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The First Report of its Kind Warns: 25 Thousand Teenagers are At Risk of Wandering the Streets

In Israel, thousands of children and teenagers are without a roof over their heads and a hot meal to eat. A new report by the Knesset's Research and Information Center examined the phenomenon of minors who dropped out of the education system and ended up on the streets. "We meet hundreds without a safe place to stay," say ELEM representatives. "Most of them are 14 years old or older, but recently we met a case of a nine-year-old boy."

Written by Hadar Gil-Ad

A little more than a week has passed since the school year started, and millions of children and teenagers who need a healthy routine, companionship, and education flocked to classrooms throughout the country. But September 1st is not a happy day for all children. For tens of thousands of boys and girls who have dropped out and spent their days on the streets, the loneliness and distress only increase.

A new report by the Knesset Research and Information Center attempts to indicate the scope of the phenomenon of girls and boys living on the streets. "The phenomenon of 'street children' is recognized as a relatively limited one," the authors of the report explained, "but it is a serious phenomenon that endangers the safety and security of girls and boys, and its treatment is complex, both due to the characteristics of the girls and boys - mainly resistance towards treatment providers and refusal to receive assistance, but also, apparently, due to the lack of suitable and flexible solutions."

The ages of the youth living on the streets are largely between 15-17, but the care providers also encounter younger youth. Among them are cases of boys and girls who were exposed to domestic violence, faced a family crisis surrounding their sexual identity, or left their religious life. Many are at risk daily, living in unacceptable living conditions and exposed to violence, crime, and drugs.

"During the year, we meet hundreds of youth who are 'on the streets,' without a safe place to stay, and at various levels of disconnection from services," says Roi Homri, National Director of Street Work at ELEM. "The main age group is 14 and older, but not only them. We only recently encountered a case of a nine-year-old boy. This is a phenomenon that affects the entire population."

The authors of the report explain that one of the difficulties in dealing with the phenomenon is the lack of complete mapping of girls and boys who live on the streets, but this is not the first time such criticism has been voiced: during 2018-2019, the State Comptroller examined the state's treatment of high-risk youth who are removed or are in the process of becoming

removed from educational settings, and already then it turned out that there is a significant lack of data.

The fact that in Israel, in 2022, there is still no accurate data about children and youth on the streets is outrageous," said the former chair of the Committee for the Rights of the Child, MK Michal Shir Segman (Yesh Atid), who commissioned the report. "Every moment these children spend on the street, their lives and safety are in immediate and real danger. Homeless minors are not a default. We as a state and as a society are responsible for bringing about change."

The report's authors collected data on youth in risk situations to try and give an indication of the extent of the phenomenon. "During the mapping of the national program for children and youth at risk 360°, we learned that about 25,000 youth may be found wandering the streets," they explained. "Although we are not necessarily dealing with children who end up living on the streets, it can be assumed that some of them may deteriorate to homelessness in the absence of appropriate and available assistance and treatment."

In addition, according to data from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2021, approximately 21,700 youth ages 13-17 did not attend a recognized educational framework. "In certain situations, wandering and dropping out may lead to living on the streets," the authors explain. According to them, that year, approximately 500 runaways from the Youth Protection Authority frameworks were recorded, and about a third of them were from the closed residence for girls in Jerusalem, "Mesila." In addition, at least one attempt to escape from boarding schools for children and youth at risk was recorded among about 500 teenagers.

Between December 2020 and April 2021, the *We See You* scouting program operators met about 200 teenagers who were separated from their families and about 30 homeless people. In 2021, 1,600 applicants were registered for shelter-type programs, about 330 girls and boys received help at *Halev* programs for youth and young people in prostitution, about 750 youths received assistance in day community centers in Jerusalem, and ELEM's scouting work found and treated nearly 4,400 minors on the streets. In addition, 120 abandoned children ages 14-17 were recognized by the Ministry of Welfare in 2020. That year, 353 abandoned children of all ages received an 'abandoned child' benefit from Social Security. According to police data, 550 missing minors were reported in 2021.

"It is very difficult to identify minors who are homeless," explains Maya Baron, National Director of the Extreme Risk Field at ELEM. "For the most part, these are children who will give vague answers to questions about where they sleep and how they manage. Many times these are teen girls and minors who actually 'get by' in exploitative housing arrangements, and not necessarily sleep on the streets."

According to data from the Ministry of Welfare, in 2020, about 13% (approx. 397,000) of all children ages 0-17 were registered with the Ministry of Welfare. About 167,000 registered children were defined as "in need" (about 42% of all registered children). This year, approximately 116.4 thousand children ages 0-17 were placed in welfare settings.

"There are several challenges in operating the out-of-home services," explain the report's authors. "From insufficient nationwide distribution, a short permitted stay period, to the lack of dedicated frameworks for the Arab society. In addition, because they are not defined as 'homeless,' minors who live on the streets are the responsibility of other welfare agencies, which are not part of the municipal homeless units." According to them, the Ministry of Welfare

is currently working on a new program to identify at-risk youth on the streets in order to respond to these challenges.