Trajectories of Homeless Youth in Austria

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Pre-Study

Masterthesis: „Youth on the edge of homelessness“

- Survey on causes, manifestations and effects of homelessness among adolescents and young adults
- 9 interviews with experts, 11 problem-centered interviews (Witzl) with homeless youth, survey among politicians – analysis using qualitative content analysis (Mayring)
Research Focus

• **Research Question:** How can patterns of street-careers be described?

• I took special interest in the triggering conditions und the processes, which strongly influence the patterns of street-careers.
Method

Grounded Theory Ethnography (Charmaz/Mitchell 2001)

- six-month participatory observation
- 45 interviews with young people at all stages of the career, parents, teachers, social workers and police officers
- short interviews with the people working on the square
- pedestrian questionnaire
Investigated Group

"Teenagers and young adults from the Jakominiplatz"
Description of the group

- 50-100 members, 30-40 were everyday at the square
- High fluctuation
- Balanced gender ratio
- Boys are a little bit older than the girls at the time of entry (16-17/14-15)
- Different age groups: 50% young people up to the age of 18; 50% young adults between 18 and 26; a few older people
- ‘Hidden homeless’: insecure or unsafe housing; frequently changing places to sleep
- Most are not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- Making their living from public support, doing unskilled labour, street economy like drug selling or selling stolen goods, sex work
- Looks are average, on the square they are „invisible“
Low-threshold facilities
- Question: places of entry, places of events
- Methods: observation, interviews with social workers

Entry groups
- Question: Initial conditions
- Methods: observation, interviews

Homeless youth “Jackominiplatz”
- Question: structure of the group, "careers"
- Methods: Participatory observation, Interviews

Families
- Question: perspectives of the parents, triangulation
- Methods: Interview

Schools
- Question: schools as places of entry, strategies of teachers, assessment of resources and risks
- Method: Interviews

"People working at the square"
- Question: awareness, points of contact
- Method: Interviews (short)

The view of the urban population
- Question: awareness, points of contact
- Method: survey

Secondary groups (Train station, main square)
- Question: Reasons for switching, living conditions
- Methods: Observations, Interviews

Standing in a professional contact (social workers, police officers, politicians, ...)
- Question: perspectives, triangulation
- Method: Interviews

Exit
- Questions: Reasons and strategies of leaving, living conditions, retrospective view of the group
- Methods: Interviews
"Yes, that is like a black hole ... pulling you in and will not let you go. If your in, it's shit and then have to swim against the tide ... damn long if you want to get out again. "(Günther)
Entry into the group

- Different entries to the group
  Common way is a creeping entry not a dramatic escape
- Difficult childhood
  Financial problems, drug addicted parents, violence, abuse, neglect.... Broken-up relationships
- Structural factors such as segregation
- Places of entry or entry mediators:
  Schools, smaller neighborhood groups, friends, brothers and sisters and low-threshold facilities
- Great fascination exerted by the group:
  Place of rebellion and adventure, persons with the same experiences, cohesion, power and strength by the group
Adaption to the group

- Separation from other social relationships such as family, work, education
- Establishing Solidarity
  - Functions of the group: Care for one another, provide sleeping space, money sharing, protection, psychological support
- Fighting for Reputation
  - Requirements: no other points of reference, almost no other activities such as regular work, alcohol and drug use, delinquency, violence
- Experienced Social Exclusion
“That's the problem when you're on the square, your social environment is usually completely lost. The people on the square basically become your family afterwards.” (Michael)
Exit

• Reasons: boredom, existential fears, negative experiences in the group…

• Leaving strategies:
  avoiding the square, breaking up with all members of the group, strengthening ties outside the group such as completing an education, finding a job, searching for new friends, having a baby…

• Barriers:
  Point of reference, way of living life, mental problems, no completed education, exclusion,…
“How can you escape? Everybody needs a duty or a goal in life, you want to achieve. I want my child back, somebody else wants to work, and sometimes you learn to know better in prison… (Sara)
The relevance of school, education and training for the trajectories of homeless youth

Residential Segregation: Schools are reinforcing institutions

Childhood experienced as problematic—one Factor: School

Entry

Schools as Places of Entry

Adaption

Turn away from School and Education

Failures due to a lack of education

Strategy to exit: Complete Education

Exit
Childhood described as problematic: stresses and strains in school

- Frequent change of schools
- Special need schools
- Position as an outsider in Class Community
- Permanent truancy

Early school leaving

„I went to school in Waltendorf, because we were living there. The second class I attended in Puntigam, the third class somewhere else and the fourth class on the main square and then I didn’t attend school ever again.“ (Claudia, 17)
Residential Segregation

„We are born into this life on the streets“ (Maria 16)

• Effects occur that are discussed as social exclusion (e.g. Kronauer 2002, Häußermann 2006)

• Context Effects in order to segregated neighborhoods (e.g. Oberwittler 2011) and segregated schools (social segregation in the lower secondary schools) (e.g. Solga/Wagner 2004)

• School effects have stronger influence on the pupils achievement than neighborhood effects. (e.g. Oberwittler 2007, Kauppinen 2008, Brännström 2008)

• Young people who live in segregated neighborhoods are more likely not to achieve a graduation (e.g. Ottersbach 2004)

• One cause is the commonly made experience of failures while school socialization (e.g. Thomas 2010)
• Different ways of entry – the usual way is a creeping entry due to relationships

• School as a place of entry into the group

I: How did you enter the Jakominiplatz at the age of 14?
IP: The guys from school always went there.
I: Which school did you attend?
IP: First I went to Strassgang and after that to a school for difficult educable youth. Who was playing truant always went to the square and I started to join them… (Ferdl, 26)

• Schools seem to be unable to compensate unequal starting conditions and provide help for children with problems.

• The interviewed young people don’t consider problems at school as essential
Adaption

- Turn away from School and Education
- Early school leaving; termination of employment or training

Maria: “No I don’t like school.”
Angie: “I’d be glad to go to school.”
Maria: “Yes that’s what you all are always saying, but nevertheless nobody is going to school. I’ve already receive my second official warning and it’s not even… For how long is school going on? Two Months? I repeated last year and I didn’t go to school very often last year and that’s why the teachers hated me. And they still hate me now.
Angie: “And they will continue hating you, if you don’t change!”
Maria: “I don’t know if I will complete school.”
Angie: “You should complete. You don’t know what’s good for you. You don’t know what you want.”
Maria: “That’s right.”
Angie: “And that you need a graduation.”
Exit

- Strategies to exit: complete education or complete job training

„During the time of my schooling, I didn’t care about all these things. I didn’t care about learning, but now I know, I want to achieve something in life. Now I changed, I want to learn and I don’t care, what the others are telling me. They always keep saying stay here, take a drink, but I’m no longer listening to them.“ (Kerstin, 20 Jahre)
Exit

- Strategies to exit: complete education or complete job training
- Significant barriers to entering conventional society especially formal economy: homelessness itself, educational limitations (low achievement or learning disabilities), perceived stigma associated with homelessness and past incarceration

Yes, I wanted to find a job. I applied for a job as a salesman. And I got it. But then they asked me for my certificate of good character. I told them, yes ok, but... it'll take you a long time to read through. And on my first day they told me, they couldn't give me the job, because I had stolen something years ago. I told them „kiss my ass, I'll buy a bottle of wine, I don't need you!“ And then I left.
Exit

- Strategies to exit: complete education or complete job training
- Significant barriers to entering conventional society especially formal economy: homelessness itself, educational limitations (low achievement or learning disabilities), perceived stigma associated with homelessness and past incarceration
- Niches for unskilled workers are practically vanished
- Specific offers for this target group are needed – According to the often negative school experiences, they are likely to react dismissive to new training opportunities.