

Short Description of the "WALK MAN" Project Implemented by Frankfurt's Youth Welfare Department

Youth social work in the area around Frankfurt's main station is an open kind of youth welfare field service that reaches out to young people in the streets and stands by them, helping them with education and organizing leisure time activities.

This project resulted from observations that drug-consuming adolescents and young offenders could no longer be treated in the traditional setting of residential and non-residential youth work, because they were expected to seek help of their own accord. Street social work was a means of reaching out to precisely these young people who are threatened by segregation or have fallen through the grid of conventional youth welfare services. They are to be offered effective and up-to-date treatment. Street social workers make contact directly in the scene around Frankfurt's main station. In addition to counselling, they provide emergency care (medical first aid, help with finding overnight accommodation etc.) and go along to institutions and administrative departments to look after young people's interests or support them in asserting their claim to adequate aid. The project "WALK MAN" consists of two official, full-time posts, each of which is filled by a sociologist and a social worker. The actual working hours depend on the needs of clients as well as the business hours of cooperating welfare institutions. Therefore, working outside regular time is nothing unusual. "WALK MAN", however, does not only cooperate with youth welfare institutions, but also with those fighting drug addiction, especially since the former provide no crisis intervention service for drug-consuming adolescents around the main station. According to § 35 a KJHG, a service is to be organized that helps young people to quit the drug scene and find a perspective for their future.

The "WALK MAN" strategy consists of three distinct parts. The first part involves going to the adolescent scenes and dealing with the young people there in an unprejudiced manner. This means we have to accept and tolerate their being in these scenes, because we assume they have chosen the streets as part of their survival strategy. Even though these places, as a rule, put adolescents at considerable risk, "WALK MAN" will never use repressive means to attempt to remove them from there against their own will. Knowing and accepting the scene and its consequences is a basic prerequisite for being able to give effective help. The presence of "WALK MAN" team members in the scene also gives them privileged field access to adolescents, who find that our approach does not correspond at all to what they have experienced so far with youth welfare services. Many of the adolescents we can still gain access to in this way have criminal records and have dealt with youth welfare services for longer periods of time. They are known to the courts and the Youth Welfare Office, and they refuse to have contact to these official authorities. Our crisis intervention, giving various kinds of initial survival help in the streets, aims to build up relationships as a basis for any further action.

The second part of the "WALK MAN" strategy is to give advice: our assumption being that adolescents may well have chosen the surroundings of the main station "voluntarily", because they consider them the only place where, with their drug addiction problems, they have a chance of survival, but at the same time, they do not feel positive about all the consequences of living in the streets. Therefore, we think it is possible to jointly discuss ways of quitting the scene, provided we present an alternative to the negative experiences they have had. They have seen many relationships fail, and they are most likely to refuse any advice from the start. It is important to demonstrate to these young people that they are the centre of attention, to find out what their strengths, abilities and desires are, and not to confront them with the usual expectations of residential youth services, since they, the services, have frequently failed to meet those expectations. Surviving in the streets

requires a lot of competence, which must not be disputed under any circumstances. The adolescents must not be reproached for their inability to set themselves goals, which they cannot possibly do in the extreme circumstances of their lives. That is why the classical range of youth service initiatives has mostly failed especially with regard to these adolescents. Work, training, a profession are the focus; and only those youths who are in a position/have the ability to adapt to these middle class norms stand a chance to meet the demands. Streetwise youths who have had experience with drugs may want to adapt themselves to these norms, but they cannot keep the rules that go with them. Therefore, counselling should not focus on ideas the adolescents are start from real life situations and prepare adolescents step by little step for the effort required to quit the scene. Empathy for these young people is needed, as much of it as possible. For this reason, it is absolutely necessary that they cooperate of their own free will, and attention must be given to their own thoughts and ideas if the aid process is to succeed. Adolescents should fashion their lives with our help, but we should not try to fashion them.

The third part of the "WALK MAN" strategy is to stand by the adolescents over a longer period of time. Resulting from our experience that help can only succeed if the "patient" contributes to his/her own recovery, "WALK MAN" accompanies the adolescents wherever they have to go in the complicated labyrinth of social services. These services often assume that adolescents don't need help if they don't ask for it of their own accord. Street social workers, on the other hand, assume that adolescents, because of their situation, cannot take the necessary steps alone, and if they can, they won't be able to articulate their interests properly. "WALK MAN" supports them all the way: which does not mean they are being incapacitated; rather, they are being guided through a system which is not client-oriented; consequently, it happens frequently that youth welfare services hit upon youths they haven't yet been able to develop an aid concept for -because of their own deficiencies and far too high expectations. Street social workers, however, by advising adolescents thoroughly in the streets, have been able to develop ideas in a joint effort that show escape routes from the scene. These ideas must be consolidated in a creative manner and adapted to each individual using methods relevant to our time. Long-term waiting periods and aid strategies linked to preconditions cannot succeed. But even our approach is a (secondary) preventive one. Every drug-consuming adolescent, because of his/her addiction, comits more or less serious offences. He/she can be a victim, but also a perpetrator of violence. Their potential for violence increases steadily the longer they are out in the streets, and their ability to quit decreases accordingly.

An aid system that deals with young people's problems in a rigid, inflexible manner will not be able to solve these problems, nor will it prevent their consequences (violence, crime, prostitution). An approach that reaches out to adolescents and tries to help them shape their lives contributes to the prevention of juvenile delinquency in a meaningful way, even when a record of offences already exists. Juvenile delinquency is not caused by the adolescents themselves, but by living conditions which the adult world has created for them.

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