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“They’re Smiling on Stories, but They’re Lost”: The Youth Distresses that Worsened During COVID are Still Here

ELEM’s annual report presents disturbing data on the struggles of the youth in Israel post-Covid. In 2022, 13% reported self-harm, 44% dealt with anxiety and depression, 26% reported violence outside the home, and 18% reported sexual abuse. “Loneliness brings them to dangerous places; we must recognize this as a society.”

Written by Hadar Gil-Ad

Use of dangerous substances, dealing with loneliness, anxiety and depression: Today (Tuesday), ELEM submitted its annual report to President Isaac Herzog, including disturbing data on the struggles of Israeli youth post-Covid. “Even though life has been back on track for a long time, the hardships of youth that worsened and deepened during Covid did not decrease in intensity since,” claimed the NGO.

According to the report that examined key trends in 2022, “the youths in Israel today are getting lost. They are lively, active, happy, and smile in every selfie and Story, but they are lonely. They represent an entire generation that walks around with its soul wandering, lost. The distress of the youth, which was exacerbated during the covid crisis, did not decrease in intensity, even though life has seemingly been back to normal for a long time. Life continued, but the risk situations remained the same.”

And the data speaks for itself: 50% of the teenagers and young adults served by ELEM, an NGO for teenagers and young adults in situations of risk and distress, said that they were lonely and shared about the difficulty in creating social relationships and dealing with social situations.

“The youth are experiencing the impact of progress and technology, screens and social media: lack of eye contact, lack of body language, facial expressions, and lack of audio, elements that, when missing, increase the levels of loneliness, lack of belonging, alienation, and social anxiety,” ELEM explained. “In

addition, the youth felt the final lasting consequences of COVID. The pandemic might not be a part of our lives anymore, but they have lost, like many of us adults, the skills and basic abilities to communicate with one another.”

It was also noted that 44% of the youth reported dealing with anxiety and depression. “They shared about feeling despondent, detached, disconnected, and lacking motivation while at home, at school, in the neighborhood, in parks, and on social media,” the report states. 19% shared that they receive clinical and emotional care from psychologists, psychiatrists, and various therapists.

In addition, there were reports of self-inflicted harm among 13% of the youth and young adults, including suicidal statements, self-harm, and even suicidal attempts. 9% of all respondents reported facing eating disorders, with body image and the pursuit of perfection being issues that only worsen and deepen with every passing year.

Even in examining the use of consciousness-altering substances, findings have been disturbing. 58% of the youth reported using alcohol and 40% drugs. “Among the most common drugs, youth have spoken a lot this year about whipped-cream charges (filled with nitrous oxide gas - ELEM USA), which is becoming increasingly widespread in recent years,” claimed ELEM. “23% reported that they participated in unsupervised parties throughout the year.”

ELEM claimed that violence among teenagers has been getting worse in recent years. In 2022, 26% of the youth and young adults served by ELEM reported experiencing violence outside of the home - on the street, in the neighborhood, at schools, at parties, in parks, and other places, including extreme cases of bullying and vandalism, 22% of the boys and girls were involved in criminal activity.

During the same year, 20% of ELEM’s beneficiaries reported cases of violence at home, some long-term for years – the place that’s meant to be a refuge, a warm and enveloping place, is actually threatening and frightening. “Violence also exists on the ‘New Street,’ the place where the youth spend more and more time – social media platforms,” ELEM explained. “8% of the youth and young adults at ELEM

suffered from cyber-violence, including shunning, being picked on, exposure to offensive content, and the sharing of sexual-oriented pictures and videos.”

In addition, 18% of the youths, young men, and women served by ELEM reported that they experienced sexual abuse this year. Sometimes it's long-term violence that they've experienced from a young age at home or in their close circles.

In 2022, ELEM helped 12,309 teenagers, young men, and women across the country, and the report's data is based on information collected from all those the NGO helped throughout the year. ELEM's report tells the stories and shows the faces behind the poverty, distress, and risk,” said President Herzog. “We must not ignore this. A society that does not help and support those in need, especially young people, does not deserve to be called a civilized society. I thank you, those who are always at the forefront of the work - the employees, the volunteers, the activists, and the supporters. Be strong and courageous.”

Nava Barak, President of ELEM-Israel, said: “I appeal to the hearts of the mental health professionals and all the welfare and education systems to continue and strengthen the support of youth, to see them and not leave any boy or girl behind, this is critically important at this time.”

ELEM-Israel's CEO, Tali Erez, added: “We need to wake up. What was is not what will be. Our children, especially those at risk, who have no family backbone, a guiding hand, or someone who sees them, face extremism of the risk phenomena. Everything is more intense. More suicidal situations, more self-harm, and the most foundational thing - our teenagers are lonelier. And loneliness leads to dangerous places. As a society and country, we must recognize this, take responsibility and adapt the services offered accordingly.”