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# **Ultra-Orthodox Youth and Young Adults at Risk – Needs and Services Literature Review**

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# Abstract

## Background

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the existence of risk situations among ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults. The Rehabilitation, Accompaniment and Prevention Administration of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (hereinafter, the Administration), is responsible for providing services to youth and young adults at risk. This literature review is part of a larger study commissioned by the Administration to examine the characteristics and needs of ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults at risk, as well as the compatibility of the services provided to them.

## Objectives

The objective of the literature review is to gather and analyze existing knowledge about ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults (both female and male) at risk. It aims to gain a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the formation of risk situations among this population, their characteristics and needs, the services currently available to this population and the level of compatibility with their needs, and the adjustments necessary to ensure more comprehensive services.

## Method

Academic articles and research reports published within the last ten years on ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults at risk in Israel were reviewed. In addition, articles and reports on other relevant topics related to this issue were reviewed. The review was also based on information from government websites, articles in the press, and websites of civil society organizations.

## Findings

### **Dropout and risk situations among ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults**

Dropping out of the educational system plays a pivotal role in the emergence of risk situations within this particular demographic, as it impacts both the social standing of the dropouts and their families. Dropping out can lead to the adoption of attributes of dress and general appearance of the non-ultra-Orthodox population, estrangement from their community and family, vagrancy, inappropriate sexual conduct, and delinquency. The

majority of cases of dropping out occur prior to enrollment in a yeshiva high school for boys (“yeshiva k’tana”) or seminary for girls, or during high school or seminary. The dropout rate among ultra-Orthodox youth surpasses that of the general Jewish population, particularly among males. However, due to the reluctance of many in the ultra-Orthodox population to report to the authorities, accurately assessing the extent of risk situations within the target population and identifying long-term trends is challenging. Nevertheless, there are indications suggesting that the prevalence of risk situations has been increasing over time.

### **Factors, characteristics, and needs of ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults at risk**

The various factors leading to dropout and risk situations often work in combination, thereby accelerating the process of deterioration. These factors include, among others, difficulty in family functioning; difficulty in fulfilling the requirements of the educational institution; ADHD or other learning disabilities; exposure to the customs of mainstream society or to ultra-Orthodox youth who are disengaged from their community; and coping with sexual abuse. It has been claimed that the attitude of the family and the community towards girls who do not meet social expectations is stricter than towards boys. Additionally, there is a group of “lapsed” (formerly religious) Jewish youth who have unique risk characteristics primarily related to their struggle to integrate into mainstream society both socially and occupationally.

Interviews conducted with ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults at risk shed light on the challenges they face. These individuals express difficulties in navigating the closed nature of ultra-Orthodox society, emphasizing the need for non-judgmental support from the adults in their lives. Despite experiencing disappointment and harm within the ultra-Orthodox community, they still aspire to integrate into it. However, they also experience feelings of failure due to their inability to meet the community’s expectations. Among the factors that aid in coping with these risk situations are personal resources such as self-esteem and a sense of control, parental support, social support, and a sense of belonging to the community.

### **Programs and services for ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults at risk**

Programs and services that aim to identify ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults at risk and address their needs have been implemented by the Administration in recent years. Additionally, other government ministries and non-profit organizations have also launched their own programs. The majority of these programs focus on establishing support networks within the community and promoting the reintegration of these individuals into educational institutions, their families, and the wider community. However, it is important to note that many of these responses lack sufficient documentation and evaluation studies.

## **Challenges in and strategies for the treatment of ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults at risk**

The treatment of ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults at risk presents several challenges. One such challenge is the difficulty in identifying cases of risk and distress in this population. Furthermore, addressing the needs of these youth and young adults requires bridging the gap between their perspectives and those of the professionals providing treatment. Other challenges include the lack of tailored solutions in educational institutions and a shortage of interventions for girls in certain local authorities.

Existing literature suggests various strategies for addressing these challenges. Some of these strategies have already been implemented by the Administration. These include placing greater emphasis on the cultural competence of caregivers, fostering collaboration with community leaders, and maintaining the involvement of the family and community in the lives of these young individuals.

## **Recommendations**

- To enhance the effectiveness of interventions in educational institutions, it is recommended to focus on training the teaching staff, strengthening the advisory-therapeutic system, providing guidance and support to parents, and maintaining mentoring programs while evaluating their efficacy.
- It is crucial to raise awareness about risk situations and the interventions offered within the community. This can be achieved by involving ultra-Orthodox leaders and educators, as well as by utilizing appropriate channels for disseminating information and content tailored to the ultra-Orthodox community.
- Enhance the target population's personal and social resources. This can be achieved by fostering strong relationships with parents and promoting a sense of belonging to the community through various means, such as community engagement programs.
- Efforts should be made to promote cultural adaptation in various areas by providing training to professionals and enhancing their cultural competence. Additionally, establishing mechanisms for collaboration with community leaders can further facilitate this process.
- It is necessary to develop a tailored response to address the challenges faced by LGBT youth and young adults.
- Consideration should be given to the establishment of a comprehensive governmental body dedicated to addressing the needs of ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults in risk situations. This body would be responsible for setting overall goals and objectives for all interventions in the field, based on a mutually agreed-upon definition of the target population. Furthermore, it would be entrusted with the ongoing collection of data regarding the size of the population of ultra-Orthodox youth and young adults at risk, its characteristics, and the services provided.