

The Situation of Young People in Aachen (1947)

Abstract

The harsh living conditions in postwar Germany had an especially negative effect on children and young people. As this 1947 report from the city of Aachen attests, a lack of food and care, irregular school attendance, the loss of paternal authority, and disordered family lives promoted neglect, immoral behavior, and criminality among youth.

Source

If the question is posed – when does this misery of youth begin and when it will end? – then the answer must be that it begins in the mother’s womb, and that no end is in sight as long as the unhappy current conditions persist.

Malnourished mothers give birth to their children; often there is a lack not only of the most necessary cloths to diaper the babies, but of almost everything that is needed for the care and adequate feeding of these small mortals. In their early youth, shortages and need are their constant companions. Small pleasures, like candy or other sweets, are foreign to these children. They hardly know fruit; in most cases they cannot even get their fill of dry bread. It is fortunate if they perhaps get an egg for Easter.

When children are enrolled in school upon turning six, they lack food, but that is not all, since the schools also lack the necessary teaching materials. They sit on inadequate benches, hungry and freezing, in overcrowded classrooms where lessons are held in shifts. Again and again, the teachers are given notes explaining that the children cannot attend school because they lack clothes and shoes [...]

In many cases, this general misery of youth is saddled with an additional burden. Regrettably enough, many fathers are still prisoners of war, after having already been taken from them for years by the war itself. During the difficult developmental years, the mother is often not able to handle raising the children by herself; in many cases, mothers cannot curb the doings of their children, since the children have become too much for them to handle.

Frequently, the separation of the spouses also leads to a moral threat to the wife and the children. The matrimonial bonds have often been loosened by the long separation. In a great many cases, economic misery and a lack of food and consumer goods are the driving forces behind women’s attempts to improve their living conditions through sexual favors. Often a grim confusion of moral concepts can be observed. Mothers excuse their behavior by saying that they have to get bread for their children [...]

Youth criminality has witnessed a frightening increase since the collapse; the causes of this rise should be sought in the lack of food, consumer goods, clothing, shoes, heating fuel, and in the emotional neglect of youth by the Nazi regime.

In the year before the evacuation of Aachen, young people were accused of criminal acts in:

August	1943	6	January	1944	6
September	1943	5	February	1944	11
October	1943	2	March	1944	10
November	1943	2	April	1944	–

December	1943	18	May	1944	1
			June	1944	1
			July	1944	1

The statistical development of youth crime offers the following picture from January 1946 on:

January	1946	10	January	1947	42
February	1946	13	February	1947	27
March	1946	33	March	1947	32
April	1946	35	April	1947	70
May	1946	56			
June	1946	23			
July	1946	46			
August	1946	50			
September	1946	77			
October	1946	60			
November	1946	62			
December	1946	54			

Particularly high is the number of property crimes, which range from simple crop thefts to multiple robberies. At the same time, an increase in black marketeering can be seen, since young people wish to procure cash in this way.

The fact that even school-age youths are involved in black marketeering is characteristic of the hardship of the times and the resultant dissipation.

The number of male law-breakers is considerably larger than that of female lawbreakers. The likely explanation for this is that girls purchase food, luxury items, and consumer goods with sexual favors. Because of this, girls are far more endangered morally. A frightening increase in venereal diseases and illegitimate births is the result. Because of the hardship of the times, the moral standards in broad circles of youth have dropped so low that it is almost seen as perfectly normal if a girl gets “a foreigner” in order to enjoy coveted food or consumer goods.

Source: Sozialbericht der Stadt Aachen über die Lage der Jugendlichen 1947. HSTA/Bestand NW 43/457; reprinted in Klaus-Joerg Ruhl, *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945-63*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988, pp. 31-33.

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