

På väg ut

När ungdomar rymmer och kastas ut hemifrån – ur socialtjänstens perspektiv

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av

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to discover and understand how caseworkers in the social services view and present the phenomenon of young people who run away from and/or are thrown out of their homes. What images of these young people do they entertain and how do they articulate their work with this group?

The data were collected through 20 qualitative group interviews with caseworkers who in 1997 were working with young people between the ages of 12 and 20 at Individual and Family Care sections in all the social districts of Stockholm Municipality. Simultaneously, a quantitative background study of 96 problem cases was also conducted. Following analysis of the initial group interviews, two of these were chosen for detailed case study. To provide a complementary perspective, the thesis also contains two case studies of accounts of running away/being thrown out from a runaway's and a parents' respective points of view.

Leaving home in this way is seen to be more common among girls than among boys and the most usual cause a problematic family situation with elements of violence, assault, and substance abuse. A particularly vulnerable group is girls in immigrant families who are exposed to authoritarian upbringing and often suffer rough treatment. Dominant among these young people's own individual problems is difficulty in school. Other problem areas mentioned are substance abuse, truant behaviour, staying out late and sexual promiscuity. A small number of runaways were able to return home after counselling; but the conditions leading to running away/being thrown out were described by the welfare workers as complex, and accounts of the same situation given by parents and runaways often differed widely.

The caseworkers' view of the phenomenon is informed by a relationship and family oriented perspective, where the paramount goal is "working home" the runaways/thrown outs and restoring them to the bosom of their families. When that avenue has failed, as often was the case, the alternative is to place them in family homes or institutions. Running away and being thrown out are seen as deviant attempts at accomplishing the process of separation from parents that is normal at this stage. In the case of girls of immigrant background who run away/get thrown out of their homes, the tendency is to explain the phenomenon as a 'culture collision' between incompatible value systems and traditions. When young people and even the parents come to the social services needing practical help with accommodation and economic support so that the children can leave home, the caseworkers described this as presenting a dilemma.

The main technique relied upon by the caseworkers is counselling intended to lead to reconciliation between children and their parents. The thesis discusses the importance and consequences for these youth in their development towards adulthood of the lack of a young people's perspective within the social services and the emphasis on the sanctity of the family. A clear contradiction lies in the fact that while the youth units have been established expressly for the purpose of helping young people, a social services dominated by a family perspective with the aim of reintegrating runaways into their often dysfunctional families takes on a mainly controlling and disciplinary role, where the young people's individual survival strategies are not paid attention to or taken seriously.