

Current Challenges in Social Work in Germany

and the Role of Open Child
and Youth Work

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PART I

Current Challenges in Social Work in Germany

Demographic change, mental health pressures, and growing complexity

Demographic Change and the Workforce Crisis

An ageing society

- Germany's population is ageing rapidly — by 2035, ~30% will be over 65
- Growing demand for elder care, health services, and social support
- Rural areas face depopulation: fewer services, longer distances, weaker infrastructure
- **Child poverty persists: ~2.8 million children affected**

A profession under pressure

- Severe shortage of qualified social workers across nearly all fields
- High workloads, underpayment relative to responsibilities, burnout
- Competition with better-paid sectors for graduates
- **Key question: How can Social Work remain attractive as a profession?**

Growing Psychological Pressures on Young People

(connecting to our earlier lecture on Existential Social Work)

- Post-pandemic effects: anxiety, depression and loneliness have not returned to pre-2020 levels among children and adolescents (COPSY 2024)
- Waiting times for child and adolescent psychotherapy in Germany: often 6–12 months
- Digital overload and social media effects — particularly on younger adolescents (12–15)
- Schools are under strain and often cannot provide adequate social-emotional support
- **Implication: non-formal settings like youth work become even more important as spaces for support, belonging and orientation**

6–12

months

average wait for
child psychotherapy

The Increasing Complexity of Social Problems



Migration & Integration

Germany has received large numbers of refugees since 2015. Integration into education, housing and employment remains an ongoing challenge — particularly for unaccompanied minors.



Poverty & Inequality

Rising cost of living, housing scarcity in cities, and persistent inequality in educational outcomes. Social work increasingly operates at the intersection of material need and systemic exclusion.



Digitalisation & New Risks

Cyberbullying, online radicalisation, gaming addiction, and AI-driven labour market disruption create new fields of intervention that Social Work must adapt to.

PART II

Open Child and Youth Work in Germany

Offene Kinder- und Jugendarbeit (OKJA) — a unique pillar of the German welfare system

Legal Framework and Structure

Legal basis

- § 11 SGB VIII (Social Code, Book 8) — the central legal mandate for youth work in Germany
- Every young person has the right to receive support for their development and to be educated towards becoming a responsible and socially engaged person
- Youth work is part of the child and youth welfare system (Kinder- und Jugendhilfe), not part of the school system
- Funded primarily by municipalities; delivered by both public and non-profit (freie Träger) providers

Typical settings

- Youth centres (Jugendzentren / Jugendhäuser) — the most common format
- Adventure playgrounds (Abenteuerspielplätze)
- Mobile youth work and street work (Streetwork)
- Youth cultural centres, youth farms, digital labs
- Open-door programmes within schools (Offene Ganztagschule)

Core Principles of Open Youth Work



Openness

Open to all young people regardless of background, without registration or fees



Voluntariness

Participation is always voluntary — young people come and go freely



Participation

Young people co-design programmes and have a voice in decisions



Low Threshold

Easy access, no bureaucracy, no referral needed — the opposite of institutional gatekeeping



Relationship-Oriented

Professional relationships built on trust, not authority or mandate



Non-Formal Education

Learning through experience, projects and encounters — not curricula

What Happens in Practice?

A typical youth centre (Jugendzentrum) offers...

- Open café / hang-out area — a safe, informal space to spend time
- Music rooms, art workshops, cooking programmes
- Homework support and educational counselling
- Sports, games, outdoor activities
- Media and digital skills workshops
- Informal conversations with social workers — relationship-building
- Conflict resolution, peer mediation
- Gender-sensitive and intercultural programmes
- Youth parliaments and democratic participation
- Holiday camps, excursions, exchange programmes

The key is: none of this is mandatory. Young people choose to be there — and that is precisely what makes the relationships and the learning authentic.

Open Youth Work Under Pressure

- Funding cuts: OKJA is often the first to be reduced when municipal budgets are tight — it lacks the legal 'must' status of child protection
- Legitimation pressure: open youth work struggles to 'prove' its effectiveness in measurable terms — how do you measure trust, belonging, orientation?
- Reaching young people: digital lives pull young people away from physical spaces — how does OKJA adapt?
- Staff shortages and high turnover — relationship-based work suffers when professionals leave
- **Despite all this: OKJA remains one of the few spaces where young people are met without conditions, without diagnoses, without grades**

Connecting the Dots

How the challenges, OKJA, and existential questions come together

The psychological data from our first lecture showed a growing crisis of meaning among young people. The challenges described today — labour market uncertainty, digital overload, social fragmentation — are among its root causes.

Open Youth Work, with its low-threshold, relationship-oriented approach, may be uniquely positioned to address these existential needs — precisely because it is not school, not therapy, not mandatory.

But this requires that youth workers are equipped — both theoretically and practically — to engage with existential questions, not just organise activities.

Challenge

Young people face a crisis of meaning that traditional systems do not address

Resource

OKJA offers the relational and structural conditions for existential accompaniment

Gap

We lack research, training and methods to bridge theory and practice

DISCUSSION

Youth Work Across Borders: What Can We Learn From Each Other?



1

How is youth work organised in Hungary? Are there similar structures to Open Youth Work (OKJA) — low-threshold, voluntary, open-access spaces for young people?

2

What are the biggest challenges facing social workers who work with young people in Hungary right now? Do you see parallels to the German situation — or very different pressures?

3

In both countries, young people seem to struggle with orientation and meaning. Could youth work — rather than schools or therapy — be the right place to address this? What would that require?

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