

The Social Communication of the Street Children

Georgeta Stoica-Marcu

Associate Professor, PhD, Ovidius University, Constanța, Romania, daniella_gsm@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: Around this theme, regarding the “social communication of the street children” some prejudices have been created and a confusedly natured opinion war is going on, as well as the subject itself asks for a special analysis effort that has to be made with lucidity and profoundness, because it’s about a problem of distinct complexity. The Romanian society has been marked by the apparition of this “children of the street” phenomenon after 1990. The “children of the street”, as a nationally extended social phenomenon, is tied directly with the poverty rate in the different parts of the country. The main area where these children come from is Moldova (a third of the total number). The territorial indicator of poverty shows a concentration of poverty in the north-eastern part of the country (in Moldova). The poverty rate for this region is 40.61%, the highest in the country. The Romanian society has been marked by the sudden apparition of this phenomenon in the 1990 and by a raise in the number of children of the street. In 1990 there were 3500 children of the street registered, in 1995 there were 6000 and, in the present, there are over 8500 children at a national level. The children of the street represent the children category that live on the streets – a social phenomenon encountered widely everywhere in the world, but accentuated in the industrialized societies.

KEYWORDS: children of the street, social communication

“The social perception of the street children” is a piece that has a lot of soul put into, thinking of what we could do for the children of the street. It raised a series of delicate problems.

This is due to the fact that around this theme, regarding the “perception of the homeless children of the street” some prejudices have been created and a confusedly natured opinion war is going on, as well as the subject itself asks for a special analysis effort, that has to be made with lucidity and profoundness, because it’s about a problem of distinct complexity.

Undoubtedly, these questions arise: Why and how does a child end up on the streets? What is the magnitude of this phenomena in our country? What are the effects that the street environment has over the growth of the child? What are the most effective ways to intervene? Who are the children of the streets?

The social and economic changes in Romania have had a big impact over the whole social system, including over the structure and organization of the family. In this context, an increasing amount of children experiment a new way of living, being driven to the streets by the social costs of the reform, as well as by the alteration of the inter-human relations within the family nucleus.

The children and youths of the streets are those children or youths, that stay permanently or only a part of the day on the streets, procuring for themselves, even illegally, the ways to get by, without receiving any form of protection from the part of their parents or any other person empowered by the law.

Children need to find themselves an opinion space as if they were adults. They need experimentation grounds, places and fields opened to action, in which things are not established, defined once and forever and named definitely. That space, that they have found and in which they feel free and unbounded, is the street. Children need to feel that the social environment accepts them. They need to be able to relate through their interaction with the social environment to both the adult world and his own world.

The theoretical part of the piece presents the street phenomenon with its conceptual delimitations, classification, determined factors, characteristics of the families, these children come from, and their deviant behaviors. In the theoretical part, it’s also analyzed the social problems on the perception of life and the social protection of the children of the street.

The Romanian society has been marked by the apparition of this “children of the street” phenomenon after 1990. The problematic of these kids was and keeps being an actuality, on one hand it’s because of the specific of this social phenomenon and, on the other hand, it’s because of the different ways to diagnose and to initiate concrete measures for its diminution.

The “children of the street”, as a nationally extended social phenomenon, is tied directly with the poverty rate in the different parts of the country. The main area where these children come from is Moldova (a third of the total number). The territorial indicator of poverty shows a concentration of poverty in the north-eastern part of the country (in Moldova). The poverty rate for this region is 40.61%, the highest in the country.

This region includes two thirds of the most impoverished communities (89 out of 137), one third of the ones at risk (86 out of 227). The studies and analysis performed by the Institute of Research on the Quality of Life show that families with more than two children and mono parental ones are affected the most by poverty. In these families the majority of the population is aged between 0 and 16 years old.

The causes which determine a child to end up on the street environment are poverty, family violence and running away or leaving placement centers at the age of 18. From existing studies in Romania, comes out that the family is the main environment of provenience for the children of the streets, being responsible for approximately 80% of the cases of children ending up on the streets. This situation also marks the zone over which to intervene in order to prevent the phenomena. Only 14% of children and youths come from state care institutions.

This distribution of causes points out that family is the main “reservoir” of children of the streets, whether it is by the fact it influences through poverty, violence or indifference the decision of the child to leave his or hers home, or by the fact that because of a lack of a home the whole family ends up on the streets. It also shows that 6% of the children end up on the streets because of individual wishes (to be free, independent). Behind these statements the absence of interest from the parents regarding the children’s growth is to be understood (Salvați copiii 1999, 56-57).

The Romanian society has been marked by the sudden apparition of this phenomenon in the 1990 and by a raise in the number of children of the street. In 1990 there were 3500 children of the street registered, in 1995 there were 6000 and, in the present, there are over 8500 children at a national level. The children of the street represent the children category that live on the streets – a social phenomena encountered widely everywhere in the world, but accentuated in the industrialized societies.

The causes of this phenomena are extremely complex, both individual and social factors intertwine, economic and material, which realize cumulative effects that grow the proportion of the phenomena. The consequences are extremely grave: behavior disorders, aggressiveness, violence, deaths, embolisms, sexual abuses, and the absence of moral and cultural norms. On a society level the consequences are: juvenile delinquency, the expansion of illiteracy, the spread of venereal diseases and AIDS, prostitution and the new generation of children born on the streets. UNICEF studied this phenomena at a global level and elaborated a typology of the children of the street that also is available in our case:

- the children on the streets, that spend most of the day on the streets and that abandoned school - 53%;
- the children present only temporarily on the streets, period that can last from a couple of days to a couple of months – of them 21% are recoverable (runaways);
- the children permanently on the streets, that have abandoned school definitively.

By studying the way of organization of these children, from A. Muntean’s point of view, a nomadic, tribal and a below the normal conditions of hygiene and morality lifestyle is observed.

In their poor language, that is specific to them, the children of the street have created and circulated their own myths, expressing metaphorically the insecurity of their lives. One thing that is shocking, though, is the fact that none of these myths are positive (Muntean 2001, 18).

The social report with the world is generated by the ambivalent attitude of the social towards them and the conscience of a devaluation doubled by an immature judgment, in the early stages of development. Society rejects them, on one side, and, at the same time, has an attitude of compassion towards them.

The street can create the opportunity of unexpected gains through methods that their moral judgment can indulge without barriers. Between the children and the world, a “victim-executioner” type of rapport arises.

The street means for them “drug, freedom, money and entertainment”, and the symbol of life is represented by the home, the space where they would feel secure. The dream of a home is acutely present for these children, the home being everything which is normal – “a life like any other normal person”.

In the urban environment the zones preferred by the street children are the central ones. In over 50% of the cases they practice begging, they stay out of peripheral areas and use night shelters in the central zones. There is an interesting balance in the choice of central and peripheral zones regarding the season and the way group association works. The mobility of the street children has ample dimensions. In the months of May to September they head to Bucharest and Constanța, while, in the winter, they head to Bucharest. Most of these children come from torn apart families, instable materially, morally or affective-wise. Socialization in these kids is, therefore insufficient and inappropriate.

A large part of the children of the streets have adopted a pre delinquent and delinquent behavior, given the extreme situations they encounter. Aggressiveness and violence are manifested in order to obtain food or shelter, sometimes power over the group. The main source of existence is begging. The children of the streets are often used on the black market as work force, and they, in order to survive, practice hard and dangerous works, not suited for their age or the payment they receive.

The large amounts of time spent on the street (56% are on the streets for 4-9 years) indicate: the inefficiency of the care centers for the street children, the risks that teenagers face; promiscuity, drug abuse, lack of responsibilities, their accustoming to certain liberties, the degradation of their health, the impossibility of being trained scholarly/professionally, prostitution, gloomy perspectives as adults (beggars, bums, delinquents).

The situation of the sexual abuses in the case of street children presents a highly diversified picture, prostitution is a main source of income for the children of the streets especially for the girls and pedophilia is the privilege of the boys preferred by foreign citizens.

There are cases of underage youths that go abroad, being used on the sex market; such cases are frequent in Holland and Germany.

The intervention strategies regarding the protection of the “children of the street” has to rely on rich empirical information on the phenomena and, firstly, with regard of these kids’ career. For example, hypothetically speaking, such career regards:

- I. The objective and profound cause of the “running away”;
- II. The motive (subjective) or the circumstance used in this case;
- III. The way of abandonment (running to other relatives, integration in a street group, leaving to begging or to stealing, wandering in the street or on public transportation, etc.);
- IV. The evolution of preferences in the street (begging, stealing, vagrancy, marginal street groups, acceptance of other relatives – grandparents, uncles, etc.);
- V. Building a new identity and new social representations;
- VI. The dynamic of the style of life and the ways of survival;

- VII. Insertion in the street environment and adopting the new way of life;
- VIII. Social commuting between street and family (the rhythm of the hypothetical return within the family);
- IX. Definitive remigration to the original family;
- X. Definitive social reinsertion in an institution or in another family (including building his own family).

Unfortunately, children that live on the streets are robbed of most of their rights. Children of the street represent the category most exposed to the exclusion risk, which, in most cases, beg on the street (80%), wash cars (16%) or rob (14%). The phenomena is worrying because if the lack or inefficiency of the social politics for this category, even though the efforts of institutions, civil societies, NGOs, through the programs they ran, have been notable, the results haven't been on par with these activities meant to solve the problems.

In Bucharest, immediately following 1990, living permanently on the streets were, maybe, a couple dozens of children. The most recent approximations made by the National Authority for the Protection of the Children Rights (ANPDC) shows that around 400-500 children were working on the streets of Bucharest at the end of 2004, even this might be a conservative estimation. The number of children that work on the streets during the day has risen. Many of the children that work on the street confront health problems, including dermatological affections, scabies, injuries and burns, some even having tuberculosis and hepatitis, while most of them also show signs of chronic sub nutrition.

The extending of the "children of the street" phenomena is favored by various factors: macro-social (economic status, poverty, familial-educational instances, school etc.), micro-social (neighborhood gangs), weakening of the "family's control", micro-communitarian (neighbors, friends, relatives, teachers, etc.). These factors act in the vicinity of the child and even though he's not directly involved in this reality as a social actor, the consequences are being well felt. In the theoretical part regarding the influence of the social problems on the perception on life of the children of the streets.

The social control subject regularly to normative systems and socially accepted "value scales" are replaced hypothetically, in the case of the street children, with the influence or group pressure (gangs that function by different rules and values, most of the times being anti-social). Made to choose between the family and the street or between the school and the gang, because he still lacks sure norms and a normal family attachment, he chooses the most attractive option: the street and the group.

The child develops other social representations and builds another identity, different from the one the family, school and macro-society gives him. UNICEF offers us the following definition by enunciating five characteristics of the street children:

- a. They live on the "streets" (canals, railroad stations, parks, etc.);
- b. Weak relations with their family or relatives (if existent);
- c. They develop own "strategies" for survival;
- d. "The people on the streets" replace their original family;
- e. They are exposed to major risks and dangers.

Lucchini Riccardo speaks of six parameters of the social concept of "children of the streets", each representing an importance for the adequate acknowledgment of this minority and to realize an efficient way of protection:

- a. The physical space in which the street child lives – in Romania the term of "boschetar" has been launched regarding this;
- b. The time (temporal dimension) that the child spends in the street environment, the alternation between the streets and the others;

- c. The group of interaction or streetwise social learning of the child, who he spends time with and his network;
- d. Street activities, what they do on the streets or within the public space;
- e. The identity of the child built on the public space, that is the image of himself and the representation of the street and society in his conscience;
- f. The motivation of leaving or of his preference for the street environment, in spite of his family, school or institution (Miftode 2004, 149-155).

I have studied the bibliography from the current doctrine, like for example: Practices in social care, Sagebiel, J., Muntean, A., (2007) / For a sociology of aspirations by Chombard de Lauwe, (1972) / General Psihology by A. Cosmovici (2005).

Regarding the protection of the “children of the street” this imposes the profound knowledge of the causal factors and the favoring conditions, out of which, in the first influence line is the lack of familial control and, thus, of primary socialization;

- a. The original families’ dismantling through divorce or the death of one parent (mono parental families offer the streets many problem-children);
- b. The familial promiscuity state (the cases where parents live in concubinage, the child lacking one of his natural parents, violence states and a permanent tension in such families etc.);
- c. The state of poverty and generalized “filthiness” (material, moral, affective, relational, etc.);
- d. The authoritarian family, lack of support and familial privacy, “the generation conflict”, the practice of a “free union” as a family, the precocious initiation of the children’s sexual lives etc.;
- e. Alcoholism, violence, drug abuse, heavy smoking, familial immorality, deviating from the social norms etc.;

The complete image of the “children of the street” and the dynamic of the phenomena, both national and international, generates perceptions and ambivalent evaluation in the eyes of the great audience. Is it about the “oppressed of fate, tragic destinies, psycho-social deviances or bravado”, the run from the order and law? The answer is even more difficult as the “surrounding environment” offers a large diversity of children met on the streets, without guardians, parents or educators.

The defining and delimitation of this minority is imposed by the necessity for intervention regarding the reduction and stopping of this negative phenomenon of the “transitioning” Romanian society. Important for their real protection is to identify the following:

- a. Their original families, because most children of the street are mostly runaways or castaways.
- b. Their provenience environments in the case that their families can’t be found or are refused by the child.
- c. Their last home, because most of them have been integrated in many institutions that they just run away from.
- d. The real “children of the streets”, orphans, abandoned, “uprooted” from their communities, from torn-apart families, etc. and the micro-groups they are a part of (Miftode, 2004).

Strictly on an empirical level it’s about the precarious living conditions, general lack of comfort, “waiting” (reported to the data of the contemporary civilization), the bad influence of some commercial TV programs, the ideologization of rights (abstract) and the fetishization of liberty (ignoring any responsibility, familial, scholar, communitarian and social).

In the opinion of Ursula Șchiopu, “the society has a nuanced programmer of its requirements towards human ontogenesis. It is known that that what is allowed to a child, is not allowed to a young person; what is allowed to an elderly person, is allowed less to a teenager. More than that, the fact remains that a child does not always understand what is allowed to an elderly person.” (Șchiopu 1979, 9).

The practice of social assistance confronts on a daily basis with the reality of the pressure given by the autonomous culture of the children, the socialized childhood, the institutionalized educational background and the local public control opinion. In this wide array of pressure there is a need to include also the social perception of the children of the street on life in order to capitalize the social perspective.

To express the overlap of influences, natural in the society of which we are a part of, the shared factor presents in the activity of each and every one of us, the French writer A. de Musset said: “You are imitating someone even when you are planting a cabbage” (Musset 1960, 3).

Also, in the opinion of J. Sagebiel the diagnosis of the social problems allows for relieving, describing and systematic evaluation of the information that the active factors have access to and that are considered relevant for the identification of the problem and resource analysis. In the case of a specific situation (child neglect, family violence, etc.), the constitution of a global image of the given situation is built with the help of all persons involved (parents, children, nurses, doctors, etc.) (Sagebiel 2007, 400).

In the conception of Chombard de Lauwe, the apparition of a necessity generates a state of tension at the subject level, reflecting the necessity. Not satisfying that need and the chronicization of the state of unmet satisfaction determines the apparition of the human problem. It needs to be pointed out that the need is not the problem (human or social); there are, therefore, human needs outside the problematic situations: “Preventive actions, for example are made by a different logic than actions that target the solving of a problem. We can talk, in this case, of the need to prevent of a population, without an identified manifested issue” (Chombard de Lauwe 1972, 18). Problematic situations are determined by the unmet human needs, but the identification of the problem isn’t reduced to just identifying the needs that generates it, because neither the needs nor the perception of society over them have been the same forever. “Perception is an act of observation of the concrete reality”, says A. Cosmovici (Cosmovici 2005, 110).

In the modern world, the chronic poverty, family abandonment, unemployment, criminality, drug abuse, prostitution, insecurity and social mess represent situations that can be filed as social problems. The children of the street face problems like these every day, some of these have not been always considered problems in previous centuries, for example: illiteracy, drug abuse or the alarming growth of urban peripheries; In exchange, the world, at that time, confronted great plagues, infantile mortality, etc.

The present piece was necessary for the knowing of the children that live on the streets of Constanta, a growing phenomenon after the year 1989. The analysis of the social perception on street children is complex because of the numerous problems that they confront with, difficult problems, even for adults. These problems can’t get solved as a whole, unless each child’s problem is approached one at a time. The understanding of the generating causes of major conflicts for these children of the street ensure the fundamental necessary work methods to be applied on the collectivity, methods better suited for the areal specific of Constanța.

References

- Bocancea, C. and Neamțu, G. 1999. *Elemente de asistență socială (Elements of social assistance)*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
- Chombard, de Lauwe. 1972. *Pentru o sociologie a aspirațiilor (Toward a sociology of aspirations)*. Cluj Napoca: Dacia Publishing House.

- Cojocaru, Șt. 2002. *Prevenirea copiilor și dezinstituționalizarea copiilor/ Populații vulnerabile și fenomene de auto-marginalizare. Strategii de intervenție și efecte perverse (Prevention of children and deinstitutionalization of children / Vulnerable populations and self-marginalization phenomena. Intervention strategies and perverse effects)*. Iași: Lumen Publishing House.
- Cosmovici, A. 2005. *Psihologie generală (General psychology)*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
- Munteanu, A. 2001. *Familii și copii în dificultate. Note de curs (Families and children in difficulty. Course notes)*. Timișoara: Mirton Publishing House.
- Musset, A. 1960. *Poezii (Poetry)*, (Trad. L. Iliescu). Bucharest: Tineretului Publishing House.
- Ordinul Nr. 132-07/04/2005 pentru aprobarea standardelor minime obligatorii privind serviciile destinate protecției copiilor străzii (Order no. 132-07/04/2005 for the approval of the Mandatory Minimum Standards regarding the services designed for the protection of street children).
- Sagebiel, J. and Muntean, A. 2007. *Practici în asistența socială (Practices in social assistance)*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
- Șchiopu, U. 1979. *Criza de originalitate la adolescenți (The crisis of originality in adolescents)*. Bucharest: Didactică și pedagogică Publishing House.
- *** Salvați copiii (Save the children). 1999. Broșură comunitară (Community brochure).