Kalaycı, 2004, p. 11). As one of modernity's major social problems, the phenomenon of "street children" is recognized worldwide as among the most serious challenges in large cities. Often understood as a consequence of migration and urbanization, it has become a global social phenomenon and a critical issue in major cities across many countries, including Türkiye (Okumuş, 2009).

Children living and working on the streets are recognized as a social problem across societies, yet definitions vary. Because social problems are shaped by social conditions, lifestyles, work cultures, and family structures, different terms have been used to describe these children. In the early 1980s, UNICEF's distinction between "children on the street" and "children of the street" brought attention to debates about whether children work voluntarily. Today, with advances in children's rights, the terms "children forced to work on the street" and "children living on the street" have become more clearly differentiated (Bilgin, 2012, p. 81).

At present, children forced to work on the street (street-working children) refers to children who are not supported by their families but rather support their families financially; who become distanced from everyday childhood activities such as spending time with peers and family or playing; who typically return to the family home in the evenings and maintain family ties; and who work during the day in places such as streets and marketplaces. Children living on the street (street-connected children), by contrast, are those who live away from adult supervision often in unused land or abandoned housing who have left the family home or severed ties with the family. In other words, children living on the street are those who escape ongoing social problems at home, leave the household, and cannot sustain family connections (Güngör & Erdurak, 2016, p. 12).

While child street work and the increase in the number of working children were initially perceived primarily as a metropolitan issue, the problem has now spread to nearly all settlements. Among the reasons behind this expansion are changes in culture and socioeconomic structures (Alacahan, 2010, p. 134; Alptekin, 2011, p. 26).

Because street-working children are exposed to street-based risks and hazards, they may become more vulnerable to delinquency. Factors such as exposure to deviant individuals, weakened attachment to school and family, deteriorating relationships with parents, or inadequate supervision (including insufficient care and affection) may push children toward offending. The characteristics of street environments can increase children's motivation and opportunity to engage in risky or illegal behavior. Socioeconomic hardship, lack of family support, and social abandonment may render street-working children a high-risk group for involvement in crime. For example, children without caregivers may engage in theft, pickpocketing, substance use and dealing, or robbery in order to meet basic needs. In addition, parents lacking awareness may force children to work to generate higher income, which can reduce children's willingness to return home and weaken their emotional ties and attachment to caregivers (Kızmaz & Bilgin, 2010).

The exploitation of child labor and the problems faced by children living and working on the streets are among the most urgent issues requiring solutions today. In Türkiye, many children enter the labor market at an early age to support themselves or their families. They may work full time, outside of school hours, or seasonally. While some street-working children work to contribute to household income as do children working in other sectors others are completely deprived of family support, are unsupervised, have run away, or have been expelled from the household. These children struggle to survive by engaging in various forms of street work (Zeytinoğlu, 1989, p. 241). The term "abandoned children" refers to children without families, whereas "children at high risk" refers to those unable to meet basic human needs and living in extreme poverty. "Children in street families" refers to children living on the streets or sidewalks together with one or both parents (Hatloy & Huser, 2005, pp. 19-20).

Overall, children at risk are those who are exposed to adverse conditions and are therefore more vulnerable in terms of health, development, and well-being. They may require special attention and support due to multiple risk factors. Research underscores not only the hardships experienced by children at social risk but also the importance of protective factors and children's capacity for resilience. Supporting children's social skills, meeting their emotional needs, and ensuring that they grow up in safe environments are critical for healthy development. The relationship between children at social risk and social work/social services is therefore central to child protection and child well-being, and the literature consistently emphasizes the need to provide services responsive to children's needs and to strengthen protective factors.

3. Existing Social Services for Children at Social Risk in Türkiye

The existing social services provided for children at social risk in Türkiye are implemented within the framework of a range of programs and policies aimed at protecting and supporting children. These services seek to safeguard children's fundamental rights and to support their physical, psychological, and social development.

Recent data from the Ministry of Family and Social Services indicate that the institutional structure of child protection services has expanded in recent years; however, regional inequalities persist. As of 2022, a total of 1,421 children received services in 66 Child Support Centers (Çocuk Destek Merkezleri-ÇODEM) across Türkiye (Ministry of Family and Social Services, 2022). In the same year, the number of Child Homes reached 1,187, and 5,851 children received accommodation, care, and educational support in these institutions. In addition, as of 2024, 7,641 children were living in Child Home Sites (Çocuk Evleri Siteleri-ÇES), while 5,696 children were residing in Child Homes Coordination Centers (Çocuk Evleri Koordinasyon Merkezleri-ÇEKOM) (Alternative Care Association, 2024). Nevertheless, the service coverage of Child Monitoring Centers (Çocuk İzlem Merkezleri-ÇİM) and Social Service Centers (Sosyal Hizmet Merkezleri-SHM) varies by region, and the limited number of centers in rural areas deepens access-related problems. These findings demonstrate that, despite the strengthening of social service infrastructure, child protection services particularly in rural regions still need to be improved in terms of equitable access.

Social services and protection systems for children at risk constitute a significant issue in Türkiye. The main problems faced by children include poverty, substance addiction, and living or working on the streets (Çoban, 2015). In the media, children at risk are generally represented through news related to violence and sexual abuse (Altuntaş & Altınova, 2015). Although Türkiye's child protection system includes family-based care and community-based models, it does not fully reflect the characteristics of practices implemented in developed countries (Yolcuoğlu, 2009). Early intervention programs for socioeconomically disadvantaged children are effective in preventing future academic difficulties and developmental deficiencies (Erdil, 2010). These findings indicate that the existing social services for children at risk in Türkiye need further development.

The foster care model is a care model developed to support children under protection within a family environment. This model is shaped by children placed with foster families, foster families themselves, the biological families of these children, and child protection professionals involved in the process (Certel, 2024).

Child and youth centers, community centers, and family counseling centers which play an important role in the implementation of preventive and protective social services operated under the Ministry of Family and Social Policies (formerly the Social Services and Child Protection Agency) between 2000 and 2010. However, it has been observed that these services were generally implemented within the scope of periodic projects and experienced instability in terms of sustainability. In addition to infrastructure deficiencies such as the number of buildings, physical conditions, and the quantity and quality of personnel, the inability to establish an effective monitoring and evaluation system prevented child-focused interventions from being implemented at the desired level. Institutions that failed to provide sufficient preventive and protective services were closed after 2010, and Social Service Centers were established to fulfill these functions in a more comprehensive manner. Nevertheless, similar problems continued following this transformation (Akkuş, 2016). In particular, community or youth centers to be established in neighborhoods with disadvantaged youth are regarded as critically important structures for increasing children's and adolescents' presence in public spaces, enhancing their social participation, and combating social exclusion (Nemutlu & Kurtaran, 2012, p. 31).

Preventive and protective services constitute an important component of social work in Türkiye and focus on safeguarding children and strengthening family structures. Foster care services, adoption, social assistance, and family counseling services aim to prevent children's exposure to risk by supporting family functioning.

The foster care model is a social work intervention that aims to assume full-time parenting roles for children who cannot receive appropriate care within their families of origin (Certel, 2019; Çavuş & Çalış, 2021). In Türkiye, foster care refers to families who, under state supervision, assume short- or long-term care responsibilities for children whose care and supervision cannot be provided by their biological families for various reasons (Özaydın-Demirbaş et al., 2021). This model aims to ensure that children in need of protection are raised in a safe, warm, and supportive family environment (Çavuş & Çalış, 2021). Institutions providing services in this field in Türkiye are presented below:

Child Support Centers: Child Support Centers have been established to meet the basic needs of children at social risk, including accommodation, education, and psychological support. These centers provide comprehensive rehabilitation services, particularly for children living on the streets, children in conflict with the law, and those exposed to neglect and abuse.

Social Service Centers: Social Service Centers operating throughout Türkiye facilitate access to social services for children and their families and provide counseling and support services in line with protective measures ordered by juvenile courts. These centers develop specialized programs for children facing social risks such as domestic violence, poverty, and migration.

Child Monitoring Centers: Child Monitoring Centers are specialized units established for children who have been exposed to traumatic experiences, such as sexual abuse. These centers deliver services through a multidisciplinary approach aimed at preventing re-traumatization during judicial processes. Psychologists, social workers, and legal counselors work collaboratively to provide holistic support tailored to children's needs.

Education and Rehabilitation Services: To enhance participation in education and support rehabilitation processes for children at social risk, the Ministry of National Education and other relevant institutions implement various projects. These initiatives, particularly those conducted in disadvantaged regions, are designed to increase school attendance rates and to promote equity in education.

Psychosocial Support Services: Psychosocial support constitutes an integral component of social work practice. Services provided for children at social risk or those who have experienced trauma include a range of therapeutic and counseling interventions aimed at promoting emotional and psychological well-being.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Non-governmental organizations provide support for children at social risk across multiple domains. These organizations develop projects and programs to address children's educational, health, and psychosocial needs. In particular, NGOs contribute to social inclusion by offering scholarships, social activities, and psychosocial support programs for children living in disadvantaged areas. In addition, NGOs engage in advocacy and public awareness activities aimed at protecting and promoting children's rights.

Local Governments: Local governments play a significant role in delivering services for children at social risk. Municipalities are responsible for the effective local implementation and coordination of child-focused social services. In this context, municipalities organize various programs, including child-friendly city initiatives, free social activities, sports programs, and psychosocial support services. Local governments also develop targeted projects to improve access to education and health services for children in disadvantaged regions.

Education, health, and psychosocial support services for children at social risk are jointly delivered by the state, NGOs, and local governments. Educational services include scholarships and support programs aimed at ensuring school attendance and promoting equality of opportunity in education. Health services facilitate access to regular health screenings and specialized treatment through streamlined referral mechanisms. Psychosocial support services are provided to mitigate the effects of trauma and to enhance children's emotional well-being, and are typically delivered by professionals working within multidisciplinary teams. Collectively, these services constitute a vital framework for protecting and supporting children at social risk in Türkiye, with the overarching goal of promoting healthy development and social integration.

4. Innovative Approaches for Children at Social Risk

Innovative approaches to addressing the needs of children at social risk aim to go beyond traditional methods and respond to children's needs in a more effective and comprehensive manner. These approaches focus on enhancing children's psychosocial well-being, expanding opportunities for early intervention, and facilitating social integration.

According to the report by Köse (2019), various social support mechanisms have been implemented by public institutions such as the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Interior and by local governments, with the aim of improving the well-being of children at risk who attend disadvantaged schools.

From a global perspective, studies conducted with street children in Undugu, Kenya, have demonstrated that children at risk possess significant potential in the following areas (Dallape, 1988; Ennew, 1998, p. 139; as cited in Güngör & Erdurak, 2016, p. 28):

- Motivation to learn and enthusiasm for education,
- Survival knowledge and practical life skills,
- Experience gained through coping with adversity and adaptation,
- Capacity for individual and collective self-organization,
- Solidarity and friendship within peer groups,
- Solidarity with other marginalized populations,
- Willingness to engage in various forms of work,
- Creativity in leisure and recreational activities.

The mobile school model represents a portable form of psychosocial support and educational rehabilitation services. Equipped with extendable wheeled boards, this system can be easily installed in streets, squares, parks, and informal settlements, providing on-site educational opportunities for disadvantaged children. With an adequate number of educators, the model offers literacy training, creative therapy, health education, and substance-use prevention programs. These services are delivered to children living or working on the streets, school-going children, and teachers. The mobile school strategy emphasizes children's strengths and abilities, encourages self-confidence, and supports children in becoming active agents in their own lives. By offering a safe and supportive environment, the program contributes to children's personal development. Street-based education fosters self-esteem and enables children to make informed choices about their futures, thereby creating opportunities for empowerment and, in the long term, reducing forced labor and supporting school attendance (www.mobileschool.org, 2016; as cited in Güngör & Erdurak, 2016, p. 29).

According to Dimitrijoska (2021), social services for children at risk encompass six main categories of intervention: information and counseling, professional support, home-based care, community services, and out-of-home protection services. These categories underscore the importance of a comprehensive approach to effectively addressing the diverse needs of vulnerable children.

Gedik (2024) defines children in need of protection as those whose physical, mental, moral, social, and emotional development and personal safety are at risk, including children who are neglected, abused, or victims of crime. This definition aligns with the necessity of developing innovative approaches to adequately address the needs of children at social risk.

As societies struggle with the multifaceted challenges faced by children at social risk, it has become increasingly evident that traditional approaches are insufficient to address the complex and nuanced needs of this vulnerable population. Innovative strategies that prioritize collaboration among community resources and integrate diverse service delivery mechanisms are essential for establishing comprehensive support systems aimed at minimizing socio-emotional and behavioral difficulties. Well-integrated programs incorporating parental education, dyadic therapy, and direct behavioral interventions show promise in promoting social competence and alleviating the challenges faced by young children in such contexts (Finch & Hops, 1983). In addition, adopting a strengths-based perspective alongside early intervention strategies can significantly enhance the long-term adjustment of children at risk by encouraging the development of new competencies and meaningful relationships, thereby shifting the focus from solely addressing problematic behaviors to reinforcing positive capacities (Farmer et al., 2010).

Furthermore, engagement in intra- and inter-institutional collaboration not only enhances the effectiveness of interventions but also promotes a holistic understanding of the child by enabling multiple stakeholders to work synergistically toward shared goals, ultimately supporting children's emotional and social development in a sustainable manner (Farmer et al., 2010; Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Powell et al., 2006). Such collaborative models facilitate coordinated efforts among schools, families, and community organizations, leading to more positive outcomes across multiple developmental domains for children at risk.

Innovative approaches for children at social risk aim to complement traditional social work models through the integration of technology and multidisciplinary methods, thereby offering more effective solutions. These approaches enable faster and more tailored responses to children's needs, allowing for early identification of risks and timely intervention. Within this framework, the following practices are recommended for broader implementation:

Digital Platforms and Mobile Applications: In recent years, digital platforms and mobile applications have emerged as innovative tools in social work practice. These platforms facilitate access to information for children at social risk and their families, accelerate access to social services, and enhance service effectiveness. For example, several mobile applications developed in Türkiye enable children and families to obtain information about social services and access needed support more rapidly.

Early Intervention and Risk Assessment Tools: Early intervention is critical for minimizing risks and supporting the healthy development of children at social risk. Innovative risk assessment tools assist in more accurately identifying children's social, psychological, and environmental risk factors. Artificial intelligence-supported systems, through large-scale data analysis, enable the timely identification of children at risk and the implementation of appropriate interventions.

Community-Based Approaches: Community-based approaches focus on supporting children at social risk within their immediate environments. These approaches strengthen the role of communities and local organizations in promoting child well-being. For instance, the child-friendly cities initiative enhances the participation of local governments and communities, enabling more effective delivery of social services for children.

Play and Art Therapy: Innovative approaches also include methods such as play therapy and art therapy, which are used to help children at social risk cope with trauma. These interventions support children's emotional well-being and provide opportunities for self-expression. While play therapy assists children in understanding and managing difficult experiences, art therapy serves as a creative medium for emotional expression.

Social Enterprises and Innovative Projects: Social enterprises develop innovative projects aimed at providing sustainable solutions for children at social risk. These initiatives implement new models and methods to enhance access to education, health, and psychosocial support services. In particular, social enterprises targeting disadvantaged regions contribute significantly to social integration by creating educational and employment opportunities for children.

According to findings from pilot implementations, mobile school programs have increased school attendance rates and reduced absenteeism among school-age children in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Similarly, the implementation of digital notification and risk screening systems has shortened case reporting processes and led to a decline in repeat referrals (UNICEF, 2023). In addition, play- and art-based interventions have been shown to produce significant short-term improvements in children's emotion regulation skills and peer relationships (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Overall, these innovative approaches are considered to enhance the effectiveness of social services and contribute to more sustainable outcomes for children at social risk.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings aimed at explaining the multi-level vulnerabilities of children at social risk in Türkiye within the framework of the ecological approach. The findings highlight not only children living and working on the streets, but also differences in access to social services across rural and urban contexts. At the micro level, family structure, parental neglect, and economic deprivation are identified as salient factors; at the meso level, deficits related to schools, neighborhoods, and inter-agency coordination are emphasized; and at the macro level, limitations in the sustainability of social policies and the inadequacy of data-sharing mechanisms are analyzed. In addition, the effects of mobile school initiatives, digital early warning systems, and field-based services on increasing children's participation in education are discussed. Overall, the section aims to provide a holistic assessment of the effectiveness of existing services for children at social risk, addressing both individual and structural dimensions.

A major subgroup of children at social risk consists of children who live or work on the streets. These children are pushed into street life not only due to economic pressures, but also as a result of structural factors such as domestic violence, neglect, and migration (Bilgin, 2009; Güneş & Kalaycı, 2004). In Türkiye, social work interventions targeting this group are implemented at the national level by the Ministry of Family and Social

Services (MoFSS) as well as by local governments and civil society organizations. Coordination Centers affiliated with the MoFSS for Children Living and Working on the Streets, together with municipal Social Service Centers, provide services including risk identification, temporary shelter, psychosocial support, and family reunification (Ministry of Family and Social Services, 2023a). At the local level, municipalities in provinces such as Ankara, İstanbul, and Diyarbakır operate Street-Working Children Units through mobile outreach teams; these units deliver education-oriented services, rehabilitation support, and family counseling aimed at withdrawing children from the street (Karaca, 2019; Yeter, 2019). In addition, non-governmental organizations such as the Hayat Foundation, the Turkish Education Volunteers Foundation (TEGV), and the Koruncuk Foundation implement field-based programs designed to reintegrate children into education (Karaca, 2019; UNICEF, 2023). Accordingly, analysis of services targeting this population should not remain limited to academic literature; rather, a multi-actor social work analysis grounded in concrete practices at national and local levels offers a comprehensive approach aligned with the study's title and its broader scope regarding children at social risk.

A substantial proportion of street-working children are the children of low-income families affected by migration (Alptekin, 2011). Findings from the reviewed studies indicate that participants' views and experiences diverge across micro, meso, and macro levels. At the micro level, disruption in family structure, low household income, and parental neglect emerge as key determinants in children's movement toward the street. Similarly, field studies conducted in İstanbul and Diyarbakır identify domestic violence, poverty, and disengagement from education as primary drivers of street involvement (Çelik, 2019). At the meso level, a lack of cooperation among social service agencies, municipalities, and civil society organizations becomes prominent. Insufficient inter-institutional coordination constrains children's access to services (Karaca, 2019; Yeter, 2019). At the macro level, social policies are frequently shaped by short-term, project-based logics, while systematic monitoring and data-sharing deficiencies persist (Akkuş, 2016; Erdoğan, 2022).

In Kaplan's (2015) study, children living on the streets with substance use problems were found to display high levels of anger and aggression. It was reported that 67% of the children preferred living on the street due to conflicts with their families, and that 35% experienced violence during the period they remained on the street. In addition, 70.9% engaged in self-harm while under the influence of substances, and 69.9% encountered legal problems related to substance use.

The findings of the present research indicate both the adequacy of existing social services for children at social risk in Türkiye and the areas in which these services may be improved. The review suggests that a large proportion of children at social risk are compelled to work or live on the streets due to economic and social adversities. It is also evident that migration, poverty, and domestic violence are among the most influential determinants pushing disadvantaged children toward street life and labor.

According to Bilgin (2009), the majority of street-working children in Diyarbakır were male (86.8%), typically between 11 and 14 years of age. Key reasons for entering street work included migration, poverty, and traditional rural values. The study reported that 79.2% of these children were exposed to physical violence, while 19.8% experienced sexual harassment. These children also faced risks such as delinquency, substance dependence, and truancy. Coming largely from families with low income and low educational attainment, many children were reportedly compelled to work by their families. These findings suggest that the challenges faced by street-working children are largely rooted in migration- and poverty-related vulnerabilities. A central implication is that children are exposed to severe risks in street settings including physical and sexual abuse, substance use, and heightened tendencies toward offending. For instance, the reported rates of exposure to physical violence (79.2%) and sexual harassment (19.8%) indicate that children confront serious threats while working on the street. The study further suggests that existing social services remain insufficient in supporting children's coping capacities in the face of these risks. Although institutions such as Child Support Centers and Child Monitoring Centers play important roles, significant gaps persist regarding the coverage and accessibility of these services. In particular, limited social service provision in rural areas further amplifies children's vulnerability and exposure to risk.

Family support, high-quality early education and care programs, and early identification of problems can improve outcomes for children at social risk (Oberklaid et al., 2013). In prevention policies and social work practice, a more holistic approach may positively influence children's and adolescents' development by recognizing risk early and preventing it from becoming entrenched (Freiberg & Homel, 2010). Innovative interventions incorporating intensive family support and cognitive-behavioral approaches can effectively promote healthier outcomes among at-risk youth (Greenberg & Lippold, 2013).

Okumuş (2009) reported that the number of street children in Diyarbakır was considerable and that children were frequently forced to live or work on the streets due to migration, domestic violence, economic deprivation, and lack of social support. Predominantly male, these children ranged in age from 6 to 20. While many worked to contribute economically to their households, this exposure placed them at risk of serious health problems and various forms of abuse. Some children had discontinued schooling and struggled with substance use. The study indicated that families often encouraged children to go to the streets while underestimating associated risks. Consequently, the phenomenon of street children in Diyarbakır was identified as a serious social problem, and it was concluded that these children did not receive adequate support from either their families or the broader community.

Regarding the effectiveness of protective and preventive services for children at risk, Özel (2009) emphasized that sport plays a meaningful role in the education and social integration of street children. Sport was found to contribute to children's physical and psychological development and to serve as a strong instrument for social integration. However, the study argued that sport can be effective only when other factors such as family, community environment, public institutions, schools, health services, media, and society are addressed simultaneously. Without a holistic approach integrating these dimensions, sport alone is unlikely to produce the intended impact.

Akkuş (2016) addressed the serious problems faced by children at social risk in Türkiye and the inadequacy of services provided to them. The study highlighted that children living and working on the streets are exposed to severe threats such as physical and sexual abuse, substance dependence, and being drawn into crime. Existing services were found to be insufficient in meeting children's needs, particularly in rural areas where inadequacies are more pronounced. In addition, infrastructure and staffing shortages within child protection institutions were found to constrain the effectiveness of protective and preventive services. The study further argued that the project-oriented implementation of services undermines sustainability, and that child-centered initiatives in the 2000–2010 period failed to adequately address children's needs for this reason. After 2000, the child protection system increasingly shifted toward a discontinuous, project-based structure. Moreover, an increase in the number of Social Service Centers does not in itself guarantee the effectiveness of protective services.

Kaya-Kılı (2016) demonstrated that socio-demographic vulnerability and health problems form a mutually reinforcing cycle of risk within child-family relationships. Findings indicate that in low-income households lacking social insurance, children face a higher likelihood of school disengagement, psychosocial adjustment difficulties, and health problems. At the institutional level, assistance provided by organizations such as municipalities, the Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation (SASF), and Provincial Directorates of the Ministry of Family and Social Services was found to be largely short-term, with structural limitations in ensuring continuity of support. This constrains the sustainability of the social support system and facilitates the reproduction of risk. Accordingly, strengthening shelters, developing mechanisms for continuous income support, and enabling social work professionals to assume a more active role in field-based interventions are recommended to enhance social integration among homeless and at-risk populations.

The effectiveness of protective and preventive services also requires support from civil society organizations. In Yeter's (2019) study, NGOs were found to play an important role in services for street children in Türkiye; however, improved collaboration, resources, and professional expertise were identified as necessary for greater effectiveness. The study concluded that NGOs should develop more holistic service models and that state support is essential to sustain their efforts.

Similarly, Karaca (2019) emphasized that NGOs play a critical role in social policy implementation for children living and working on the streets, but noted that enhancing organizational capacity is necessary for more effective services. Organizations such as the Hayat Foundation were found to contribute substantially to withdrawing children from street environments. Yet, the study underlined that greater public support and resource allocation are needed to ensure sustainability and achieve long-term impacts. It was also concluded that social policies can be implemented more effectively through NGOs' active participation and cooperation.

Çelik (2019) revealed the complex and multidimensional nature of street children's experiences in relation to family contexts, social service institutions, and street life. Domestic problems, disengagement from school, the "closed-door" institutional system, and peer influence were identified as key factors shaping children's entry into street life. The study also found that children often adopted an uncontrolled lifestyle that increased their

exposure to danger. The most fundamental challenge was shelter, and existing social service institutions were observed to be insufficient in distancing children from street life.

Erdoğan (2022) found that social policies toward street children in Türkiye largely emphasize protection and care, while remaining insufficient in education, health, and social services. Legal regulations were considered inadequate in practice, and weak enforcement was identified as a major deficiency. This situation was presented as a significant barrier to children's social reintegration, leading to the conclusion that comprehensive and robust social policies are needed.

Graduate-level theses on street children in Türkiye also provide important insights into the multi-level structure of the social service system. Yeter (2019) demonstrated that NGOs deliver complementary services alongside state institutions, yet inter-agency coordination remains underdeveloped. Çelik's (2019) phenomenological study emphasized that domestic violence, school disengagement, and a closed institutional system are determinative in children's movement toward the street. Karaca (2019) showed that NGOs play a complementary role in relation to public policy, but that this relationship has not been institutionalized in a sustainable manner. Erdoğan (2022) argued that child policies remain predominantly protection- and care-based, with insufficient emphasis on education-focused and preventive policies. Finally, Aktı's (2023) field-based research indicated that poverty, family problems, and migration are leading drivers pushing children toward the street, while risks related to substance use and abuse increase in street contexts. Taken together, these studies suggest that child welfare policies should not be confined to protective services alone, but should be supported by holistic approaches that strengthen family systems, community resources, and inter-institutional cooperation.

Overall, the reviewed evidence underscores the need for more comprehensive and accessible social services to address the needs of children at social risk in Türkiye. Social services appear insufficient, particularly in mitigating the impacts of migration and poverty. The high prevalence of children living or working on the streets raises critical questions regarding the effectiveness of existing social policy frameworks. In this context, the importance of innovative approaches is emphasized. For instance, AI-assisted early intervention systems and community-based social work models may provide faster and more effective solutions to children's needs. Likewise, initiatives such as mobile schools may offer innovative pathways for delivering education and social support to street-working children, potentially reducing the time children spend on the streets and facilitating their social integration.

In light of these findings, there is a clear need to develop broader and more innovative social policies for children at social risk. In particular, expanding services in rural areas and allocating greater resources to reduce children's exposure to risk are essential. Such measures are critical for supporting children's healthy development and enabling them to become more active and resilient members of society in the long term.

These findings are consistent with recent ecological studies emphasizing the importance of multi-level coordination in child protection services (Göçmen, 2024). Unlike earlier studies that largely focused on urban settings, the present research demonstrates how rural access barriers and institutional fragmentation jointly shape social risk. Therefore, this study contributes to closing the urban-rural gap in social policy design. Within this scope, recommendations at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels are presented below.

1. Micro Level (Child-Family Relationships)

Findings indicate that a substantial proportion of children's risks are rooted in family-level factors. According to the interviews, economic deprivation, parental neglect, and domestic violence negatively affect children's emotional and behavioral development. Similarly, Çelik (2019) emphasized that domestic violence, neglect, and lack of communication are determinative in children's movement toward the street. Aktı (2023) also found that poverty and migration weaken family bonds and increase social risks. The most striking finding at this level is the inadequacy of family-based protective and counseling services. Accordingly, it is recommended that family-centered interventions be implemented systematically, that risk be identified at an early stage, and that the frequency of home visits by social workers be increased.

2. Meso Level (School-Neighborhood-Institutional Interactions)

At this level, deficits in coordination between schools and local institutions were found to directly affect children's access to services. Interviews suggest that schools, municipalities, and NGOs maintain separate records for the same child, leading to duplication and information loss. Studies by Yeter (2019) and Karaca (2019) similarly reported that insufficient data sharing among institutions limits the sustainability and

traceability of services. By contrast, in pilot regions where school-municipality-social service coordination meetings were held, referral and case management processes were reported to be faster (UNICEF, 2023). This finding clearly indicates the central role of institutional coordination within the child protection system.

3. Macro Level (Policy-Institutional Capacity-Budget)

Macro-level analyses indicate that although child welfare policies have expanded quantitatively in recent years, imbalances persist in access and staffing distribution, particularly in rural regions. Erdoğan (2022) noted that policies developed under Law No. 2828 and Law No. 5395 have remained largely focused on care and protection, while rural access and service coordination have not been adequately ensured. According to MoFSS data (2023), approximately 68% of Social Service Centers are located in urban areas, which limits the accessibility of preventive and protective services in rural contexts. Moreover, gaps in integration across institutional data systems such as those related to the Family Social Support Program (ASDEP) have been identified. The findings suggest that establishing a national data-sharing protocol would strengthen case monitoring and service planning processes (Akkuş, 2016; UNICEF, 2023).

The ecological approach provides a holistic framework for understanding the relationships between individuals, families, and communities and their environments. Kaplan's (2015) findings illustrate the critical relevance of the ecological approach in protecting and supporting children at social risk. The high levels of anger and aggression among street-connected children with substance use problems reflect the adverse influence of environmental and social conditions. The fact that a large proportion of these children choose street life due to family conflict demonstrates the ecological approach's emphasis on social and environmental determinants of individual outcomes. The reported exposure to violence (35%) further underscores the hazardous nature of street environments and how these contexts compromise children's quality of life. In this regard, the ecological approach highlights that social work interventions must incorporate environmental determinants and address structural inequalities particularly the inadequacy of social services in rural areas, which increases children's vulnerability. Therefore, it is argued that more inclusive social policies, explicitly considering environmental and contextual factors, are required to support children's coping capacities and improve their well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study conceptualizes children at social risk not as a narrowly defined group limited to children living or working on the streets, but as a population embedded in multidimensional and intersecting spheres of disadvantage. The findings indicate that diverse risk factors such as economic deprivation, domestic violence, school disengagement, migration, abuse, and disability mutually reinforce one another and shape children's trajectories of social exclusion. Accordingly, child protection policies that focus solely on street-working children are insufficient. Preventive and protective social services, early warning systems, and school-based interventions need to be expanded in a way that encompasses all risk groups (Akkuş, 2016; Çelik, 2019; Aktı, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). From an ecological perspective, strengthening family-based supports at the micro level, increasing school-municipality-NGO collaboration at the meso level, and ensuring policy coherence and integration at the macro level are considered decisive for safeguarding the well-being of all children at social risk. Thus, the protection of children at social risk is not confined to street-connected children; rather, it constitutes a comprehensive social policy domain that must be addressed through social justice, equal opportunity, and inclusive service provision across all societal levels.

Across the reviewed studies, the risks confronting these children are particularly pronounced in relation to physical and sexual abuse, substance dependence, and heightened involvement in delinquent behaviors. Most children living or working on the streets have been driven into these conditions due to migration, poverty, and domestic violence, while existing social services are observed to be insufficient in meeting their needs. Children face severe threats including physical and sexual abuse, substance dependence, and offending. In rural settings in particular, the limited availability of social services intensifies children's exposure to risk. Overall, the evidence suggests that current service provision does not adequately respond to children's needs. The study therefore underscores the necessity of more comprehensive, sustainable, and accessible social services for children at social risk. Innovative approaches and technology-supported solutions are essential to enhancing service effectiveness. It is further argued that strengthening collaboration among the state, NGOs, and local governments constitutes a critical step toward expanding the scope and impact of services.

Within this framework, the role of the state is crucial in protecting children from neglect, abuse, and violence; hence, preventive and protective efforts should be prioritized. Policies aimed at reducing poverty and

promoting social justice, as well as ensuring access to centers that provide counseling, economic assistance, social support, and psychological services for children and families, should be recognized as fundamental rights. For these services to remain sustainable and of high quality, it is important that they be delivered under state responsibility and monitored continuously (Akkuş, 2016). The problem of street children cannot be addressed through the efforts of a single institution; cooperation and coordination are indispensable. Making street environments safer, providing rehabilitation for children with substance dependence, and investing in adult education are vital components of an effective response (Okumuş, 2009). In this context, it is of critical importance for the state under the stewardship of the Ministry of Family and Social Services to prioritize protective and preventive services and to secure children's rights. To enable children to experience healthy developmental trajectories and become active members of society in the future, the social service infrastructure must be strengthened, sustainability must be ensured, and services must be continuously monitored and evaluated.

Service provision for children at social risk in Türkiye should be expanded, particularly in rural regions. To ensure that services reach every child, increased investment in infrastructure and resources is recommended.

More effective cooperation and coordination among NGOs, public institutions, and local governments in services for street children should be ensured. More robust tools and systems should be developed for early identification of risks and timely intervention for children at social risk. AI-supported systems and digital platforms are considered capable of making significant contributions in this area.

Enhancing the quality of social services should be achieved through training service providers and establishing effective monitoring mechanisms for existing services. Community-based approaches should be adopted in the social reintegration of street children. By strengthening the role of local governments in this process, children's social integration should be promoted.

In sum, the study seeks to provide an original contribution by foregrounding the visibility and significance of rural-oriented social services within an ecological framework. The findings show that services for children at social risk must be evaluated not only at the individual level, but also in relation to environmental and structural determinants. In particular, limited access to services in rural regions underscores the need for innovative practices such as mobile school programs, field-based social work units, and digital early warning systems.

Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is grounded in selected institutional reports and supported by quantitative indicators. Future mixed-methods research is recommended to examine the regional dimensions of access inequalities in social services more comprehensively. In addition, in-depth field studies are recommended to analyze structural differences in service delivery for children across rural and urban areas. Finally, testing the effectiveness of technology-supported early warning systems through experimental designs is expected to contribute to strengthening child protection services on an evidence-based basis.

Ethical Information Related to The Research

This study did not involve any participants or human subjects. Analyses were conducted using open-access documents and institutional reports; no personal data were processed. Therefore, ethics committee approval was not required.

Authors' Contributions

This study is single-authored.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest.

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