

How football is rewriting futures for city lost boys

Staggering. There is no single exact figure for the total number of lost or missing people globally, but hundreds of thousands are actively registered as missing or temporarily separated.

BY PATRICK SSENTONGO

On a dusty pitch on the outskirts of Kampala, 14-year-old Reagan Korwomuhangi pauses mid-drill, his chest heaving, eyes fixed on the ball at his feet. Until recently, he had disappeared from this very ground.

Just weeks after being reintegrated with his family in Kyegegwa District, the teenager has returned briefly to Kampala—not to the streets he once called home, but to the football programme that helped pull him away from them. He greets former teammates with quiet ease, slipping back into drills as though he never left. For those who have followed his journey, the moment carries weight. Only months earlier, Reagan had been living on the streets of Kisenyi, one of Kampala's busiest informal settlements, navigating the uncertainty of street life after a long and difficult journey from home.

"I did not think I would go back home," he says, as he puts a stop on the drills. "Out there, you do not plan. You just survive." Reagan's path to the streets began far from the capital. Originally from the village, he left home and walked to Mubende, where he spent several months drifting between survival and uncertainty. Eventually, he climbed onto a lorry that brought him to Kampala, joining the growing number of street-connected children in the city.

Back home, life had already become

difficult. Financial hardship had repeatedly disrupted his education, with frequent school dismissals over unpaid fees. At the same time, he lived under the pressure of a strict older brother who demanded better academic performance, an expectation that clashed with the realities of his inconsistent schooling. Caught between economic strain and fear of punishment, Reagan chose to leave. By the time he encountered outreach workers in Kisenyi, he had spent years stuck in primary three, far behind what would be expected for his age.

The game that finds them

It was through one of the weekend street outreaches that Reagan first encountered MGG Soccer Friends Foundation, a Kampala-based, faith-driven organisation using football to engage street-connected children.

"They didn't force us," he recalls. "They just told us to come and play." Founded by Raymond Mugagga, the organisation draws much of its inspiration from his upbringing. "Watching my mother show love, generosity and care to everyone around her shaped me from a young age," Mugagga says. "That stayed with me, and it is what led to the start of this work."

Now a registered non-governmental organisation, the foundation works primarily in areas such as Kisenyi and Katwe, where many street-connected children are concentrated. At the training ground, the setup appears simple—cones, worn-out boots, bursts of laughter, but beneath it lies a deliberate intervention. "Football is the entry point," Mugagga explains. "What we are build-



ing is a safe and structured space where these children can begin to feel valued and guided." Through regular training sessions, the foundation introduces routine into lives often defined by instability. Discipline, teamwork and accountability are embedded into each session, while mentorship extends beyond the pitch.

Every weekend, the team returns to the streets, offering food, clothing and guidance to children still living there, building trust gradually before inviting them into the programme.

Currently, the foundation supports about 10 children under its direct care, while more than 30 have passed through the programme. On average, at least one child is successfully reintegrated with their family each month. But the process is neither quick nor straightforward.

"We do not rush it," Mugagga says. "We walk with them until they are ready, emotionally and mentally, to return home." For Reagan, that transition required more than relocation. It demanded a shift in identity. At the foundation, mentors recognised that returning him to the traditional classroom would not address the gaps created by years of disrupted schooling. In-

Deft turning.

One of the boys who have benefited from the program go round several cones at a training session. PHOTOS/PATRICK SSENTONGO

stead, they guided him toward vocational training. Today, back home in Kyegegwa, he is learning welding, a skill the foundation believes will offer him a more sustainable path forward.

Weight of reintegration

Reintegration, experts note, is often the most delicate stage of the process. Joyce Nabposa, a Kampala-based social worker working with vulnerable youth, says children who have lived on the streets develop survival instincts that can make returning home difficult. "Rebuilding trust, identity and belonging takes time," she explains. "Programmes that succeed are those that remain consistent and do not rush the process."

Reagan acknowledges that adjustment has not been easy. "The first days were hard," he says. "It did not feel like home anymore."

Yet the connection to the programme remains a stabilising force. His return visit to Kampala, he says, was as much about reconnecting with mentors as it was about seeing friends. Like many grassroots initiatives, MGG Soccer Friends Foundation operates within significant constraints. Funding remains limited, with much of the organisation's support drawn from locally organised football tournaments, where teams pay participation fees, as well as contributions from well-wishers.

"Sometimes it is difficult to meet all the needs or sustain activities consistently," Mugagga admits. "But we continue to do what we can with the support available." Despite these challenges, the demand for intervention remains high, reflecting a broader reality in Kampala's urban landscape, where hundreds of children continue to navigate life on the streets.

More than a game

As the session draws to a close, the boys gather briefly before dispersing. Some head back to temporary shelters. Others, like Reagan, prepare to return to homes they are still learning to readjust to. For Mugagga, the work goes beyond sport. "The ball brings them in," he says. "But what we are building are pathways, moving them from survival to stability, from isolation to belonging."

Reagan lingers a moment longer on the pitch, exchanging quiet words with teammates before stepping away. He is no longer the boy who arrived in Kampala on the back of a lorry, uncertain of where to go.

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