Introduction

The professional and academic literature deals extensively with factors contributing to the phenomenon of at-risk youth (Chen, 2016; Etzion & Romi, 2015) and at-risk youth in minority groups in particular (Marks, Woolverton & García, 2020), and explores possible strategies for coping with it (De Vries, Hoeve, Assink, Stams & Asscher, 2015; Lifshitz, 2017).

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the exacerbation of the risks to teenagers who live in Israeli Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jewish communities. Typically, one of the most concerning issues for these closed religious communities has always been the exposure to modern Western lifestyles. The lack of skills and knowledge provided to members of the community in dealing with the outside secular world, create risks and challenges for Ultra-Orthodox youth, their communities, educators and social service providers.

The Ultra-Orthodox community is among the poorest in Israel, with approximately half of their members (44%) living below the poverty line and are often made up of large households (with an average of seven children per family) (CBS, 2021). There are vast differences between the educational frameworks within closed religious communities and the norms and values that exist outside this world. Within these educational frameworks, there is a great emphasis on proper religious behavior, such as wearing modest clothing and intensive religious studies (Malchi, 2020; Cahaner, 2020). Students who encounter difficulties adjusting to these standards have the potential to drop out of this demanding educational environment. These students are eventually integrated into alternative community educational-therapeutic settings or find themselves without any formal/educational framework (Chernovitsky & Feldman, 2018; Palay, 2021). This can be a precipitating factor for involvement in risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, criminal activity, and sexual encounters potentially vulnerable to abuse. In recent years, following the expansion of the phenomenon of Ultra-Orthodox youth at risk, there has been an increasing willingness of Ultra-Orthodox leadership to receive assistance from non-community professionals (Malchi, 2020; Weissblai, 2019).

Research Goal

The purpose of the study is to identify unique risk factors of Ultra-Orthodox adolescents and prediction of subsequent dropping out of the traditional Ultra-Orthodox educational framework and risk behaviors.

Methods

*Population*. The study involved 333 Ultra-Orthodox adolescents at-risk (53% male, 47% female) aged 13-18 living in three localities with a large Ultra-Orthodox population. The adolescents had dropped out of their educational framework (73%), or were in the process of doing so or being moved to alternative settings (43%), with 15% dropped out of the educational system completely. Most of the participants (77%) lived with their parents. The adolescents grew up in families with characteristics that are less prevalent in the Ultra-Orthodox community with most (68%) of them having grown up in newly religious families (compared to 15% among the general Ultra-Orthodox population) and 26% with divorced parents (20% among the general Ultra-Orthodox population). A significant proportion of the participants have siblings who study in non-ultra-Orthodox institutions (43%), or siblings who dropped out of the educational framework. (33%).

*Instruments.* Questionnaires for identifying risk factors for youth at-risk (Lifshitz, 2017), and the School Climate Questionnaire for Students of the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (NAMEE, 2018) were used. These tools were adapted to the specific characteristics and needs of the Ultra-Orthodox community. This involved gathering data from several key areas – socio-demographic characteristics of the youth and their families, the connections between the youths and their parents, dimensions of integration in educational frameworks and youth at-risk behaviors.

*Procedures.* Data collection was conducted between March and June 2021 by Ultra-Orthodox staff, using “snowball method”. Student participants were recruited through Ultra-Orthodox local street counselors and staff in alternative educational-therapeutic settings for Ultra-Orthodox youth at-risk. The researchers obtained parental consent, and then questionnaires were passed on to the teenagers who expressed their interest in participating in the study.

*Analysis*. To predict the likelihood for dropping out of school (yes, no) we conducted a hierarchical logistic regression; and to predict the number of risk behaviors (0 thru 8 problems) we conducted a hierarchical negative binominal regression. In the first step we introduced measures that were highlighted as potent risk factors for at-risk youth and in the second step of the analyses, we added measures that might serve as unique risk factors in closed religious communities.

Results

**Ana**

The analysis indicated that the traditional risk factors explained 37.6% of the variance. Specifically, switching educational framework (Incidence Rate Ratios [IRR] = 1.18), having friends who do drugs (IRR = 1.49), being male (IRR = 1.77), and having a history of sexual trauma (IRR = 1.43) were all significantly and uniquely linked with subsequent risk behaviors. Adding the unique risk factors characterized within closed religious communities in the second step of the analysis, significantly added 5.5% to the explained variance of risk behaviors, Δχ2(4) = 16.94, p = 0.002. The analysis revealed that being of a newly religious family (IRR = 1.30) and with difficulties in managing religious demands (IRR = 1.11) were significantly associated with additional risk behaviors above and beyond the contribution of traditional risk factors. Overall, the model explained 43.1% of the variance.

**Predicting the likelihood of dropping out of educational framework**

The analysis indicated that the traditional risk factors explained 14.3% of the variance with academic difficulties and sexual trauma significantly predicting the likelihood of dropping out of the educational system. Specifically, having sexual trauma (Odds Ratios [OR] = 2.23) and greater academic difficulties (OR = 1.62) increased the likelihood of dropping out of school by 123% and 62%, respectively. The unique risk factors in closed religious communities did not add significantly to the explained variance of dropping out of school, Δχ2(4) = 3.44, p = 0.487.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that a considerable part of these phenomena examined – risk behaviors and dropping out of educational frameworks - are explained by traditional risk factors that appear in the literature (Etzion & Romi, 2015; Chen, 2016), but with specific focus on relevant to the unique context of the Oltra-Orthodox community, such as sexual trauma and academic difficulties. However, there are two significant factors identified as contributing to risk behaviors – growing up in a newly religious family and difficulties managing religious demands within the educational framework.

The findings will provide social work and educational professionals with greater insight into concentrated areas of risk, helping them to focus their work and counter disengagement in its early stages.

Ultimately, the regression findings explain relatively well the phenomenon of risk behaviors among youth from Ultra-Orthodox families, but much less the phenomenon of dropping out among these adolescents and it require further examination.