

Open Youth Work in Young People's Spaces –

A SITUATIONAL ASSESSMENT



Editor:



bOJA – Bundesweites Netzwerk
Offene Jugendarbeit



DOJ – Dachverband Offene Kinder-
und Jugendarbeit Schweiz



BAG OKJA – Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft
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netz | Offene Jugendarbeit EO

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movetia Movetia – Nationale Agentur zur Förderung von
Austausch und Mobilität im Bildungsbereich, Schweiz

Introduction

For young people, public spaces are important places of their socialisation, education and identity development. They serve as physical and virtual meeting points, places for experimentation, shelter, retreat, stages for self-expression, and adolescent self-assurance. However, these spaces, which are so important for young people, are becoming increasingly restricted. Instead of promoting young people’s appropriation of public space, they are often perceived as a disruption to public order. Issues such as noise, pollution, vandalism and violent conflicts characterise the discourse on young people. The consequences are various forms of displacement mechanisms.

Open Youth Work (OYW) outside youth centres and youth clubs, i.e. in parks, train stations, shopping centres, squares and virtual spaces, counteracts these processes by acting as a partisan advocate for young people in public and semi-public spaces and by accompanying and supporting young people in maintaining, developing and reclaiming spaces.

The four umbrella organisations of Open Youth Work in German-speaking countries: bOJA – nationwide network for Open Youth Work (Austria), BAG OKJA/ federal working group for Open Child and Youth Work (Germany), netz | Open Youth Work (South Tyrol) and DOJ/umbrella organisation for Open Child and Youth Work (Switzerland) engaged in a joint process focused on such practices that are implemented outside of youth centres and clubs.

In the course of two years of practical research, analysis, events and working group meetings, the various practices in public spaces were described, analysed and underpinned with quality and qualification criteria and recommendations.

Three broad forms of work were defined:

01	MOBILE YOUTH WORK / YOUTH STREETWORK	4
02	OUTREACHING FORMS OF OPEN YOUTH WORK	8
03	ONLINE STREETWORK	11

MOJA+

Open Youth Work in Young People’s Spaces

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Outside you have to be different

MOBILE YOUTH WORK/ YOUTH STREETWORK

Mobile youth work sees itself as an outreach service that is orientated towards young people's lifeworlds and flexibly focuses on their needs and resources in direct communication with them. Young people are reached at their informal meeting places in public spaces such as parks, shopping centres, train stations, bars or public squares. The aim is to identify, strengthen, deepen and expand the interests, skills and resources of young people. Mobile youth work is operating between the poles of educational leisure activity, social work-based support and public order and security interests.

Mobile youth work in German-speaking countries has evolved in differing ways in terms of history, youth policy and structure. Nevertheless, common quality factors can be identified:

Aims

- Promoting the potential of young people by identifying and providing access to resources
- Prevention and support in difficult and challenging life situations
- Promoting youth participation and positive coexistence in public spaces
- Not just combatting symptoms, but working on underlying societal conditions



Mobile youth work requires qualified social work professionals.

Basis Vinschgau Venosta, Südtirol

Approaches & core principles

- Accepting attitude
- Anonymity
- Needs-oriented approach, flexibility, and immediacy
- Intersectionality & diversity
- Voluntary participation
- Continuity, stability, and regularity
- Lifeworld-orientation and a holistic approach
- Low-threshold access
- Openness
- Partisan advocacy for young people (partiality)
- Participation
- Resource-orientation and empowerment
- Social space-orientation
- Transparency
- Confidentiality and discretion

Methods & services

Mobile youth work deploys the methods of streetwork and outreach work as well as the classic methods of social work: social individual (case) help or individual case work, social group work and community work. In addition, mobile open youth work also carries out project work, lobbying, and public relations work.

The following methods are used in mobile youth work:

- Streetwork
- Individual case work
- Group and clique work
- Community work and networking

Mandates & limits

Mobile youth work is guided by the goals and interests of young people, the mandates of funding bodies or commissioning institutions, as well as its own expertise/profession. However, these different mandates also encounter limits – e.g. if young people are in conflict with existing laws or directly cause themselves physical harm. Political or event-related mandates/requests (i.e. soft or social policing, pacification, or responsabilisation mandates) can also constitute a limit. Professionalism reaches its limits when resources (personnel, financial, etc.) are insufficient to ensure high quality work, or when adequately qualified staff is unavailable.

Further limits are: Legal framework, Personal boundaries and distance, Young people's boundaries, Demarcation from youth center work / facility or location-based OYW.

Qualification & training

Mobile youth work, as part of OYW, is a field of social work and therefore also requires qualified social work professionals. In addition to the varying availability of qualified staff (shortage of skilled labour, urban/rural disparities), it can also make sense conceptually to work in a multi-professional team if, for example, specific (e.g. linguistic or cultural) skills are required at a particular location.

Relevant training standards and competencies for mobile youth work:

- Priority for social work graduates (e.g. social work, social pedagogy, sociocultural animation)
- Multiprofessional teams (with a core team from the field of social work)
- Reflection and further training
- Regular supervision and intervision
- Trained leadership staff
- Personal skills, e.g. social skills, openness, flexibility, resilience, willingness to reflect and enthusiasm
- Provision of internships in MOYW facilities



Mobile youth work requires framework conditions and resources.

JLW, Niederösterreich

Framework conditions & resources

- Teams of 2 as a rule in streetwork (at least 3 full-time positions in the team)
- Permanent positions with wage agreements (tariff pay)
- Social space analysis as the basis for developing services
- Flexible but fair working hours
- Insurance cover for professionals
- Official ID cards and distinctive marks (for recognisability)
- Fixed drop-in centre
- Up-to-date technical equipment in the drop-in centre, e.g. smartphones, laptops and internet access
- Free mobility, e.g. annual tickets for public transport, company bicycles or cars/minibuses
- Reimbursement of expenses / allowance
- Multi-year funding for services

Quality development

- Documentation
- Impact measurement and evaluation
- Reflection, supervision, intervision
- Developing a culture of error
- Child protection concepts

If the young people don't come to us, we'll just come to them

OUTREACHING OPEN YOUTH WORK

8

Outreaching open youth work operates from an OYW location, e.g. a youth centre or club, and offers services in the young people's social space in addition to the facility-based services. Outreaching open youth work appears in a variety of forms, activities and methods. It carries out its own projects in the social space, such as experiential education programmes, holiday activities, projects on playgrounds and sports grounds, contributes to festivities and festivals, supports spatial development projects, youth parliaments, clique spaces and semi-autonomous spaces, visits schools, municipal spaces and student parliaments, accompanies to parties and events and much more.

The term "reaching out/outreaching" open youth work is largely used synonymously with socio-spatial, extending, regional or neighbourhood-oriented open youth work and has the following quality factors in German-speaking countries:



Outstanding open youth work appears in a variety of forms, offers, and methods and usually operates from an Open Youth Work location.

Basis Vinschgau Venosta, Südtirol

Aims

- Reaching young people in the local social space
- Opening up new target groups for the OYW location
- Informing young people about the services offered at the OYW site
- Acting as a mouthpiece for young people in the social space
- Improving the infrastructure of the social space for young people
- Creating spaces of appropriation for young people
- Establishing and maintaining co-operations within the local social space

Approaches & core principles

- Voluntary participation
- Lifeworld-orientation
- Guest role in the social space
- Participation
- Partisan advocacy for young people (partiality)

Mandates & limits

Open youth work in the social space regards itself as representing and supporting young people's interests. It places the needs of young people at the centre of its work and is committed above all to the mandate from the young people as well as from its own profession.

9



Open youth work in the social space sees itself as representing and supporting young people's interests.

Offene Jugendarbeit Lauterach, Vorarlberg

The limits of its actions are:

- Legal framework
- Personal boundaries and distance
- Boundaries of the young people
- Differentiation from mobile youth work

Qualification & training

- Multi-professional team (core team from the field of social work)
- Reflection and further training
- Regular supervision and intervision

Framework conditions and resources

- Social space analysis as the basis for the development of an outreaching concept
- Teams of 2 as a rule for outreaching work
- Permanent positions with wage agreements (tariff pay)
- Flexible but fair working hours
- Material equipment, e.g. cargo bike, music box, games box

Quality development

- Documentation
- Impact measurement and evaluation
- Reflection, supervision, intervision
- Developing a culture of error
- Child protection concepts

From the street to the web

ONLINE STREETWORK

The digital space has by now become a natural part of young people's lives. They use it to communicate, play, shop, stream and browse for content, but also to produce their own content. The consequence of this orientation towards the lifeworld is that open youth work is also present in the digital space and connects these social spaces in its work.

The methods of online streetwork are often based on established practices of analogue mobile youth work/youth streetwork and digital youth work/online youth work.

Differences and similarities between mobile youth work/youth streetwork and online streetwork:

Similarities

- Outreach work: going where young people are
- Public spaces (also: semi-public)
- Voluntary participation
- anonymity
- Partisan advocacy for young people (partiality)
- Target group that is not reached by existing systems
- Similar content



Basis Vinschgau Venosta, Südtirol

Differences

- Target group that is primarily or exclusively active in digital spaces
- Reduced communication channels: purely digital contact can be more difficult as, for example, facial expressions and gestures are absent in conversations
- Disinhibition effect: young people open up more quickly digitally
- Digital conditions: platforms, data protection, and data minimisation

Methods & services

- Researching topics and trends on digital platforms
- Presence – understood as outreach activities on digital platforms
- Creating and adapting content for various digital platforms
- Relationship work in the form of one-to-one or one-to-many interactions

The respective platforms that are used in the practice of online streetwork are used for various purposes by the young target groups. In practice, it has become clear that networked work across several platforms makes sense. This also means that different methods (content, contact, communication, counselling) can be used on different platforms.

Platforms

Jodel (regionally usable)	Facebook (e.g. networking)
Reddit (regionally usable)	Instagram (e.g. business card)
Discord (e.g. own server)	Snapchat (e.g. communication)
TikTok (e.g. trends/content)	BeReal (e.g. communication)
Tellonym (e.g. communication)	Hopp (e.g. business card)
Messenger: WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram, Element (e.g. communication: phone, video, messages)	

Mandates & limits

Important aspects to consider when implementing online streetwork include the strict separation of personal and professional devices and accounts in order to avoid overlaps or confusion. Data protection is also a key concern for professionals. In Germany, for example, it is possible to request a disclosure-ban (“Auskunftssperre”) from the residents’ registration office, so that professionals cannot be tracked down privately.

It can be challenging that the digital platforms are available 24/7 and are therefore open for communication and contact, but the services offered by online streetwork are usually time-limited due to the (limited) resources of the professionals.

In terms of labour law, it must be considered that professionals can become visible to a large public through their work on digital platforms; this applies both to visibility within produced content and to visibility through profiles and public communication in discussions or in posts.

Content-related conceptual questions

- What objectives should be pursued within the framework of OYW using which (digital) methods?
- Which target groups should be reached on which platforms?
- Hybrid online streetwork: How can the transition from digital to face-to-face services be realised?
- How can a regional connection of digital services be created?
- What concepts and quality criteria for digital services already exist (digital youth work, online youth work, online counselling) and how can these be used for online streetwork services? Where are there overlaps, where do additional aspects need to be defined?



Jugendtreff Arthaberbad, Verein Wiener Jugendzentren

How can the transition from digital to face-to-face services be realised?

- Which impact dimensions (e.g. identity development, coping with everyday life, participation, etc.) and impact mechanisms (e.g. greater accessibility in digital media, availability of content even after the end of the project, etc.) can be described for online streetwork in the context of open youth work?
- Will AI-based chatbots play a role in digital communication services in the future?

Organisational conceptual questions

- What protection concepts are needed for professionals in digital spaces?
- What happens to the produced content after the end of the project? Does it remain available digitally and, if commenting is possible, who manages these comments and enquiries?
- What happens to content in which professionals can be seen when they leave the organisation and ask for the content to be deleted?
- What skills do professionals need for online streetwork (e.g. online communication and counselling, content production and algorithms, data protection and data security) and how can these skills be acquired?
- How can a concept be implemented in an area that is not regionally limited (Internet, social media) if the funding is local or regional?



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The book „Open Youth Work in Young People’s Spaces“ was also published as part of the project.

Available from Umbrella organisations of OYW in Austria, Switzerland, Germany and South Tyrol.