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Children and Youth at Risk in Israel

Rachel Szabo-Lael

The study was initiated by 360° – the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk and funded with its assistance

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Executive Summary

Background

In 2008, the government of Israel adopted a standard definition of children and youth at risk. The definition was formulated by a public committee examining the status of children and youth at risk and in distress chaired by Prof. Hillel Schmid (the Schmid Report, 2006); it is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and definitions accepted in the literature and among policymakers in Israel. According to the definition, children and youth at risk live in conditions that endanger them, their families and their environment. These conditions are harmful to their rights as set out in the Convention in the following areas: Physical existence, health and development; family-related issues and care of the child; learning and acquiring skills; wellbeing and emotional health; social belonging and integration; protection from others; and protection from behaviors that are dangerous to themselves. The definition adopted by the committee is broad and sets out a risk continuum that ends with abused and neglected children and youth. The adoption of a standard definition of children and youth at risk was a step forward in defining the extent of the phenomenon in Israel.

The government ministries in this country have a number of databases on children and youth at risk. However, there are many limitations to the information in these databases, the most notable being:

- ❖ The data relate only to cases known to social services and the police.
- ❖ The data do not relate to a single, uniform definition for different manifestations of risk, and the forms used to collect information often do not include the definition of the type of harm or other key data.
- ❖ There is no structured and orderly system of data collection.
- ❖ No attempt has been made to collate information from different sources in order to learn about the overall number, characteristics and needs of children and youth at risk.

Research in this context has taken the form of one-time studies (not conducted on a regular basis), which are based on data about children in the care of different services. Most are not surveys aimed at identifying children at risk within the total population and the emphasis is not so much on measuring the extent of the phenomenon, but rather on understanding it.

Over the past two decades, MJB made several efforts to estimate the number and characteristics of children and youth at risk in Israel and this has made it possible to obtain estimates of the extent of the phenomenon and the needs of the children and youth and of their families.

360° – the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk (hereafter the National Program) which began implementation in 2008, has made it possible to obtain a fuller and comprehensive appraisal of the number, characteristics and needs of children and youth at risk in Israel. It is an inter-ministerial program of the ministries of Labor and Social Affairs and Services (MOLSA), Education, Health, Immigrant Absorption, and Public Security. The program is headed by MOLSA and is currently

implemented in approximately 180 local authorities of lower and middle socioeconomic status, which are home to almost two-thirds of the children and youth in Israel. The goal is to change the attitude of Israeli society to children and youth at risk and to enhance and strengthen the services for them in the community. The local authorities have been allocated an additional earmarked budget and given the responsibility and authority to use it to develop services for children and youth at risk according to their needs and the specific characteristics of each locality. The first stage of the program was to gather information about the children and youth at risk in each locality. The data were obtained from the main universal and specialized services working with children and youth (well-baby clinics, preschools, primary and secondary schools and treatment services) through a process of identifying and mapping the children and youth at risk. In this way for the first time in Israel, systematic and comprehensive information about children and youth at risk and their characteristics was collected concurrently in many localities by a variety of professionals, and was based on a standardized and agreed-upon definition of children and youth at risk.

The goal of this report is to present the information collected in the process of identifying and mapping the children and youth at risk in every locality in the program and present an up-to-date description of them. The report contains information about the number, characteristics and needs of children and youth at risk, as well as their percentage among the population of children and youth in the program localities. The report takes account of the demographic characteristics, areas of risk, risk situations (the problems experienced by the children and youth) and the complexity of the risk situations. Reports published in the past were based on partial information from the identification and mapping process. This report, as noted, presents information gathered from a larger number of authorities as well as estimates of the rate of various risk situations among all the children in the localities of low and middle socioeconomic status, which are home to almost two-thirds of the children and youth in Israel.

Children and Youth at Risk: Extent

- ❖ In the localities where the National Program is implemented,¹ 260,888 children and adolescents – 16% of all children and adolescents in those localities – were identified at risk.
- ❖ In attempting to learn from this information about the percentage of all children and youth at risk in Israel, it must be remembered that almost two-thirds of the children and youth in Israel live in these localities (the information was gathered from 180 out of 250 local authorities). On the other hand, these localities are in the lowest socioeconomic clusters and include a high percentage of Arab localities and localities that have a high percentage of ultra-Orthodox and new immigrants; they do not therefore constitute a representative sample.
- ❖ In the localities in the program: 15% of the preschoolers are at risk; 20% of the elementary schoolchildren are at risk, and 20% of the youth are at risk.
- ❖ There is great variance among the localities in the percentages of children and youth identified as at risk, ranging from 9% to 47%. In half of the localities, the percentages of children and youth identified at risk ranged from 9%-15%, and in half of them, from 15%-47%. Importantly, all seven

¹ In this report, unless otherwise noted, "localities" refers to those that are in the program.

of the localities where the percentage of children and youth identified at risk ranged from 37%-47% were Arab localities. The average percentage of children and youth at risk in a locality is 19% ($SD=8.0$).

- ❖ 12% of the children and youth in the ultra-Orthodox localities are at risk and 23% of the children and youth in the Arab localities are at risk. Immigrant children and youth at risk account for 27% of all immigrant children and youth at risk in these localities.
- ❖ 13% of the children and youth at risk in the localities in the program have problems of family-related issues, in other words there are problems with the parent-child relationship, and with the care and supervision of the children. Ten percent have problems with studying and acquiring skills, i.e., with learning and behavior at school, 8% have problems in the area of emotional health and wellbeing, 7% have problems with social integration and belonging, and 6% of the children in these localities have physical health and developmental problems.
- ❖ 9% of the children and youth in the program localities were reported as victims of neglect (i.e., neglect within the family) and 1% are victims of abuse (physical and sexual).

Children and Youth at Risk: Characteristics and Needs

- ❖ Out of the ***total population of children and youth at risk***, 31% are preschoolers, 37% are in elementary school, and 32% are adolescents. Note that the percentage of preschoolers at risk is higher than expected by the program directors, while that of the adolescents is lower than expected. The high percentage found among preschoolers may be because the National Program particularly emphasized this age group, while the process of identifying and mapping youth between 2009 and 2011 was less meticulous and it is possible that not all of those who had dropped out of school were mapped.
- ❖ 58% of the children and youth at risk are boys. The percentage increases with age – 56% of preschoolers, 59% of elementary school age and 60% of youth.
- ❖ 49% of the children and youth at risk are Jewish (12% ultra-Orthodox) and 47% are Arab). There is no information about the remaining 4%.
- ❖ 9% of the children and youth at risk are immigrants (as defined by the National Program), 4% are Ethiopian-Israelis. The percentage of immigrantss increases with age – 7% of preschoolers, 9% of elementary school age and 12% of youth.
- ❖ 52% of the children and youth at risk are from large families (4 or more children); 19% are from single-parent families and 20% live in families where neither parent is working. The percentage of children and youth at risk who are from large or single-parent families greatly exceeds the percentage among all children and youth in Israel.
- ❖ 37% of the children and youth at risk have a disability or learning disability. The percentage of preschoolers at risk with disabilities and learning disabilities is lower (28%) than the percentage among elementary school children (43%) and youth (39%).
- ❖ Most of the children and youth at risk (73%) have problems relating to family-related issues; 59% have problems with learning and acquiring skills; 47% have problems of wellbeing and emotional

health; 41% have problems with social belonging and integration; 37% have physical health and development problems; 18% have problems with protection from others; and 15% showed dangerous risk behaviors.

- ❖ As expected, the percentage of those with problems in various areas increases with age, with the exception of problems with physical health and development, where the percentage declines with age (50% among preschoolers, 35% elementary school children, and 26% among youth).
- ❖ The problems in the area of physical existence, health and development are: physical care (23%) and suspected abnormal physical/cognitive development (23%). The extent of these types of problem declines with age.
- ❖ The most frequent problems in the area of family-related issues are: parents' inability to provide enrichment for their children (49%); parents' difficulty coping with the children's behavior and their ability to set limits (36%); parents' difficulty obtaining services their children need (35%); problems with the emotional bond between parents and children (27%); and lack of supervision (26%). As expected, problems of this kind increase with age.
- ❖ The most frequent problems in the area of learning and acquiring skills are: low functioning or scholastic achievements (44%); lack of learning involvement (38%); and disruptiveness and non-acceptance of authority (27%).
- ❖ The most frequent problems in the area of wellbeing, emotional health, and social belonging and integration: displaying behaviors indicating emotional difficulty (47%); difficulties adjusting and creating relationships with others (29%); and displaying aggressive behaviors (23%). As expected, the extent of these types of problems increases with age.
- ❖ Problems of protection from others: 15% of the children and youth at risk were identified as exposed to dangerous behaviors in the family. There is suspected or substantiated physical abuse of 7% of those identified. There is suspected or substantiated sexual abuse from outside the family of 2% of those identified and suspected or notified sexual abuse from within the family of 1% of those identified.
- ❖ With regard to risk behaviors: Illegal or non-normative behaviors were reported for 8% of the children and youth at risk; 7% display self-harm and risk behaviors; 3% have used drugs or alcohol; and 2% have engaged in sexual behavior that is non-normative or inappropriate for their age. The extent of [these problems](#) increases with age and, as expected, is most evident among youth.
- ❖ The number of problems of children and youth at risk in the program localities ranges from one problem to the 25 problems that could be listed. On average, children and youth at risk have 5.1 problems ($SD=4.0$). The number increases with age. Preschoolers have an average of 3.7 problems ($SD=3.2$); elementary schoolchildren have an average of 5.4 problems ($SD=4.0$), and adolescents have an average of 6.2 problems ($SD=4.5$).
- ❖ A high percentage of children and youth (40%) were identified with problems in 3 different domains. These are children and youth who have problems of family-related issues (i.e., it is their parents who have problems) and suffer from problems of social/emotional functioning and

developmental/scholastic functioning as well. Their problems are the most complex and require multidisciplinary intervention

- ❖ As expected, the problems become more complex with age. 24% of the preschoolers identified have problems in three domains, while the percentage is higher among elementary schoolchildren (45%) and almost half of the youth (49%).
- ❖ The number of children mapped by the treatment services (Truancy Service, Youth Advancement Units at the Ministry of Education, Social Service Departments of the municipalities, and the Youth Probation Service at MOLSA) as children at risk receiving any kind of service or treatment was almost half the number of those described at risk. The percentage of children receiving these services (relative to all children identified) increases with age (55% of preschoolers, 47% of elementary schoolchildren and 64% of youth).
- ❖ Most of the children and youth at risk mapped by the treatment services are under the care of a single service (usually Social Service Departments). Only 9% of the children are under the care of more than one service, and the percentage increases with age (2% of preschoolers, 8% of elementary school children at 12% of youth). These findings refute the earlier assumption that there is a high level of overlap among the treatment services. The data indicate that service provision by more than one agency is more prevalent among youth.

Children and Youth at Risk – Special Populations:

Arabs, Ultra-Orthodox and New Immigrants

- ❖ The situation for Arab children and youth is more severe than that of Jewish children and youth at risk: the percentage is higher, there is a higher percentage of risk situations among them, and their status is more complex. In addition, the percentage of children and youth at risk who are receiving services out of all Arab children and youth at risk is lower than the percentage among Jewish children and youth at risk.
- ❖ The extent of risk among ultra-Orthodox children and youth is much lower than among total children and youth than in the general population. They are characterized by fewer risk situations and fewer complex situations, and a lower percentage of them were identified with problems in the different areas. The ultra-Orthodox children and youth identified at risk have fewer complex situations with regard to both the number of problems and the type and number of areas in which they have problems. However, the percentage of ultra-Orthodox children and youth identified was low. It is possible that the findings regarding the extent of complexity of problems are affected by the fact that the professionals in the various services are less familiar with risk situations among ultra-Orthodox children and youth (due to relatively low service consumption within the ultra-Orthodox community) and that some of them may be uneasy about reporting due to the reluctance within the ultra-Orthodox population to disclose information about problems.
- ❖ The status of immigrant children and youth at risk is better than that of non-immigrant Jewish children and youth at risk with regard to wellbeing and emotional health. In contrast, immigrant children and youth are at greater risk in the areas of family-related issues and risk behaviors. Similarly, the immigrant children and youth at risk have a greater number of problems than the

non-immigrant Jewish children and youth at risk. A comparison among the different groups of origin found that the situation of immigrant children and youth at risk from the Caucuses was more serious than among children and youth identified at risk from other immigrant groups, regarding both the prevalence and the complexity of problems. In addition, the percentage of children and youth at risk from the Caucuses who are receiving services from the treatment services is lower than among children and youth at risk from other immigrant groups.

Programmatic Directions

- ❖ The variation among the localities and the sectors with regard to the extent of risk, the prevalence of specific risk situations and the complexity of the problems warrants attention. Different population groups may require different approaches.
- ❖ The situation of Arab children and youth is more difficult, with regard to both the extent and the complexity of the risk situations. Particular attention should be paid to this finding.
- ❖ The prevalence of risk situations among ultra-Orthodox children and youth, as shown in the findings, was lower than expected. It is possible that the findings about the extent of risk and the complexity of the problems is affected by the relatively low acquaintance of the professionals in the various services with risk situations among children and youth and that some professionals may be apprehensive about reporting. Professionals who work with this population should receive additional training and guidance in this area.
- ❖ The findings reveal that many children and youth who are at risk are not known to the services or receiving services. Less than half of the children and youth who were identified by the professionals in the universal services are receiving treatment. Treatment services should be made more accessible to those who need them.
- ❖ In contrast to popular assumption, it is rare for services to be provided to children by more than one provider and it occurs mainly among youth. The data refute concerns about service duplication and raise the need to ensure that children and youth with a complex array of needs are receiving all the services they require.
- ❖ The study findings indicate that collaboration and sharing of information among various services could advance the national processes of identifying children and youth at risk, understanding their needs, and providing suitable services for all their needs. The study also identifies that the professionals could relate to areas in the children's lives that are not necessarily included in their traditional job descriptions. Nevertheless, it is important to continue developing additional ways of integrating the different perspectives of professionals in order to achieve a comprehensive, holistic perspective of the needs of the children and youth.

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