

NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child  
**Database of NGO Reports presented to the UN Committee on  
the Rights of the Child.**

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**Document Title:**  
**NGO Report on the situation of Children in Trinidad and Tobago**

**Region:**  
Central America and the Caribbean, South America

**Country:**  
**Trinidad and Tobago**

**Issued by:**  
YMCA of Trinidad and Tobago with the assistance of other NGOs

**Date of publication of NGO Report:**  
03/97

**Date of presentation to presessional working group:**  
06/97

**CRC Session**  
(at which related national state party report was submitted):  
16th Session : Sept - Oct 97

**Language:**  
English

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**Document Text**

[Link to the state party at UNHCHR  
In French](#)

Compiled for the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child by the YMCA of Trinidad & Tobago, February 1997

**INTRODUCTION:**

The observations discussed in this report were sighted by representatives from 4 different NGOs at recent meetings to discuss this topic. Organizations present included the YMCA, Families in Action, St. Dominic's Home (orphanage) and the Baha'I Faith. Over 40 NGOs were contacted, however, the overall response was less than favorable with about 1/3 responding. Other professionals working with children were generally supportive of our views during consultations with them. No statistical data was sighted in this report as we chose to gather information directly from those NGOs and individuals who work with children and children's rights.

This report must begin with stating that all NGOs contacted believed that the current status of children in Trinidad & Tobago is deteriorating and that the mechanisms currently in place to address the

growing crisis are grossly inefficient. We do acknowledge the fact that the current government is attempting to improve its services to children but unfortunately, the present situation has proven to be inefficient and ineffective in the majority of areas.

#### Observations on the current status of children in Trinidad & Tobago

All references will be taken from our government's report: (CRC/C/11/Add.10), stating the pages relevant to our observations.

Pg. 8. (d) This report confirms that there is definitely no single authority with responsibility for children and their rights, however an NGO group will be meeting within a few weeks to discuss the establishment of a unified body to advocate on children's behalf and monitor the governments commitment to the CRC.

Pg. 9. (16a) Social services to the family through the Ministry of Social Development are inadequate and not far reaching enough. This is mainly due to the fact that they are under staffed and therefore unable to be effective

The Social Welfare system has many loopholes and no way of truly monitoring if moneys dispensed to family heads benefit the children in their care Many youths are placed in remand at the Youth Training Camp (YTC) for months, attending court hearings without being told their rights, and are not aware that they may seek legal counsel with the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority. Some youths are also arrested and remanded without their parents being notified of such. Pg. 9. (1 6c. .iv) The monitoring of children housed at government institutions and homes run by private persons and organizations is superficial at best. Many cases of cruel and unusual treatment fall on deaf ears and there have been an overwhelming number of incessant abuses at these residential facilities which are covered up. Complaints are dismissed as childish games being played by the complainant.

Pg. 10. (20a) There is no consistent promotion on the convention whatsoever. From time to time posters are distributed to schools and other agencies working with children hut the general public remains oblivious to the Convention. Children are not well informed of their rights however, some NGOs have been attempting to remedy this at a community level.

Pg. 11. (22) There are many cases of unmarried girls under the minimum age of sexual consent being sexually active with males more than 3 years their senior, without any arrests or penalty for the perpetrator. Incest is rampant in many areas of the country, particularly in rural areas. However, because of the lack of exposure to the Convention, ignorance of the law in these areas and the proper mechanisms to bring the perpetrator to justice, the problem is difficult to ascertain and address.

Pg. 12. (27) In general, the primary school system is far too academic and children are not encouraged to be creative and independent in thought. All schools have uniforms and there are numerous cases of underprivileged students being debarred from attending school because they lack the full uniform. Children are also moved through the system without proper testing thus leave the institutions not being able to read or write in many circumstances. Every year, after the common entrance exam as much as 700() children aged 10-13 are displaced by the current education system due to the lack of facilities to place them. A large number of these children find themselves on the streets or getting involved in criminal activity because there are few viable alternatives.

Pg. 13. (31) These amendments have not yet been made to the best of our knowledge.

Pg. 13 (31 a. .iv) At presents because of the rise in violent ciimes committed by juveniles, the Attorney General is seeking to have the age to legally carry out the death penalty lowered from 18 years to 16 years. This follows the recent conviction of an 18 year old who committcd a double murder when he was 16 years old. This is a matter that the NGOs oppose and are monitoring closely.

Pg. 15. (36) Respect for the views of the child' is inconsistently dealt with from magistrate to magistrate. In our society children are generally seen and not heard and there is no difference in the majority of criminal, custodial and other legal cases.

Pg. 16. (H) This right is not guaranteed in practice in government or private institutions, or in the home. There are numerous reports of street children and other underprivileged children being victims of police brutality on a regular basis. Residential institutions also continue to have complaints from residents re: mistreatment and various types of abuses, yet there is no existing body which actively and efficiently deals with such reports and their investigations.

Pg. 16 (48) Refer to article: Pg. 13 (31a..iv) of this report.

Pg. 20 (E: 64-71) Within this section of the Children's Act, there is no adequate accountability as to how the child benefits from the moneys received. There are many faults in the system and payments of maintenance is not a guarantee. The overall system dealing with this aspect does appear to be well managed.

Pg. 23. (84) There is a serious shortage of Family Counselors and case workers at the Ministry and this adversely affects the assistance received. Information on Family Life Education is not far reaching enough and the government has not been effective in their National awareness campaigns. NGOs like SERVOL have been doing a respectable job in this area.

Pg. 24. (91) These planned programmes have not gotten off the ground as yet as many NGOs working with children have not received notice of the government initiatives.

Pg. 29. (A) EDUCATION: There is a general consensus that the entire education system is overdue for a major overhaul. Our system caters to the academically elite and does not place much emphasis on recreation, creativity or the arts. From the pre-school age, children are asked to sit standard entrance exams on a variety of subjects in order to gain entry into institutions of higher learner. This places a lot of stress on children and many of them are mentally burnt out before entering high school. Entrance into most reputable high schools requires a test score of over 90%. thus, many students who do not gain entry into a 'first choice' prestige school or a comprehensive, may not have necessarily failed the entrance exam, but are victims of an extremely stressful, competitive and inadequate educational system. Every year, 7000 children on average, are displaced by this system and deemed failures.

Whereas all Junior & Senior Ssecondary Schools offer vocational training, there is not enough choice in academics. The reverse is true for the more 'reputable' schools, where the emphasis is on academics with little or no options for vocational training. Since placement into these schools is based on the outcome of the common entrance exam which is graded as a total exam and not subject by subject, children are placed according to their grade and availability of space, rather than by their interests and talents.

Pg. 32. (129) The Central Guidance Unit of the Ministry of Education is grossly understaffed and is unable to properly carry out its mandate. There are a total of 34 officers dealing with the entire school population from primary through secondary. Where is the efficient service'?

Pg. 33. (132) The Aims of Education as laid out in (a) through (g) have not been actively enforced in any meaningful way. Whereas some institutions may be encouraging, in general, these aims are not met on a national level.

Many children have expressed their disdain with the current education system and it's lack to adequately facilitate their growth.

Pg. 35. (138) The system of teacher training is inconsistent in its implementation as it is not mandatory for all teachers to attend training sessions. Teachers at the primary level are being systematically trained, however, at the secondary level, teachers volunteer to attend training and this poses obvious inconsistencies in the profession. It must be noted that most teachers are trained after being involved in the system for many years and after their various bad habits have been entrenched. This creates a feeling that the training is superficial. thus not as effective a mechanism for change as it should be.

Pg. 36. LEISURE, RECREATION & CULTURE: Whereas there are recreational facilities available in some areas, there is a general lack of adequate facilities nationally. Most of the facilities in existence are not readily available to the general public or are in a state of disrepair. There are NGOs like the YMCA that have facilities but they can only service a minimal amount of children at any one time. This is an area of major concern for the NGOs, as recreational activity is an integral aspect of social and physical development.

#### CONCLUSION:

The situation of children in Trinidad & Tobago is rapidly approaching a critical level. The education system, the judicial and penal system, institutional care, parent/family counseling and the services which protect children from all forms of abuse have their shortcomings and are inadequate. The idea that children are second class citizens, to be seen and not heard, must be changed. Children must be taught that with rights comes responsibility and the adults taught that children have rights, which are to be respected, as individual citizens of the country.

Whereas the system is not a total failure, there is a need for evaluation with the view of improving it swiftly and thoroughly. As is always the case, lack of finances hinders advancement. Although there is a wealth of financing and manpower available locally, awareness and motivation to help bring about change is non-existent. A campaign to educate the public about the need to support community and government initiatives is required.

#### Short to Medium Term Objectives:

- (1) An urgent need for a Family Court System and Judicial reform regarding how children are treated by the system
- (2) train community leaders in areas of Child Rights, Childcare and sustainable development so that the knowledge passed on is relevant to the particular community
- (3) Urgent need to increase resources in the area of counseling for abused and dysfunctional children, students, parents and families - at present there is no on going professional counseling available to children in residential care i.e. orphanages, penal institutions etc.
- (4) Referendum on Educational Reform to better address the current needs of our children. i.e. a more diverse curriculum incorporating Family life, Art, Music and a variety of modern subjects etc., encouraging these as viable career alternatives from a primary and secondary school level. More emphasis on personal development, social responsibility, culture and recreation.
- (5) Establish smaller community based secondary schools to service displaced common entrance students
- (6) Compulsory teaching certificates for all teachers in the system.
- (7) Supervised recreational facilities to provide an 'outlet' for children in outlying areas.
- (8) The establishment of Independent watch groups to monitor government/private residential institutions and investigate complaints etc.
- (9) An ongoing awareness campaign, utilizing all forms of media to reach all levels of the community

One shared belief that was repeatedly verbalized was that the society in general is not sufficiently aware of the plight of our children. A 'Child's Right / Status of our Children' Awareness Campaign is a priority at this time. We as NGOs They as the Government and Us as a Society, cannot allow ignorance to be an excuse for the neglect, the exploitation, the abuse or the failure to develop our children.

#### Current services provided by NGOs responding to our request for information

- YMCA Nursery/Pre-School  
Street Youth Outreach Programme  
Youth Leadership/Character development Programme CRC Advocate
- CREDO Foundation  
Operate Drop-in Centre for Street Children Advocates for Justice for all
- Emanuel Community

The Cradle - Home for battered children

· St. Vincent de Paul  
Hospice for babies and children with HIV/AIDS Nursery

· Living Waters Community  
Residence and Night Shelter for Street Children

· St. Dominic's Home  
One of four certified Orphanages

· Holy Name Training Centre-  
Resident programme for girls in Skills Development

· Baha'I Faith  
Comununity Outreach  
Moral Education Classes Advocates of Parental Responsibility/Justice for all

· Servol  
Early Childhood Care, Education/Training Parent Outreach Programme  
Adolescent Development Programme Regional Training and Resource Centre

- Families in Action

Counseling, Assessment and Referral Advocates of Justice For all  
Outreach for Battered Women And Children  
Conununity Outreach  
Effective Parenting  
Drug Abuse Awareness and Prevention - Excel (XL)  
Programme for Youth

The YMCA and the NGOs hereby represented wish to thank the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for their consideration on these important matters and commend them for their continued efforts on behalf of our children Worldwide.

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