**Adolescents from Closed Religious Communities Dropping Out of Israeli Ultra-Orthodox Education: Unique Risk Factors**

**Abstract**

**Introduction:** In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of exacerbated risks to teenagers in Israel’s closed religious communities, especially among ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jews. This study examines unique risk factors and anticipated risk behaviors for ultra-Orthodox adolescents in order to identify situations posing risks to vulnerable populations and to focus on ​​prevention and intervention in this area.

**Methods:** The study examines 333 ultra-Orthodox at-risk adolescents (53% male, 47% female) aged 13–18 living in three localities with large ultra-Orthodox populations. Most had dropped out of ultra-Orthodox educational system, were in the process of doing so, were being moved to alternative settings, or had dropped out of education completely (15%). Staff members from ultra-Orthodox educational or at-risk youth treatment frameworks collected the data between March and June 2021 using the “snowball method.”

**Results:** Regression analysis indicated that traditional risk factors – being male, having friends who take drugs, having a history of sexual trauma and switching junior high school – are key to predicting risk behaviors. The additional risk factors unique to closed religious communities identified in the second phase of the analysis – being part of a newly religious family, experiencing difficulties managing school religious demands and having fragile religious faith – significantly added to the risks associated with other risk behaviors. Particularly notable are sexual trauma and having friends who take drugs, especially among girls.

**Conclusions:** The findings provide social work and education professionals with deeper insights enabling them to develop more effective interventions and focus their work and counter disengagement in its early stages both within and beyond the community.

**Keywords**

school disengagement; youth at risk, closed religious communities; faith schools; ultra-Orthodox Jewish community

Considerable professional and academic literature examines the factors contributing to the phenomenon of at-risk youth (Belfield & Levin 2007; Brekke 2014; Chen, 2018; Etzion & Romi, 2015; Rumberger & Lim 2008), particularly at-risk youth in minority groups (Marks et al., 2020; Neblett et al., 2012). Studies emphasize that the social and developmental context in which minority youths grow up, including school, family, and community aspects, affect the level of specific risks (Juarez et al., 2006; Makarova & Birman, 2015; Marks et al., 2020).

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the heightened risks faced by adolescents living in religious minority groups and of the need to relate to their cultural and religious context when providing them services (Itzhaki et al., 2018a; Kali & Romi, 2021; Ubani et al., 2020; Unger, 2006). Closed religious communities (CRCs) can be considered “collective societies,” distinct from “individualist societies.” In the former, relationships between the individual and the group are characterized by high levels of cohesion and support, with group members expected to conform to societal norms. Group needs are placed above personal ones and people are perceived primarily as group members and only secondarily as individuals (Hofstede, 1980; Itzhaki et al., 2018b; Kali & Romi, 2021). When undergoing the process of identity formation – a major developmental challenge for adolescents (Erikson, 1968) – the individual youth in these societies is expected to accept and defer to the collective identity. Kuusisto (2010, 2011) discusses the tension between the expectations and norms of the CRCs and those of the wider secular culture. Exposure to modern Western lifestyles is frequently a major source of tension in these CRCs. In Israel, too, there is increased concern for at-risk youth among the ultra-Orthodox (UO; also known as Haredi) community). The failure of UO youths to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to cope with the secular world outside their communities, coupled with their gradual disengagement from family and community support circles, creates risks and challenges for them, their parents, and their service providers (Itzhaki et al., 2018b; Itzhaki-Braun, 2021; Itzhaki-Braun & Yablon, 2022; Kali et al., 2019; Nadan et al., 2019). Professionals are concerned that they may not be providing these CRCs with services that are appropriate and responsive to their population’s culture and social norms (Juarez et al., 2006; Keesing et al., 2020; Marks et al., 2020; Seider & Graves, 2020).

**Research goals**

This study, focusing on at-risk UO youth in Israel, first examines the extent to which the factors contributing to risk behaviors among adolescents in the general population already identified in the professional literature also contribute to risk behaviors among adolescents in the UO community. It also assesses whether there are additional factors characterizing these risk behaviors that uniquely arise from the community’s particular sociocultural context. Finally, it examines the role of gender differences in risk factors or behaviors.

**UO Jewish youth in Israel**

The UO community makes up about 13% of the Israeli population (Cahaner & Malach, 2021), and at least 17% of UO adolescents are identified by the authorities as being at risk (defined as having dropped out of UO formal education frameworks or receiving services from authorities providing services to at-risk youth), with only few of them (2%) receiving treatment from recognized treatment professionals (Blass, 2015; Weissblai, 2019).

Over the past 20 years, the percentage of UO students in Israel’s secondary education system has increased from 4% in 1980 to 28% in 2020 due to demographic growth of the UO population in Israel. About half (49%) of OU children and youth in Israel grow up in poor families (compared to 29% of all Israeli children). A relatively high proportion of UO students (4%) drop out at the end of eight grade, the end of elementary school in the UO educational system (compared to 1.6% of all Israeli children). About half of these UO dropouts are not integrated into alternative frameworks supervised by the education system (compared to 1.2% of all Israeli children) (INCC, 2021).

Families in this highly religious community are typically large (with an average of seven children per family), patriarchal, and authoritarian (Lahav, 2015), and among the poorest in Israel, with approximately 44% of the UO community living below the poverty line (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This community separates itself from secular society in various ways, such as living in enclosed neighborhoods, having separate education systems, observing clearly defined dress codes for men and women, and rigidly observing Jewish law (Itzhaki-Braun & Sulimani-Aidan, 2020).

Vast disparities exist between the UO educational system and secular norms and values, the former strongly emphasizing proper religious behavior, such as wearing modest clothing and engaging in intensive religious studies (Cahaner, 2020; Malchi, 2020). Adolescents encountering difficulties adjusting to these demanding standards may drop out of this educational environment, eventually either integrating into alternative community educational-therapeutic frameworks or finding themselves without any formal educational framework at all (Chernovitsky & Feldman, 2018; Kali & Romi, 2021; Palay, 2021). This process of dropping out is often accompanied by gradual disengagement from the UO community and parental connections (Elfassi et al., 2016; Itzhaki et al., 2018b; Itzhaki-Braun & Sulimani-Aidan, 2021) and may precipitate involvement in risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, criminal activity, and sexual encounters, the latter potentially making them vulnerable to abuse.

There is no flexibility in UO community behavioral expectations in social arenas such as dating and exposure to non-religious media. Adolescents who fail to conform are typically met with blame, rejection, and exclusion from family and community (Kali & Romi, 2021). With the constant increase in the phenomenon of at-risk UO youth, the community’s leadership has recently become more willing to receive assistance from professionals outside of the community (Malchi, 2020; Weissblai, 2019).

**Theoretical framework**

The study draws on the ecological theory. The ecological perspective characterizes the interdependence of the individual, family, educational institutions, and communal/social environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Chen, 2018; Hawkins et al., 1992).

**Factors contributing to risk behaviors**

Risk behaviors as commonly defined in the literature are significant negative behaviors that threaten adolescents’ health and reflect negative adjustments to educational settings or societal norms (DiClemente & Wingood, 2000; Erickson et al., 2005; Itzhaki-Braun & Sulimani-Aidan, 2021). Among youth, these may include smoking tobacco, using alcohol and marijuana products, school truancy and dropping out, interpersonal violence, weapons possession, and risky sexual behavior (Scott et al., 2006; Sinha et al., 2007). These behaviors also threaten adolescents’ psychosocial development (Melkman, 2015). Adolescents so affected gradually disconnect from society (Gruper & Romi, 2014; Kali & Romi, 2021). When risk factors are present in youths’ environment, there is a greater likelihood of negatively influencing youths’ development or behavior (Chen, 2018). The isolated nature of the UO community, however, may limit the utility of risk factors defined out of community context. In fact, the phenomenon of UO youth at risk does not consist of isolated events but is instead embedded in complex systems of relations that may be described as the social-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, UO youth behavior may be seen as a result of a set of relationships experienced in multiple environments (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007). During interactions with each of the environments the social and cultural capital of the individual and his family also have an impact. Adolescence is a transitional period in which the importance of contextual interactions increases – with peers, in the school system, and within community frameworks – which are all connected. More specifically, individuals are nested within their families, which can affect their relationships with their peers and the community. The peer group is embedded in the school system, which is a part of neighborhood and community (Merrin et al., 2015). Based on the social-ecological theoretical framework, we identify several key factors that affect youth risk behaviors at the level of the individual, family, peer group, school framework, and community. Our study examines a number of variables that appear in the broader literature as contributing to UO youths’ risk behaviors.

***Individual level***

At the individual level, emotional and other personal characteristics are important risk factors for determining how adolescents interact with risky situations. Impulsivity and fraught emotional states (Juarez et al., 2006), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)-related symptoms (Budman & Maeir, 2022; Resnick, 2000), and exposure to extreme situations, such as sexual harassment (Marks et al., 2020), are risk factors that contribute to risk behaviors. This study specifically examines the factors of emotional difficulties, ADHD symptoms, and exposure to sexual trauma.

***Family level***

At the family level, parents play a pivotal role in amplifying or reducing adolescents’ exposure to risky situations, with the relationships between them having a significant effect on the youths’ degree of involvement in risky behaviors. Several factors have been identified as contributing to risky behavior in this context, including parental neglect, lax supervision, low parental involvement in school matters, conflicts between parents (Morley et al., 2000), parental expectations and negative conditional attitudes regarding adjustment (Itzhaki-Braun et al., 2020; Juarez et al., 2006) that indicate a lesser degree of parental affection/warmth as a result of the youth not meeting parental expectations. Parental support can also be a significant resource in coping with difficult situations (Marks et al., 2020; Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017). Limited family resources and status (such as social connections and roles within the community) have been found to contribute to risk among religious minorities, especially in situations when the family is new in the community. The existence of another dropout in the family also increases the risk for youth (Ben Yair & Rosenal, 2014). At the same time, living with one’s parents (Clubb et al., 2001) and having a close relationship with them reduces the risk to religious minority group youths (Griffin et al., 2000; Itzhaki-Braun & Sulimani-Aidan, 2021). We examine these family influences – parental family status, parents’ involvement, having siblings who dropped out of the education system, and being a newly religious family – in relation to UO youth.

***Peer group***

At the peer group level, the peer group becomes increasingly significant during adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Harris, 1995). The individual spends more time with friends and less with parents. The interaction with peers enables the development and practice of social skills and the re-examination and consolidation of personal identity (Geldhof et al., 2013; Merrin et al., 2015; Reifman et al., 1989). Peer relationships are also a crucial factor in determining further related risk behaviors in adolescence by buffering adverse childhood experiences (Freeman & Brown, 2001; Zielinski & Bradshaw, 2006) and the role of peer relationships may also be associated with healthy youth development. For example, peer group support may help prevent dropout (Virtanen et al., 2020). Variables relating to friends involved in maladaptive behavior have likewise been identified as risk factors (Duncan & Raudenbush, 2001; Yoon, 2020). Peers’ alcohol and drug use and bullying were found to be significantly associated with gang involvement (Merrin et al., 2015). In our study, we asked about friends’ drug use and bullying.

***School system***

At the school system level, a setting in which youth spend a significant part of their time and where their experiences are of great significance to their personal development, risk factors including frequent transitions between schools (Baker et al., 2001; Ruff & Keim, 2014), early dropping out, low academic achievement, and perceived unfair treatment and demands from school staff (Marks et al., 2020), have been identified as contributors to risk behaviors (Brooks, 2006). The transition between elementary school and high school and the search process required to find a suitable new framework were also identified as a critical junction (Hanewald, 2013). On the other hand, significant supportive adults in school can reduce risk (Wright & Masten, 2015). In the current study, we examine the contribution of frequent transitions between schools, academic difficulties, the ability to manage with religious school demands, and the existence of a supportive adult in relation to youth risk behaviors.

***Community level***

At the community level, the availability of resources and the degree of cohesion in their provision may either mitigate or exacerbate risk behaviors of adolescents (Chinman et al., 2005). Living in distressed neighborhoods and within deprived social structures also exacerbates risk (Duncan & Raudenbush, 2001). Religious belief and/or involvement in communal religious activities have been identified as risk reducing (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017; Cattelino et al., 2014; Clubb et al., 2001; Kyle, 2013; Sinha et al., 2007), as has a sense of community cohesion and belonging (Clubb et al., 2001; Elfassi et al., 2016; Itzhaki-Braun & Sulimani-Aidan, 2021; Klonover et al., 2022; Saarelainen, 2018). Kali & Romi (2021) point to the process of social re-evaluation of the individual and the family social capital, tracing changes in adolescent behavior as a possible mechanism for marginalization of at-risk youth in CRC. The present study also examines the role of religious belief and the exposure to the internet and online content outside of the community as these relate to youth risk behaviors.

**The current study**

Over the last decade, only a few studies have been conducted of at-risk UO youths due to the community’s strong resistance to researchers and professionals from outside the community. Most of these studies have focused on male adolescents (Itzhaki et al., 2018a, 2018b; Itzhaki-Braun et al., 2020; Itzhaki-Braun & Sulimani, 2020; Lifshitz, 2017) or have used qualitative research methods (Kali et al., 2019; Kali & Romi, 2021; Malchi, 2020; Nadan et al., 2019; Saban, 2020). The present study analyzes at-risk youth from the UO community quantitively and addresses gender differences.

The current study examines risk factors among UO adolescents, aged 13–18, in order to identify situations that post risks within the main circles of adolescent life. The results should enable professional teams to devise and apply appropriate tools and intervention strategies for ​​prevention and intervention services to this population. The study focuses on UO at-risk adolescents, most of whom had dropped out of UO educational system or were in the process of doing so. The study explores the hypothesis that the environmental, cultural, and social context of CRCs may lead to unique risk behaviors among youth growing up in these communities. Hierarchical regression was used to examine these assumptions and identify the main risk factors that lead to risky behaviors among these youth.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The study involved 333 at-risk UO adolescents (53% male, 47% female) aged 13–18 living in Israel in three localities with large UO populations (about 50% or more of the total) that are ranked in a low socioeconomic cluster (1–3 out of 10). Two out of three of the targeted localities are located in the center of the country. Most of the adolescents (85%) had dropped out of their educational framework or were in the process of doing so or of being moved to alternative frameworks, while 15% had left the educational system completely. A large portion of the participants (77%) lived with their parents. Most adolescents in the cohort grew up in families with relatively unusual characteristics for the UO community: a majority (68%) grew up in newly religious families (while now members of the UO community, the parents had not grown up in an UO home or been educated in an UO school) (15% of the general UO population), and 26% had divorced parents (4% among the general UO population). A significant proportion of participants had siblings studying in non-UO institutions (43%) or siblings who had dropped out of their UO educational framework (33%).

**Procedures**

Data were collected between March and June 2021 by UO staff using the “snowball method.” Student participants were recruited through staff in alternative educational-therapeutic frameworks for at-risk UO youth and local UO street counselors. Parental consent was obtained before questionnaires were given to the adolescents willing to participate in the study. Almost all parents and students who were approached expressed their consent/desire to participate in the study. The procedure and the questionnaire received ethical approval from the appropriate government authority.

**Instruments**

Informed by the social-ecological framework, data were gathered on several key factors: the sociodemographic characteristics of the adolescents and their families, youth-parent relations, and dimensions of integration into school system, as well as at-risk youth behaviors generally and those specific to youth in the UO community.

***Sociodemographic***

The sociodemographic characteristics of the adolescents and their family included age, gender, country of birth, place of residence, parents’ declared religious affiliations, whether the adolescent was from a newly religious family, parents’ marital status, number of siblings, whether the youth resided in their parents’ house, and whether any of their siblings had dropped out of school. These questions were based on the 2020 Israel Central Bureau of Statistics social survey questionnaire (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020), which has repeatedly been shown as valid and reliable.

***Parents’ involvement in their children’s lives***

The respondents were asked two questions about parental involvement: “Do your parents know where you spend time in afternoons?” and “Do your parents know what is happening in relation to school?” These two single-item questions were part of the questionnaire developed by Friedman and Fischer (2003), whose answer they found to be valid indicators for parental knowledge of children’s leisure time and school-related behavior. Each question was answered on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much).

***Peer group***

The respondents were asked to answer one question: “Do you have friend/s who use drugs? (yes/no).” The question is based on the Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) questionnaire (Harel-Fisch et al., 2019).

***Integration into School System***

Several questions were included to elicit data regarding respondents’ difficulties in integrating into school frameworks. Specifically, we included these single-item questions: (1) the number of schools participants had attended at the elementary school level; (2) the number of schools participants had attended at the high school level; (3) whether they were currently studying in any educational setting (yes/no); (4) whether they had been professionally diagnosed with ADHD (yes/no); (5) whether there was any school staff member they could turn to for help when needed (yes/no); and (6) whether they had encountered difficulties in coping with school religious requirements (yes/no). The respondents also were asked three general questions about whether they had encountered academic, social, and emotional difficulties during the last year. Each question was answered on a 4-point Likert scale between 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much). These nine questions were based on validated items used to identify risk factors for at-risk youth (Lifshitz, 2017) and the 2018 “School Climate Questionnaire” for students of the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education, 2018); all questions were adapted to the specific characteristics and needs of the UO schools.

***Maintaining a religious lifestyle***

Respondents were asked whether they used the internet (yes/no) and how they would define their religious belief fragility on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (highly fragile). These two questions were formulated based on the 2020 Israel Central Bureau of Statistics social survey questionnaire, which was repeatedly shown as valid and reliable.

***Sexual trauma***

Respondents were asked whether they been sexually assaulted (yes/no) using a single item with high validity as part of the HBSC questionnaire (Harel-Fisch et al., 2019).

***Risk behaviors***

To appraise the number of risk behaviors, we asked about the following behaviors, each using the same 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (more than 3 times a month): returning home late; involvement in fights; having suffered a beating from peers; drinking alcohol for nonreligious reasons; and smoking cigarettes. In addition, respondents were asked whether they had ever consumed drugs (yes/no), had ever been arrested (yes/ no), or had had meetings with probation officers (yes/ no). These questions were based on the HBSC questionnaire (Harel-Fisch et al., 2019). The scale’s reliability was measured using Cronbach’s alpha was 0.69 95% CI (0.60-0.76). Accordingly, for each participant, we calculated the number of risk behaviors (answer of 5 on the Likert scale—or, more than 3 times a month), and “yes” answers on the three dichotomous scale questions, with the possible range of 0 to 8.

**Data analysis**

Overall, 7.37% of the data was missing. Little’s Missing Completely at Random test (MCAR; Little, 1988) was performed to analyze the pattern of missing data, revealing that the data were not MCAR, χ2(1) = 9.81, p =.002. Using the “missing\_compare” function of the finalfit R package, we explored the pattern of missing data between participants with and without data on the three primary outcome measures – dropped out of school (yes/no), emotional difficulties, and the number of risk behaviors. Out of the 57 comparisons we performed, only two significant patterns were detected: participants with missing data on the “dropped out of school” measure were more likely to be boys than girls, p =.012, and participants with missing data on the emotional risk measure were less likely to exhibit ADHD, p =.004. Given the pattern of missing data, we employed the Multiple Imputation (Rubin, 2009) procedure via the mice R package (Van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2010) to handle missing data. In multiple imputations, missing data were imputed to create 50 complete datasets, analyses were performed on each dataset, and a pooled result was reported such that analyses comprised data on all cases (i.e., n = 333). The algorithm used to predict missing data in binary measures was logistic regression following a pre-processing lasso variable selection step, and we used random forest estimation for ordinal and/or quantitative measures.

Next, we examined the presence of multivariate outliers through the Minimum Covariance Determinant approach using the Routliers R package. We detected 39 multivariate outliers. Hence, robust analyses were selected to avoid biasing the models’ results. Specifically, to predict the number of risk behaviors (0 thru 8), we conducted a hierarchical robust negative binominal regression (an analysis best fitted for count data with negative binominal distribution) using the robmixglm R package and nbinom family. In the first step of the analysis, we introduced measures that were highlighted as potential risk factors for at-risk youth: parental family status (married, unmarried), whether parents knew where the adolescent was spending time, whether parents were involved in what happened in school, whether the adolescent lived with parents (yes/ no), whether sibling(s) had dropped out of school (yes/no), whether the adolescent had switched elementary school (yes/no) or junior high school (yes/no), academic difficulties, having an adult to turn to at school, friends who do drugs (yes/no), gender (boys, girls), ADHD (yes/no), sexual trauma (yes/no), and degree of emotional difficulties. In the second step of the analysis, we added measures that might serve as unique risk factors in CRC: being a member of a newly religious family (yes/no), difficulties managing religious demands at school, fragile faith, and internet exposure (yes/no). In the final step of the analysis, we added the 2-way interactions between gender and all other variables. To facilitate interpretation and avoid multicollinearity, quantitative measures were centered around their grand mean and dichotomous measures as 0.5 and -0.5 (i.e., effect coded with a 1-point difference between values). Interaction terms that still caused multicollinearity were excluded from the analyses and significant interactions were probed by simple slopes test using the interactions R package.

**Results**

**Predicting the number of risk behaviors**

Results are presented in Table 1. The analysis indicated that the traditional risk factors explained 22.36% of the variance, which reflects a moderate-sized model with respect to its effect size (Cohen, 1988). Specifically, having friends who take drugs, being a boy, and having a history of sexual trauma were all significantly and uniquely linked with a greater degree of risk behaviors. Two marginally significant results also emerged, indicating that switching junior high schools and having parents who do not know where the adolescent spends time are associated with more risk behaviors.

Adding the unique risk factors in CRCs in the second step of the analysis significantly added 4% to the explained variance of risk behaviors, *Δχ2*(4) = 17.33, *p* = 0.0017 (a weak addition with respect to effect size; Cohen, 1988). The analysis revealed that coming from a newly religious family and difficulties in managing religious demands at school were significantly associated with more risk behaviors above and beyond the contribution of traditional risk factors. One marginally significant result also emerged, indicating that having fragile religious faith is associated with more risk behaviors.

[Table 1 insert here]

The model (step 3 in Table 1) also revealed two significant interactions with participants’ gender: friends who do drugs × gender, and sexual trauma × gender. As shown in Figure 1, exposure to friends who take drugs (*b* = 0.89, *z* = 4.24, *p* = 0.00002) and/or experiencing sexual trauma (*b* = 0.66, *z* = 4.45, *p* < 0.00001) significantly increased the number of risk behaviors for girls, but not for boys (*b* = 0.22, *z* = 1.65, *p* = 0.099; *b* = 0.08, *z* = 0.77, *p* = 0.441, respectively, for boys). Overall, the model explained 32.58% of the variance, which reflects a substantial-sized effect (Cohen, 1988).

[Figure 1 insert here]

**Discussion and Conclusions**

We examined several variables that contribute to risk behaviors among at-risk UO youth, understanding that living in a CRC is an atypical context. The findings indicate that factors arising out of the special context of the UO community contributed significantly to risk behaviors. These factors contributing to risk among CRC adolescents include: being part of a newly religious family (Ben Yair & Rosenal, 2014); being unable to manage religious demands at school; and having fragile religious faith (Chernovitsky & Feldman, 2018; Kali & Romi, 2021; Kaufman. 2020; Palay, 2021). These three factors are related to key circles in which UO youth at risk operate: the individual, the family, and the educational framework. The significance of each of these factors in the development of risk behaviors may be better understood as resulting from the degree of the adolescent's and the family's social and cultural capital within CRCs.

[Figure 2 insert here]

The resources of “newly religious” parents who joined the community at a later stage of their lives is a complicated matter. Such parents are “immigrants” into a new cultural community and therefore have limited social and cultural capital in the CRC. They do not have a sufficiently high level of religious education to support their children in their religious studies (Assari & Caldweel, 2019; Kaplan, 2007), and are not familiar enough with the characteristics and nuances of the different types of learning frameworks in OU schools to accompany their children in the process of locating a suitable education framework within the community. Furthermore, the family sometimes lacks social support networks within the new community (Kaplan, 2007). Without these connections, families have more limited access to information that may help them cope with the difficulties their children encounter. Moreover, the UO community has an ambiguous attitude toward newly religious families, who are viewed, at least in part, with a fear and/or a lack of appreciation of the secular backgrounds of the newcomers. Sometimes the community applies stricter or more demanding religious behavioral standards to the newly religious to which they must adhere in order to attain social status and affirm that the family has indeed cut itself off from the past. This strictness also makes it difficult for their children, who are not always partners in making the decision to move to the UO community (Kaplan, 2007; Saban, 2020).

The social and cultural context in CRCs also plays an important role. Strict requirements exist in UO schools regarding ordinary and religiously-related behavior (Cahaner, 2020; Malchi, 2020), and there is also no tolerance for any fragility in adolescents’ religious faith. Any weakening of faith is perceived as posing a “spiritual risk” and undermines both the adolescent’s sense of belonging to the community, as well as the cohesion of the community and its systems themselves, which are, in turn critical to the development of the UO adolescent’s identity (Gemara et al., 2021; Keesing et al.,2020; Nadan et al., 2019). Students who do not learn how to conform to the UO school religious demands face huge obstacles in adapting to these schools, which present additional contributing factors to dropping out (Chernovitsky & Feldman, 2018; Kali & Romi, 2021; Kaufman. 2020; Palay, 2021). Moreover, there is a tendency for UO schools to expel students who deviate from the behavior deemed appropriate to the religious framework, as the greatest fear of educational staff is that these students’ behaviors and beliefs will affect other students (Budman & Maeir, 2022; Finkelman, 2011; Itkin-Ofer, 2019; Lifshitz, 2017).

The findings also point to risk factors previously identified in the professional literature as reasons for at-risk behavior: being male, moving from junior high school to high school, experiencing sexual trauma, and having friends who take drugs, with the last two factors especially affecting girls. However, these variables take on a special meaning in the social and cultural context of the UO community. As identified in previous studies (Hanewald, 2013), the key stages in which UO adolescent boys drop out are during the transition to a religious boarding school (known also as a yeshiva), at the end of the eighth grade, or several months following this transition. The main reason for that is the difficulty parents and their children face in finding a suitable yeshiva. Dropping out from a yeshiva due to educational, behavioral, social, or religious difficulties leads to further transitions between educational frameworks (Palay, 2021). This process may be particularly severe among boys, as teachers in the UO education system for boys have mainly in-depth religious knowledge but are usually less skilled or professionally trained in dealing with behavioral or emotional problems (Finkelman, 2011; Itkin-Ofer, 2019; Lifshitz, 2017).

One of the disturbing findings in the study relates to the unique difficulties at-risk UO adolescent girls face, revealing the greater significance of two risk factors – the experience of sexual trauma and having friends who take drugs. The risk process is especially accelerated among UO girls (Kaufman, 2020; Keesing et al., 2020), and the process of their rehabilitation in the community is more challenging than for males due to the greater perceived damage of girls’ risk behaviors to the family, to the community’s good name, and to the family’s social capital (Kali et al., 2019). Studies among UO adolescent girls have been more limited, but it appears that the tight social supervision of ​​community norms around modesty leads to the quicker labeling of girls as deviants if they appear to engage in exhibit risk behaviors and they quickly become socially excluded – an experience accompanied by feelings of guilt, shame or a tendency toward emotional distress and self-harm (Korbman et al., 2022; Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2021; Rosmarin et al., 2018; Saban, 2020).

It is noteworthy that the experience of sexual trauma among UO adolescent girls takes place within an environment of silence about sexual abuse in UO society, a cultural pattern that characterizes CRCs. Risk zones within CRCs are not clear for the adolescent, since there is an equivocal deference between the private and public zones and the risks they pose (Keesing et al., 2020). The difficulty of exposing sexual abuse in UO society is particularly complicated by its tendency not to disclose such issues for fear that in the eyes of the community, harm will be done to the girl’s future, the family’s good name, and potential matchmaking prospects. This silence often leads to failure to treat the problem, exacerbating accompanying emotional difficulties that may worsen the girls’ situations and lead to behavioral and emotional deterioration, dropping out of school, and risky behaviors (Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2021; Saban, 2020).

A key question is: What can educational and welfare teams do about this in the UO community’s schools without harming community values? The findings offer social workers and educational professionals deeper insights into the nuances and needs of the UO community, emphasizing the need to focus on identifying and providing guidance to newly religious families (Ben Yair & Rosenal, 2014); expanding educational and welfare professionals’ tools for coping with emotional and behavioral difficulties among UO students (Finkelman, 2011; Itkin-Ofer, 2019; Lifshitz, 2017); and raising awareness that can increase sensitivity and expand professional tools for locating and providing adequate treatment for girls who experienced sexual trauma (Korbman et al., 2022; Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2021; Saban, 2020). In addition, the findings indicate a need for guidance at the critical juncture of the transition between elementary and high school for children and their parents in choosing a yeshiva, and in the first months of their stay there (Palay, 2021; Malchi, 2020).

In recent years, initial steps in these directions have been taken, especially among educational and social teams, although less among the adolescents and their parents (Kessing et al., 2020; Palay, 2021). These first efforts need further expansion and professionalization, both in the fields of prevention and treatment. There is also a need to increase the awareness and the capacity of educational teams in schools, and to formulate systematic approaches for appropriately interacting with students who do not cope well with the strict requirements of UO schools. In addition, it is important to expand the professional tools available to the educational teams for specifically dealing with emotional and behavioral difficulties of UO adolescents.

Despite the contributions of the present study, there are several methodological limitations that should be taken into account when analyzing the data and drawing conclusions. First, the sampling method was based on the “snowball method” in educational institutions that agreed to participate in the study. Thus, the study is not based on a representative sample of the entire population of UO youth at-risk. Second, the examination of the UO youth at-risk phenomenon is based on the perspectives of the UO youth only. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding and reach deeper insights about this issue, the perspectives of the UO parents and the educational staff should also be studied. Third, a comparative analysis with other UO communities in the world and with other closed religious communities (such as the Amish or religious Muslim communities) would prove of great value in determining whether there are similar underlying risk behaviors and risk factors among other closed religious communities. Another caveat is that causality should not be assumed on the basis of our statistical analysis. Finally, to facilitate participation and avoid partially completed questionnaires, we selected several single-item questions to capture several indices of the UO population. The use of single-item questions prevents reliability assessment, although all items were based on valid and reliable scales. Future studies should address these methodological challenges to deepen our understanding of the challenges involved and to help develop tools for meeting them.

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