Navigating the Challenges: Street Youth in Latvia and Their Journey to Career Opportunities

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Abstract: Topicality of the research is given by the author's observation of street youth situation in Latvia – there is no data about them, there are a few services for them, but quite a lot of young people choose streets as their way of living. Their future depends on choices they made in the early age– not attending school leads to lack in education and low possibility to be involved in education, training and, as a result, getting desired job and being successful in professional life. The aim of the pilot study is to realize what kinds of issues street youth are facing, what are their desires about professional development and how are they looking into their future. Methodology includes theoretical research on the topic and small qualitative research which consists of five questions. The questions covering respondents plans towards their future, education possibilities and reasons that brought them into streets. The results show that street youth are coming to street because of problems at home (lack of parenting, parent abuse, addictions in families and problems in school as well). Theoretical research shows that youth needs more support and services prior their becoming street youth, it emphasizes the importance of prevention.

Keywords: social work, street youth, career counselling, career development.

Introduction

Riga is capital of Latvia, European democratic country and when visiting it you won't see badly dressed and not good looking groups of youth scrolling around city centre or suburbs in order to find some activities. That was in 90th. Today it looks even worse. Clean, very authentic city with expensive cafes and young people ordering drinks to go, but actually there is youth that doesn't have a safe place to live. They choose street.

There is no statistics in Latvia about street youth, but it is considered that it might be around thousands of young people who need help (Baltic News, 2022).

90% of street youth ends up at the street because of the problems in family and, most of the times, they don't want to get any help because they are afraid to get into even more trouble that they have now (Baltic news, 2022). Most of the times the reason that bring kids onto street is violence at home, parental addictions and shame and fear to ask for help, because at some level having "family problems" is still might be stigmatized.

Street youth definition differs from country to country. For example, in a lot of countries street youth is considered "Runaway and homeless children and adolescents living on the streets of cities and having no fixed place of residence" (XMRI, 2023). In case of Latvia it is a bit different, because rate of homeless young people are very low, that's why we consider street youth as young person aged 7-29 who spends most his/her time outside. By outside we mean streets, shopping malls, parks, public transportation stops and other places that infrastructure of the city provides (Grīnhofa, Āboliņa, 2019).

There are some similarities or features of street youth in Latvia:
- they have a permanent street location or a regular occupation in a street environment (e.g. illegal ways of earning money for a living, slot machines, computer games, etc.);
- they often form their own social group as a means of survival;
- they (if they are of compulsory education age according to the legislation of the Republic of Latvia) tend to not attend school or attend irregularly, thus dropping out of the education system and without being under the supervision of state or local authorities;
- have weak family ties, parents are not interested in the young person's lifestyle and hobbies, problems (Ielu jaunatnes ABC, 2022).

So, Latvian street youth most of the times has a home but don't want to come home and prefer to spend time outside, make meaningful connections outside and live life to the fullest outside. This full life usually is not socially acceptable, because make young be to drop off educational system, gets them into addictions, violence, criminal records. Definitely not what European society want their youth to look like and how they spend their time.

Street youth also is part of what is called NEET – not in employment, education or training young person aged between 15 and 29 (Eurofound, 2023).

There is variety of social services provided by state and non-governmental organizations for street youth in Latvia, especially last few years street youth and youth problems, in general have been one of the publicly demonstrated problems. New projects, services, organizations were established in order to provide assistance and help for street youth and youth with different kind of problems.

Thinking about street youth major problem is how to involve them in different activities and make them use available services. This is crucial. For a young person that chooses to live "free" life is might be hard to accept that it is interesting to go somewhere and take part in some activities. That's why street social workers (and other professionals who are coming directly to places where street youth are spending their time) are so important.

When working with street youth not only social services are important and crucial. Urbanization and city planning plays really important role – creating and developing city architects must cooperate with people from welfare organizations – how to create city youth friendly, to provide safe places for spending time, how to avoid dark, shadow covered, dirty places where, usually, youth are hiding (Placino, Rugkhapan, 2023).

Case differs from municipality to municipality in Latvia, but speaking about the capital – Riga (the biggest city of the country, typically provides a huge variety of services for different groups) Social Service provides services for home based kids and youths. In case street youth is coming to Social service then most likely a social worker will try to bring him back home, if it is not working he will be placed in a crisis centre.

Non-governmental organizations in Riga provide day care centers and different activities during the day and in the evening, but street youth mostly tends to spend time outside. There are mobile social workers groups that are goings to places where youth tends to spend time in the evening. They are trying to create some meaningful relationships with youngsters, to hear their stories and try to figure out how to help them. With one person from this group author of the article spend some time while preparing it.

Last and most important thing – what's next? For example, in America around 4.2 millions young and young adults experience homelessness which is radical continuation of being street youth (NCSL, 2023). Young people living on the street or just spending time on the street are more likely to have health issues, addiction issues, can became victims of sexual assault, gain criminal records and everything in between you can imagine that happens on the street.

Providing services is important, but also important to understand roots of the problem. Why young people choose to be outside, choose to leave their home that supposed to be best place in the world? Everything starts with a family. Society, governmental services should work more on providing safety environment at home, giving to people opportunities to work, earn money, spend free time meaningfully and provide everything for the family needs. Provide safety in school and public areas, so kids feel safe, loved and needed.

Some of the street youth say, that they choose street because it is easier to became "a bad boy" that to solve complicated problems at home or in school (Balleste-Isern, Feixa, 2022). Might sound really weird, but for some young people all over the world it is easier to be in the street and to take this culture and way of living than to go to school, to see their parents struggling, to feel fear of being abused and neglected (Bwambale, Birungi, et al., 2022).

The aim of the pilot study is to realize what kinds of issues street youth are facing, what are their desires about professional development and how are they looking into their future.

Methodology

Monographic method has been used to provide this study. Available literature (printed and online versions) about career counselling for street youth, social work and social work with street youth were used. The author used sources in Latvian and English. Previous research in the field related to the theme of article was used.

In addition, quantitative research was carried out – authors, accompanied with a social worker, went out to the street and interviewed five youth and one social worker who were asked to answer a few questions on career opportunities for street youth and their future in general.

For street youth:

1. Have you been thinking about your future job?

2. Who would you like to become?

3. Have you heard about career counselling?

For a social worker:

1. How often do you talk about career future with street youth?

2. What is a typical path of street youth?

Answers were recorded on tape and then decoded into text; pieces of the short interview (each around 10-15 minutes) are shown in the article.

Participants were five street youth age from 13 to 16, technically involved in formal education, but not taking part in it and two social workers, 36 years old, with 9 years of experience in the field.

The current empirical research was carried out in the streets of Riga during October 2023. The participants of research were the following: 5 females between the age of 13 to 16 (Mean (M) = 14.4, Standard Deviation (SD) =1.14).

Results and Discussion

All conversations with street youth happened in two evening/nights of going out to the field with a social worker. The author should admit that street youth were not interested in speaking to author, after short conversation with a social worker (who is already known and accepted) two of them accepted to talk during the first evening and three on the second attempt during the second evening. In total, the authors tried to reach 16 potential respondents and only five of them agreed to answer questions. The author talked to a social worker before going out to streets. Both authors talked to youth one by one according to prepared questions.

Starting to research the topic about the street youth in Latvia the author realized that the term exists separately from the real situation. Many (if not all) youth that now are considering street as a safe place are trying to escape trauma that they previously got from parents, peers, school (Haley, Roy, 1999).

Having unstructured interviews with a different social worker who works with unmotivated youth, street youth in social service, community centres and day care centres the authors realized that there are not so many "real street youth" like young people who actually have no home and for them, obviously, any ideas and talks about future are not realistic while basic needs are not covered. There are no statistics about how many street youth are there in Latvia.

All the street youth author was talking to have homes and at least one parent with whom he/she is living, so the author considers them as the street youth, but not homeless. Technically they have where to live in and most of them most of the time go home to sleep, but not having meaningful interactions at home and a feeling of "home" that is very valuable to most people.

Replying to the first question four out of five respondents mentioned that they have not been thinking about their future job. One respondent (girl, 14) mentioned that she has been thinking about it and she is afraid: "*I sometimes think about it, but it makes me fell anxious. Like I dream to live, I want to travel to France one day, but then I see my mom, my friends and I realize that nothing from my dreams can happen*".

Next respondent mentioned that her mum is using alcohol too much and she realises that she won't have any support from family in her future.

This idea or motivation to stay on the street is very typical for youth. In conversation with the social worker authors got to know Latvian "real street youth" meaning – the number of the youngsters who are really homeless is very low. There is no official statistics because it is almost impossible to get one, but in general Latvian climate is not so friendly for living on the streets even during summer and infrastructure as well. The social worker also mentioned that even some people try to live on the street local inhabitants quite quickly will call the police and police will bring the person to a shelter.

Latvia is not an exceptional case – street youth face similar problems that street youth all over the world – lack of housing, health issues, mental health disorders, substance abuse, physical abuse, unwanted pregnancies, assault (Roy, Robert et al., 2014). Absence of education, job opportunities and clear life development plan is a big deal for street youth.

According to the street social worker they want to improve their life, at least, they want to have a house, to have money, food, friends etc. Not all of them understand that in order to have it all you need to work hard and achieve it, maybe even harder if it wasn't given to you by your family. The social worker sees it as a main focus of her job – to show street youth that everything is possible and a career is part of it.

The social worker mentioned that she speaks to street youth about future quite often, tries to motivate and here is the biggest struggle. When individual is not having proper housing and basic need are not covered she with a team try to solve their situation with help of different sources and projects. In general, it is not that hard to find housing for street youth if he/she accepts help. Then it is important to work on putting individual into schooling system or job market (depends on age and situation). And here is where the problems start.

One of the respondents (16 years old) agreed to live in a crisis center where she can live for free and all her needs will be covered (food, health, clothes etc). while social workers are working with her mom, but she was not attending school, hasn't even tried, because *"school is boring, there is nothing I can do there. I'm not interested in math or languages; it is not needed in life. I want to make money. Maybe I will become a famous Tiktoker or will earn money on Onlyfans. School education is not able to provide me with what I want"*.

Here we can see few problems – for 16 years old girl who have "seen it all" it might be very frustrated to come to regular school where her classmates will be girls and boys living at homes with their families who, probably, can't even imagine what she went through. She might feel out of the box there – not accepted, not needed, just different., she definitely needs a different way of getting education, but there is nothing the system can provide – regular schools for all different type of people out there and tired teachers who are not able to provide "individual" learning style for every student.

It brings us to the second question for respondents – who would you like to become. Three of five respondents mentioned that they don't care about the actual job – they just want enough money for living and they are ok to work anywhere to achieve it. One respondent (15) mentioned that she would like to work as a nurse in a hospital. She said that this autumn she started to attend school again and hopes to finish it and then go to college. Another two respondents mentioned that they don't see any reason for working because it is hard and bring small amount of money, but to earn a lot you need to get good education. Asking them if they are planning to get education the author received answers – *"Education is not for us. Not for people like us."* That shows that street youth feel the difference between them and "home and family kids", feel that they have different opportunities. Mainly it shows as street youth feeling that they don't have support– when you can come home and get love and acceptance from parents no matter what have happened and what you have done (Decker, Weerman, 2005).

When asking respondents about career counselling all of them mentioned that they have heard about career counselling at school and three of them have participated in group session with career counsellors at school. Asking about how could career counsellor help them with education choices and getting some professional goals created and achieved respondents' thoughts were different.

Two respondents mentioned that conversations they had with a career counsellor at school were quite interesting and useful. One of them mentioned that she would like to come to career counsellor again, because they were doing some interesting games and tests and respondent liked it a lot. Another respondent mentioned

that in her school there was a career counsellor available, but it was one of the regular teachers of school doing this job and respondent was afraid that if she goes there her information won't stay confidential. This fear kept her from using service.

Another two respondents mentioned that they personally never used career counselling services, but some of their classmates and friends did and some of them said that it was even interesting at some point, so they both consider using it when it will be possible. One of these two respondents mentioned that to use this service she needs to get to school and this is not her preferable scenario in near future.

According to Setlhare-Meltor and Wood street youth living in harmful environment could potentially benefit from personal, individual oriented counselling (Setlhare-Meltor, Wood, 2016). They mostly benefit from personal approach, and they are motivated to act when there is someone who is interested in them, ready to listen and to talk, when young girl or boy feel personally connected with a counsellor and feel responsibility to act.

This might be the case that street youth are in lack of parental attention or significant adult in their life and they are not experiencing interest in them, not from "the system", but from a real person. Love and attention cannot solve all problems, but certainly can solve some of them.

Thinking about systematic approach to street youth problem it is hard to implement attitude in the system, not only available services and assistance. That brings us to human resource management and how to find passionate professionals ready to help youngsters to find way for better future. That often is a real problem even when financial support is adequate there a huge lack of career counsellors and social workers who are ready to start their journey.

Speaking with the social worker the author found out that youth are quite often speaking about their possible future and how they could live their life. It covers career topics as well. The social worker mentioned that "*most of the time youth are not limited in their imagination and dreaming about becoming artists, entrepreneurs etc., but when I mention to them that in order to get there, they need to start with little steps like going to school, planning to get into university or college or get another plan. I don't want to say that dreaming is bad or something, but dreaming is not enough. Let's say, we are not equal at all, like we should be in theory. We all have different starting point in life and when you don't have proper family support, have lack of education, maybe some addiction history it is harder to start*".

That sounds like harsh truth or something similar. According to Mintz (2022) who investigate how people with disabilities can succeed in professional career mention that one of the biggest roles goes to professionals who accepts youth at their places – workplace, university, college etc., but here youth participation is needed – to be brave enough and to tell that you need slightly more attention and help than, maybe, others.

It is hard to ask from *society* to be tolerant even if we are speaking about tolerance every day, but you can find individual who will be personally interested in youth success. That is how the author sees a social worker working with street youth.

Answering the second question about youth's typical path, the social worker mention, that there is no such thing as "typical paths", but some similarities could be seen. Starting from not so positive – many girls become pregnant very early, way earlier that they would want to and be ready to became a mother, usually it brings more complex problems to the girl and her family. Some people try to get education, usually it is professional education and, most of the times, youth understands when they go out looking for a job and work at several places where education is not needed. Usually, it is places where no one wants to work because of low salary, difficult work conditions or something similar. At that point youth might consider getting some qualification, because they realize that when you have qualification you can get better salary, better conditions.

To sum up with words of the social worker "*You know, life is life. I always worry about my girls and boys* [mean – clients] *and am always ready to help them with advice, with some real help or just to listen to them and I'm always happy when they are doing good. There is no certain path we should suggest to all of them and I accept that at some point some of them are choosing wrong ways, but I truly believe that we, as professionals, should create a safe space to all of the street youth where they can come and ask for help and get it*".

Conclusions

- Street youth in Latvia is a group that needs multiprofessional support;
- Street youth considers streets as safe and normal place to spend time, that's why service providers should come to youth and meet them in their safety place;
- Street youth are choosing their path because of numerous problems at home and in school;
- Street youth are thinking about their future, but their dreams and thoughts often are not connected with reality;
- Social workers and career counsellors should help street youth to create understandable way of dealing with problems and moving forward – you need to study in order to get a proper work in future;
- All of the street youth respondent has heard about career counselling, some of them have good reviews about it, but they are not considering it as serious resource for their future;
- The social worker working with street youth mentioned that street youth are speaking about their future (including career) quite often, but it is more on a dream level;
- Street youth's typical path can be very different from very positive scenarios when it is just a phase of life, to quite a negative one when it becomes a full-time lifestyle. All professionals who deal with street youth can make impact on youth's choices.

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