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# Changes in Behavior Self-reported by Minors Residing in Youth Educational Centers

Zmiany w zachowaniu zgłaszane  
przez nieletnich przebywających  
w Młodzieżowych Ośrodkach Wychowawczych

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the effectiveness of social rehabilitation interventions targeted at minors residing in Youth Educational Centers (YECs). The issues addressed focus on the extent to which gender, age, and length of residence differentiated the changes that minors reported observing in their behavior since placement in youth educational centers. The study was conducted on a representative sample of 506 minors using a paper-and-pencil survey administered in direct contact with respondents.

The results indicate that most minors observed changes in their behavior, with this tendency being particularly pronounced among girls. Respondents reported the greatest changes in their functioning in the roles of student and child, while considerably smaller changes were noted in the role of peer and in problem behaviors. Younger respondents reported changes in problem behaviors less frequently than older ones. Improvements in relations with parents and in school performance were more often reported by minors who had been in

## KEYWORDS

change, rehabilitation,  
social maladjustment,  
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## SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

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the institution for an average length of time. No age-related differences were found in respondents' functioning in the role of peer or in their engagement in problem behaviors. However, younger respondents were less likely than older ones to notice changes in their problem behaviors.

## ABSTRAKT

Artykuł porusza kwestię skuteczności interwencji resocjalizacyjnych skierowanych do nieletnich w Młodzieżowych Ośrodkach Wychowawczych (MOW). Omawiane w nim zagadnienia dotyczą tego, jak silnie płeć, wiek i długość pobytu różnicują zmiany w zachowaniu, jakie wychowankowie obserwowali od momentu umieszczenia w Młodzieżowych Ośrodkach Wychowawczych. Badanie przeprowadzono na reprezentatywnej próbie 506 nieletnich, metodą ankiety papier-ołówek, w bezpośrednim kontakcie z respondentami. Wyniki badań wskazują, że większość nieletnich zaobserwowała zmiany w swoim zachowaniu, ze znaczną przewagą tej tendencji u dziewcząt. Respondenci zaobserwowali największe zmiany w funkcjonowaniu w rolach ucznia i dziecka, znacznie mniejsze zmiany w roli rówieśniczej i w zachowaniach problemowych. Młodszy uczniowie rzadziej niż starsi zgłaszali zmiany w zachowaniach problemowych. Poprawę relacji z rodzicami i lepsze wyniki w nauce częściej zgłaszali nieletni, którzy przebywali w placówce przez średni okres. Nie stwierdzono różnic ze względu na wiek w funkcjonowaniu respondentów w roli rówieśniczej i w angażowaniu się w zachowania problemowe. Młodszy uczniowie rzadziej zauważali zmiany w zachowaniach problemowych niż starsi.

## Introduction

The objective of social rehabilitation is to improve the psychosocial functioning of minors through care, educational, and therapeutic measures aimed at bringing about desired changes in their development. This is necessary because of the varying levels of social maladjustment, which manifest in deficient functioning in the social roles assigned by the social system (Pytko 2000: 102). Consequently, "manifestations of adolescents' social maladjustment include negative and inappropriate responses to the demands and expectations inherent in the social roles assigned to them—as a child in the family, a friend in a peer or play group, and a student at school" (Pytko 2000: 91, translation mine).

Another important indicator of maladjustment is problem behavior, such as lying, truancy, substance use, running away from home, suicidal behaviors, risky sexual behaviors (including prostitution), violence, aggression, fighting, theft, and other crimes and offenses. These behaviors elicit a social response because they pose a threat to the healthy development of individuals and society. It should be stressed, however, that engagement in both asocial and antisocial behavior is strictly related to the cognitive sphere (beliefs), which generates the emotions experienced and, together with them, behavioral responses (Ellis 2008).

Evidence for such a relationship is provided by the phenomenon called criminal thinking (Walters 2006: 88), and research findings confirm that in minors the decision-making processes associated with it act as a trigger for problem behaviors. Both boys and girls residing in social rehabilitation facilities display strong indicators of criminal thinking; however, girls tend to “engage in cognitive processes characterized by impulsiveness, hostility, and emotionality, whereas in boys the predominant patterns of thinking support planned and goal-oriented antisocial behaviors” (Rode 2021: 122, translation mine).

According to the classical perspective, rehabilitation should aim to change adolescents’ antagonistic and destructive (antisocial) attitudes toward the norms that define the proper performance of social roles. This involves organizing situations that encourage them to modify and abandon destructive behavior in favor of socially approved conduct, in view of the benefits involved. The goal is to create an internal conflict in the teenager’s consciousness, consisting of a clash between two equally attractive goals; the educator’s task is to motivate the minor to choose prosocial behavior more frequently and to abandon antisocial behavior. One recommended intervention technique is conversation with the young person, aimed at making them aware of the consequences of a particular choice (Czapów 1978: 188–190).

The underlying assumption is that engaging in activities that conflict with existing beliefs, especially when those activities require considerable effort, produces cognitive dissonance which, under certain conditions (personal responsibility and freedom of choice), leads to changes in the remaining components of attitude, namely emotions and beliefs (Böhner, Wänke 2004: 175–195). Moreover, according to

the concept of creative rehabilitation, creating appropriate conditions and motivating minors to engage in artistic or sports activities can lead to favorable changes in self-perception and in the emergence of a personal identity that is alternative to a deviant identity (Konopczyński 2006, 2014).

In contemporary social rehabilitation theory, increasing emphasis is placed on the idea that change is not only about correcting diagnosed deficits but, above all, about developing the potential of socially maladjusted youth. This approach is reflected in the concept of fostering adolescents' mental well-being through the use of social rehabilitation methods based on their personal and social resources, which equip them with new competencies to independently overcome difficulties and safely meet developmental needs. Research shows that such a strategy effectively motivates minors to introduce positive changes in their thinking and behavior and contributes to a stronger sense of agency (Dąbrowska 2023). This trend also includes the Good Lives Model (GLM), which assumes that the rehabilitation of minors should aim to develop personality strengths and the abilities necessary to attain goods that ensure a sense of life satisfaction (Purvis et al. 2011). One key resource that conditions proper social functioning is the ability to regulate emotions in a safe manner, which educators can effectively develop in the process of resocializing youth (Chomczyński 2017).

Behavioral change is an observable indicator of the effectiveness of rehabilitation; however, it should be remembered that it may also reflect only superficial change. This is usually the case when such change is imposed through excessively strong external control or when it is a form of manipulation used by teenagers to obtain more favorable treatment from educators. By contrast, when change is the result of a sufficiently long process in which systematic interventions are tailored to the level of intrinsic motivation and to the young person's current needs and resources, it is more likely to be genuine and lasting.

In the transtheoretical model (Prochaska, DiClemente 1982), change results from completing tasks that lead to the achievement of goals specific to a given stage of the overall process. This is difficult because of resistance, which stems from individuals' embeddedness in dysfunctional relationships in their community and from the

operation of defense mechanisms. Consequently, an important role in overcoming such resistance may be played by “turning points” in the course of life that enable individuals in crisis situations to break with the past through the social support received in a new and unexpected context (Laub, Sampson 2003). For socially maladjusted adolescents, such a “turning point” may be a court-ordered placement in a youth educational center (YEC).

In most institutions of this type, rehabilitation relies on behavioral influence and operates through a token economy system (Pospiszyl 1998), which involves the use of rewards and sanctions for behavior that deviates from institutional regulations. In the institution, minors pursue compulsory education under the supervision of teachers and educators. After classes, they participate in special interest groups (focused on sports, arts, music, tourism, theatre, etc.), as well as in prevention-oriented and sociotherapeutic activities, the scope and intensity of which vary across institutions (Kamiński et al. 2016: 89–100).

However, minors residing in these institutions often report that staff devote more attention to matters such as maintaining order and discipline than to building interpersonal relationships. This observation is supported by research findings indicating that in many YECs the social climate is unfavorable—described as controlling and restrictive (Staniaszek 2018) or controlling and paternalistic (Granosik et al. 2015). Factors contributing to this include:

- neglect of the educational value of free time (Kupiec 2014),
- a flawed system for establishing and enforcing rules,
- inconsistent and error-prone disciplinary practices,
- the absence of a shared strategy for conflict resolution,
- (psychological) violence among pupils and in staff–pupil relationships,
- limited cooperation with institutions operating in the local community (Granosik et al. 2015: 68–71).

Additional barriers limiting the effectiveness of the rehabilitation of minors include:

- failure to individualize interventions and tailor them to young people’s needs and problems,
- a lack of specialized psychological and therapeutic interventions,

- superficial diagnosis of residents, including inadequate preparation and implementation of Individual Educational and Therapeutic Programs,
- negligence in supporting adolescents' transition to independence and in maintaining contact with them after they leave the institution,
- cases in which group sizes exceed the acceptable number of residents per group (Supreme Audit Office of Poland [NIK], 2017).

In light of the above, it is reasonable to expect limited rehabilitation outcomes. Nevertheless, the majority of juveniles residing in such institutions, regardless of age, gender, or length of residence, report either a high (32%) or moderate (37%) overall level of motivation to make constructive changes in their behavior, while fewer than one-third indicate no such need (Kupiec 2019: 312–313).

The practical application of the principles of desistance theory offers a chance to bring about lasting change in juveniles' current behavior. The theory emphasizes that change depends on aligning specialized interventions with the intrapsychological and social factors that determine an individual's willingness to abandon a deviant identity and the associated behavioral trajectory. Most of these factors are linked to the acquisition of valuable personal resources, including the ability to form constructive and satisfying social relationships. Strengthening such connections helps reduce feelings of loneliness and overcome isolation, thereby significantly enhancing psychological well-being and self-esteem.

Crucial in this process is the importance that individuals attach to the changes they begin to observe in their behavior and the way these changes influence their reevaluation of their self-image, sense of meaning, and life goals. Accordingly, supportive interventions should adapt resocialization goals to the minor's current life situation and identified needs and, above all, motivate them to develop the personal and social resources necessary to achieve these goals. It is crucial to build dialogical relationships that most effectively strengthen residents' sense of agency and capacity for reflection.

It should also be noted that developing minors' personal capital, which is the main catalyst for constructive change, requires enabling and supporting them in better fulfilling social roles in their natural

environment. This process also includes making amends to society for the harm caused and repairing the damage done (McNeill 2006).

## Methodological assumptions of the study

The study aimed to identify the areas in which minors perceive changes in their behavior after being placed in a social rehabilitation institution. The following research problem was formulated:

*To what extent do gender, age, and length of residence differentiate the changes that minors perceive in their behavior since placement in youth educational centers?*

In accordance with the adopted theoretical framework of social maladjustment, the general problem was divided into the following research questions:

1. To what extent do minors residing in YECs perceive changes in their functioning in the roles of child, student, and peer, as well as in their engagement in problem behaviors?
2. To what extent does the gender of minors residing in YECs differentiate their perception of changes in their functioning in the roles of child, student, and peer, as well as in their engagement in problem behaviors?
3. To what extent does the age of minors residing in YECs differentiate their perception of changes in their functioning in the roles of child, student, and peer, as well as in their engagement in problem behaviors?
4. To what extent does the length of minors' residence in YECs differentiate their perception of changes in their functioning in the roles of child, student, and peer, as well as in their engagement in problem behaviors?

Given the diagnostic nature of the study and the lack of access to prior research addressing the issue under investigation, I formulated no hypotheses. Instead, a quantitative strategy was adopted to establish empirical facts concerning the population of minors residing in youth educational centers (Rubacha 2008). To this end, I employed a diagnostic survey method, as it is suitable for identifying opinions held by members of large populations.

The survey technique was based on a questionnaire that I developed to measure changes in behavior. The questionnaire consisted of

items grouped into four subscales relating to minors' functioning in the roles of child, student, and peer, as well as their engagement in problem behaviors, both before and after placement in a YEC. For each item, respondents indicated a YES or NO response.

Reliability, assessed using Cronbach's alpha, was  $\alpha = .71$  for the overall measure. For the individual subscales, reliability coefficients were as follows:  $\alpha = .79$  for *Functioning in the Role of Child* (16 items),  $\alpha = .70$  for *Functioning in the Role of Student* (18 items),  $\alpha = .73$  for *Functioning in the Role of Peer* (19 items), and  $\alpha = .81$  for *Engagement in Problem Behaviors* (11 items).

The study was conducted in November 2018 on a sample of 506 adolescents, representative of the population of 4,902 juveniles residing in Poland's YECs at that time. I used a stratified sampling scheme, preserving the gender ratio (75% boys and 25% girls), with the social rehabilitation institution serving as the sampling unit. In total, 12 YECs were selected. After excluding incorrectly completed surveys, 450 questionnaires were included in the final analysis.

The study procedure involved respondents completing paper-based questionnaires after class, exclusively in the presence of a pollster. The research was conducted with the consent of YEC authorities; minors and their legal guardians were informed about who was conducting the study and for what purpose. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Respondents completed the questionnaires anonymously, under conditions ensuring the confidentiality of their responses, with each person seated at a separate desk. After completion of the survey procedure, the collected empirical material was secured for further analysis, and incorrectly completed questionnaires were destroyed.

## Results

The results of the study indicate that after placement in a youth educational center, most minors noticed changes in their behavior compared with their functioning prior to being court-ordered to a social rehabilitation institution. At the same time, statistically significant differences were found between boys and girls in their assessments of changes observed in all areas of functioning (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Changes in the behavior of minors residing in YECs by gender

Functioning in the role of:	Gender	Level of change								Statistical test
		none		moderate		substantial		total		
child	boy	86	25.8%	213	64.0%	34	10.2%	333	100%	$\chi^2 = 9.2$ $df = 2$ $V = .145$ $p = .01$
	girl	14	13.1%	75	70.1%	18	16.8%	107	100%	
	total	100	22.7%	288	65.5%	52	11.8%	440	100%	
student	boy	99	29.6%	176	52.7%	59	17.7%	334	100%	$\chi^2 = 9.3$ $df = 2$ $V = .146$ $p = .01$
	girl	19	17.8%	57	53.3%	31	29.0%	107	100%	
	total	118	26.8%	233	52.8%	90	20.4%	441	100%	
peer	boy	185	56.1%	121	36.7%	24	7.3%	330	100%	$\chi^2 = 22.0$ $df = 2$ $V = .224$ $p < .001$
	girl	39	36.1%	46	42.6%	23	21.3%	108	100%	
	total	224	51.1%	167	38.1%	47	10.7%	438	100%	
problem behaviors	boy	125	38.2%	162	49.5%	40	12.2%	327	100%	$\chi^2 = 21.3$ $df = 2$ $V = .221$ $p < .001$
	girl	18	16.7%	63	58.3%	27	25.0%	108	100%	
	total	143	32.9%	225	51.7%	67	15.4%	435	100%	

Source: Author's research.

Adolescents reported the greatest changes in their functioning in the role of student (52.8% moderate and 20.4% substantial change), with girls expressing this view considerably more often (17.8% no change, 29.0% substantial change) than boys (29.6% no change, 17.7% substantial change). The second most frequently reported area of change was minors' functioning in the role of child (65.5% moderate change, 11.8% substantial change), with this tendency again being more pronounced among girls (13.1% no change, 16.8% substantial change) than among boys (25.8% no change, 10.2% substantial change).

Respondents reported changes in their behavior toward their peers much less frequently after placement in a YEC (38.1% moderate, 10.7% substantial), with a clear gender difference indicating that girls reported such changes more often (36.1% no change, 21.3% substantial) than boys (56.1% no change, 7.3% substantial change). The majority of residents also believed that their engagement in problem behaviors had decreased (moderately according to 51.7%, and substantially according to 15.4%). This perception was more common among girls residing in YECs (16.7% no change, 25.0% substantial

change) than among boys (38.2% no change, 12.2% substantial change). These findings indicate a clear gender difference among YEC residents in the changes that they perceived in their behavior following placement in the institution. Girls reported changes more frequently than boys in all analyzed areas of functioning.

By contrast, no statistically significant age-related differences were found in perceived changes in functioning in the roles of child, student, and peer. The bivariate distribution (Table 2) shows that, regardless of age, most respondents reported moderate or substantial changes in their functioning in the family, at school, and in peer relationships. An exception was engagement in problem behaviors ( $\chi^2 = 13.5, p = .04$ ): younger respondents (aged 13–15) reported such changes less frequently than older respondents (aged 16–18).

**Table 2.** Changes in the behavior of minors residing in YECs by age

Functioning in the role of:	Level of change									Statistical test
	Age	none		moderate		substantial		total		
child	13–14	14	31.8%	31.8%	27	3	6.8%	44	100%	$\chi^2 = 3.8$ $df = 6$ $V = .067$ $p = .70$
	15 yrs	14	18.4%	18.4%	52	10	13.2%	76	100%	
	16 yrs	27	20.8%	20.8%	87	16	12.3%	130	100%	
	17–18	41	22.9%	22.9%	116	22	12.3%	179	100%	
	total	96	22.4%	22.4%	282	51	11.9%	429	100%	
student	13–14	15	33.3%	33.3%	24	6	13.3%	45	100%	$\chi^2 = 4.4$ $df = 6$ $V = .072$ $p = .62$
	15 yrs	24	31.6%	31.6%	39	13	17.1%	76	100%	
	16 yrs	31	24.0%	24.0%	66	32	24.8%	129	100%	
	17–18	48	26.7%	26.7%	95	37	20.6%	180	100%	
	total	118	27.4%	27.4%	224	88	20.5%	430	100%	
peer	13–14	28	63.6%	63.6%	13	3	6.8%	44	100%	$\chi^2 = 4.7$ $df = 6$ $V = .076$ $p = .56$
	15 yrs	35	46.1%	46.1%	33	8	10.5%	76	100%	
	16 yrs	64	49.6%	49.6%	52	13	10.1%	129	100%	
	17–18	90	50.6%	50.6%	65	23	12.9%	178	100%	
	total	217	50.8%	50.8%	163	47	11.0%	427	100%	

Functioning in the role of:	Level of change									Statistical test
	Age	none		moderate		substantial		total		
problem behaviors	13–14	23	51.1%	51.1%	18	4	8.9%	45	100%	$\chi^2 = 13.5$ $df = 6$ $V = .125$ $p = .04$
	15 yrs	28	36.8%	36.8%	42	6	7.9%	76	100%	
	16 yrs	37	29.4%	29.4%	66	23	18.3%	126	100%	
	17–18	51	28.8%	28.8%	94	32	18.1%	177	100%	
	total	139	32.8%	32.8%	220	65	15.3%	424	100%	

Source: Author's research.

It is also worth noting that, despite the absence of statistically significant differences among age groups in the remaining domains of functioning, a clear pattern emerges: the youngest respondents (aged 13–14) reported changes in their functioning in the roles of child (31.8% reported no change), student (33.3% no change), and peer (63.6% no change) considerably less often than their older peers residing in such institutions.

The results of the present study also indicate that, regardless of length of residence in a YEC, the majority of adolescents reported a moderate or substantial level of behavioral change in all the specified areas of functioning (Table 3). However, more detailed analyses revealed that length of residence in a YEC significantly differentiated the level of change minors perceived in their functioning in the roles of child ( $\chi^2 = 11.8$ ,  $p = .02$ ) and student ( $\chi^2 = 9.8$ ,  $p = .04$ ).

Based on the bivariate distribution, improvements in functioning in relationships with parents were most often reported by teenagers with a moderate length of residence in the institution (17.6% no change, 16.5% substantial change), and less often by those who had been in the institution for a shorter period (1–5 months; 19.2% no change, 7.7% substantial change). The fewest minors reporting changes in their behavior were those who had spent the longest time in a YEC (over 15 months): 29.1% no change, 9.0% substantial change.

**Table 3.** Changes in the behavior of minors residing in YECs by length of residence

Functioning in the role of:	Length of stay	Level of change								Statistical test
		none		moderate		substantial		total		
child	1–5 mos.	20	19.2%	76	73.1%	8	7.7%	104	100%	$\chi^2 = 11.8$ $df = 4$ $V = .119$ $p = .02$
	6–15 mos.	31	17.6%	116	65.9%	29	16.5%	176	100%	
	> 15 mos.	39	29.1%	83	61.9%	12	9.0%	134	100%	
	total	90	21.7%	275	66.4%	49	11.8%	414	100%	
student	1–5 mos.	25	23.6%	66	62.3%	15	14.2%	106	100%	$\chi^2 = 9.8$ $df = 4$ $V = .109$ $p = .04$
	6–15 mos.	47	26.7%	82	46.6%	47	26.7%	176	100%	
	> 15 mos.	41	30.8%	67	50.4%	25	18.8%	133	100%	
	total	113	27.2%	215	51.8%	87	21.0%	415	100%	
peer	1–5 mos.	65	61.3%	34	32.1%	7	6.6%	106	100%	$\chi^2 = 7.8$ $df = 4$ $V = .097$ $p = .10$
	6–15 mos.	81	47.1%	69	40.1%	22	12.8%	172	100%	
	> 15 mos.	61	45.5%	56	41.8%	17	12.7%	134	100%	
	total	207	50.2%	159	38.6%	46	11.2%	412	100%	
problem behaviors	1–5 mos.	34	32.1%	53	50.0%	19	17.9%	106	100%	$\chi^2 = 3.2$ $df = 4$ $V = .062$ $p = .52$
	6–15 mos.	51	29.7%	91	52.9%	30	17.4%	172	100%	
	> 15 mos.	47	35.9%	69	52.7%	15	11.5%	131	100%	
	total	132	32.3%	213	52.1%	64	15.6%	409	100%	

Source: Author's research.

A similar pattern was observed with respect to changes that respondents reported in the performance of school duties. The greatest changes in this domain were reported by minors with an average length of residence in the institution (26.7% no change, 26.7% substantial change). Changes in functioning in the role of student were also noted by adolescents with the longest length of residence (30.8% no change, 18.8% substantial change) as well as by those with a shorter period of residence in a YEC (23.6% no change, 14.2% substantial change). On this basis, it can be concluded that both short and long periods of residence in a YEC are associated with a lower perception of change in functioning in the roles of child and student, compared with minors who had spent an average amount of time in this type of social rehabilitation institution.

Further analysis showed that length of residence did not significantly differentiate perceived changes in relationships with peers or in engagement in problem behaviors. It is therefore warranted to conclude that, regardless of how long residents had been in a YEC, most reported changes in their behavior in these domains, and that only about one-third of respondents in each group reported no such changes.

## Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained are subject to several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, behavioral change was assessed exclusively on the basis of juveniles' self-reports, without the use of additional triangulation methods. Given the strong need for social approval characteristic of individuals residing in rehabilitation facilities, this may introduce bias that inflates the reported extent of change in the fulfillment of social roles. However, for organizational reasons, it was not possible to obtain comparative assessments of juveniles' behavior from educators or to conduct behavioral observations during the one-day data collection in each center. Second, in light of the values of Cramer's  $V$  coefficient, which ranged from 0.14 to 0.22, the statistically significant differences by gender, age, and length of residence should be interpreted as indicating only weak differentiation in behavioral change. Similarly, the observed differences in the performance of specific social roles and in problem behaviors, although statistically significant, should be considered small in magnitude ( $\chi^2 = 111.0$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $V = .178$ ).

For socially maladjusted adolescents, court-ordered placement in a social rehabilitation institution is a sudden and radical change in environment—one in which institutionally organized interventions train them to function in social roles in ways substantially different than before. Concurrently, an equally strong catalyst for change is activated: awareness of the loss of personal freedom combined with the hope of regaining it through improved behavior. A third factor facilitating behavioral change is providing YEC residents with opportunities to develop their interests and skills, which is made possible in some facilities by high-quality infrastructure and the strong professional competence of teaching staff.

Considering the influence of these three factors alone, it becomes easier to understand why, over time, most young people residing in YECs begin to notice positive changes in their behavior resulting from functioning under conditions governed by new, different rules. In light of the results obtained, several patterns in the changes reported by YEC residents warrant closer attention.

First, behavioral changes in all specified areas of functioning were reported more often by girls than by boys. This may be attributable to girls' greater sensitivity to social control interventions and their stronger experience of separation from the family. Girls tend to place greater importance on social approval than boys, which may explain why they are more likely to respond to external control and to modify their behavior more readily. Moreover, girls residing in YECs generally demonstrate more developed social skills than boys, which makes it easier for them to meet the standards of social role performance expected by educators (Kupiec, Zięciak 2024: 62–63).

Further evidence of the relationship between openness to change and psychosocial development is provided by the finding that younger teens (aged 13–15) reported noticing changes in their behavior less often than older teens (aged 16–18). This is because behavioral change requires a capacity for reflection, which is largely determined by the uneven maturation of different brain regions during adolescence. Research has shown that brain structures associated with sensation seeking mature more rapidly, whereas those responsible for attention control, outcome prediction, delayed gratification, and reflective decision-making develop more slowly (Steinberg 2004). As a result, younger adolescents tend to display greater emotional sensitivity and reactivity, along with a lower capacity for emotional and behavioral self-regulation. In older adolescents, this imbalance gradually diminishes as the frontal lobes continue to mature.

Second, the group that reported markedly greater changes in their behavior toward parents and in their functioning in the role of student consisted of adolescents with an average length of residence in the institution (6–15 months). This finding may be interpreted as follows. Immediately after placement, adolescents usually typically exhibit the strongest reluctance to cooperate, which stems from feelings of resentment and perceived injustice regarding the court's decision, as

well as from the anxiety and stress associated with entering a new and unfamiliar environment, initially experienced as hostile.

It usually takes several months for adolescents to adapt to the requirements and rules governing life in the institution, made particularly difficult by their previous lifestyles and generally low levels of trust and social competence. Consequently, it is only after this initial period that most begin to reassess their prior behavior in light of their current circumstances. At this stage, they weigh the costs and benefits of abandoning asocial habits and learning new, socially accepted behaviors. If, with appropriate support from staff, they resolve the resulting internal conflict in a positive way, they begin both to introduce and to notice changes in their behavior.

This mechanism likely weakens among minors who have remained in the institution for an extended period (over 15 months). In such cases, either responsiveness to feedback may diminish, or adaptation to educators' expectations may become so complete that teens no longer encounter new challenges or receive the support needed to meet them. It may therefore be surmised that after a period of intensive change during the middle phase of residence (between 6 and 15 months), a phase of stagnation sets in as residence lengthens. This pattern applies specifically to changes related to youth's functioning in the roles of child and student and thus requires separate interpretation.

Third, the results indicate that the greatest behavioral changes among minors concern their functioning in the roles of student and child, whereas changes related to peer relationships and involvement in problem behaviors are considerably less pronounced. Given the importance that minors attach to regaining the trust of their parents and the feelings of guilt they experience over the deterioration of those relationships, their openness to change in this regard is easier to understand—especially since parents are the main source of support that most YEC residents rely on to help them leave the institution as soon as possible.

Taking into account the most important developmental task of adolescence, which is the formation of one's own identity, it can be assumed that by changing their attitudes toward parents, teenagers seek to demonstrate their need for parental support in the process of destigmatization. Also noteworthy is the fact that contact with

parents during residence in a YEC is largely limited to daily phone calls and occasional home leave, which may facilitate adaptation to parental expectations and potentially lead young people to overstate the extent of change in this area of functioning.

A similar situation applies to changes in functioning in the role of student, the emergence of which is largely driven by compulsory education in a school located at the YEC and by a consistently applied system of supervision and sanctions. It should also be noted that the educational system in YECs takes into account individual needs, deficits, resources, and abilities as specified in each resident's Individual Educational and Therapeutic Program. For this reason, the young people who have previously experienced difficulties in education can expect individualized support from educational staff and greater understanding from teachers. Consequently, achieving change in these areas of functioning may appear easier than in other domains.

Difficulty in making changes related to the role of peer may stem from the fact that, after being placed in a YEC, a minor remains in the sphere of influence of their more or less deviant peers. Although institutional educational staff attempt to weaken this negative influence, its primary source continues to be the socially maladjusted youth residing in the facility. These peers are guided by subcultural norms that define what behavior is expected of a "good" friend. This is especially true given that adolescence is characterized by a high degree of conformity to peer expectations, aimed at confirming one's attractiveness and status in relationships. Furthermore, isolation from the external environment limits opportunities to make social choices that would allow for experimentation with alternative patterns of behavior.

The presence of these "alternative life" rules in social rehabilitation institutions makes it extremely difficult—and at times even impossible—for minors to change their engagement in problem behaviors. It should be noted that this situation is partly attributable to the passivity and inertia of educators and, in some cases, even to their deliberate actions (Wolan 2013). However, the main cause of difficulty in achieving change in this area lies in the complex etiology of problem behaviors and the equally complex mechanisms that perpetuate them. Consequently, appropriately managing these behaviors

requires cooperation with specialists (psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists), for which the current organizational model of youth educational centers generally fails to provide adequate conditions.

Nevertheless, despite the limitations noted above, the results of the present study justify cautious optimism regarding the effectiveness of rehabilitation carried out in youth educational centers. They indicate that most minors notice changes in their behavior since their placement in this institution. Although these findings do not allow conclusions to be drawn about the durability of the behavioral changes reported by youth, similar doubts have been raised in relation to results reported by other authors.

A report by the Supreme Audit Office of Poland (NIK 2017) showed that approximately 30% of former YEC residents violated the law and that this proportion increased to 60% over time after leaving the institution. These trends were confirmed by other studies, which found that over a five-year follow-up period as many as 71% of former YEC pupils were convicted of criminal offenses. In the first year after leaving the institution, 43.4% of former YEC residents committed an offense; in the following year, this figure increased by 21 percentage points to 64.3%. Only after former YEC residents reached the age of 20 did the proportion of those convicted decrease, to 5.1%. It should also be noted that 80% of these individuals committed offenses more than once (Bartkowicz, Chudnicki 2015: 141–145).

In seeking explanations for this unfavorable trend, attention should be paid to the dominant methods used to induce and maintain behavioral change in social rehabilitation institutions for minors. Most importantly, these methods rely heavily on strong external control exercised by educators. Adolescents residing in such institutions are rarely granted wider autonomy or opportunities to make independent choices and to take responsibility for them (Zięciak 2020: 164–171). Yet this is precisely the key condition for the development of self-control based on intrinsic motivation to resist the temptation to violate social norms.

In the scholarly literature, this capacity is referred to as self-regulation, and its development depends on adolescents having a sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Autonomy, in this context,

does not mean unrestricted freedom to disregard others' expectations, but rather taking responsibility for one's choices in accordance with one's will and with respect for others. Equally important is the presence of emotional and social bonds, which form the basis of mutual trust in interpersonal relationships. Self-regulatory capacity is also strengthened by belief in one's own abilities, which emerges from a sense of agency developed through experience—more specifically, through improving skills in the course of purposeful activity.

Satisfying these three basic psychological needs in the process of upbringing contributes to the internalization (adopting as one's own) and integration (incorporating into one's self-concept) of socially approved goals, thereby supporting optimal individual development (Ryan, Deci 2000). In this way, self-regulation becomes the ability to direct one's own life, a skill which takes shape during adolescence (Oleszkowicz, Senejko 2013: 121).

However, in the resocialization systems that systems operate in most YECs, pupils decide to change their previous behavior mostly because doing so allows them to obtain rewards that are important to them or to avoid punishment—mechanisms predicated on external control. Their actions less often arise from personal initiative and are less frequently motivated by a disinterested desire for self-development associated with a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. As a result, after leaving the institution, when the influence of external control gradually weakens and adequate social support is lacking, former residents, despite sincere declarations that they intend to maintain positive behavioral changes, often relapse into previously harmful habits.

On the basis of the findings obtained, several practical recommendations can be proposed. Given the fluctuation of behavioral change among minors during their stay in YECs, it is necessary to conduct systematic observation of their behavior and to engage them in conversations that encourage self-reflection. If the changes young people achieve are to be lasting, educational staff should dedicate more attention to developing intrinsic motivation for change rather than relying primarily on external control. This goal can be pursued by granting adolescents greater autonomy combined with responsibility for their choices, by strengthening relational bonds with them, and by enhancing their skills and sense of agency.

The results of this study indicate that most minors placed in social rehabilitation institutions by court order want to change their behavior and recognize the benefits of doing so, but they require professional support from specialists to ensure that the positive effects achieved do not fade after they leave the institution. It may therefore be beneficial for educators to employ methods aimed at developing minors' individual and social resources, which makes it easier to cope with life's difficulties and contribute to improved mental well-being (Dąbrowska 2023).

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