

Street children in the big city

Abstract:

Young beggars become a “natural” element of the metropolitan life. The aim of the paper is to introduce to the phenomenon of the street children and analyze it on the base of the psycho-sociological concepts of the process of growing up, and in the context of macro social and economical changes in Poland which reflect on the family’s everyday life and on the relationship between child and parents. We will focus on the questions of the ‘begging’ as the process (learning the role, playing the role etc.), as a style of life, as the economic strategy of the family, as a social problem.

Key terms: street children, young beggars, city, family, process of maturing, social problem.

The contemporary, colloquial definitions of a ‘street child’ or ‘street kid’ were shaped under the great influence of 19th century literature and the image of a child which it presented, not only socialised on the street – ‘by the street’ – but also bearing obvious external signs of neglect (e.g. gauntness, dirty clothing). This paper is an attempt to redefine the category ‘street child’ in the modern city, as well as to reflect on the appearance of numerous types of street children. It presents the problem in the context of transformation – that of society in general and particularly that which influences the living conditions of children and young people in Poland, their daily habits and ways in which they adapt to the dynamics of real life. We come to the conclusion that the presence of each type of street children represents a serious social problem. This makes it all the more important to highlight the types whose antisocial character is not obvious as well as the behaviour and habits which are ‘normal’ in the social consciousness, but which from the perspective of developmental sociology and psychology testify to the dysfunctionality of the social environment of the young person. We consider a sociological reflection on the phenomenon of street children to be vital. This should encompass children socialised both on the traditional urban street and in the space of shopping arcades or ‘virtual streets’ too. On the one hand there academic enquiry shows this need, but even more important are practical reasons, connected to the need to develop new strategies to counteract the antisocial phenomena and processes which threaten the safety of children and expose them to social exclusion in their later adult life.

The political and economic transformation which began in Poland at the beginning of the 1990s brought with it a need to quickly adapt to and meet the new demands of the market economy. Ubiquitous models of the culture of consumption promote hierarchies of values where mass material goods find themselves at the top. The

individual is led to believe that satisfaction and happiness must be reached by constantly acquiring and consuming these goods. They therefore become desired, although not available for all. The lack of obvious and attainable ways of acquiring the goods can give rise to a need for 'innovative' actions (Merton 1982: 205-213). People experiencing repeated incidental contact with the ever more visible margins increasingly face the danger of 'sliding down', meaning entering new structures and adapting to the conditions there – and with time accepting them too – at the same time rejecting the general norms as ineffective in efforts to attain the goods in question and satisfy needs.

A further consequence of the changes in Poland was a worsening of the material conditions of society, including a growth in the numbers of families living in poverty (J. Lustig 2003; J.Grodecka, M.Chechelska-Dziepak 2005, CBOS press release no. 3119/2004). The fundamental source of a feeling of safety for a child is not, though, that his family can provide prosperity in the material sense; more crucial are relations with the social environment, as it is this that gives the child support and a feeling of belonging. The main provider of this support is a positive relationship with the immediate surroundings, marked by strong integration and a distinctive system of values and rules (E. Durkheim 1951). Such groups provide the individual with a feeling of balance and meaning in life. A fundamental and protective role for the psychological state of a person is played by social bonds and a feeling of integration especially with primary groups, most importantly the family (Filipiak 1999: 131). Social integration and bonds protect the individual from a loss of psychosocial balance. Support, in the form of a particular kind of personal, mutual and committed relations and information, allows the individual to believe that he or she is surrounded by love and care. Including a child in a network of social communication and mutual commitments, we satisfy its lifelong need to feel important for others, valued and respected (Filipiak 1999: 136).

The tough material conditions which affect many families usually, however, have a negative correlation with social support (capital) (Filipiak 1999: 138, 144). The changes in Poland concerned, among other things, limiting state intervention in the field of material support to families. So on the one hand the transformation resulted in an increasing number of families facing economic exclusion, and on the other state aid was limited. As a consequence this affected the role of the family towards their child, who, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, has the right to such things as protection from physical and moral neglect and exploitation in the workplace, as well as to care in the case of disabilities or social inadequacies. The guardians of these rights should be initially the child's family, and then the social community in general as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations appointed specifically for this purpose. The fundamental criterion on which the adequacy of the authority of the child's legal guardians is measured is the child's interest, interpreted as a system of material and non-material values. This set of values is essential to the provision of physical and psychological development to the child as well as in sufficiently preparing him or her to fulfil social roles, including working in a position suiting knowledge and aptitude (Stojanowska 1979). One result of the transformation period in Poland was, therefore, a threat to the safeguarding of the rights guaranteed by the aforementioned convention.

Children and young people who do not find psychological and material care and ways of fulfilling their needs in their own families look for it outside of the home, on the street (metaphorically and literally). The term 'street children' is used in the social sciences to describe groups of children and young people who experience social isolation through labelling and marginalisation, and are not necessarily actually homeless or orphaned. For many, though they have a home and family, their main social environment is the street. The public space becomes for them a place of socialisation in which they play and work – often begging or stealing – and where they enter into contact with other people and build their 'street' social position. The Foundation for Poland's Street Children Programme defined its subject as children who "spend practically their whole time on the street. They actually only sleep at home. On the street they find ("sort out") everything – from money to food, toys and clothes. They do not know the value of money and objects, and take pleasure in destroying possessions. They are often members of informal groups of children in which the 'cult of strength' operates and they get into scuffles or mount assaults on random people. They 'earn' mostly by begging and stealing, and deal in the goods they come by among themselves or at markets. Some experiment with alcohol, glue and other substances, the lack of supervision or things to do making this an attractive way to spend their time. Almost all street children have serious problems with school due to truancy, aggression and low intellectual prospects as a result of educational neglect. They reproduce their parents' lifestyle, becoming marginalised socially. The lack of proper role models in the family denies them the opportunity to develop close and constructive relationships with peers" (<http://dzieciulicy.ngo.pl/x/123389>). At the same time, researchers and practitioners in the field agree that the 'street child' is a variable – the characteristic takes on varied intensity according to the degree to which the child is entangled in street life and his bonds with his environment away from the street (family, school and other social institutions) are weakened. This processual view of 'street children' makes a division into: *street-working children* – earning money on the street but living, or at least maintaining contact, with the family – and *street-living children*, who work and live outside (Staszewska 2003). This typology resembles that of the categorisation proposed by the report 'Street Children: Promising Practices and Approaches', according to which children and young people can be divided into the following risk groups: "1. still connected to the family, school and environment, but situation could be threatened in future due to poverty or other factors; 2. weaker bonds with environment and exposed to a certain concrete risk (e.g. giving up school, exploitation, child labour); 3. (highest risk) those for whom one or more of these threats has become reality. Bonds with environment and family gravely weakened or cut off." (World Bank definition from 'Street Children: Promising Practices and Approaches', 2002 based on: <http://dzieciulicy.ngo.pl/x/123389>).

Preliminary research carried out by CPES Parasol in 2005 (Drewniak, Sierocka 2006) shows that the various organisations involved in assessing the scale of the phenomenon of street children in Poland (and applying the above criteria) give similar approximate data: there are around 1.2 million street children in Poland, or around 13% of all people under the age of 18. At the same time, observation of the social-economic

situation in Poland leads us to the conclusion that an increasing number of children are threatened by social exclusion. The unemployment rate in general is in fact decreasing, but this optimistic trend does not count deactivated adults, supporting themselves long-term from social aid. Through a process of intergenerational transmission, these people transfer this kind of lifestyle and the dependence that results to their children. To these children, consumer goods are clearly on display at every turn, but usually they are not available in any socially acceptable way. In order to satisfy the whole range of their (and sometimes the whole family's) needs, children get hold of the goods in ways modelled on the example of adults or peers, or come up with their own innovations. Begging, extortion and petty theft are prominent examples of these practices.

The effectiveness of the begging carried out by children is favoured by the stereotypisation of begging. Beggars are generally perceived (in Poland at least) as infirm, passive people who tend to assume an imploring, fairly static pose. Children in fact often realise that it can be most effective to go against this stereotype, 'wrong-footing' the passer-by on the street. It could even be said that children have mastered the craft of begging according to the free-market ideology. This can readily be seen on the Main Market Square or the Kazimierz district of Krakow, where they beg actively, producing their enterprise and individual talents such as dancing, singing, or selling their artistic handiwork. According to CPES Parasol, an organisation which specialises in street work, some of these children – it is hard to say how many – provide for the whole family in this way.

Before concentrating on the problem of contemporary street children, though, it is worth looking at the phenomenon of children occupying the public space from a diachronic point of view. Periods of transformation of modern society identified by sociologists are reflected in changes in this category. In other words, if we consider 'street child' as a social role, each era, defined according to its variable social, economic and cultural conditions, formed a new model of street children.

The stereotypical 'street child' described in the first paragraphs was a product of early modernity – processes of urbanisation, democratisation and industrialisation marked not only opportunities for various social categories to advance, but also the appearance of individuals and groups for whom the anonymous community of the big city was a peculiar jungle, and life there a battle for survival. The Paris depicted by French realists is not just the burgher's townhouse, but the street too – the harshest school of life. The 19th century and beginning of the 20th saw increasing social aid for street children and efforts to keep them 'out of the gutter' – a description that rendered then (and does today too) the wretched state of moral depravity of a person – but of course many children remained untouched by the activities of children's homes and shelters. The Second World War dramatically exacerbated the problem of orphans, yet the later ideology of the Polish People's Republic somewhat successfully eliminated the issue of street children from the public discourse – the 'perfect system' simply could not allow social problems and pathologies. The term 'latchkey kid' did, though, come into social usage. It referred to children whose parents both worked, meaning that they had to spend time outside school without being looked after. The 'latchkey kid' can be considered the consequence of the

very intensive transformations in the familial role that had taken place – in a nuclear family in which both parents work, educational and child-rearing roles can no longer be filled as they were in the traditional family, and this gap is not filled by other institutions (school, organisations set up for this purpose, neighbourhood community). The latchkey was, therefore (and still is) a symbol of the excessively early independence of the child, who must not only acquire practical skills (preparing meals, using domestic appliances etc.) and self-discipline (doing homework) but must also internalise his mistrust towards reality and those who he does not know well. The changes in Poland since the 1990s have ushered in a new phase for the street child. These changes had a special dynamic, an accumulation of processes of systemic transformation and new labour market conditions on the one hand, and those resulting from global cultural transformation – for instance the appearance of new spaces of consumption such as city shopping centres taking over the erstwhile role of the city centre. Sociological observations show these to be a new site for children to spend time free of parental care.

The increasing segmentation of society and growth in the class of the socially excluded is resulting in a ‘return’ to the stereotypical image of the street child, not only lacking in parental supervision but leading an antisocial lifestyle too. At the same time, ‘latchkey kids’ continue to be numerous. The final significant category is ‘late modernity street children’, made up of children who, without parents to look after them, frequent city shopping and entertainment centres, as well as those who spend their time on the virtual street, learning life on the internet and meeting new, not always safe people there.

Studies directly and indirectly linked to the problem of street children have been and continue to be carried out in Krakow since 2005. In that year CPES Parasol spent several months performing sociological observations of street children in various spaces in Krakow (the Main Market Square, Planty, railway station, housing estates, shopping centres) (Drewniak, Sierocka 2006); in 2006 students of the Institute of Sociology of Jagiellonian University conducted fieldwork (including 100 interviews) on children and young people spending their free time in one of the shopping arcades (‘Young People in a Shopping and Entertainment Centre’ 2006); in 2007 the Krakow City Crime Prevention Programme began a campaign which aimed to bring a stop to the phenomenon of children working on the street – the city council, police force, specialist NGOS and academic institutions joining forces to work on this. All research and observations carried out to date suggests that the local community does not take much note of uncared-for children roaming the streets, and that those who earn money in the city centre are treated either as a nuisance, or as an attraction, in the case for example of ‘break-dancers’ – the children in question exploit this fact, expertly seeking out tourists, especially foreign, in the crowd. The fact that the presence of street children tends not to be taken seriously might be due to the fact that communist Poland saw a weakening of society’s ability to distinguish children without parental care. People associate ‘street kids’ much more with the image of children living in the sewers of Moscow (*bezprizornye*), than with latchkey 10 year-olds or even children selling their own drawings on the Main Market Square.

The negative consequences of each form of growing up with no or limited parental care result directly from the child’s psychosocial development, specific needs and

activity at each stage of his or her development. Each stage on the way to adulthood sees the child to a greater or lesser degree susceptible to being hurt or manipulated, which significantly affects the child's functioning in the space of the city streets, where he will experience a different kind of social contacts. Until adolescence the child's relationship with the guardian is characterised by dependence – although it is two-sided, the adult plays the dominant role. The child's first years see the formation of a skeleton personality. Control, direction, example and authority are needed in this period. Especially important at this point are constant and close contacts with other people, who act as a guardian, also in a social sense. At the age of 3-4 the child's partial 'combination' with the guardian disappears, as an identity becomes discernible. Fear, though, especially the fear of losing the support of other people, continues to be the overriding feeling in this period of development. This emotion is remarkably intensive (Osterrieth 1962: 89).

As the child grows up, it discovers a new dimension of adulthood, that which makes demands, gives orders and prohibits, and even punishes. Disapproval and reprimands are associated in the child's mind with the loss of important values, meaning that the adult has stopped loving them. The child goes to great lengths to avoid this experience (Osterrieth 1962: 90-91). It also begins to discover inevitable links between cause and effect and to make sacrifices and 'gifts' for other people in an effort to please and earn that person's sympathy. Children feel pride when their behaviour satisfies adult demands, especially when they earn praise and affection, confirming to them their feeling of safety. This is especially important when affection and interest are deficient on the part of the parents. At age 3, the child's tendency to conform and cooperate with its parents increases, and it judges its own behaviour according to how that fits the rules established by grown-ups. What parents, and adults in general, want and say is good, and they as a rule are always right (Osterrieth 1962: 102-103, 119). At 6, children begin to spontaneously strive to form groups and desire to play and work in the company of others. From this moment contact with adults is reduced, as they are no longer required for a feeling of safety to be maintained. The child begins to shelter in peer groups, where more opportunities are available to prove how 'big' he is. Until a child's seventh year, however, adults remain the 'axis' of these groups of children. 'Rules of the game' begin to arise – principles of mutual concessions and conduct – as does organisation of collective activity, resulting from the need for compromise between the needs for self-valorisation and group belonging, with the latter being needed to satisfy the former. These childhood groupings lack cohesion, however – they are short-lived and low in organisation. Until the age of 9 the composition of groups remains fluid firstly because children continue to require friends mainly so that they can develop their own activity and confirm their sense of 'me', and secondly generally have limited opportunities for choosing partners as various external factors decide for them. Intentional choice of company begins to play a role later (Osterrieth 1962: 141-147). With time, the group of friends becomes limited and increasingly close and exclusive, and adults as well as children not sufficiently well-matched in terms of age become almost entirely excluded. 'Gangs', usually made up of only one sex, do not become organised and fixed until around the 10th or 11th year. They are generally formed spontaneously, without the intervention of outsiders, and usually in

opposition to the adult world, achieving a new-found cohesion and durability. They becomes a kind of centre of the child's life, as only in this sphere can certain needs be fulfilled, such as affirmation of values outside of the adult world. In the context of the peer group constructed in this autocratic and aristocratic fashion, the child has his place, fulfils a defined role and occupies an appropriate position. The children who act as leaders constitute an elite which sets a tone for the whole group, and the loyalty of other children to them becomes the most important of virtues.

At age 11, constancy in friendship becomes the rule, increasing proportionally with age, and the 'gang' takes on more democratic characteristics (Osterrieth 1962). This is a time of strong emotions and enthusiasm, and the child is not only active, but also especially receptive and open to new experiences. Having reached 12 and early adolescence, interest in oneself takes centre stage. At age 13, farewell is bid to childhood, as the individual starts to concentrate on himself and become immersed in his own world. Friendships are formed between 'loners', forming groups of two or three people. The teenager becomes increasingly aware of himself, and especially sensitive to the differences of individual ownership and variable social positions (Osterrieth 1962). This concentration on one's own survival and commitment to building an individual identity appear to hide the social dimension of responsibility from the person as he grows up – failure to perceive the consequences of one's own decisions on another person is an example. This situation only changes at the end of adolescence, at which time the young person becomes responsible for others, which can be shown for instance by greater readiness to pursue activities for the good of another person (Mac-Czarnik 2000: 201, 205).

The transition from childhood to adulthood is the time in which changes in physical, psychological and social growth are greatest. The young person encounters new situations in all areas of life, each demanding from him new coping strategies. In terms of decisions made and the variety of situations of choice, he relies on his own thoughts to a lesser degree, an important source of information being provided by peers and other people from outside the family environment (Mac-Czarnik 2000: 198). This is a period without participation in either of the clearly defined groups of children and adults. The young person finds himself on the threshold between the two groups, a full member no longer of one and not yet of the other. Adolescence is a time of a kind of transformation which includes becoming psychologically independent of one's parents. In this period too, consideration of the consequences of one's actions does not appear to interest the young person. Taking risks is in a way analogous to play – a way for a person to test and widen his boundaries during the growing-up process (Bateson, Martin 2003: 33-34). Dominant in this period are the need for independence and autonomy in the relationship with one's parents.

A range of factors influences the development and behaviour of adolescents, such as family behaviour patterns, peer groups, the local environment, socioeconomic change, fulfilment of basic needs, and also personal conditioning, independent of external factors. In spite of the number of these factors affecting the maturing of an individual, the family remains the fundamental environment. It is here that the person's values system and the norms that protect it are established and fulfilled, and here too that the

axionormative system is internalised (Kocik 2006: 63). The overwhelming influence of the family means that dysfunction within it threatens the course of development seen by society as correct and desirable. Today, many families are dominated by frustration caused by unemployment, poverty or excessive demands of the parents' workload (Balcerzak-Paradowska 1997). The family's failure to fulfil its role of adjusting and providing support for inadequacy, together with the feeling of not being accepted or belonging that results, can trigger adaptation strategies in the form of nonconformist peer groups. This usually constitutes an extension of dramas played out in the family since early childhood, the outcome being that the child feels under threat in relations with his or her parents and in terms of internal safety.

Children and young people whose contact with their parents is occasional and cool and who are not accepted by their peer group do not experience a feeling of satisfaction in life, while additionally failures at school, which determine the level of self-esteem, affect the amount of fear the child feels, and may lead to emotional disorders. Failure on the part of the adult world to provide acceptance and dialogue and attempt to establish new contacts with the young person on the level of positive interpersonal relations can intensify the developmental characteristics of the early stage of adolescence mentioned earlier. The need for fulfilment, especially when the family and school fail to provide a feeling of safety, belonging and chances to achieve success, is satisfied in interpersonal relationships as well as in the field of 'learning' within alternative, 'deviant' subcultures. Contributing factors, therefore, are the characteristics of the parents' personalities and personal experiences of socialisation, as well as the negative educational methods used both at home and in school, and the lack of authorities, norms and values governing the child's environment (Gelles, Streus 1997: 83).

The existence of children and young people with problems that cannot satisfactorily be solved by standard means encourages the development of subcultures which fulfil needs in deviant and alternative ways. Their lack of access to highly valued goods and limited opportunities mean that even if these children make an effort to live according to the recognised norms, their chances of reward are small. Satisfaction is, though, well within reach and much more certain in comparatively non-conformist groups. This is especially the case as society – as noted earlier – provides a range of attractive goals on the one hand, but does not give the means necessary to attain them on the other. In a group in which social differences are fading, the most striking patterns of emancipation are given by individuals who have been neglected pedagogically and morally. The overwhelming authority of adults, failures at school and a favourable social atmosphere become fertile ground for antisocial behaviour among groups or individuals. In demonstrating reprehensible or immoral behaviour, they can compensate for all their deficiencies and gain the approval and acceptance of the group.

Children who are immersed in a dysfunctional family environment are in various ways denied opportunities to satisfy needs which are important from a developmental point of view. Deprived of the supervision of adults from their family or help centres, and with an 'excess' of free time, they submit more easily to corrupted influences. It is important to point out that dysfunctionality of the family environment does not

necessarily result from a lack of good will on the part of the parents, but may also mean that they simply lack time for the children. In many families the parents find themselves having to take on extra work, or even go abroad to work, the result being a weakening of their bonds with their children and control over them. Socialisation of children of the 'poor working classes' often takes place with the children sure of the irrationality of putting effort into work, since it does not solve the problems of poverty (Hirszowicz, Neyman 1997). The bonds in moderately well-off families in which both parents work are also endangered. This group is rarely perceived as at risk from exclusion, even though for its children too the most attractive place for spending their free time is the 'post-modern street' of the shopping centre. Out of 100 young people interviewed in 2006 in one of Krakow's shopping and entertainment centres, 12 were aged 11-13 and 48 were 14-16 (groups of younger children wandering around and playing without parental supervision were also observed, but not interviewed). Some 58 of those surveyed admitted to visiting the centre every day or almost every day. These are not, though, 'typical' street children from antisocial families: 61 interviewees replied that both parents work (in only 9 cases did neither parent work), and around two thirds of the children had parents who had completed secondary or tertiary education. When asked for their reasons for visiting the shopping arcade (any number of answers could be given) they responded: "friends come here" (and they come with them) – 82 responses, but at the same time "I don't come for any particular reason" (47 responses) and "I have nothing to do after school" (44 responses). In spite of the presence of friends, then, some interviewees admitted to visiting the arcade without any aim. This group of children, without parental supervision, invisible during a normal visit to the shopping centre, is already significant, and successive shopping centres being built are filling up with the next groups of young people, often travelling in from far-off places and the countryside. Fieldwork shows that this is also a space where children learn antisocial behaviour – they drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and some learn to steal. During the study, after the structured interview, several respondents related how they had encountered threats of being beaten up, recalled thefts, often even confessing to knowing teenagers who lived off petty theft in shopping centres – in car parks as well as shops (Młodzież w centrum handlowo-rozrywkowym 2006).

CPES Parasol's research findings contain alarming information. The researchers report that shopping arcades and supermarkets are also a place of prostitution: "this is the most veiled practice in which juveniles are engaged in supermarkets. This kind of activity only takes place in certain shopping centres. It does not resemble prostitution of the street or agencies, of course – teenagers do not 'exhibit' themselves on the corners of shopping aisles, and there is no 'dating agency' hidden in the shop (...) But provocatively dressed girls in heavy make-up can be observed in the shopping arcade, on their own or in groups. (...) "Hunting for a sponsor" takes place in boutiques – the first phase of selection is finding a professional-looking man, usually middle-aged. Suitable – meaning suitably expensive – clothes, shoes, mobile phone, indicate the wealth of his wallet. Similar checks can be carried out on how much a man spends on shopping and what kind of card he pays with. A further, optional test is the quality of car in which he travelled to the shop. This is 'optional' because the proposal of a "meeting" will often be made before the client returns

to his car. Payment for sex is likely to be in cash, although the girl might also demand items from the shop.” (Drewniak, Sierocka 2006).

Shopping arcades, then, increasingly numerous in Polish cities, are becoming the modern equivalent of the big-city street – which of course does not mean that children have left traditional streets. A situation is being reached, though, where a segmentation of children and young people is taking place, isolating and organising themselves into groups in various spaces of the city, creating their own activities and slipping out of the influence of their families and social institutions. Neglected children, denied the care of adults, tend to become isolated, and naturally begin to look for substitute groups. The street becomes the scene of many opportunities, the only place where children have different ways to satisfy their needs. Owing to the variety of situations causing children to take to the street, their various experiences, age and sex, ‘street children’ are a heterogeneous group. What links them are needs, which for each of them constitute a condition for a sine qua non feeling of safety; the subordination of this appears to be, in an outsider’s eyes, the completely irrational and often destructive behaviour of children deprived of the adult care they require.

We can refer to the Chicago School’s concept of ecological processes and suppose with a good degree of certainty that every city possesses its own ‘catchment areas’ of street children. Of course, street children in a small town will have quite different characteristics from the more varied, and difficult to study, phenomenon in the metropolis. Fieldwork carried out in Krakow shows that the street children here can indeed be categorised according to the space which they frequent. Researchers from Parasol distinguished several basic types of street children from the 1372 they observed: children on estates (over half of those observed), at supermarkets, the railway station and its environs, and children in places associated with street prostitution. Estate children are a category close to that which was formerly described as ‘latchkey kids’. This group is the least immersed in street life – because they have a family, but also because they are the most numerous. The actions of this group, such as noisy, crude and aggressive behaviour, and usage of substances, serve for them to attain positions among the peer group. Significantly, the report stresses the lack of any sort of reaction from adults in the surrounding community. Among the cases observed in the city was also the smallest group (87 cases) – runaways, whose situation made them particularly determined to engage in criminal activity (Drewniak, Sierocka 2006).

Aimlessly roaming young people are participants in the non-conformist groups which are widely discussed today, and whose permanent stomping ground is the street, which can mean estate, shopping centre, or railway station. It is here that they can often find a substitute for what their family does not provide, liberated from frustration, pressure and impairment, ensuring direct interpersonal contact, which can be a strong external pulling factor. A determinant in this kind of ‘choice’ seems above all to be poverty and/or a defective family environment, especially when, at and outside school, the child begins to feel that his situation is somehow different from that of his peers. But it is not poverty per se that creates an unfavourable home environment; it is the individual social pathology of the people involved, lack of ability, knowledge, family ethos or work as well as a range of

other values important for maintaining the status quo and interest of the family. The child may, in such a situation, be 'pushed out' of the family home by centrifugal force, as a result of a lack of bonds, of a feeling of belonging, caused by lack of interest or expectations or pressure from the side of the adults, themselves deprived of money to live on and the ability to come by it. Experiences gained in the family home often cause the child to grow up early and with this bring the need to stand on one's own two feet and adapt to new conditions. It must be noted, however, that children are not individualists – they enter the 'street system', where they learn new rules and practices and are governed by the system of internal control. Initially they are dependent on people higher up in the group hierarchy than them, but with time they assume these higher positions and themselves take the role of 'educators' for those younger than themselves as well as control of them, thanks to which they can draw profits. The ease in which money can be made discredits in the eyes of these children the conformist method of earning money through work. If children can earn in a day the same as an average Pole does in a month, that they should be unwillingness to change their methods of earning seems obvious. As a consequence, the length of time spent in this 'state' is inversely proportional to the child's later capacity in socially approved means of earning and work.

The interference of global and local processes makes the daily lives of the inhabitants of cities considerably more dynamic and demands from them increasingly new adaptation strategies. For a significant group of children and young people social life takes place above all on the street – it is there that they learn new axionormative patterns, social roles and ways to react to new situations. Growing up and maturing in the conditions of the street are, though, contradictory to their needs and psychological possibilities, even if this life does not lead to behaviour perceived to be clearly antisocial. Differentiation between types of children socialised in the environment of the street, in the broad sense of the word (streets themselves, estates, stations, shopping centres) is a current and very important subject of social science research. Recognition of the mechanisms making children 'join' the street environment, the ways in which the environment is organised, and factors prolonging the child's involvement in street life should aid the adaptation of social policy and methods of street-working. Effective counteracting of the problem of street children requires a complex, interdisciplinary action-strategy with the participation of representatives of all groups: politicians, council officials, national and municipal police, courts, NGOs, researchers, the media, and local business. It is crucial to reflect on the legal system and functioning of the laws which prevent effective intervention in the case of children spending time on the street without parental supervision¹³. Crucial too is a wide social campaign, its aims being the following: firstly to dispense with the stereotypical image of the 'street child' and show the graded and processual character of the phenomenon; secondly, to inform the local community that the problem of street children is the whole community's problem (and not that of individual services or institutions); but, thirdly, to demonstrate the negative consequences of offering short-term

¹³ This kind of initiative has already been introduced in Krakow by the City Youth Crime Prevention Programme, whose pilot preventive scheme focused on the Main Market Square area.

help to street children, who, for instance, make money by dancing or selling their work. Finally, the phenomenon of street children must be viewed as a challenge for social work, in whose framework it should be conducted on three levels: with the individual, with the family and in a group (in schools, institutions working on behalf of children and young people such as youth centres, and preventive work) and in local communities, including work with local businesses.

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