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“I’d rather die of Corona than die on the streets.”

The Corona crisis has made life even harder for the at-risk youth. Between the months of March – May, ELEM has treated more cases of violence, addiction and suicidal risk than the entirety of 2019.

Written by Yuval Bagno and Avner Ben Shosan.

The Corona crisis and the lengthy shutdown brought upon a severe social crisis. But some suffer more than others. This morning we’ve learned the harsh details about the worsening conditions for the Israeli at-risk youth during this period.

ELEM/Youth in Distress in Israel, published a report this morning showing the consequences the Corona crisis had on the at-risk youth. The report, which was given to President Reuvan Rivlin and Minister of Welfare Itzik Shmuli, is based on data collected from 4,800 at risk-youth, who were assisted by ELEM during the Corona period, between the months of March – May.

Among these youth, 251 were left without a roof over their heads and 145 ran away from home, a 47% increase compared to 2019. 232 tried to hurt themselves. 159 youth developed an eating disorder – a 50% increase compared to 2019. 59 young single mothers at extreme risk asked for assistance and couldn’t even afford buying baby food. That’s 2.5 times more than in 2019 (59 compared to 23.)

With the report, ELEM also examines the most common phenomena reported by youth who were served by ELEM during this period, compared to the entirety of last year. 72% reported being depressed, anxious, and experiencing emotional crises and loneliness. 43% reported being depressed, anxious, and experiencing emotional crises – 4 times more than 2019. While 29% suffered from loneliness – 2.25 times more than 2019. 38% used drugs, and 23% consumed alcohol, a 13% increase compared to last year. 13% suffered from hunger and poverty. 11% experienced violence at home, 325 cases of physical violence, and 160 cases of sexual violence – a dangerous escalation of almost 2 times more than in 2019. At the same time, there’s been a 40% increase in online support through ELEM’s Digital platform.

A', a youth in one of ELEM's centers for teens and young women at extreme risk, has been through an especially intense sexual assault a year ago. During the Corona period she found herself on the streets because she couldn't bear the limitations of the shutdown. She became homeless, starved, and vulnerable. "I wanted to contract the virus. I'd rather die of Corona than die on the streets," she says. ELEM's staff convinced her to get tested and then return to ELEM's center. Another girl who lived on the streets told ELEM's people during the Corona period, "I'm not going to wait for the virus to kill me, I'll do it myself."

During that period, ELEM engaged the youth by carrying out 1012 scoutings on the streets, 2835 interceptions on the social media platforms, 12,449 personal and group meetings via Zoom, 572 urgent humanitarian interventions, 485 cases of personal and material support and assistance to young people who found themselves with no means, distribution of 1051 food packages, and more.

ELEM Israel CEO, Inbal Dor Kerbel: "In spite of the new challenges brought by this period, our teams kept assisting the youth, without losing a single person." ELEM Israel President, Nava Barak added: "Within the great hardship of the Corona period, weakened demographics, that are marginalized as it is, became even more marginalized. Many at-risk youth throughout Israel, who are facing many hardships on a daily basis, suffered during the Corona crisis more than ever. Distress has grown deeper, to the point of intense emergencies."

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The danger: Violent sexual activity

During the Corona period we've seen a concerning increase in cases of dangerous and endangering sexuality. A climate of sexuality with no regard, meaning less intimate relationships born out of thought or emotion, and more sexual relationships and acts that served as a mean to blow off steam, to deal with anxieties and fears and rebelling against the guidelines brought upon by the shutdown. It was all done in a climate of violence.

Some teens said: "I'm bored, just like I was yesterday. What should we do? Let's call this girl and that, and see where it goes." No one saw them, or supervised. There were groups of teens who also told us of group sex that was done with no regard to age or consent. A lot of this happened at dens, in the woods and the outskirts of cities.

During normal times, the way we deal with sexuality is by talking about relationships and healthy sexuality. During the Corona, all we could do was short term interference, simply put – stop them. Try and stop the sexual violence a moment before it occurs. Unfortunately, sometimes we arrived too late and found boys and girls in deserted buildings after group sex.

Suddenly, the usual hardships of adolescent escalated significantly. One of our street workers told us of one shift he was working, when he looked around and just saw how everyone was hurting themselves and the people around them – teens dealing with dangerous sexual activity, others were smoking drugs, and another groups was trying to break into a store. A very rough experience.

The writer is a headquarters manager at ELEM's Street Work Field