

Original Paper

Children and Youth at Risk

Usama Heib^{1*}

¹ Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University of Timisoara, Timisroara, Romania

Received: August 9, 2020

Accepted: August 17, 2020

Online Published: August 26, 2020

doi:10.22158/jecs.v4n3p146

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v4n3p146>

Abstract

Youth dropout is a worldwide phenomenon, that needs to be addressed extensively. Due to a lot of reasons especially within the family; teens tend to dropout from schools. Israel is one of these societies where children dropout from school in a worrisome percentage. So, the awareness on the youth dropout from school problem has increased in the last decade. Dealing with this phenomenon poses a challenge to the Israeli society and to the authorities responsible for educational services. Findings showed that certain groups among the Israeli population are at a higher risk of dropping out from school compared to other groups. Many teenagers from these groups do not complete their high school studies and are unable to integrate in a qualitative and significant manner in the army and the labour market. With no doubt, the consequences of dropping out of the education system have a significant impact of the young generations of citizens. Therefore, preventing the problem of dropout and helping the youths to get back into the loop is a tremendous challenge to the Israeli education system.

Keywords

Educational dropout, youth in risk, educational system, dropout in Israel

1. Introduction

Children and youth are our future. The way they grow and develop shapes their adult personality. Over 2 million children live in Israel, 350,000 of them are children and adolescents at risk and distress, with some of the risk situations expressed in isolation from normative educational frameworks.

These risk situations undermine the ability of children and youth to exercise their basic rights to security, protection and dignity. This is a sequence of different risk situations, which require adaptation to various situations. These situations originate, among other things, from coping with the financial difficulties, illness or death of one of the parents, learning difficulties, or social differences, and are expressed in difficulties that vary from performing normal functions to social deviation. The Ministry of Labor and Social Services assists children and youth in these situations of distress and danger that include:

- Those who are in direct and immediate danger and exposed to abuse or violence.
- Those who are suffering from behavioral disorders or mental problems.
- Those who are in a state of neglect by those responsible for them.
- Those who live in circumstances that can cause them a risk: divorce crisis, unemployment, immigration, illness, the death of one of the parents or a defect in the ability of the person responsible to fulfill his duties towards him.
- Those who may harm themselves or others.
- Those who have violated the law or are in danger of doing so again.

2. Youths at Risk

In adolescents, there has been an increase in the experience and involvement of youth in behaviors defined in the literature as problematic behaviors and as health-threatening behaviors. The origin of these behaviors is not necessarily medical, but a result of social, environmental, and behavioral influences. These behaviors include a wide range of behaviors and their consequences, such as dysfunction in school, drop out of school, violence, delinquency, eating disorders, pregnancies at an early age, which may have implications not only for the adolescents themselves, but for their families, their environment, and even society as a whole (Atkinson, Halsey, Wilkin et al. 2000; Nelsen 1989).

3. Defining Youths in Risky Situations and at Risk

Youth at risk and danger are those who observe all the following conditions:

- Age between 18-12.
- They have normal intelligence and no active mental illness.
- They are found in risky situations and at risk, while being on the margin of the continuum of education and care in the community.
- They suffer from at least two of the following three difficulties:

Emotional difficulties - difficulties in making contact and trust, difficulty in postponing gratification, low self-esteem, and feeling of alienation.

Asocial behavior - difficulty in accepting authority and rules in a social or institutional framework, difficulty in adapting socially, and behavior problems.

Wandering, desertion, violence, the use of psychoactive substances (drugs), delinquency patterns, and violations of the law.

The Public Committee to Examine the Situation of Children and Adolescents at Risk and Distress headed by Prof. Hillel Schmid set an agreed definition for children and adolescents at risk, according to which:

“Children and adolescents at risk are children and adolescents living in situations that endanger them in their family and environment, and because of these situations their ability to exercise their rights under the International Convention on the Rights of the Child is impaired in these

areas: physical existence and development, family affiliation, learning and skills acquisition, belonging and social participation, protection against others and of their own dangerous behaviors” (Schmid Committee, 2006, p. 7).

4. Data

When I try to examine the social aspects of “children and youths at risk” I find that the subject is complex and loaded, akin to a real minefield. The assessments in the field are inaccurate, and sometimes even inconsistent. The study will go over the existing data and begin by noting that the State of Israel is a very young country in terms of its population. The median age is only 28 years. Israel’s population is considered the youngest among the developed countries. In Israel, there are over two million children, of whom 350,000 are children at risk and distress. This gloomy picture reflects a reality where almost 20% of Israeli children and youths are at risk. The risk situations are the result of financial difficulties, illness or death of one of the parents, which immediately leads to a high risk of poverty, learning problems, social diversity, and difficulties in functioning at the personal level. The main characteristics of children at risk in Israel are large or single-parent families. These families are concentrated in the Arab population and in localities and neighborhoods with low socio-economic status.

It is widely accepted that 17% of children in Israel are “at risk”, almost one in five children! But there are other data. For example, about 40% of youths suffer from verbal violence in the family. “Verbal violence” is included in the definition of “children and youths at risk”. About 18% of children suffer from physical violence and about 5% are sexually assaulted. The data, therefore, indicate a “risk epidemic”. Even if we do not get the data in full, the situation is that 30% of the children and youths in Israel are at risk. Every third child you meet on the street is a child at risk. Another statistic: There are more “youths and children at risk” in the periphery and in the lower strata than in big cities or among the upper stratum.

On the face of it, there is a clear problem here: poverty is one of the main causes of the risk of children and youths. Therefore, it is necessary to examine poverty in Israel in order to understand and treat its relationship to the phenomenon of children and youths at risk. A critical finding in this regard is that Israel is one of the leading countries in the world in poverty rates, both in general and in high rates among groups at risk of poverty: children and the elderly. The importance of this finding is compounded by additional findings, some of which are already mentioned above. We are therefore in a vicious circle: a very young population, high poverty levels, very large gaps between the upper and lower deciles, high concentration of capital and, as a result, a significant increase in poverty.

The picture begins to clear: “Youth at Risk” comes mainly from groups with low incomes. Who are these groups? First, the group that is not part of the central national narrative - the Arabs. The children and youths in this group comprise about 30% of all children and youth at risk. About 80% of these children and youths are Muslims. The number of children and youths at risk among Arabs is three times

that of Jews.

Another group whose children and youth are at high risk is that of new immigrants. About 10% of all children at risk are from new immigrant families, most of them, 8.5%, are of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and Ethiopian immigrants - constitute 1.5%. And, of course, an almost absolute majority of children and youth at risk come from disadvantaged (not “weak”) socio-economic areas where the majority of the population are Sepharadi Jews.

So what did we find? We found that in Israeli society children and youth at risk are among the most disadvantaged groups by the two decisive factors: the state (its various institutions) and society. The weakest group is the Arabs. State institutions discriminate against the Arab society and marginalizes it, and the Arab family, which is financially weak and economically disadvantaged, cannot provide its children’s needs. The result: “children at risk” is more prevalent in large numbers in Arab society.

The second group that “contributes” large numbers to the category of “children and youths at risk” is that of new immigrants. In the past, the policy of the “melting pot” dominated the immigration policy of the state to allow it to integrate and control new immigrants. This was not the melting of cultures but the domination of one culture over other cultures. And what is the situation today? There is no melting pot, but the immigrants’ socio-economic “melting” (read integration) is much worse. As a result, their descendants are candidates number two (after the Arabs) of being “children and youths at risk” (Motola, 2010).

The Committee to Examine the Situation of Children and Youths at Risk and in Distress - The Schmid Committee was established in 2006, against the background of the deteriorating situation of children and youth during the economic crisis of the previous decade. Fifteen years earlier there has been a change in thinking about children in general and children at risk in particular. We have learned that children and youth at risk are not only children and teenagers in extreme situations, such as children, who suffer from violence at home, or children who drop out of school, but also children who are on the continuum in each of the risk situations. These groups include, for example, children whose parents do not know how to set boundaries, neglected children who come in inappropriate or dirty clothes to school, and “covert dropouts” - children who often miss school and sit passively in class but are not really part of the class (Dovrat, 2005).

Youths at risk from an educational perspective:

There are factors and situations that are commonly perceived and prescribed as harming or impeding students, defined as youths at risk, from an educational perspective. We will relate here to the main ones:

4.1 Undermining the Family Unit

The family is the anchor and basis for the framework that provides self-confidence and social capabilities to children and adolescents. Destruction or disintegration of the family unit, whether due to domestic violence, unemployment and economic hardship, severe divorce or the death of a parent leave the child without the basis and source from which they derive security. The world of such a boy or girl

changes and s/he may focus on difficulties in the family and deteriorate in school and socially.

4.2 Mental States

A boy or a girl suffering from dyslexia, ADHA or PDD, and studying in a regular framework, where they cannot integrate academically, will experience difficulties and ongoing frustration. The result may be a variety of emotional and social problems that lead, inter alia, to disciplinary disorders, depressions, social withdrawal and violence. If there is no awareness of the situation, on the part of the parents or the system, this may cause further deterioration and drop out of the educational framework.

4.3 Conflict in Personal Identity

During adolescence, the identity of the girl or the boy is consolidated. This is an extremely important period, since this identity will accompany the person for the rest of his/her life and it may be founded on a strong or an unstable base. What is this identity? This is a mosaic composed of faith or lack of faith, preference and sexual identity, social and familial affiliation, a sense of national belonging and ideals, etc. Often, during the formation of personal identity, the adolescent will undergo various crises and sometimes a rebellion arising from this period saturated with hormones. In more extreme cases there may be situations of unloading the burden, including the framework or educational frameworks for one reason or another.

4.4 Social Difficulty

Not everyone is born with social skills that allow her/him to fit easily wherever s/he goes. There are boys and girls who, due to shyness, low self-confidence, syndromes on the autistic spectrum such as Asperger or any other reason find it difficult to make contacts with others. This causes social alienation and loneliness of the boy/girl, despite his/her desire to form friendships.

Dropout from the education system is one of the main factors that nourishes and preserves the social gaps we encounter in every society, including (Dovrat, 2005). Dropout is a dynamic process, commonly described by two concepts: overt dropout and covert dropout. Overt dropout describes a situation of physical disconnection of the boy or girl from the education system. Covert dropping refers to a population that is frequently absent from the education system or who is present passively in the classroom and does not participate actively in learning (Dovrat, 2005).

The rate of youth dropout is rising among the new immigrant community, especially immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Among immigrants from the former Soviet Union, a particularly worrisome picture emerges, according to which the dropout rate, both overt and covert, is extremely high. Among Ethiopian-Israeli youths, the dropout rate is not particularly high, but the covert dropout rate is high, and many of them frequently transform from one school to another. Data from the Israeli Ministry of Education show that 10%-15% of youth ages 14-18 were defined as a population at risk due to covert dropouts. This figure refers to approximately 10% -30% of the youths of secondary school age (Cohen-Navot et al., 2012). Some researchers claim that all teenagers have the potential for being at risk. In light of this, in order for the dropout population to be diagnosed, it is necessary to diagnose the adolescent's functioning at home and within the educational framework (Archambault et

al., 2017).

The problem of dropping out of the educational frameworks is a known problem. It has appeared throughout the years of existence of the State of Israel and even before, since the institution of the school as a service of the community and the state. The phenomenon has not disappeared over the years and it exists to this day, although its face has changed and its scope has decreased considerably since the establishment of the state in 1948. It can be seen that at the beginning of the last century the dropout rate was more than 50 percent, while the dropout rate has dropped by at least 15 percent.

There are cases when adolescents leave the educational framework before the end of the 12th years of education from an uncontrollable need to help their family economically. In any event, this departure creates a situation in which there are two groups of youths in Israel: one group, which includes the students who take advantage of the “menu” that the state prepared for them and offers them; And a second group, which includes those who do not find their place within the existing system and do not get along with the “menu” offered to them there. This situation is very complicated because of the main reason that only half of those teenagers who go out to work finish 12 years of schooling with a matriculation certificate that will help them find decent work during their professional lives (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac, 2007).

The studies that began in the early 1950s show that those who dropped out of the educational system were called “school leavers”. During this period it became clear that many students did not see the school as an avenue that could prepare them and bring them to their next life - the world of work. Later, the concepts changed and the reasons for leaving school changed, but unfortunately the phenomenon itself did not disappear. Studies examining the phenomenon of dropping out in recent decades emphasize the fact that the phenomenon is expanding and that it presents a social crisis and a social tragedy for the dropouts, their families and the society in which they live. Many studies have repeatedly emphasized the high price that youths will have to pay, once they are forced to seek work that requires knowledge and skills that they have not acquired (Miller & Tyler, 1992).

Lahav divided the term youth at risk into four main components that lead to the creation of delinquency:

- Risk factors: forces in the immediate vicinity of the adolescent that have a negative impact on their development. This category usually identifies three prominent factors: poverty, a criminal social environment, and a dysfunctional family.
- Risk signs: adolescent behaviors that, combined with risk factors, significantly increase the likelihood of injury and the likelihood of negative behavior. This category identifies two prominent phenomena that affect adolescents: school dysfunction (including dropping out) and involvement in criminal activity.
- Risk behaviors: Behaviors that are perceived as potentially harmful to the teenager, either directly or indirectly, such as frequent school absences, escape from home, early use of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs, and affiliation with criminal groups.

- Risk outcomes: are results of the previous three components.

4.5 Causes of Risk-taking Behavior

Lahav (2013a) defines risk factors as forces in the adolescent's immediate environment that have an impact and a negative impact on his/her development. He points out to three major risk factors: poverty, a criminal social environment, and dysfunctional family.

The explanations are broader and the studies discuss stressing factors that are both biological, psychological and social (Lahav, 2013a). There is a distinction between the reasons for dropping out of school related to the personal and family variables of the youth, such as: learning difficulties, learning disabilities and attention problems, low self-esteem, emotional difficulties expressed by anti-social behaviors, migration crisis, student dissatisfaction with the framework and characteristics Socio-economic variables affecting learning, etc.

4.6 Meanings

If many young people are in the category of "children and youths at risk" or on their way there, it is worthwhile understanding what happens to the young person associated with this group. Well, a young person in this category needs help, but the caretaker system has remained helpless. Although there are six organizations that treat children and youths at risk, they do not even reach half of the children at risk. Most of the burden falls on the education system at the school level. What can a teacher do in front of an overcrowded class, where some of the students are "at risk"? In most cases, the teenager is sentenced to the risk of staying in school without any support. It is a condition called "hidden dropout". It is "as if" s/he is in the education system, but it does not exist for him/her. S/he is waiting for junior high school where the drop-out turns from covert to overt. What remains for the child? S/he remains with a stigma, as a youth at risk, that is having difficulty adapting, perhaps a criminal--a boy who is not interested in school and society.

Here we have to distinguish between "children and youths at risk", who come from a disadvantaged socio-economic stratum to those who come from a strong stratum. The categorization of the latter is not done in public; The system does not label their difficulties as "children and youth at risk", as labeling them like that may ruin their future. The former, however, are labeled as "children and youths at risk", which undermines their chances of escaping the cycle of poverty, as the socio-economic mobility of modern society depends primarily on education. "Children and Youths at Risk" will later have their own "children and youth at risk" who will also "produce" children and youth at risk. The strong classes have other terms for children and youths who do not fit into the education system. The terms intended for them do not block their way in society.

Then there is another decade or two until the majority of young Israelis become "children and youth at risk". Another vision was established to fit the new era. What should we do next? We can of course play with the definition and reduce the number of children and youth the definition applies to them. But this is not the solution to the problem but only a concealment of it. The Israeli society as a whole should have has a fundamental interest in solving or reducing the phenomenon, bringing more children

into the education and employment cycle, reducing crimes and allowing adults to take care of themselves without relying on the state. To do this we must understand the source of the problem. This is not a problem of origin. There is no unique garden for immigrants from certain places that causes their children and youth to be “at risk”. “Children and youths at risk” are the outcome of social construction. Thus, the solution involves strengthening the weaker segments of society--empowering the families, strengthening the education system, investing more resources in disadvantaged neighborhoods and building programs to strengthen the connection between the children and their environment.

There is no magic solution; It requires hard work, and investing resources and changing national priorities. Ignoring the existing situation is tantamount to social suicide. If we do not manage to deal with the problem in all of its components, we will become a society in which most of the children will be “children and youths at risk”.

5. Children and Adolescents in Danger and Emergency Situations

It is the duty of the state to assist and protect children and adolescents, who are at risk by their environment, or by someone in their environment or high self-risk. It is recommended that all assistance and protection activities for children and youths at risk be in partnership with the parents and the children themselves. However, there are situations of danger that require emergency intervention aimed at protecting children by social workers under the Youth Care and Supervision Law, by virtue of the law and the courts. For this purpose, the state has created mechanisms and tools to implement this protection.

References

- Archambault, Isabelle, Michel Janosz, Véronique Dupéré, Marie-Christine Brault, & Marie Mc Andrew. (2017). Individual, social, and family factors associated with high school dropout among low-SES youth: Differential effects as a function of immigrant status. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 87(3), 456-477. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12159>
- Atkinson, Mary, Halsey, K., Wilkin, A., & Kinder, K. (2000). *Raising Attendance: A Detailed Study of Education Welfare Service Working Practices*. National Foundation for educational research (NFER).
- Balfanz, Robert, Liza Herzog, & Douglas J Mac Iver. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223-235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520701621079>
- Dovrat Committee. (2005). *National Education Program: Because every child deserves more*. Jerusalem, Ministry of Education Israel.
- Duncan, Lindsey. (2015). *Children and Youth Services Review*. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

- Lahav, H. (2013). The phenomenon of dropping out of the education system - the debate over the numbers and who pays the price, In A. Shemesh (Ed.), *From Disconnection to Integration* (Vol. 12, pp. 11-27). Jerusalem: The Ministry of Education, Society and Youths Administration.
- Lahav, H. (2013). Youths at risk - the phenomenon in perspective. In A. Shemesh (Ed.), *From Disconnection to Integration* (Vol. 10, pp. 17-18). Jerusalem: The Ministry of Education, Society and Youths Administration.
- Miller, Jr., & Tyler, G. (1992). *Living in the environment: An introduction to environmental science*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.
- Ministry of Education Israel. (2015). *Division A for the education of children and youths at risk, the phenomenon of dropping out and separation and its implications*. Retrieved January 15, 2019, from <http://www.cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/YeledNoarBesikun/mitbagrim/KidumNoar/NeshiraNituk.htm>
- Ministry of Education Israel. (2016). *360 National Program for Children and Youth at Risk, Joint Israel*. Retrieved January 16, 2019, from <https://www.molsa.gov.il/ProjectShmid/Pages/ProjectHome.aspx>
- Motola, M. (2010). Covert and Overt Dropouts in Israel. Echo of Education. *Journal of the Teachers' Union in Israel*, 84.
- Zeev Kaim, & Shlomo Romi (2015). *Adolescents at risk and their willingness to seek help from youth care workers*. Published by Elsevier Ltd.