

This chapter presents a descriptive account of child vendors — that is, vendors below the age of 16 — in Masvingo, provincial capital with a population of 52 000 in southern Zimbabwe. There is literature on street traders, mostly on women vendors, but a dearth of literature focused on child vendors or child street traders. Until very recently, the study of working children in urban areas in the informal and formal sector did not receive the attention it deserved,' but in the last decade, a number of works have appeared in Zimbabwe. In general the situation of children is linked to that of their families and households. In many ways urban child. Vendors, like street children, are both a creation of, and a reaction to, poverty. Where households depend on meagre incomes, additional income, such as that derived from vending activities of children, often becomes critical to the survival of these households. During the course of my fieldwork on poor, female-headed households in Masvingo, child vendors were very visible in the streets and outside the food retail shops in Masvingo. I did not set out to examine children's street trading activities. My main concern was on how female heads of households, within an urban setting, dealt with impoverishment. Over a 14-month period in 1994 and 1995, I studied a sample of 58 women in the two high-density and low-income suburbs of Masvingo, 50 of whom headed the households in which they lived. The sample was acquired snowball-style, through the network of the first women I met. This enabled protracted interviews and observations to support my quantitative data. Anonymity for my respondents was guaranteed by assigning letter symbols for each one of them. During my fieldwork it became clear that the plight of women is intricately linked to that of children. My interest in children is recent, and I paid little attention to child vendors during those months of fieldwork. When I was asked about working children, I re-examined my data and was surprised to find that out of the 19 female heads of households, whose main source of income was derived mainly from food vending, seven had working children to assist in their operations. These might be their own children, their sisters' children or paid hands. The discovery prompted me to re-examine this data resulting in the production of this chapter. Unlike Bourdillon's observation' that a number of child vendors in Harare are of Mozambican origin, all the child vendors who assisted the seven female heads of households in Masvingo were Zimbabwean. This might be due to the fact that the data are limited and, statistically, insignificant. Nevertheless, it provides useful insights into the lives of child vendors.