



Maariv, Israel, August 28<sup>th</sup> 2019

## **Disturbing statistics: Thousands of students drop out of schools annually**

The last decade saw an average of 15,000 students annually who do not attend schools. Reut Guy, director of the extreme risk and young women program at ELEM: “The Education System will not give up on these kids.”

Next week marks the beginning of a new school year (if we manage to avoid a pending teachers’ strike...) but thousands of kids and teenagers who were supposed to go back to school, will not have that opportunity, and you almost never hear their stories. Looking at this past decade, an average of 5000 students who should be attending elementary school, do not. That’s a little less than 1% of that age group. The statistics for junior high and high schools point at about 10,000-15,000 students who drop out. That’s about 1.5% of all the student body. In the non-Jewish demographic, that amounts to approximately one in every five students. And that’s before we consider “quiet drop-outs,” meaning kids who are enrolled, but never show.

This is a huge improvement compared to 40 years ago, when 20% of students dropped out. Then again, the education system is ill-equipped and misinformed when it comes to dealing with thousands of students. Schools would rather maintain a certain “atmosphere” than to fight for these kids within the school system.

These are kids who, in the best case scenario, drop-out in order to help support their low-income families. They usually have no solid family backbone, with their parents being chronically ill, poor, or criminals and convicts. These kids can be orphans who found themselves in distress and with no means, and, in extreme situations, these kids can also be kids whose household is unstable and dangerous, which lead to them being emotionally and physically neglected, if not even physically and sexually abused by their parents or other adult relatives.

Shelly (pseudonym,) from ELEM’s ALMA center for extreme at-risk young women, is a 19 years old who arrived at the center three years ago. She had to drop-out of school before she turned 16 because of financial circumstances that forced her to work, and because she didn’t fit in socially.

“My family has been struggling greatly since I was little” she said. “I’ve also been through trauma as a child and during those days I realized I have to survive, physically and emotionally. Things at home weren’t good and the entire staff at my school knew. The headmistress fought for me and tried to offer me an individual schedule, but it didn’t work out. Pretty soon after, maybe a few months, I realized I made a mistake, because, yes, I was working, but looking back I realized I had enough time during the day to dedicate to school. When I

dropped-out, my mother and I signed a document stating I'm no longer part of the education system, and I learned that once you sign that document, there's no going back. I enrolled in the HILA project for youth in distress, but it was a very limited program and I found it hard to commit to it, and it's not like you have the supportive framework of a school to keep you afloat."

Soon after, her mental state deteriorated and she found herself on the streets, addicted to drugs. "The staff at ALMA insisted that I won't sleep on the street. They came to me at all hours and made me feel significantly less alone. I found a place where I wasn't being judged, even when I turned to drugs. Most importantly, I found a place where people believe in me." Nowadays, her relationship with her mom has improved and she's back home. She still comes to ALMA but she's been working a steady job for a few months now, and is also socially active and vocal about violence against women. Still, she points out – "It's very embarrassing to come to a job interview at 19 years old with less than ten years of education under your belt. Schools focus greatly on academics, but not on the social state of the youth, and the things that happen between classes. And that's a shame."

Reut Guy, director of the extreme risk and young women program at ELEM said: "In my opinion, the education system, which we also work with, isn't giving up on kids that easily. Often times it's a matter of resources and missing regulations. The youth we meet on the streets has, naturally, a tendency to open up to us more than to the staff at schools, and that is major. We found that potential for endangerment isn't something that starts at 17, but much, much earlier. We know that one in every five children in Israel will be hurt by an adult in his

immediate surroundings, and when I ask ‘why didn’t you say anything at school?’ the most common reply is ‘no one asked me if I’m being hurt by someone.’ Some counselors and teachers do ask that question, but, what’s the next course of action after that?

I’ve met with hundreds of counselors. Some say they lack the tools to handle such situations other than their obligation to report to welfare services. Welfare services tends to keep the kids in their homes and communities as much as possible, and when such thing isn’t possible, the kid would be the one taken away to some sort of fostering solution, and not the adult who did the hurting and neglecting. With all due respect to these protective solutions, they are no replacement for a child’s home, and many a youth treat these removals as imprisonment. In other countries, such as the Netherlands, the welfare and education systems work together for the benefit of the child. In Israel, not only are they operating separately, but the paradigm is very old fashioned. Neither leaving a child in a risky environment, nor removing him from his familiar surroundings does him any good.”

“We also need to remember that most cases aren’t being reported because teenagers don’t tend to share, and professionals don’t tend to ask. We see women who report about sexual abuse at the age of 30, and men who report at the age of 50 and it’s partially because when it was early enough to treat the issue, school wasn’t a meaningful provider of support. When I ask ‘what could’ve possibly be so bad about being at home that you preferred sleeping on the street?’ I discover horrifying things. ELEM isn’t a national solution for the problem, and there are thousands of kids we can’t reach. Even counselors and

educators who actually see an issue through all the way, are lacking the gratification, the tools, and the support to do so. The more complex cases require the supportive weight of the system and not just certain educators who go the extra mile.”

ELEM works with youth in distress year round, and during this time of the year ELEM accompanies any drop-outs in order to help them find alternative options and mentor them throughout the process at ELEM’s different programs all across Israel. Your donation can help assisting these youths. [Bit.ly/donatetoelem](http://Bit.ly/donatetoelem)