

# Care Under Constraint: Street Children in a Rehabilitation Centre in Tijuana (Mexico)

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## Abstract

Based on an ethnographic investigation carried out in 2010 in the city of Tijuana, this article questions the policies of institutional intervention targeting marginalised teenagers living in this city on the border with the US. Tijuana is characterised by the proximity to the United States and by the violence linked to drug trafficking. Such city traits are reflected in institutions, conceptualisations and actions concerning intervention towards street children. What is the specificity of the policies and institutions concerning those individuals? How can it be explained? How do teenagers deal with institutions and the subjectivity they propose? I will argue that the treatment of the addiction and non-voluntary reclusion in rehabilitation centres are the cornerstone of the treatment of street children on the border. The analysis of the speeches of those youngsters considered by institutions as “incorrigible” will show the ambiguity linked to the normativity of those kinds of institutions. On the one hand, the rehabilitation centres are rigid structures that compel and constrain individuals into a completely new subjectivity. On the other hand, those places represent a starting point from which the young people succeed in considering themselves as subjects, sometimes in contradiction with the normativity of the institution.

**Keywords:** Marginal Childhood, Drugs, Institutions, Identities, Tijuana, Mexico

Tijuana<sup>1</sup> is a city whose dynamics are strongly determined by its proximity to the United States. It is the main gateway to the country and is also known worldwide for drug-related violence and for being marked by corruption in the broadest sense (Berumen 2003). Social representations of the city are

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1 The workgroup “traitements et contraintes” – <http://www.traitements-contraintes.org> – played an important role on the analysis of my field material.

linked to its border position, but also institutions and the ways of thinking and acting towards adolescents associated with the street world are strongly influenced by this characteristic of the city. They produce a local and specific way of apprehending this public problem. Based on a two-month ethnographic field research in Tijuana carried out between May and July 2010<sup>2</sup> and through the theoretical tools provided by urban anthropology and the sociology of institutions and of social work, this article questions institutional policies for the care of marginal young people having life experiences on the streets of this border city. What are the specificities of these policies and various actors (private and public) of care? How do adolescents “deal with” these institutions and the subjectivities they have the mission to shape?

In this article, I use the expressions “associated with the worlds of the street” or “street children” in a broad sense. I refer here to young people who live or have lived for certain periods of their life on the street or in close contact with it and outside specific childcare institutions such as family or school. The purpose of this is to go beyond the distinction among children *in* the street (referring to children who work on the streets, but are not separated from their family) and children *of* the street (actually living and sleeping in the street) (Taçon 1985). This categorisation has been produced by the international organisations and adopted widely by social scientists. But it crystallises situations that are in fact transitory (Glaser 1990, Champy 2015) and doesn't allow for describing the precise experiences of these young people, nor to account for the multiplicity of forms in which the street is meaningful and represents a “support” for those youth relegated to the margins.

Many social science researches carried out on street children since the 1980's, in Latin America and around the world have treated the issue from several perspectives. The first works concentrated on the characteristics of this population and its definition (Aptekar 1998, Lucchini 1993, Meunier 1977, Hetch 1998, Stoecklin 2000). Later some others' field research investigated the strategies of survival of these groups (Suremain 2006, Pérez López 2009, Magazine 2003) and some of them focused on the relationship of those groups with urban space both materially and symbolically (Morelle 2007, Pérez López 2009, Bolotta 2014). Here, it is a matter of understanding how the characteristics of Tijuana and the boundary structures and influenced the trajectories and life in the street for poor youngsters and how they direct the work of the institutions for these young individuals.

The case of the El Refugio rehabilitation centre<sup>3</sup>, allows me to advance the

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2 The field research in Tijuana is part of a 23-month field research between 2003 and 2010 in Mexico for my PhD dissertation.

3 All persons and names of places that appear in this article have been anonymised.

idea that the treatment of addiction and the non-voluntary confinement of adolescents are the keystones of the way the city actors take care of street children at the border. The analysis of young people's speeches shows the ambiguity associated with the normativity of this kind of institution. On the one hand, these are rigid structures that push individuals into a new subjectivity. On the other hand, these places also represent a point of departure from which some young people succeed in asserting themselves as individuals, sometimes in contradiction to the normativity of the latter, in other cases at the intersection with the integration of norms, adaptations, and projections outwards.

At first, I will show how the specific characteristics of Tijuana have led me to conduct an investigation on street children in a closed rehabilitation centre. Afterwards I will characterise this closed centre, its program and its proximity to the total institution (Goffman 1961). Finally, I will show how this addiction-centred institution, in the case of minors, receives a much broader set of adolescent profiles that live in close contact with the street and are quite independent of their home or of institutions supposed to supervise youth. I will show how, for these young people, this civil society institution, which works vertically to the transformation of subjects, can nevertheless represent, a resource of individuation.

### **Tijuana: a city closing in on street children**

Tijuana is a modern city that developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in close connection with the neighbouring city of San Diego and was highly influenced by the policies and socio-economic dynamics of California and the United States. Its architecture and buildings reflect its relative youth. However, poor road maintenance and the chaotic development of housing estates also reflect a demographic explosion and very rapid growth that is difficult to manage (Griffin and Ford 2009):

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Tijuana was a small community of 242 people settled on the riverbed, while on the other side of the border, San Diego was the largest city on the North American border and had 17,700 inhabitants (Alegria 2009). Today the whole agglomeration of Tijuana, including the localities of Tecate and Rosarito, counts a population of 1,559,683. The development of the city has been strictly linked to North American policies such as prohibition and employment policies. Indeed, Tijuana is a city characterised by the fact of being a binational space constructed in constant relation and reference to the border, and by a certain violence linked primarily to the drug trafficking (Quintero and Martín 1995).

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This is also the reason why I do not specify where El Refugio is in the city.

Different childcare institutions have chosen a problem-oriented specialisation strategy in the last five years<sup>4</sup>. This has reinforced a highly polarised conception of the street child: certain “profiles” are considered as absolute victims and others as dangerous expressions of the corruption of the city. Le DIF Municipal<sup>5</sup>, the local childcare protection, is the main local public institution with a shelter created for street children that only accepts boys. It functions as a filtering centre as well. Many minors in difficulties are or should be referred from the shelter to specific institutions according to their profile. Migrant children go to a specific shelter or are sent back to their families if possible; victims of sexual abuse and exploitation go to a specific institution, delinquents to juvenile prison and teenage drug users to a rehabilitation centre. Within the City Council of Tijuana, the different actors involved take part in a specific committee for “Children on the streets and in danger”. The division of “tasks” according to children’s profiles is a recent choice of these institutions, which initially all worked in an undifferentiated way. It is important to point out that despite this precise classification based on different profiles, many children or teenagers fit several profiles at the same time, which is of course problematic.

Historically Tijuana is represented as a city of “excess” where anomie, perversion and violence prevail. This image partly originates in the development of the city, linked to the American prohibitionism during the interwar period, which favoured the appearance of bars, playhouses and tourist complexes on the other side of the border (Berumen, 2003). From the 1990’s onwards the transformation of Tijuana into a strategic location for drug trafficking to the United States and the exacerbated war between cartels produced this image of violence. The Cartel linked to the family of Arellano Félix performed a significant and spectacular number of executions<sup>6</sup>. In 1999 and 2000, the number of executions related to drug trafficking amounted to 400 in the city of Tijuana and these crimes remain largely unpunished. The war against the Cartel undertaken by the government of Felipe Calderon in 2006 exacerbated the climate of violence and feeling of insecurity in the city (Devineau 2013, Bataillon 2016).

In this context, the city streets are perceived as an extremely dangerous space, especially for young people. The “public space” is heavily controlled

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4 Referring to the fieldwork led in 2010.

5 DIF *desarrollo integral de la familia* (Literally, the “integral development of the family”) is the institution of protection of the Mexican childhood which exists at federal, state and local level. The local level of child protection depends on the City council and is relatively independent.

6 The Arellano Felix cartel, which controlled the city and the entire border region of Baja California from 1995 to 2000, played an important role in consolidating this monstrous image. This family of entrepreneurs was able to maintain and establish this control through violence and corruption.

by the local police, ordered to take charge of any young person found unaccompanied on the streets at late times (from around 11 pm).

Since 2004, as soon as a minor is identified as being alone in the public space at night, he is detained by the police. They send him to a public institution or an NGO such as the rehabilitation centre. The child who took drugs in the street found other forms of living, because he was prevented from living on the street, both by us and the authorities (Roberto, 55, director of a home for street children and orphans, field notes, June 4, 2010).

The city and its actors, by setting up a public space with no flexibility, create a controlled, closed environment for the youths, making it impossible for them to organise their lives and to have an enduring, visible presence on the downtown streets. While in Mexico City, groups of street teenagers and adults occupy in a very visible way the squares, gardens and some streets in the city centre (Pérez López 2006), in Tijuana street kids have learned to stay in hotels since they are not allowed to use the public space. One of the reasons for this strict control of the city centre seems to be the danger that Tijuana represents for young lives, but there are other factors that come into question as well. Actually, the Tijuana Tourist Committee actively participated in the implementation of this policy in order to “clean up” the city centre and promote a new image of the city. During an interview, the director of this committee underlined that the problem of “children in the public space” was a degradation and considered as “intolerable” in the public opinion, as “they sold children right on the pavement of the Avenida Revolución” (Fernado, about 40 years old, field notes).

What emerges quite clearly from the way my inquiry was organised is the presence of a very important link between Tijuana’s image of degradation and danger, violence linked to the drug economy and the type of care for marginalised children and young people. In this context, which is also in the context of an abundant supply of rehabilitation centres, the main entry to the issue of street children is by the centres in question. The fact that in Tijuana drugs and their economy is a major societal issue (Rojas Guiot and others 2009)<sup>7</sup> that occupies social space in an important way is also reflected in the experience of street children and youth. Actually, when I arrived in this city to explain that I was working on the issue of street children, the different institutional actors I met sent me to the El Refugio rehabilitation centre, telling me that if I wanted to meet “children who actually have lived on the street”, this is where I had to go to investigate. Basically, to put it

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<sup>7</sup> According to a survey by the Instituto Nacional de Psiquiatria, between 1998 and 2005, drug use increased from 16.6% to 19%, and illicit drug use increased from 14.7% to 16.9 %.

abruptly, being a street child in Tijuana is considered as being synonymous with drug addiction.

### The closed space of the rehabilitation centre

It was in El Refugio that I fulfilled the most intensive part of my fieldwork in Tijuana. The building is organised in order to prevent escape. At the entrance, there is always someone to note who comes in and out and at what time. On the roof, there is always someone seated on a chair supervising the place. The centre receives adults and teenagers who have “problems with drugs”. It is an association, founded in 1991, which now has 4 homes. They work based on the model of therapeutic communities. Like in other border towns, in Tijuana, this type of establishment is particularly represented and representative of civil society: they are about 150<sup>8</sup>. During my investigation, the young people in this centre were 47, they were between 12 and 17 years old, 21 of them were boys. Adults enroll in the program on their own will, on a voluntary basis, but it is compulsory for children. The rehab program lasts 90 days for both adults and minors and has three components: the “behavioural part” (rules, limits and discipline), the group therapy, and the learning part. Lessons to finish primary or secondary school, workshops to learn practical work such as mechanics are offered into the community. The therapeutic community model I used here is called “mutual assistance” (*ayuda mutua*). It is based on the idea that first of all it is necessary to recognise the problem of dependence and therefore to recognise oneself as an addict in order to recover. After that it is necessary to have spirituality. One must be helped by a superior being to achieve abstinence (Odgers Ortiz, Galaviz Granados 2014)<sup>9</sup>.

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8 There is a web page that highlights the recognition by the state of the importance of the functions of these centres. *Centros de rehabilitación del Estado de Baja California* <http://ipebc.gob.mx/centros-de-rehabilitacion/>. It should be emphasised that the pharmacological treatment of addictions in Mexico is not very widespread and that hospitals often lack resources to deal with this public health issue.

9 Olga Odgers classifies the approach of rehabilitation centre in Tijuana in three types. The first model consists of a clinical approach, through the work of psychologists and social workers. The second is an approach based on the therapeutic community, based on mutual assistance. The third is that of openly religious centres which conceive of addiction as a spiritual problem and which in the great majority are of evangelical Pentecostal orientation. The El Refugio centre, like others, combines therapeutic approach and spirituality. The largest group is represented by therapeutic communities. These centres are regulated by a Mexican law on the treatment of addictions. *Norma Oficial Mexicana NOM-028-SSA2-1999, Para la prevención, tratamiento y control de las adicciones*. They depend and are or should be, supervised by the Baja California State Psychiatric Institute, and must respect human rights, hygiene rules and complete records of users.

The main characteristic of this place is that almost all functions are fulfilled by persons who have been interned. The employees are former interns rehabilitated who continue to be a part of the institution. The only external staff I have seen are psychologists and social workers in training, who come to do activities with children from time to time. Adults and minors share the same establishment, but the spaces remain separate even if there is a constant flow between teenagers and adults. Firstly, because some common spaces are used both by youngsters and by adults (such as the refectory for example), even if the schedules are staggered. Then, because the adolescents cross several times a day in the courtyard of adult's area (to go to eat their meals, to go to the small inner shop that sells cigarettes, sweets, soap). Finally, some adults, the "most rehabilitated" who participate in the community service, are responsible for monitoring the free activities of the youngsters and interact quite often with them. Teenagers arrive at this centre through several channels. Some of them arrive through the domestic violence police unit or a judge (*juez calificador*). When young people are found, for example, on the streets at 2 am, in the "zona norte", the red light neighbourhood, they are then "put in security" by authorities here. Others are arrested by the police committing offenses in public spaces (tagging buildings is often associated with inhalation) and in this case they arrive in handcuffs. The DIF of the State, but also of the city, sometimes send some of their "guests" there. According to the president of the El Refugio (who is also, like the majority of people in this place, a former intern) at the DIF of the State of Baja California, "they only want well-educated orphans". He means that "difficult" children are sent to the rehabilitation centre. Very often some families bring their children here, or ask the police to do so. The pretext in all cases is the consumption of psychotropic drugs, but very often it is a more complex situation where the parents "resign" somehow or just can't deal with the "incurable" side of their children and think that at least in the centre he or she will be safer than at home or in the street.

During an interview with Jesús, in charge of the teenager's section, he tells me about the different phases of the arrival of young people.

The first days when they arrive they take off their shoes and are given sandals, because they will try to escape. Afterwards, they start to get up at a specific time (6 am) and they go to school (they receive the lessons within the centre). They begin to socialise with others and to understand the rules of collective behaviour. Here there are no blows, you cannot tag, you do not say vulgarities, they come here with the law of the strongest, but here they are shown that it is not like that. During the first 7 days, the young person stays with the others, follows what happens, adapts himself through imitation and the example of others (Jesús, about 50 years old, field notes, June, 6 2010).

Jesús receives them after this first short integration process. At this point the administrative process begins so that the child can follow distance courses of the school and can pass examinations. The third step is the preparation of the family for the return of their child. There are also groups of therapy and speech for families. Sunday is visiting day. Families come to see their children in the afternoon. However, several young people do not receive regular visits. This depends very much on the family. There is no maximum time to stay in the community. If a teenager is there and he wants to finish his studies in this centre, he can ask to remain there, even if according to Jesus, very few young people can stand this confinement very long. In general, they stay a few months longer, in some exceptional cases even a year or two.

The young people received in this centre are generally from Tijuana itself. Some come from the United States, but the majority are from the suburban area, and from very poor backgrounds. The association maintains itself in different ways, basically with donations. Each family is supposed to pay 250 *pesos* per week, the City Council through the municipal DIF gives 10,000 *pesos*<sup>10</sup> per month to the structure. The interned adults go to work and give their salary to the structure. They work in the *maquiladoras* (assembly plants) and make night schedules. However, this represents very little financial resource for the institution.

### **The importance of example**

Jesús is about fifty years old. With his sunken cheeks, and his black moustache, he looks very serious. His arms are covered with old tattoos which have lost a little of their contours, but which testify of a past of rebellion. During our meeting, I found him intimidating. He is a man of few words but as the interview progressed, his deep and intelligent gaze softened. We started the interview in the refectory and we continued in his office. Many pictures drawn by the girls of the centre hung on the walls. Our interview was interrupted several times by teenagers dropping in for different reasons that mostly seemed to be excuses to get attention and satisfy their curiosity about my presence.

He is obviously loved and respected by these youths. His reserved nature and seriousness didn't seem to intimidate them or hinder their daily interactions with him.

He told me about his journey: After recovering from a drug addiction, he "had surrendered to God". He was offered a position at the Centre, to be in charge of children section and of the distance learning and certification program for both adult and children, supported by the National Institute

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10 About 520 euro.

of Adult Education<sup>11</sup>.

Today, he lives on site, benefiting. “I am here because I must be here, I am father, uncle, grandfather”. His story shows how influential this type of structures can be for individuals and the choices they make: for some of them, staying within the centre is only possible outcome. This situation can be interpreted as the result of a total institution (Goffman 1961). The recovery process is based on a prolonged period of abstinence and time spent at a place of residence and work, in a closed and almost cut-out world structure, in which every aspect of daily life is regimented by strict rules and shared with people in the same situation. In cases considered as a success by the institution, the institution not only treats individuals, but also claims to restore a meaning to their life and their place in the world. Rehabilitation is understood by these actors as a “re-affiliation” closely linked to the institution. This re-affiliation extends beyond the time spent within the institution. We succeed in finding or recreating a place and meanings by establishing a sense of shared identity and belonging within a community characterised by shared life experiences. During this rehabilitation (drug addiction treatment) process, abstinence remains the golden rule. This is where residents can find their place, reconnect with their family and can assert themselves in their ability to work and contribute to the economy.

This community-based organisation seems to fill a vacuum in a social context where the economic and community structures are partly overturned and disrupted by the drug market and the violence experienced in these personal histories<sup>12</sup>. Here, the institution becomes a place of identity and identification, through its rigid framework and strong constraints, but also by allowing individuals to work on their themselves, through abstinence and free discussion of shared experiences (within the framework of the *jun-tas*) also. Socialisation with individuals who have overcome the same ordeal is the cornerstone of the community’s logic.

In the case of this rehabilitation centre in Tijuana, not only for Jesús but also others, staying within the structure long term is presented as a vocation and a renewed sense of purpose through serving the community. It is thanks to Jesús that I was able to visit the centre regularly and observe its everyday routines but also more exceptional and festive events. The celebration of the 16th anniversary of the centre was especially interesting because it condenses in a single day several aspects characteristic of the institution’s operational logic and illustrates their method’s core values: speech and example.

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11 Instituto Nacional de Educación para los Adultos.

12 I discuss those aspects in my PhD dissertation “La cité des enfants des rues. Représentations, politiques et expériences des jeunes urbaines marginales Mexico et à Tijuana”, EHESS, February 2017.

### “Hello I am Francisco, another addict”

Even though it is an “open day” when the centre stages its success, the organisation of this day shows the rigidity and the level of constraint that this institution imposes on its residents.

*Saturday, June 12, 2010 El Refugio* — It is the celebration of the 16th anniversary of one of the various rehabilitation centres linked to the REFUGIO. The ceremony begins at 2 pm. In the courtyard of the institution a podium is installed and facing the chairs for the public. Several representatives from different centres are present. The event begins with the reading of the founding principles of the centre and the various stages called “steps”. After that, we invite people who want to testify. On the podium placed in the shelter of a large tent, everyone states their success. We celebrate the fact that some old internal people had not consumed (*restar limpios*) psychotropic drugs for one year, two years, three years, 15 years. They sit behind a U-shaped table. The majority are adults, but there are also two teenagers. Before each of them is a large cake box. Each person who is to be celebrated must give his / her testimony and speak on the podium, and must also invite someone to speak before him: a friend, a godfather, a friend. Each speech starts with the same phrase: “Hello, I am Francisco, another addict” (*hola soy Francisco y soy un adicto mas*) and the group answer: “cheer up!!” (*animó!*). The testimony consists mainly in motivating others and thanking them for their presence and support. [...] Around 4 pm, sandwiches are served, but the people remain seated and continue to follow the ceremony. At the end of the evening, when the party begins and dinner is served, the boxes are finally opened: the cakes have all melted. (Field notes).

Young people separated by gender and age are obliged to sit in the assembly and listen to the testimonials for several hours. They are visibly bored and it is a long time, but they accept this function without protest. Indeed, this is the same function of the meetings, *juntas*, in which they participate regularly several times a week. Testimonials are the basis of the therapy. Though strictly separated by sex and age, the different residents of the centre are in the same place, they have the same right to testify and the same treatment concerning physical restraint, which means to sit for several hours listening to repetitive speeches. But there is a certain equality, everyone eats and drinks at the same time, and no one gets up or goes.

The testimonies don't give much factual or concrete information because the narratives are told through the filter of the system of values which governs the institution, and which is perfectly adhered to by those who intervene. Indeed, the witnesses insist on the sordid details of their addiction, on everything they say they are ashamed of having done: violence, family theft, humiliation, loss of sphincter control and hygiene, street life, prostitution for a dose of drugs. Male homosexual relationships are also presented as the most

humiliating stage of what is described as a descent into hell. And the entrance to the centre is presented as a pivotal moment, in which the individual was on the brink of the precipice, but thanks to the institution through trials and sacrifices, falls and failures, achieved self-reconstruction, transformation. The speeches emphasise the importance of recognising themselves as sick.

This organisation is deeply inspired by the model of AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, which is extremely widespread and widely known in popular circles in Mexico<sup>13</sup>. Gregory Bateson, in a classic article questioning the success of the AA approach, states that in recognising oneself as a sick person and accepting to entrust oneself to superior power (these are the first two steps of alcoholics anonymous), allows the alcoholic to place alcoholism inside oneself. This would make it possible to break the dichotomy of mind-matter (the basis of western epistemology) on which the experience of the sober alcoholic, characterised by a struggle between his conscious will and the rest of his personality (Bateson 1977). This surrender would break the paradoxical injunction to resist and prove its strength, it is only through a superior “power” and in the group that the individual can regain a healthy life.

Afterwards I attended other meetings, only for teenagers, which took place almost every day. They usually were led by the teenage group but the oldest ones usually managed the time, and regulated the circulation (eg. The others must ask before going to the toilet). These meetings (*juntas*) were on a free speech mode. The speakers were volunteers and just allowed the words to flow in very long monologues. I was under the impression that the general idea was to get rid of thoughts and to receive encouragement and manifestations of affections from others. According to the model of AA, speech and listening are the core of the therapy. The idea of the meeting is to create a space where one can tell stories that can only be understood by someone who has experienced the addiction. These spaces, originally for adults, are used as therapeutic tools for the adolescents. Even if experts from different backgrounds agree on the importance of speech in the treatment of addiction (Hautefeuille 2012), in this particular context those moments are marked by a certain ambivalence. Despite the self-managed side and the underlying idea of freedom, these moments are also constrained. The residents don't have the choice to attend them or not. They frame the rhythm of daily life in the centre and they are, in fact, above all a moment of socialisation and of learning about how to live in a community. These are moments of self-narrative and sometimes they can be very repetitive. It is a ritualised moment of recognition of the individual by his peers. The empty space of the podium is filled by stories, thoughts, torments. This flow of words is in some ways the thing that allows individuals to exist. But if the meeting itself is a space of non-judgment, the young expose themselves and relate to the

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13 It is very common to see advertisements of AA groups in Mexican cities.

comrades with whom they share the rest of the confinement. For this reason, we can imagine that these are not spaces that are free. On the contrary, they are rigid frameworks of self-staging that allow a certain recognition. It is to these spaces that the idea of belonging to the community of “addicts” is anchored. Young people exist by assuming and accepting this presupposition and by recognising themselves in this condition.

This institution, with its level of constraint, is representative of how the issue of street children in Tijuana is managed. I am strongly drawn towards this type of institution in order to work with children “truly of the streets”. This important fact reflects a certain climate of the city and once again explicates how drugs and the idea of a certain violence structure the apprehension of the street children issue.

### **“Difficult” teenagers and the transformation of the self**

The institution plays an important role in the trajectories of the young residents and their world. It is one of the most interesting features of their stories. Those narratives are partly produced by the institution and show how it leaves its mark on their subjectivities. However, they also reveal how this institution is a space in which these young people try to assert themselves as individuals (Martuccelli 2010) at the same time.

In his ethnography of drugs users spending their lives between vagrancy and prison, Fabrice Fernandez describes trajectories similar to those recounted here. He calls the experience of drugs a “total experience” (Fernandez and Drulhe 2010). Borrowing the expression from Robert Castel (Castel 1992), he meant that every aspect of the lives of those people was influenced by drugs and organised accordingly. There is a continuum between vagrancy and prison that strengthens the totalitarian experience of addiction. Institutional cycles contribute to the production of figures of total experience in which subjects are constructed and give meaning to their experience. Medical care, within and outside prison, can provide people with a way of bouncing back. For many, however, they are only a means of maintaining self-controlled consumption or abstinence at a given moment, before they resume the same cycle (Fernandez and Drulhe 2010).

In the case of the young people in Tijuana, things are different, probably because of their young age. Admittedly, drug is the gateway to the institution and is a guiding thread in their narratives. Still, the young people I met cannot be reduced to a simple figure of exclusion or of disaffiliation. These trajectories are certainly the product of a structural context of strong inequalities and profound social injustices, and of an inherently violent development model that creates marginal people. However, it is also clear from their stories that they are well integrated into a marginal social world

endowed with its own norms, hierarchies and solidarities. In addition, they can pass from one system to another, from wage labour to micro-delinquency and to closed institutions. Their lives do not revolve around substances only, but around economic concerns, emotional bonds or passions as well.

Although some of them seem to have broken up with their families, these adolescents do not appear to be completely disaffiliated individuals (Castel 1991). They can be considered as “integrated by and in the margins” (Pérez López 2009). Moreover, their use of narcotics is also complex to decipher because it can sometimes reflect a self-destructive movement and sometimes a form of affirmation. It entails belonging to a world with its own economy and is part of a struggle for survival, as noted by Alice Sarcinelli in the case of street children in Brazil (Sarcinelli 2009).

It is on the basis of this ambivalent experience that adolescents arrive at El Refugio through different paths and for different reasons.

More often than not, it is their family who place them there. Various stories show that in many cases families know El Refugio because friends or relatives have already been there:

Some of my uncles, the brothers of my father, stayed here (in the Refugio) for several years. That's why I came here. My mother... it had been a long time since she wanted to take me, but she never managed to catch me. Once I arrived home after living 4 months in the street. Before that, usually when I went back, I spent one day at home and my mother kicked me out again so left again. But this time, it has been 4 months, and I came back 4 days before Christmas. I came home and they refused to let me stay, they said that I had to come here (the Refugio), because I was skinny, my face was emaciated. They told me to come here and I came (Gari, 17 years old interview of June 21, 2010).

In this case, the teenager was brought with his consent, because he realised that he was in poor health. For Gari, as for some young people in Mexico City, entering an institution means taking a pause for physical reconstruction. For some Parisian addicts, the same role is played by the prison (Fernandez et Drulhe, 2010).

In the case of Luz, her confinement appears to be an answer to her fugue in the streets, her taking drugs and to the fact that her mother was “fed up with her”, and could no longer stand her rebellion, she was “incorrigible”:

It is only my second time in here. Last year I came and I stayed for five months. It was my mother who took me here. I came almost as a volunteer because I started going out to the street, (*salir a calle*) and using drugs and my mother could not take it anymore. In the last two months, my mother did not come to see me. I feel bad, I have to stay here. There is someone, a neighbour who comes

and visits. He's been clean<sup>14</sup> for seven years. I asked him to tell my mother to come and see me (Luz, 17 years old, field notes, June 30, 2010).

Rehabilitation centres are used as a last resort for families without other means to protect young people from self-destructive behaviour. This may seem paradoxical if one thinks that traumatic events often occur within these same families. Indeed, some stories show that violence occurring within the family is often the main source of danger. However, the centre seems to be a sort of recourse for families overwhelmed by a very hard socio-economic situation, to act for the good of their children or to be relieved of their responsibility. It does not matter whether it's addiction or not. These institutions end up being a way of handling situations of youth deviance in a context of multifaceted precariousness. In her account, Luz says that it is only the second time she is interned, which suggests that around her, people regularly pass through this centre. This is confirmed by Jesús, who is in charge of the minors in El Refugio. While there may be a cycle related to the extreme conditions of consumption, that explains why people may come back several times, narratives show that this type of institution covers a much broader function in Tijuana than addiction treatment. The director often emphasises the role of El Refugio as a centre of "integration" and highlights its educational role (through teaching, workshops, plastic arts classes).

Beatriz also testifies this porous boundary between addiction and "incorrigibility".

I went back to college and got fired. My mother also fired me. I roamed on the street. When I walked into a store, I used to steal clothes because I did not have any. Since I had too many complaints for theft, my mother told me that she was going to take me to the shrink, but she took me to the police instead and the police took me here (Beatriz, 15 years old, field notes, June 30, 2010).

Emiliano accepted going to El Refugio in order to escape the police after being an accomplice of a murder.

I arrived here on December 22, 2009. This is my second time. My parents took me here both times. My dad's work is to distribute products in shops and my mother is a housewife. [...] The first time I arrived here, I was stealing, there were three of us. But he (the victim) did not let himself and a friend stung him, that is to say he wounded him with a knife. He killed him. The police patrol arrived, I was afraid and ran away. I told my parents to take me here (Emiliano, 17 years old, field notes, June 24, 2010).

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14 Not using drugs.

In this case the consumption of Emiliano becomes the filter through which his acts are explained, the centre is both a way of escaping prison for having been an accomplice in a murder, and a way of taking a break after such a violent act. Emiliano could have hidden himself, but he asked to be interned. The closed centre appears to have a protective role. In the same way, Alfredo considers that he has also been “saved” by the centre. His family didn’t place him there, and he didn’t come willingly: it was the police who found him tagging. The city somehow “closed on him”, and he makes the best of a bad fortune:

This is my second time. The first time I had been brought by the police, they picked me up on a roof in the centre. [...]I was tagging. I know that this place saved my life. If I were not here, I would be in juvenile prison. If they had caught me selling drugs, I would have gone to the correctional. I am very grateful to this place for some things. I do not regret being there. Here I do not get a visit. No one comes to see me (Alfredo, 16 years old, field notes, June 28, 2010).

Another way of entering El Refugio is through other institutions. In particular, the DIF estimates that children who use drugs do not have a place in their home. In Gabriel’s story, an act of bravery, of defiance associated with drug use lead him two stays in the centre:

My brother Francisco, who was born after me and who is 13 years old, was at the DIF. And I missed him a lot. So I entered the DIF spontaneously. I was addicted to spray-paint can (*lata*). [...] A school girlfriend who was addicted asked me to do something for her: she wanted me to *bolsear*<sup>15</sup> in the DIF and to tell him what it feels like. I did not want to, but I ended up bringing enough to inhale in my pants [...] I gave some to my little brother too. This *lata* smelled stronger than the other: the whole room smelled very strong. They discovered us. [...] They said – prepare your things, they’ll come and get you. I thought it was my family, but it was a patrol. They told me: “you’re going to go to a place that’s better for you to stop drugs”. [...]I have no choice but to stay here (Gabriel, 14 years old, interview of June 27, 2010).

Gabriel is somehow punished, put apart from others, not only because he broke the rule and introduced drugs in his home, but also because he endangered his brother, who felt faint after the poisoning. He is sent away to treat his addiction because at the DIF shelter people cannot take the risk to see other children influenced by his behaviour.

He does not consider himself an addict, it is the others who see him this way. Gabriel’s behaviour can be considered as “risky”, and it was within his family that he started using drugs. Actually it was his uncle’s girlfriend who

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15     Inhaling the product of a spray-paint can in a plastic bag (*bolsa*).

pushed and taught him to inhale.

In the treatment of psychoactive substances addiction offered by El Refugio, morality is an important issue. Being a drug addict is seen as a proof of weakness and of a lack of will, and individuals are asked to admit that they will not be able to cope with this problem alone. An important factor here is that minors are considered as developing persons who need to be educated, a process in which the institution has a major role to play. On the other hand, such an educative perspective depoliticises the problem of these marginal youths.

Considering drug addiction as the main issue for street youth is not only a form of top-down policy of government of marginal population. It is also the result of the overlapping of several sociocultural dimensions, in a context where there are not many educative actions for young people outside school and work. Rehabilitation centres are a civil society response to a problem characteristic of the border, and are part of alternative medicine solutions in Mexico (Galviz, Odgers, 2014). They also represent a resource appropriated by young people in an idiosyncratic manner.

### **An ambivalent resource**

The total institution was the scene and social space where, in Tijuana, it was possible to lead a field research on the experience of street children. The Refugio illustrates the links between the urban border context, the type of care institution that it produces and the experience of young people. During the confinement, they do not all build an identical relationship with the institution, it depends on their trajectory on the street. Through the narratives I collected we can find clues to interpret the place of rehabilitation centres such as El Refugio in their trajectory in a nuanced and complex way.

The shutting out of the outside world, the careful control of everyday life, the project of self-transformation underlying the site, and the demand for joining this project make it a place where power is exercised over individuals. This is reinforced by the ratio of age and the condition of being under 18. This transformation project, which involves a strict and rigid conception of abstinence and does not distinguish between types of use, is somewhat contradictory to the values of the consumer society, reinforced at the border by the proximity to the United States. This is also what Jarret Zigon points out in his study of a religious rehabilitation centre in contemporary Russia. It shows how subjects deliberately interned are confronted with a lifestyle that is in total opposition to the consumer society and the neoliberal model (Zigon 2011) and demonstrate how people are held by a tension between the injunctions of the inside and those of the outside. Even if there is a willingness to moralise individuals in the centres of Tijuana, and some of them

fully adhere to the morality of the institution and choose to give up almost entirely the “benefits” of the “outside world”<sup>16</sup>, young people do not appear to experiment unilaterally, a subjugation that would stem from the structure of the organisation. They seem at once to seize the institution or the aspects which seem to them useful, and to distance themselves from it, finding themselves at times caught between contradictory injunctions and desires.

Alfredo has an ambivalent discourse with regard to the institution: if on the one hand he appreciates being able to speak and have a place where he can think, he manifests at the same time a desire for escape and independence, because “he feels he is wasting his time”. He confesses his desire to go out, as “it is him who decides when it is time to go”, as he will decide when he will change his life.

[...] Here, I like *juntas* (therapeutic talk group). When we talk up there ... Maybe Saturday I'll leave, because I want to leave. I think it's time to leave. What am I doing here? It's wasted time. They'll take me to my mother's house. But I'll leave again to do drugs. I've not changed my life yet. Not yet. I'm learning a lot from others. I think. At this moment, we have plenty of time to think; I do not really know how to say it (Alfredo, field notes, June 28, 2010).

His allusions to the change of life reveal the hold of institutional discourse, which empowers young people and tends to present the transformation as matter of willpower, but it also shows that Alfredo positions himself in relation to this discourse and does not (yet) want to change his life. He somehow rebels against this imposed internment and against this injunction to change his life, which he calls a “waste of time”. Moreover, he does not deny benefiting from this situation which he knows to be temporary: a benefit that he cannot identify or define, but which is based on the idea of having a time to think about himself his choices, to compare himself to others. Beyond the therapeutic effects, in the words of Alfredo and those of other young people appear positive elements, and in particular the confrontation with others, their history, which allows young people to make sense of their own life, explain and organise. Their ability to self-relate during the interviews seemed to me to be very significant, and it is difficult not to see this as a result of institutional action.

However, some young people, such as Gabriel, have a critical view of the effectiveness of the rehabilitation process:

El Refugio seems good to me, but not for quitting drugs. Here I feel good, I'm getting used to it. I don't miss the outside so much. I read books, I spend my

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16 Jesús is an example of this because he actually devoted his life to the young people, did the training he was asked to do, and decided to live inside the centre.

time reading when they locked me in here (me *atorrillan*). That is to say, when you're punished and have to stay in this room. Because young people here talk to you about drugs, crystal, *chiva* (heroin), *el perico* (cocaine). Many leave from here and then come back, because they have tried even worse things that they heard about here. These are the same guys *morros* from here, who encourage them: try this, try this ... And after we get addicted. I have only tried the bag (*bolsa*), I do not want to become vicious (*vicioso*). I want to have something in life. I want to have my children, my wife my house and everything. And here they break my dreams. Try crystal, try this. And with that, I start thinking about it, it sticks in my mind I wonder what taste it would have, and so it works, I keep thinking that I want to try another drug. That's why it's not a good place to quit drugs (Gabriel, interview of June 27, 2010).

In this case, the relation with others is a case of resonance with the outside and with the multiplicity of experiences; instead of being a break from drug use, it acts as a stimulant. And yet, Gabriel has dreams, he imagines himself in the future with a wife, children and a house, he wants things he values. It is also because he finds himself in this universe of confinement, where boredom, when mastered, allows him to feel good, that he feels outraged by this "contamination". This reasoned critical position reveals its capacity as an actor. Things are not undergone with Gabriel, they are thought out. He remains an individual who resists the institutional constraint and the harshness of his story by forging his point of view, placing himself in a position of critical distance.

For Alfredo and Gabriel, the experience of internment in the rehabilitation centre represents a space for reflection. An opportunity to think about their subjectivity, to think about their careers, to describe their actions, but also to position themselves in relation to their desires and expectations. This introspection does not appear to be possible in life outside as described by the actors, on the contrary, there is a sense of permanent action and acceleration. The results of this introspection allowed by confinement does not always correspond to the normative expectations of the institution, as shown by the case of Alfredo. The case of Gari's seems to fulfil this expectation to a greater degree.

### **Finding your place while waiting to get out there**

I had noticed Gari as soon as I arrived at El Refugio for his supporting role (*apoyo*). He contributes to the supervision of younger residents. He exercises the same small power of the adults in the process of rehabilitation who help the leaders. He gives them permission to move from their room, to go to the toilet during the *juntas*, he keeps the silence while the one of them is on the podium to speak. The way Gari talks proves his knowledge and his ability

to handle the emotional stages of internment, because he experienced it himself. As far as he is concerned, he doesn't reveal that he was afraid, but he tells the story of his rebellion and his attempts to escape:

The first time I spent here six months, and the third month they named me "helper" (*apoyo*). I wanted to escape and they caught me at the corner... My uncles were here, and my grandmother brought me here. I arrived on December 20, four days before Christmas! I spent Christmas day here and I was angry, I spent the New Year here, I was angry. On the 17th of January I tried to escape, I got to the entrance, I quarrelled with the guard, I opened the door and ran, they caught me, they guarded me until the third month, they put me to wash the pots and the blankets, and after three months I behaved well and they named me *apoyo*. I came back on October 21, this was my second time. And on December 17 they named me *apoyo* again. I like being *apoyo*. I work on my own person, on my tolerance, on my responsibility. You cannot imagine how the kids are and how difficult is to block them from quarrelling [...]. It takes patience, you cannot hit them! (Interview of June 21, 2010).

Gari talks about his feelings about living in the centre. Even when he came voluntarily, spending Christmas locked up frustrated him. However, he narrated in an amused tone how the institution eventually disciplined him. Those who "behave badly" are confined and have to do the collective work: washing the pots, putting the blankets in their place, and so on. I asked Jesús who was washing the pots when no one was punished, and he told me that there was always someone punished. But Gari does not narrate these as episodes of humiliation: in his narrative, we find the idea of an apprenticeship and work on the self, which continues in the role he assumes as a helper (*apoyo*). He describes it basically as being patient with the younger kids and being a somewhat reassuring presence.

Gari is 17 years old and in theory he will be not able to stay at El Refugio after turning 18. However, exceptionally, if he continues his studies, a derogation from the regulation will be applied. Gari is on his second stay at El Refugio. Being older than the majority of the guests he is in charge of, but also because of his role of responsibility, he illustrates how having experienced the normativity of this institution has had an effect on his way of explaining and making sense of his own trajectory. When I ask him what he would be doing when he is grown up, music is the first thing that comes to his mind. It is an activity in which he feels "good", that makes sense for him and where he is recognised by others: for example, by his mother and by his ex-girlfriend. This is another resource that can be associated with a form of urban culture he adheres to in order to exist.

"What would I like to do?" Well, I had the passion for... You're gonna laugh, but I love music. I recorded some songs, I have my notebook of songs, I have

made songs for my... for the girls I was dating. But now I'm starting high school and I feel I will not do it anymore, and God willing I will stay here 3 years again and during these three years I will strengthen myself, because I want to take drugs ... That is to say I feel that I want to take drugs, but I don't want to do it (Gari, interview of 21 June, 2010).

Music makes sense for him. However, in his words it appears that, even if the institution provides him a base to think about his future, at the same time it seems to impose a choice between everything related to his life before and its investment for the future. In other words, the trap of “relapse” is still there. The school project he built within the institution seems to impose a choice on him. But later during the interview he reveals another reason for suspending his musical practice. Music stimulates too many emotions by “stirring” things inside him, and he feels unable to manage all these emotions.

But then it brings me memories and I say no! What for?! When I sing, I sing songs of things that I lived, songs in which I complain about my father and I tell him many things ... Why wasn't he there, why he never wanted to live with me? And so on. And I start to get caught up by the rage I have inside me and that's why I stopped. It doesn't make me feel good. (...) I listen to everything here in Tijuana, here there is everything... (Gari, interview of 21 June 2010).

The work of the institution on Gari's discourse is clearly visible in this part of the interview. Gari explains his choices by his origins and in particular by the absence of his father and the lack of paternal love. Phrases such as “I am not capable of being loved” correspond to marks left by the institution: the narration and the explanation of the experience is centred on the addiction and on its articulation with the emotional and familial aspects of the individual. Jesús, during our first interview, talked about the importance of obtaining information about family and intra-family relationships, as this is key for action and for understanding the “trajectory” of these children. This form of storytelling – with psychological explanations focused on individual responsibility and on the supposed fragility of the emotional ground – are dominant in El Refugio and almost the only possible discourse in the institution. In the interviews, formulas such as “I am emotionally sick”, “I fell into vice”, “I want to stop”, “Drug is not good” were repeated several times. Such phrases can be considered a form of “secondary adaptation” (Goffman 1961). Each young person has to deal with this narrative and with the normativity of the institution, sometimes in a fragile and/or contradictory way. For some of them, it becomes a resource for identity, as it has contributed – like the other spaces of the city (Pochetti 2017) that have marked their trajectory – to an affirmation of the self. Gari seems to have found his place

in the institution, and clearly the responsibility entrusted to him and the having his rehabilitation recognised improve his self-esteem.

## **Conclusions**

This article describes the institutional and cultural environment affecting disadvantaged and addicted Tijuana adolescents believed to be “incorrigible” (*ingovernables*). I focus my analysis on three aspects of the care of these children. First, addiction treatment is linked to the specific urban context in which these adolescents live. Second, the care of street teenagers and institutional policy regarding them is supported by a pre-existing net of actors who believe it is necessary to completely remove children from the dangers of the street. Third, teenagers themselves establish a narrative within and against the institution – El Refugio – that both holds them captive and protects them.

To understand young people categorised by treatment institutions as “street children” we must take into account the weight of drug use and economy as a social factor, as well as the multi-dimensional violence of the city. Many actors and institutions within the city cooperate to limit the ability of young people to occupy a public space that is perceived as extremely dangerous but that also must be preserved and cleaned, restoring a “good image of the city” for tourism purposes. This “non-territorialisable” aspect of the city is not specific to Tijuana. Other works on street children highlight how in some cities the level of social and institutional violence is such that children can occupy public space only in an ephemeral way (Morelle 2007, Lucchini 1993). However, the fact that Tijuana is the main gateway to the United States produces a specific configuration of actors. This is revealed by the various ways in which teenagers enter rehab facilities. Some cases addiction is a pretext for managing and safeguarding teenage runaways who find themselves in wider deviant trajectories. Drug usage is directly associated with addiction and becomes the reason for the confinement of these adolescents, (even if drug use seems to be in some cases only a risky recreational activity). The care of these minors consists largely in their confinement and in the previously described therapeutic process of moralisation, the aim is primarily protective. Those who flee are not likely to survive on the streets, according to the person in charge of the minor sector of the centre.

In Mexico’s fragile democracy, the management of public policies depends on the parties and personalities in power (Estrada Saavedra 2013). The result is often fragmentary, changeable and contradictory, contributing to a depoliticisation of the question of marginal and independent childhood. This result, however, is not forged only from the top and simply executed by actors. It is shaped in a constant intersection and interaction among social

representations, public policy, institutional work, and individuals. Moral, religious, therapeutic, and social dimensions are inseparable from these intersections.

As I have shown, many institutionalised teenagers regard the experience of confinement as the price they have to pay for street life and their quest for freedom and independence. Nevertheless, their relationship to the institution is ambivalent. The rehabilitation centre is a total institution that seeks to transform individuals. By making subjects recognise their emotional fragility, it reinforces the idea that the experience of drug use is first of all, a matter of individual responsibility; the label of “addict” becomes the filter through which young people are encouraged to read and interpret their trajectory. However, El Refugio also proves to be a place of waiting, where it is possible for young people to grasp discursive, affective, normative and moral elements that allow them to (re) construct a narrative that gives meaning, that highlights the risks involved, and that allows them to assert themselves sometimes even in opposition to the institution.

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