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The difficult past of homeless young people

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It is not unusual for young people, in particular as they become emancipated, to find themselves in globally precarious situations, albeit temporarily. Such difficult circumstances, such as joblessness or poverty, are sometimes repeated from generation to generation, especially if the person has experienced difficult times in the past, such as a family breakdown, the premature death of parents, has run into trouble with the law, or dropped out of school with few or no qualifications [1]. In order to better understand how some of these young people became homeless, INED conducted a survey in Paris and the immediate suburbs (see box).

◆ A modest social background and low educational attainment

Young people in situations of extreme poverty — living in the streets, with no housing or room “of their own” — more often come from working-class families, or had fathers with an “independent” profession (farmers, artisans, shopkeepers) than those who do have a home (see table 1); one out of four homeless respondents said his/her mother had “no profession”, against one out of ten young people of the same age residing in the Ile-de-France region.

Only 15% of the respondents were still in school at the time of the survey, a proportion four times smaller than among the other young residents of Ile-de-France, using comparable gender and age factors; of these 15%, three quarters were young women living in long-term hostels, thanks to which they were able to pursue their studies.

Very few had never been to school, but more than half had left early (had never graduated), compared to 10% of the population of the same age residing in Ile-de-France. Most of them had dropped out at the *collège* level (1) or in vocational school. About three quarters of these young school leavers ended their studies in France: these are not persons who came to France after

having attended school in another country, with a different or less developed educational system.

Dropping out of school, however, has a negative impact on a person's ability to find a job. According to the survey carried out by the French National Statistics Institute (INSEE) on the living conditions of French households (Condition de vie des ménages) in 1993-94, the unemployment rate is much higher among adults who have trouble reading and writing (in French) [2].

◆ Complex geographical and cultural itineraries

The young people surveyed by INED were three times as likely to have been born abroad than the same age group living in a home in the Ile de France region. Out of 100 youths aged 16 to 24 living in the Ile de France region, 86 were born in metropolitan France, 2 in the Dom-Tom (overseas territories and departments) and 12 abroad. Among the young homeless in Paris and in the near suburbs, 56% were born in metropolitan France, 6% in the Dom-Tom and 38% abroad, mostly in Africa or in Eastern Europe. Three quarters of those born in North Africa and almost all those from Eastern Europe were men, but the proportion drops to 63% for the total sample.

The geographical itineraries of the young homeless are often complex, depending on the origins of their parents: 61% had a father born abroad and 51% a mother. Since the age of 14, they had frequently moved to different cities or sometimes countries. These migrations often go along with a change in the family's composition, and this can weaken family ties as well as bonds with neighbours and peers; a change of cultural environment can make it even more difficult for the young person to adapt. As previously mentioned, 44%

(1) *Translator's note:* the “collège” in France corresponds to the first four years of secondary school, with the “lycée” covering the last three years (comparable to junior high school and high school in the US).

of the homeless young people were born outside of metropolitan France; to those, we may add 15% who were born in France but spent over a year abroad or in the Dom-Tom. On average, 21% of the respondents were living abroad at the age of 16 and 4% in the Dom-Tom, but situations vary considerably depending on the country of origin: for instance, almost all the respondents born in Eastern Europe were still living in their home country at the age of 16, whereas barely one third of those born in North Africa were still living there at that age.

◆ Family problems

Overall, in the Ile-de-France region, two out of three young people aged 16 to 24 still live with at least one parent (2), whereas four out of ten homeless young

Table 1 – Comparison between young homeless people and those who have a home, in the Ile-de-France region

	Homeless young people	Young people who have a home in Ile-de-France
Profession of the father (in %)		
	<i>when the youth was 16</i>	<i>when the youth left school</i>
Farmers	3	1
Craftsmen, tradesmen	16	10
Senior management, senior civil service, higher intellectual	10	25
Middle-level professions	10	19
Clerical, sales or service staff	14	17
Manual workers	48	29
Number of respondents	368	3 157
Highest diploma (in %)*		
None	52	10
BEPC (a) only	7	4
Vocational school diploma	16	9
Baccalaureate (b) or professional certificate	8	9
University degree	2	8
Still studying	15	59
Number of respondents	461	2 983
Place of birth (in %)		
France	62	88
<i>of which:</i>		
• metropolitan France	56	86
• overseas departments and territories	6	2
Abroad	38	12
Total	100	100

* The findings of the "Employment" survey are calculated on the basis of the age and gender categories of the INED survey.

(a) The BEPC is the diploma obtained in France at the end of "collège" studies (see p.1, note 1).

(b) The baccalaureate is the lycée graduation diploma (see p.1, note 1).

Field: young people aged 16 to 24 who were users, on an average day of February or March 1998, of shelters, food distribution and day services in Paris and the near suburbs, for the INED survey; young people aged 16 to 24 having a home in Ile de France, for the Employment survey.

Sources: INED survey on homeless young people, 1998; INSEE survey on employment, 1998.

people no longer entertain regular contacts with their mother and six out of ten with their father (see tables 2 and 3). Cases where the fathers are either unknown or deceased are three times as frequent among the young homeless than among the others.

Almost all the respondents had brothers and sisters (96%), in which cases, over two thirds remained in contact with at least one of their siblings. Interviews show that brothers and sisters not only provide occasional financial support, but other forms of support as well: a place to sleep, food, in addition to moral support.

The respondents often complained of having been ill-treated as children; many of them had been sent to

Table 2 – Situation of the young people's parents (deceased, separated, remarried) (% of respondents)

Both parents are alive	74
<i>of whom:</i>	
• are living together	37
• do not live together	37
<i>the mother lives with someone else</i>	21
<i>the father lives with someone else</i>	23
The father is deceased	8
The mother is deceased	5
Both parents are deceased	4
For at least one parent, does not know whether s/he is alive	9
Total	100

Field: young people aged 16 to 24 who were users, on an average day of February or March 1998, of services provided by shelters, food distribution, day centers in Paris and the near suburbs.

Source: INED survey on homeless young people, 1998.

Table 3 – Avowed contacts with parents (% of respondents)

	Father	Mother
Still in regular contact	38	59
Other	62	41
<i>of which:</i>		
• parent deceased	12	9
• parent unknown or with whom the respondent has lost touch	8	2

Field and source: see table 2

Table 4 – Frequency of certain events (in %)

Events	Men	Women
• The parents did not get along, had rows	43	47
• Was ill-treated during childhood	38	47
• Was in state care	27	39
• Ran away from home	46	57
<i>of which: several times</i>	29	33
• Attempted suicide	24	40
<i>of which: several times</i>	14	16
• Served time in prison	20	3
<i>of which: several times</i>	8	ε

Field and source: see table 2.

The INED survey among homeless young people

The INED survey on "homeless young people" was conducted in February-March 1998 as an experimental survey among 461 persons aged 16 to 24 who had had recourse to various services and facilities designed for persons in great distress. The sample is representative of the population concerned in Paris and the near suburbs. The survey was financed by INED, with the support of the CNAF (Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales — State Family Allowance) and INSERM. Pascal Arduin, of the INED survey department, was in charge of the data gathering operations.

This survey was based on the methodology applied by INED in 1995, in an earlier survey among homeless adults aged 18 or older who had used such support facilities in Paris *intra muros* [3]. For the younger group, the list of facilities was extended: in addition to night shelters and food distribution centers, other daytime centers especially designed for this population were also covered, as well as those that welcome homeless people of all ages and are open at least five days a week. The survey was also conducted in special collective housing for young people who have left their families. These young people, though described as "living in precarious conditions", are not homeless in the strictest sense of the term, since they do not sleep outdoors or in shelters for the homeless.

In this survey, the proportion of women is higher than in the 1995 survey carried out among homeless persons aged 18 or more (37% on average against 17%) (see table). Part of this difference is due to the fact that the survey also covers special hostels for young people who are in a difficult situation, but not necessarily "homeless" in the strict sense of the term.

The total number of young people concerned cannot be precisely evaluated. However, an estimated one out of every six services provided was captured by the survey. The data was weighted to account for the fact that some respondents use these services repeatedly whereas others use them rarely. The present findings, which show the number of users on an average day, underestimate the number of infrequent users (less than once a day). Despite the relatively high sampling fraction, the numbers were too small to perform multiple cross-classifications.

Distribution of young homeless according to gender and age (in %)

	Distribution according to gender			Distribution according to age
	Men	Women	Total	
16 - 18	30	70	100	18
19 - 21	57	43	100	39
22 - 24	81	19	100	43
Total	63	37	100	100

Field and source: see table 2

institutions or to live in foster homes (table 4). One out of five men had done time in prison, but hardly any women. However, when speaking of the serious problems experienced in the course of their life, the women mentioned family breakdowns and ill treatments more often than the men. Women are more likely to have been sent to institutions, to have run away from home or attempted suicide.

◆ Different past experiences among the older and the younger respondents

Except for prison time, the younger members of the group of respondents were more likely to have had a difficult past than the older ones. This difference cannot be ascribed to memory lapses, given the overall youth of the respondents. On the other hand, it is possible that part of the younger cohorts later found more stable housing or another type of institution (for instance, centers for young mothers) and were thus no longer covered by the survey. Though this does not necessarily mean that their situation was completely reversed, one may suppose that some of these young people were later spared the difficulty of finding appropriate housing.

To support this hypothesis, we observe that women were more numerous among the younger group: they accounted for 70% of the 16 to 18 age group, 43% of the 19-21 age group and 19% of the 22-24 age group (see box). This is due, in part, to the type of shelter covered by the survey, since women are proportionally more numerous in centers belonging to the "Aide sociale à l'enfance" (ASE — state social aid service for children), whereas men tend to be housed in emergency shelters or to sleep outdoors. Only one of

the women surveyed said she would be spending that night in a public area, and none declared sleeping in squats, trains or in the communal parts of apartment buildings.

The family histories of the older cohorts usually differ from those of the younger cohorts. The place of residence at the age of 16 (in France or abroad) and the date when the respondents first left their parents' home (3) enabled us to determine three main types of itineraries, in relationship to the frequency of disruptive events mentioned above. In the first place, migrants who left for economic or political reasons are mostly men who were living abroad at the age of 16 and left their parents at a later age; suicide attempts and running away from home are less frequent in that group. Secondly, those who left home at a later age are also women or men who were living in France at the age of 16 and left their parents after that age; these are very often young people whom their parents "kicked out" of the house, and it would seem that if the global economic circumstances had been easier at the time of their departure, their access to independence would have occurred in better conditions. Thirdly, young people who lived in foster homes or institutions often left their parents before the age of 16 and were in France at that age; cases of young people running away from home or attempting suicide are most frequent in the latter group. More detailed categories can be determined on the basis of gender.

This analysis, based on the definition of categories,

(2) According to the March 1997 INSEE survey "Jeunes et carrières" ("Young people and careers").

(3) To this group are also added cases of separation, when the parents leave to work in another country, for example.

leads to the hypothesis mentioned above: the older and younger groups have different pasts, with variations according to gender. Men are older when they find themselves in the situation covered by the survey: in all types of itineraries, men aged 21 and older are overrepresented. Conversely, women who left their parents at an early age and were living in France at the age of 16 seem to put an end to their homeless situation as they grow older; those who left their parents later and were also in France at the age of 16 become homeless at a later stage in life, but do not remain so. Only the women who came from foreign countries are more numerous in the older age groups, like the men. Thus, it would seem that early separation from parents, gender, and the length of stay in France are factors which must be taken into account in order to understand the diversity of the respondents' itineraries, as well as certain aspects of their behaviour.

Other factors include social policies, the support provided by specialized groups or associations or the help of family and friends; the impact of these factors varies according to gender, age, and geographic origin.

However, these young people have many characteristics in common: most of them come from rather

poor backgrounds, many dropped out of school and their lives were marked more or less early on by family breakdowns or migrations. Some, sent to foster homes at a young age, repeatedly ran away or attempted suicide; many, despite institutional care, have a great deal of trouble overcoming the psychological traumas they have suffered; and some have been disoriented even further by the termination of institutional care. Others, foreigners, were forced to flee a country at war or left their homeland in search of economic resources. Last, the economic context, and the near-impossible task of finding a job or housing, also play a critical role in the difficulties encountered by these young people, forced to gain their independence the hard way.

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What's new

Circumcision and Aids: an ongoing debate

According to UNAIDS, almost three quarters of the new Aids infections occur in sub-Saharan Africa. This region is the most hard hit by the epidemic in the world. In most cases, preventive measures (promotion of condom use, reduction of risky behaviour, control over blood transfusions and mother-child transmission) were not sufficient to curb the epidemic. The question of whether circumcision might help to fight Aids was raised over ten years ago, as the regions most affected by the epidemic were those where the men were not all circumcised. There is however an urgent need to demonstrate that circumcision itself provides protection against Aids, and not other factors that may be related to this practice (religious beliefs, sexual behaviour, etc.)

Two recent studies have shed some light on this debate. They show that circumcision does protect against Aids, though only in part. The first study was conducted in Uganda [1]. The survey covered several married couples, where the wife was infected with the Aids virus while the husband was not. Among the 137 couples where the husband was not circumcised, 40 men caught the virus; among the 50 couples surveyed where the husband was circumcised, none con-

tracted the virus. The second study surveyed the population of four medium-sized African cities: Cotonou in Benin, Yaoundé in Cameroon, Kisumu in Kenya and Ndola in Zambia [2]. The same survey method was applied in each city in order to compare the factors linked to infection. In the first two cities, the proportion of persons infected by HIV was relatively low, compared to the overall African rate, whereas in the last two cities, it was relatively high. In the first two cities, almost all the men were circumcised, whereas in Kisumu only 30% were circumcised and in Ndola only 10%. In Kisumu, the only city with a sufficient proportion of circumcised and uncircumcised men to allow a comparison, the circumcised men were less often infected with the Aids virus than those who were not, regardless of religion, ethnic group or sexual behaviour.

In what way could circumcision protect against Aids? The foreskin may favour local infections and facilitate the transmission of the virus into the body. By removing the foreskin, such infections may be avoided and the surface of masculine tissue in contact with vaginal tissue during sexual intercourse is reduced. Last, the foreskin tissue has cells that play a role in transmitting the virus to the body — Langherans cells — and their removal may reduce the risk of transmission.

Before circumcision can be regard-

ed as a promising way to fight Aids, much remains to be done in way of research, and some questions still remain unanswered: is promotion of circumcision possible in all cultures? Will its effect be the same everywhere? In addition, if, by now, it is clear that circumcision reduces the risk of transmission from women to men, there is no evidence indicating that the same is true for transmission from men to women. Last, it is important that circumcisions performed for purposes of prevention be carried out in a medical environment and that the persons concerned are adequately informed regarding Aids prevention. Indeed, if these men begin to take risks because they think they are 100% protected thanks to circumcision, the consequences could be the reverse of those hoped for. Nonetheless, given the extent of the epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, circumcision should be seriously considered as a potential tool.

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