

EXPLORING YOUTH RISKY BEHAVIOR EXPERIENCES IN ALTINDAĞ'S URBAN REGENERATION AREA^{1,2}



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ABSTRACT |

This phenomenological qualitative study explores how young people in Gültepe, Altındağ, Ankara, perceive and experience the problems and risky behaviors they face after the urban regeneration project. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews with 19 participants selected through purposive sampling between December 2020 and March 2021, three main themes were identified. The findings reveal the presence of economic hardship, increased social tensions exacerbated by the influx of marginalised groups, including Syrian and Afghan migrants, and risky behaviours among youth. This has highlighted the need for new interventions that can increase youth participation in decision-making processes to effectively address the underlying causes of vulnerability in deprived neighbourhoods.

Keywords: Urban regeneration, risky behaviors, youth welfare

JEL Code: I31, R52, Y80

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¹ The ethical compliance of the relevant study has been declared.

² This study used the data from the doctoral dissertation entitled "Investigation of Socialization Process and Experiences of Exposure to Risky Behaviors Youth Living in Urban Regeneration Project in Altındağ" which was completed by the responsible author at Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences, Department of Social Work.

ALTINDAĞ KENTSEL DÖNÜŞÜM BÖLGESİNDEKİ GENÇLERİN RİSKLİ DAVRANIŞ DENEYİMLERİNİN KEŞFEDİLMESİ



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ÖZ | Bu fenomenolojik nitel çalışma, Ankara, Altındağ, Gültepe'deki gençlerin kentsel dönüşüm projesinin ardından karşılaştıkları problemleri ve riskli davranışları nasıl algıladıklarını ve deneyimlediklerini incelemektedir. Aralık 2020 ve Mart 2021 tarihleri arasında amaçlı örneklem yoluyla seçilen 19 katılımcıyla yapılan derinlemesine görüşmelerin analiz sonucunda üç ana tema belirlenmiştir. Araştırmanın bulguları, ekonomik zorlukların varlığını, Suriyeli ve Afgan göçmenler de dahil olmak üzere marjinal grupların akınıyla yoğunlaşan sosyal gerilimlerin arttığını, gençler arasında riskli davranışların varlığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu durum, çöküntü mahallelerdeki kırılganlığın altında yatan nedenleri etkili bir şekilde ele almak için gençlerin karar alma süreçlerine katılımını artıracak yeni müdahalelere ihtiyaç duyulduğunu ortaya çıkartmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kentsel dönüşüm, riskli davranışlar, gençlik refahı
JEL Kodları: I31, R52, Y80

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban regeneration in Türkiye has been closely associated with significant psychosocial stress among marginalized groups such as youth. Türkiye's rapid urbanization since the 1950s, fueled by rural-to-urban migration, placed immense pressure on cities. The influx of new residents, seeking affordable housing, led to uncontrolled and unplanned expansion on the city peripheries. This resulted in the proliferation of gecekondu settlements, which now house a significant portion of the urban population (Kuyucu & Unsal, 2010). The process of urban regeneration in Türkiye has resulted in the displacement of individuals and an increase in social inequality, with a particular impact on vulnerable groups such as young people. This has also contributed to changes in property transfer and displacement (Topçu & Topçu, 2024). The displacement from familiar environments and the commodification of urban spaces disrupt community cohesion and damage cultural identity, often leading to alienation and maladaptive behaviors. While the stated goal of urban regeneration projects is to rehabilitate the social fabric, in practice, the social lives of affected individuals are often overlooked. Forced relocation results in the loss of neighborhood culture, reduced feelings of belonging, weakened social networks, and environments unsuitable for raising children, ultimately increasing feelings of insecurity and social isolation (Gür, 2019).

The Gültepe neighborhood located in Altındağ and previously known as Çiçin, was a squatter (gecekondu) neighborhood that has been undergoing regeneration since the early 2000s. Since Gültepe was the first and most prominent example of urban regeneration in Altındağ, the terms 'Gültepe neighborhood' and 'Altındağ' are sometimes used interchangeably to represent this large-scale urban regeneration project. Çiçin, now officially known as Gültepe, is a settlement that does not appear on Altındağ Municipality's maps and lacks any history in official records. This marginalization makes Gültepe and its residents more vulnerable to urban regeneration projects. Previously, six small neighborhoods helped to preserve Çiçin's identity, but they have also disappeared due to state-led urban transformation initiated in 2004. The area has been rescaled and reduced over the years to one neighborhood, Gültepe (Aykaç, 2024). Research on the urban transformation of Gültepe highlights that thousands of houses have been demolished over the years (Aykaç, 2024; Güler & Özgül, 2020). Furthermore, the ruins were left by the local government for several years, which created an unhealthy and insecure environment for the residents (Aykaç, 2024, p. 161)

Urban regeneration often produces social tension and a lack of harmony between residents of newly constructed “safe and secure” housing estates and those displaced from former squatter settlements (Erman, 2012). For many low-income families, these informal neighborhoods had previously functioned as key sources of social capital, mutual support, and community identity (Erman, 2010). The transformation and relocation processes associated with regeneration reshape the social environment in which young people grow up—an environment that plays a crucial role in shaping their exposure to and engagement with risky behaviors. Neighborhood conditions are known to influence the likelihood of involvement in criminal or deviant acts (Sampson et al., 2002). In the case of Gültepe, the most prominent forms of risky behavior include crime, violence, drug trafficking and substance use, possession of firearms, and alcohol abuse (Aykaç, 2020; Bektaş & Türkün, 2017; Güzey & Aksoy, 2014; Sadioğlu et al., 2016).

While the objective of urban regeneration is to enhance housing capacity and raise physical standards (Korkmaz & Balaban, 2020), there is often an overemphasis on the physical dimension and a neglect of the social dimension. This can result in a deterioration of social interactions, such as neighbourliness and solidarity (Gür, 2019). While this process affects many disadvantaged groups, it is particularly detrimental to young people. This study will therefore examine the lived experiences and risky behaviours of young people in the aftermath of urban transformation. The subsequent sections of the study will present the theoretical framework, the research methodology, the findings, and the discussion.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Risk behavior is defined as actions that can cause physical, psychological, or social harm, such as substance use, violence, dropping out of school, or involvement in criminal activities (Jessor, 1991; Jessor, 1998). There are many biological, sociological, and psychological theories that explain why young people engage in such behaviors. From a biological perspective, impulsivity and self-control are influenced by temperament and genetic factors (Bevilacqua & Goldman, 2013). However, longitudinal and experimental studies show that impulsivity is not merely a character trait; it is also dependent on social factors, and the individual's environment has an impact in this regard. For example, Fosco et al. (2025) found that adolescents exhibited higher impulsivity than normal on days when there was increased family conflict, peer rejection, or parent-adolescent conflict. Similarly, environmental factors such as

neighborhood quality, family structure, and low socioeconomic status also increase the level of exposure to risky behaviors (Orihuela et al., 2020).

The structural and spatial origins of risky behaviors can be better explained through sociological theories. The Social Disorganization Theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) argues that the combination of economic disadvantage, lack of social cohesion, and decreased collective efficacy in disadvantaged neighborhoods leads to greater exposure to deviant behavior. Similarly, Strain Theory (Merton, 2017) suggests that when legitimate means of achieving social goals are blocked, individuals—especially those in the younger demographic—may resort to alternative, often high-risk behaviors as coping mechanisms. In the context of urban transformation, if residents are displaced, they may lose their social networks, leading to new forms of marginalization. The literature on urban marginalization and spatial segregation indicates that the loss of neighborhood identity and social cohesion can lead to alienation, disillusionment, and ultimately more high-risk behaviors among young people (Stewart, 1995; Wacquant, 2008). In Türkiye, urban transformation has also been shown to increase social vulnerability by weakening informal control and solidarity (Işık & Pınarcıoğlu, 2012). Studies in Türkiye have noted a link between childhood abuse and increased risky behaviors among youth, and that family conflict and violent tendencies play a mediating role in this relationship (Özdemir Bişkin, 2024). Furthermore, weaker attachment to parents and experiences of social exclusion have been found to be associated with higher rates of antisocial behavior, suicidal tendencies, and school dropout among youth (Sezer & Gürtepe, 2025).

Explaining young people's risky behaviors solely through individual or family relationships is insufficient, these explanations remain incomplete without considering the importance of the spatial and social environment. Phenomena such as urban transformation and spatial segregation weaken social solidarity networks, particularly in neighborhoods where low-income people live, leading to consequences such as displacement and loss of identity. This process can increase the likelihood of risky behavior by fostering increased social exclusion, insecurity, and feelings of uncertainty about the future in young people's daily lives. Considering Wacquant's (2008) concept of “advanced marginality,” the renewal of physical space often weakens social integration and produces new forms of inequality. Studies conducted in Türkiye (Erman, 2012; Işık & Pınarcıoğlu, 2012; Önkal & Sümer, 2014) have also indicated that urban transformation projects reduce social control and neighborhood solidarity. This paves the way for a weakening of the sense of belonging among young people and an increase in risky behaviors.

As a critical component of internal migration dynamics in Türkiye, squatter settlements (*gecekondu*) are a buffer mechanism used in the effort to integrate with the city. *Gecekondu* is a squatter housing form in Türkiye, which can literally be translated as 'built overnight'. Şenyapılı (2004) states that the squatter dwellers in Altındağ are not connected to the city and that they are motivated by economic concerns but cannot benefit from the opportunities of the city sufficiently by working in temporary and low-income jobs. Workers seeking affordable housing near their workplaces, construct unlicensed multistory squatter buildings. Moreover, living in squatter areas can deprive residents of critical services including education and health, as economic, social, and cultural opportunities are insufficiently provided (Ataöv & Osmay, 2007; Bartu Candan & Kolluoğlu, 2008; Çetin, 2012). Türkiye's state-led urban transformation projects marked a turning point, particularly concerning *gecekondu* settlements, which remained largely untransformed and marginalized until 2004. Kuyucu (2018a) provides valuable insights into Türkiye's urban regeneration, offering institutional explanations while highlighting both the possibilities and limitations of these projects within the country's highly centralized governance structure (Kuyucu, 2018a), thus providing a theoretical framework for analyzing their impact on marginalized communities such as Gültepe. Prior to 2010, urban regeneration in Türkiye was a more collaborative effort between municipalities. However, following a shift towards recentralisation by the central government in 2010, there has been a significant increase in control by the central government, which has resulted in local administrations having minimal influence in project implementation. (Kuyucu, 2018b). Urban regeneration projects in squatter areas aim to address the associated 'dangerous' label (Sadioğlu et al., 2016; Aksoy & Kocataş, 2017; Savran Penbecioğlu, 2022) improve residents' quality of life, resolve social problems, and revitalize the regional economy. TOKİ (Turkish: Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı, literally "Housing Development Administration - HDA") has initiated transformations in these areas to achieve these goals (Aksoy & Kocataş, 2017; Yaman, 2014). While preserving a squatter settlement's original population is ideal during urban regeneration, long-term challenges may exist. Urban regeneration can cause displacement of low-income residents in two ways: some capitalize by selling their land and moving outward, while others, unable to adapt to the transformed and less familiar neighborhood, eventually leave as well (Afacan, 2015).

In the 2000s, disasters like earthquakes sparked urban regeneration efforts, initially aiming to improve the social, economic, and physical conditions of declining urban areas (Korkmaz & Balaban, 2020). However, these projects transitioned towards prioritizing luxury housing and profit, leading to the

displacement of low-income groups due to rising costs (Afacan, 2015; Korkmaz & Balaban, 2020). One such group is immigrants; especially conditional refugees (CR) and Syrians with temporary protection status (SWTPS). Refugees often find themselves in difficult circumstances, facing high rental costs. Urban regeneration in Türkiye is creating further issues for refugees in accessing suitable housing. They also tend to gravitate towards neighborhoods with lower rental prices (Karataş et al., 2018; Savran Penbecioğlu, 2022). Although there is no evidence of Syrians or Afghans in Gültepe, the low rental prices in the area make it an attractive option for other nationalities.

State-led urban regeneration interventions, aimed at tackling the challenges of unplanned settlements and growing housing demand, have become a common policy tool and approach in Türkiye. A growth in urbanisation and an accompanying reduction in average household size have resulted in an increased demand for housing. This, in turn, has given rise to the financialisation of housing (Ergüven, 2020). Squatter settlements were initially permitted as they were perceived as a potential solution to the housing problem. The state in Türkiye plays a pivotal role in this process, implementing regulatory, legislative and financial strategies to advance the financialisation of housing (Çelik, 2023; Yeşilbağ, 2020). This approach gained momentum with Law no. 6306 of 2012, making these interventions a central policy in Türkiye's major cities (Kuyucu & Unsal, 2010). However, concerns exist about their potential negative impacts on lower-middle-income residents, particularly those residing in informal settlements known as *gecekondu* (Karaman, 2013).

The implementation of state-led urban regeneration programmes has been observed to exacerbate the vulnerabilities of communities that have been identified as experiencing high levels of crime (Sadioğlu et al., 2016). The process of urban regeneration frequently results in gentrification (Aksoy & Kocataş, 2017), which entails the displacement of long-term residents and the deepening of socio-economic inequalities. This can give rise to a range of adverse outcomes, including disempowerment, poor mental health, and social instability (O'Neill et al., 2022; Squires & Booth, 2015). This displacement can result in an increase in risky behaviours, such as substance abuse and crime, as residents adopt these actions as coping mechanisms for the socio-economic and psychological impacts of gentrification. Despite the laudable intention of such projects to enhance conditions, they frequently fail to consider the needs of existing residents, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle of vulnerability and risky behaviours that ultimately undermines their intended outcomes.

Risk-taking behaviors, meanwhile, can be either maladaptive or adaptive. Adolescence, for example may involve impulsive and harmful risks.

Socialization practices, which shape how individuals learn and internalize societal norms related to risk, influence behaviors such as alcohol consumption, reflecting the role of cultural and peer interactions in shaping risk perceptions (Hennell et al., 2021). Although risky behaviors are typically viewed negatively, they can also facilitate social change or personal growth, indicating a need for a nuanced understanding of risk in social contexts (Zinn, 2024).

The urban regeneration projects of Altındağ Municipality were initially realised in cooperation with TOKİ, and the urban regeneration powers granted to municipalities by the Law No. 5393 were employed in this process. In the subsequent phases of the project, it was noted that the municipality assumed direct responsibility for its execution, and Law No. 6306 came into force (Güler & Özgül, 2020). Despite the Altındağ Municipality's assertion that it has taken care to ensure that the new residences are located in the same area by considering the needs of the local community during the urban regeneration in Gültepe (Güler & Özgül, 2020), other studies in the field indicate that displacement has been observed (Aykaç, 2024; Güzey & Aksoy, 2014). While justified by earthquake risk, critics argue that these projects often result in unjust rent transfers, displacement, and social exclusion, ultimately leading to gentrification (Elicin, 2014). Despite criticism of urban regeneration plans, which are perceived to favour wealthy buyers and result in adverse effects on the cityscape (Güzey, 2016), authorities justify them on the grounds that they address deprivation, crime, and disaster risks in gecekondu areas (Sadioğlu et al., 2016). Research shows that drug-related crime rates in Altındağ, Ankara, increased between 2012 and 2015 (Akalın, 2017), while crimes against the community remained high, driven by poor living conditions, poverty, neglect, abuse, lack of parental care, and the absence of preventive institutions and NGOs (Çağlar, 2023; Mercan & Şen, 2021).

Spearheaded by the central government, these interventions have sparked concerns about the re-centralization of planning power and the empowerment of institutions like TOKİ. Following urban regeneration, former residents may experience social exclusion and discrimination, even if they remain in the same area. This exclusion may be due to class, socio-economic status and cultural differences. In addition, individuals may face additional costs such as relocation and fees, which can be a significant challenge if their income is limited (Aykaç, 2020). Leaving the neighborhood, house, and streets where they have lived for years is also seen as an injustice (Alptekin, 2014). TOKİ creates satellite towns as part of an urban regeneration program in squatter neighborhoods, which are often disconnected from the wider urban environment. Sense of community is often lacking (Önkal & Sümer, 2014). Research suggest that in Gültepe, state-

orchestrated gentrification led to the replacement of low-rise gecekondü homes with gardens by high-rise apartment blocks (Koçak, 2019).

Urban regeneration interventions, such as the one in the Gültepe Neighborhood area in Ankara, aim to bring existing housing and buildings up to current physical standards. In Türkiye, however, these interventions often result in the loss of established neighborhoods, community ties and memories (Gür, 2019). Although interventions are justified in addressing the negative effects of crime and risk factors, evidently, significant changes of this nature can lead to serious problems. The aim of the study is to explore the challenges these youth face in the Gültepe neighborhood following urban regeneration, focusing on their socialization practices, exposure to risk-taking behaviors, and how their experiences have changed as a result of the regeneration, as perceived by the participants. Therefore, the research questions can be formulated as follows:

- *How do young people in Gültepe Neighborhood, Altındağ perceive and evaluate their experiences and the challenges they face after the urban regeneration process?*
- *How do young people experience risky behaviors in themselves and their environment after urban regeneration in Gültepe Neighborhood, Altındağ?*

3. METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This research based on a phenomenological approach has explored the narratives and experiences of youth residing in Gültepe, Altındağ, regarding engagement in risky behaviors following the urban regeneration project in Gültepe, Altındağ. The phenomenological approach seeks to comprehend phenomena through experiences (Mason & May, 2002), and posits that a person creates their own world by interpreting their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2005).

In order to gain insight into the experiences of youth, we developed a semi-structured interview guide based on the relevant literature and personal observations. The guide included sections exploring various aspects such as pre-regeneration memories, socialization practices, risk-taking behaviors, and the impacts of regeneration on daily life. Follow-up questions were used to expand the conversation, obtain more detailed information from the interviewees, and maintain the flow of dialogue when it became stagnant. An in-depth interview approach and purposive sampling strategy were implemented to recruit participants. Youth participants in Altındağ were recruited through strategic outreach involving youth centers and partnerships with community leaders to

ensure diverse representation. Transparency and sensitivity were prioritized throughout the process, with particular attention given to voluntary participation and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained in accordance with established ethical guidelines. Participants received thorough information about the study and were guaranteed their right to withdraw at any point, while their privacy was rigorously protected throughout the research process. No research incentive was provided to the participants, due to lack of funding.

Two pilot interviews were conducted prior to the main data collection. While the insights gained from these interviews were valuable, they were not included in the final analysis. The pilot interviews helped refine the interview guide by identifying unclear or repetitive questions, which were subsequently removed or revised for clarity. During these interviews, the young participants frequently mentioned the Altındağ Youth Center (*Altındağ Gençlik Merkezi*), making it a suitable and accessible location for conducting further interviews. Additionally, the process revealed that participants found it easier to discuss their present circumstances and expectations for the future, as many had limited recall or experience of the pre-regeneration period. Based on this observation, more questions focusing on the future were added to the final version of the interview guide.

The Altındağ Youth Center is situated in the central district of Altındağ, within walking distance of a diverse population. This center collaborates with educational institutions, social service centers and the municipality, receiving recognition from these organizations. Through collaboration with the Altındağ Youth Center and community leaders, participants were identified according to predefined inclusion criteria (e.g., being 18 to 25 years old and residing in Altındağ) while seeking diversity in terms of gender and socioeconomic status. This strategic sampling strategy enhanced the richness and transferability of the research findings by representing the diverse experiences of youth in Altındağ. During the participant recruitment process, 37 individuals were approached. Three were excluded due to age restrictions, and five did not meet the residency criteria. Ten young people declined to participate for unspecified reasons. We conducted 19 interviews over a period of around 100 days from December 2020 to March 2021. Some of the interviews took place at the youth center, while others were conducted in cafes, on the street, and at young people's workplaces. In addition, two interviews were conducted online via the Discord program. To achieve maximum diversity, a range of young people were interviewed including those residing in apartments, gecekondus, housing complexes, and individuals who had relocated to another neighbourhood. The interviews lasted between 52 and 130 minutes, with an average length of 82 minutes. All interviews were

conducted in Turkish, audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then translated into English for this research paper.

3.2. Ethical Considerations and Permissions

In this research, all rules specified in the "Directive on Scientific Research and Publication Ethics of Higher Education Institutions" were followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure the anonymity of participants, codes were implemented in lieu of real names. Participants were assigned a G code representing Gültepe and a sequential number. The study was ethically reviewed, and ethical approval was granted by the Hacettepe University Ethics Commission (Date: 03.12.2020, No: 35853172-300-E-0001348081). Interviews were recorded to preserve participants' words and prevent data inconsistencies. Recordings and transcripts were stored securely and confidentially.

3.3. Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify themes arising directly from the data without imposing predetermined notions (Braun and Clarke, 2012). The data were analyzed using the MAXQDA 2020 software package. The research team prepared verbatim transcriptions of the recorded interviews to enable in-depth analysis and nuanced interpretation of the data. These transcripts were used as the cornerstone for extracting meaningful insights and uncovering recurrent themes throughout the study. The analysis involved several phases: first, the research team familiarized themselves with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times. Second, initial codes were generated. Third, these codes were categorized to identify emerging themes. To ensure rigor and reliability in the analysis, several strategies were employed. The research team conducted inter-coder reliability checks (having multiple researchers independently code transcripts) and practiced reflexivity (reflecting on and documenting researcher biases). An audit trail of analytic decisions was maintained for transparency. Finally, member checking was conducted by presenting interpretations to participants for validation. These measures collectively strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the data analysis process.

4. FINDINGS

The data collected were analyzed in accordance with the aims and research questions of the study, resulting in the identification of three themes.

The initial theme outlines the situation in Gültepe, including an examination of spatial segregation and clustering within the neighbourhood. It also presents an analysis of rising tensions between middle-income residents, gecekondü owners and newcomer immigrants (CR and SWTPS). The second theme concerns the livelihoods of Gültepe residents. It covers key areas of precarity, including education, security, unemployment and time spent outside. The third and final theme addresses the risky behaviours exhibited by young people and explores the protective and risk factors involved.

4.1. Gültepe Has Changed: Spatial Segregation Between Middle-Class Newcomers, Gecekondü Owners and the Immigrants

According to some participants, the reputation of their neighborhood has been negatively affected by the reputation of the residents living there. The participants stated that the area is notorious for its crime rate. The lack of enforcement of laws and the existence of power imbalances may have adverse effects on individuals' mental well-being. This suggests that young people experience difficulties and negative pressures in this environment.

“How would someone describe this place? It’s very violent, armed, a place that sells drugs, very abusive. You can’t go in there, as you may be harmed like that. Many people would say that there were many thieves.” (G10, Apartment, M, 24)

The same young person is trying to meet their basic needs, including food and shelter, due to a lack of defined goals or financial challenges.

“I receive a disability pension, and I also go if there is work, for example, carrying yarn, carrying cupboards, etc... I work for 3-4 days. They give us 100 TL [≈13 USD] per day, I take it and give it to my mother. I am just trying to feed myself right now.” (G10, Apartment, M, 24)

Spatial clustering in and around Gültepe is said to have initially been based on political segregation. However it now seems to have shifted towards ethnic and neighbor-based segregation. More specifically, people of the same ethnicity (e.g., Roma people), reside in close proximity and only allow their own compatriots into their neighborhood.

“I used to know where everyone lived here. For example, people from Gereke used to sell drugs and they controlled the whole market. There would be fights when we passed through another neighborhood.” (G13, Squatter, M, 24)

The segregation in the area stems from a divide between the locals of the neighborhoods and immigrants; mostly Syrians and conditional refugees. Young

people living directly in the neighborhood emphasize this separation through their experiences. The arrival of immigrants has resulted in a change in the local economy, shifting it towards basic professions.

"We have a huge cultural difference. I mean, we lost our neighborhoods, we lost the neighborhoods where we grew up and spent our childhood. We vote because, as I said, it's like it's completely under occupation [of immigrants], it's not a place where you can go and walk around." (G16, Apartment, M, 23)

"We never managed to open a shop, for example, but when they came, they always opened shops. They opened businesses. They became rich. In the future, they will want to take over the state, they will want to form a party, they will create chaos. If not today, then surely one day they will create it." (G11, Site, M, 19)

"Refugees are always in the spotlight. Just now at table tennis, the two of us are Turkish, the others are all refugees. Our people are actually in the background. Think about it: the refugee has more money than you, better opportunities than you, but even though you are from this nation, you are in second place." (G7, Apartment, F, 19)

According to the participants' narratives, being born in 'Çinçin' (Gültepe), an impoverished urban neighborhood, results in prejudice and exclusion. Several young individuals from the Gültepe have reported experiences of exclusion. The word 'Çinçin' is associated with fear.

"They give the neighborhood a bad name, I'm not happy. For example, I go to another place, they ask me where do I live. I say Çinçin, and they look at me differently. This is a place of potential criminals. Everyone here is a criminal according to them. They just label us." (G11, Site, M, 19)

In Gültepe, an area beset with criminal activity, young people frequently engage in confrontations with the police. In a fear-ridden environment where the police are both revered and dreaded, they can be either a lifeline, a source of brutality or, at times, a source of harassment.

"The police came and saved me, I mean, I saw kids pulling knives and jumping on me. The police saved me. The police even asked me who are you, where are you from? I said take me home. The police brought me home, so it was a very tense day for me." (G15, Apartment, M, 24)

The common plan is to raise their children in a "more decent" area outside

Gültepe in the future. Some families moved and settled in another district to keep their children away from risky behaviors.

"We want to get out of here. Because you can't raise your children here." (G6, Site, F, 24)

"They are still leaving. ...They keep their children away from the neighborhood, from filth and drugs." (G7, Apartment, F, 19)

"For example, Karapürçek. That place is far on foot but not by transportation. When you get a little higher economically, you leave this place (laughs)." (G14, Apartment, M, 25)

4.2. Rising Urban Precariousness After State-Led Urban Regeneration

Urban regeneration has had a substantial effect on the livelihoods of many Gültepe residents. However, employment prospects within the vicinity predominantly entail unskilled and low-paying work. Given the area's low socio-economic status, it has been noted that certain inhabitant's resort to drug peddling as a source of income to avoid destitution. This phenomenon is particularly common among young people who are often exposed to impoverished surroundings and feel compelled to support their families through such means. The squatter settlements in the region compound the issue of poverty and lack of economic prospects. It is noteworthy that residents in the area generally view the police unfavorably, citing incidents of police brutality against some of them.

"There are good cops here. There are bad cops. Some swear. Some hit people for no reason. Some abuse their power. Some swear for no reason, like, 'What are you doing here? Why are you walking around? Are you looking for something?' They swear." (G11, Site, M, 19)"

"People work here without any skill set. Some of them are people who run their own shops, furniture makers, welders. They are lorry drivers or market vendors. There are very few educated people here." (G2, Site, M, 21)

Numerous squatters spread over vast areas have been replaced by 14-story buildings, accommodating hundreds of individuals but occupying significantly smaller footprints. Within this area marked by high poverty rates and low levels of education and academic engagement, it may be argued that informal social regulation has declined and mechanisms to prevent risky behavior among young people are inadequate.

“It is still being used, it's just that people do it in their houses now, in the past when it was a slum, everyone used to see everyone, but now they don't. Now if someone moves to TOKI, there are 50 flats, which one will you check?” (G19, Site, M, 22)

Education is deemed the sole solution for every young person and child from families in similar situations, as lack of education may lead to being trapped in the never-ending cycle of poverty. While some envision education and marriage as their goals, others lack motivation and aspirations. It is noteworthy that a significant percentage of young people in this region do not pursue tertiary education. The decision to forgo higher education by many students in this area often results from a combination of factors such as high poverty levels, the economic necessity of child labor, and inadequate quality of education.

“The education we received was mediocre, that is, we did not receive a quality education. I mean, I would have liked to go to better schools. I remained as an empty ordinary person.” (G17, Apartment, M, 25)

“For example, we are a family with an income below the middle, we need to study to get places. If we don't study, it's bad. If you want to go above, you need to study. Or you have to get involved in illegality [crime].” (G12, Apartment, F, 18)

The opinions of young people in the neighborhood about security are mostly negative, based on their personal experiences. Despite the high cost of housing, they do not feel safe in the area. This pervasive insecurity is a significant disadvantage for the community.

“They sold flats in that building for high prices. You don't have life safety. It really doesn't work. Look, I'll tell you something, you got off the minibus right now, your risk of being stabbed is higher than the risk of not being stabbed.” (G13, Squatter, M, 24)

Unemployment poses a significant challenge for numerous young individuals in the region, with a considerable number of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Typically, women who are unemployed shoulder domestic duties and childcare responsibilities. Women often assume a maternal role for their younger siblings, which impedes their capacity to attend school and fulfil their educational responsibilities.

“Those [domestic] responsibilities and your school responsibilities get mixed up. If I say I have school, this time she will leave the shop empty. I feel responsible for her.”

Sometimes I leave my sister to do my homework and go [to get something for the shop].” G8, Apartment, F, 18)

“[Unemployment] Unfortunately, there is. There is a lot of it, I mean, the simplest example is me.” (G 6, Site, F, 24)

Participants report limited time spent outside their housing estate and avoidance of parks due to the presence of individuals engaging in risky behaviors. They often travel outside of the Altındağ neighborhood for access to parks, as there are few available locally.

“There are not many. That's why we go to other parks. Even if it is here, those people are usually there because of the people I mentioned, and we don't want to see them, so even if there are parks and gardens here, we cannot use them. It is not safe.” (G4, Site, F, 18)

4.3. Socializing with Risk: Being Young in Gültepe

In the high-crime neighborhood of Gültepe, the residents feel the need to be strong to survive. They describe ongoing power struggles and suggest that being quiet is a disadvantage. Even seemingly calm young people are prone to violence and aggression. The prevailing attitude is that one must either be an oppressor or be oppressed.

“You know, since we are born, seeing the violence, it stays in you a little bit. Even the calmest of us have it. Like in a documentary, everyone wants to be the king of the forest.” (G9, Site, M, 18)

Gambling is a common risky behavior in Gültepe, and it is often kept secret. Illegal gambling is practiced in coffee houses, which are spread throughout the area.

“The upper floors of all the coffee houses here turn into gambling houses after 10 o'clock in the evening and everyone knows this. Alcohol and cigarettes are also allowed there, and the police also come.” (G15, Apartment, M, 24)

Young people who use drugs are often forced to engage in sex work. Some women also engage in sexual activity for small amounts of money, which young people can easily obtain as pocket money. Violence is widespread in Gültepe, including domestic violence.

“People know where they [sex workers] stand, they know what time they arrive, and pick them by car or something. As I said, they give money to the girls, 50 liras, 30 liras, [around 2 to 3

USDJ whatever it is, they have sex and then they leave her and go away.” (G17, Apartment, M, 25)

“There's pressure. One girl could not bear it and committed suicide. Her husband was an abuser. When the woman visited her father's house, her mother took her back to her husband's house. Unable to bear it, she jumped out of the flat's window.” (G4, Site, F, 18)

Many students drop out of school, which can result in financial hardship and missed employment prospects due to limited education. Another factor that contributes to dropping out of school is early marriage.

“If your father does not have money, as the primary solution you will definitely drop out of school. That will be the first thing you will throw away when the ship is sinking.” (G15, Apartment, M, 24)

Observing and imitating risky behaviors can lead young people to exhibit the same behaviors. This is reinforced by the desire for sensation seeking, which is common among youth. Living in a dangerous neighborhood where there is always activity can make young people engage in risky behaviors to experience excitement.

“The action here is so ingrained in us that when we go there, when we see calmness, we get bored after a while. In other neighborhoods, young people don't leave their homes much anymore. But I can watch if someone fights every day.” (G9, Site, M, 18)

Peer influence is a significant factor in the lives of youth, as their friends can either encourage them towards positive behaviors or push them towards risky behaviors. Groupthink and peer pressure play a crucial role in shaping the behavior of young people.

“In high school, during the crazy years, I had a glass of vodka. Then we went to my friend's house where nobody was there and one of his friends came with a joint, and that's when I tried a joint for the first time.” (G13, Squatter, M, 24)

“It could be the friend environment. Because I smoked my first cigarette with friends. The year I was preparing for the exam, my friend said, ‘Let's go for a cigarette’. The smell of this cigarette is good, gave me a loosie, one more loosie. Soon I bought a packet and that's how I started.” (G18, Site, M, 22)

Religious beliefs discourage and prohibit engaging in risky behaviors and advise individuals to avoid them. Religious youth tend to choose friends who

share similar values and beliefs. Fear of divine punishment or retribution is often cited as a reason for avoiding risky behaviors among religious individuals.

“When I was little, my friend gave me a cigarette and told me to light it, I said no, I said God sees all. First, my father told me not to smoke because it is forbidden, it is a sin.” (G1, Squatter, M, 18)

Families can significantly contribute to the protection of young people from risky behaviors. As the child's primary role models, family members can establish a positive example and discourage risky behaviors. Families can guide young people to make informed decisions and stay away from risky behaviors by having an honest and open communication. Furthermore, the family environment constitutes a fundamental risk factor.

“The family and myself are the choices of friends that I think are right, that is, number 1 is the family and number 2 is the choice of friends. As a result, they did what was necessary to keep us away from such things, so we became more conscious about staying away from such things to some extent.” (G17, Apartment, M, 25)

“For example, the reason I don't smoke is because we have cigarettes in our house. There is something like a vase and all cigarette models are put in it so that people who come to the house can buy them, I mean guest cigarettes. Now I had no other choice but to smoke.” (G15, Apartment, M, 24)

5. DISCUSSION

Urban regeneration projects are designed to address employment issues, revitalize the city, and enhance social and economic conditions (Sadioğlu et al., 2016). However, this study has found that these goals are often not met when gecekondü residents are relocated to new housing. Increased expenses can make life difficult for families in poverty, who may also lose their new homes (Alptekin, 2014). As Altındağ became more profitable, the middle and upper classes began to settle there, placing pressure on the local population to cope with increased living costs (Savran Penbecioğlu, 2022). Despite a lack of evidence in the current literature on the Gültepe neighbourhood, participants indicated that there has been a notable increase in the number of Afghan and Syrian immigrants settling in Gültepe gecekondü properties following 2020. This is attributed to the relatively low cost of rent.

Individuals in Gültepe suffer from urban poverty. Altındağ, a district in Ankara, struggles with high crime, a large informal economy, and social isolation

(Sadioğlu et al., 2016). Despite the local government's portrayal of urban regeneration as a cleansing project, residents reported that suspected gang members moved into the half-demolished and deteriorating gecekondu structures following the displacement of the original dwellers (Aykaç, 2024).

Police in Gültepe reportedly treat young people as criminals, who cannot escape stigmatization even if they have not committed any crime (Aksungur, 2006). Participants in the study also mentioned feelings of exclusion. Depressed areas are often considered dangerous and carry a negative stigma (Çetin, 2012; Alptekin, 2014). Discriminatory practices are not limited to the former gecekondu owners in the neighborhood or young people who exhibit risky behaviors.

Urban poverty in Gültepe leads to various social problems, including risky behavior and illegal activities. Residents face psychological disorders, prejudices, and discrimination. Sipahi (2016) highlights that security is a major issue raised by "new urbanites," or migrants, causing unease among locals as cities become crowded. In Türkiye, ethnic, racial, and class tensions remain low, but the middle and upper classes' desire to distance themselves from poorer residents is justified by "security" concerns, mirroring global trends (Erman, 2012). Furthermore, lower-class residents are often denied involvement in the decision-making process, which is in line with the existing literature on the subject (O'Neill et al., 2023).

Participants noted that the cost of living has risen. It was also noted that people here work in unskilled jobs. Although it is known that crime rates have increased in Gültepe, it is stated that the gangs come from outside (Güzey & Aksoy, 2014). Bektaş and Türkün (2017) also revealed that although drug trafficking has decreased, it is still a major problem.

Gültepe is a peripheral area within the city centre with diverse political and ethnic identities. However, the number and activity of the Roma and Kurdish communities in the 1970s have decreased over time (Aykaç, 2020). The spatial clustering of Gültepe is thought to be the result of local ties. People from the same regions tended to live together and formed different neighborhoods within the city (Aykaç, 2020; Bektaş & Türkün, 2017).

The phenomenon of NEETs is a significant problem for many young people in Altındağ. Türkiye has one of the highest NEET rates among OECD countries, with a higher likelihood of young women being NEET (Lüküslü & Çelik, 2022). According to Turkish Statistical Institute (2023) in 2022, the NEET rate was 24.2% among individuals aged 15-24 in Türkiye. The Gültepe area is undergoing urban regeneration, yet faces significant challenges due to high levels of poverty, low levels of education, and limited job opportunities. The lack of security and poverty among the majority of the population, including those living

in gecekondu settlements, has led to the labelling of their labour as "unskilled" (Aykaç, 2020). The majority of employed youth are in unskilled or minimum wage roles, or are hoping to be.

Another noteworthy finding of the study is that a significant proportion of young individuals exhibit a lack of hope for the future. Harris et al. (2002) found that the more classmates and other schoolmates had low expectations for their future, the more likely they were to engage in risky behavior. A study found that individuals with a "present-hedonistic" attitude ("living like there's no tomorrow") exhibited reduced savings, increased expenditure on alcohol, and a greater propensity to engage in gambling (Filipski et al., 2019).

In areas with high poverty rates, low education levels and schooling rates, informal social control is reduced and mechanisms to prevent young people from engaging in risky behaviors are insufficient (Sampson et al., 2002). Urban regeneration projects are often presented as an effective method to reduce crime rates (Alonso et al., 2019). However, in this study young people did not perceive social, economic and cultural changes, and reported that crime and risky behaviors continue. Growing up, living, and spending time in the area are prime causes of being exposed to risky behaviors. Young people's substance use is affected by the neighborhood's socio-economic status (Jackson et al., 2014). A different study showed that young people who stayed longer in disadvantaged neighborhoods had different substance usage (alcohol, cigarettes or drugs) in comparison to young people living in neighborhoods with higher socioeconomic status (Wodtke et al., 2011). Living in deprived areas increases the likelihood of engaging in disruptive behavior (Haynie et al., 2006; Orihuela et al., 2020). Moreover, the absence of positive role models and lack of good family role models are detrimental factors that adversely affect family functionality (Byrnes & Miller 2012).

Exposure to risky behaviors increases the likelihood of engaging in them. Studies indicate that witnessing community or peer alcohol use is a significant risk factor for alcohol consumption among both young people and adults in society (Jackson et al., 2014). Living in areas with low education, high unemployment rates, and high levels of criminal activity is another reason why young people exhibit risky behaviors. Unemployed young people are likely to drink and smoke more (Janlert, 1997) and engage in dangerous activities (Plessz et al., 2020). Being part of communities that have these traits could make young people more likely to engage in risky behaviors at a younger age.

Parents move to gated communities to protect their children from risky behaviors. A study conducted in Gültepe indicates that 99% of the population has been relocated. Among the title holders, who previously owned gecekondu

properties, the rate is only 1%. This suggests that the owners have moved out (Güzey & Aksoy, 2014).

At the same time, many young people want to live in safer neighborhoods to raise their families. Wiig et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of parents striving to provide a safer and more positive environment for their children, especially if they have witnessed violence. Alver (2007) argues that the primary motivation for gated communities is the yearning for a 'secure life'. Accordingly, parents employ such communities as a safeguarding mechanism to protect their children from hazardous behavior and adverse events they might have experienced in their local vicinities. Furthermore, familial characteristics, such as parental marital status and income, exert a significant impact on a family's housing decisions. Previous neighborhood conditions influence these factors, which impact children's educational achievement (Wodtke et al., 2011). This highlights the importance of the duration of stay in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The Gültepe neighborhood is still seen as a hazardous place where people engage in dangerous and unlawful activities. Common risky behaviors in this area include gambling, using substances, marrying at a young age and quitting school. A research focused on the Gültepe police records, revealed that the number of narcotics-related crimes had increased (Güzey & Aksoy, 2014). The implementation of state-led urban regeneration projects has frequently resulted in the exacerbation of vulnerabilities in neighbourhoods that are already characterised by high crime rates (Erman, 2007). This is due to the socio-economic and psychological impacts of gentrification and displacement, which can lead to an increase in risky behaviours (O'Neill et al., 2023; Squires & Booth, 2015). The results strongly align with prominent findings in the literature. A meta-analysis indicated that youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods develop higher levels of physical aggression (Chang et al., 2016).

While gambling problems may not be considered as critical as substance abuse, violent behaviors, drug use and school dropout, they still carry a substantial threat to the safety and welfare of young individuals (Sansanwal et al., 2016; Derevensky et al., 2019). Substance misuse and survival sex are prevalent in Gültepe. The fact that young people use drugs to engage in sex work, and vice versa, further complicates the situation (Azim et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2020). Factors such as social settings and participation in social activities influence the risk of hazardous substance use (Willis et al., 2022). A meta-analysis revealed a negative correlation between neighborhood disorder and residents' health outcomes. These outcomes include mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression, as well as increased substance abuse (O'Brien et al., 2019). Given

that youth residing in low-income countries and those suffering from depression are at elevated risk of engaging in risky behaviours, this situation is of significant concern (Pozuelo et al., 2022).

When examining protective factors, family, friends and spirituality are the most important. Religion helps people cope and protects against risky behaviors (Hardy et al., 2019). Risky behaviors can be learnt from family, friends or media (Johnson & Mendoza, 2019). Another protective factor might be spending free time in a controlled manner. Since the early 2000s, there has been an expansion of youth centers in Türkiye, such that, by the 2020s, they were in operation in every province. Youth centers provide a range of activities and services for young people to engage in during their leisure time. Their services are free of charge, offering young people access to courses and activities that can enhance their skills and abilities. A study has shown that youth centers play a significant role in equipping young people with problem-solving abilities (Arslan & Selçuk, 2023), particularly among those who frequently utilize these centers during their free time. This study's findings align with this, as the Altındağ Youth Center emerged as a key protective environment. However, this protective role highlights a central paradox of the regeneration project: the primary social support mechanism identified by youth appears to operate separately from the main regeneration strategy. The fact that this center provided a safe space (a finding also noted as a sampling limitation) suggests the formal regeneration project failed to create its own integrated social support systems, leaving this crucial role to pre-existing or parallel structures.

Young people in Gültepe tend to avoid parks and recreational areas, limiting their participation in sports and physical activities. This aligns with research suggesting a link between residing in high-crime neighborhoods and mental health issues (Baranyi et al., 2021). Local crime can impact mental health through coping mechanisms. Studies show that residents in high-crime areas are more likely to exhibit avoidance behaviors like reduced physical activity (Yu & Lippert, 2016) and turn to potentially harmful coping strategies such as smoking or substance abuse (Fleischer et al., 2015). This potentially explains why Gültepe youth themselves associate their environment with risky behaviors.

In Türkiye specifically, a study shows that professionals working with young people active in urban transformation areas report that “the perception of safety in the neighborhood is still weak,” that the use of spaces is low, and that the social structure has weakened (Ayalp & Tuncay, 2023). In this context, experiences such as “the disadvantage of remaining silent,” “feeling under siege,” or “unequal power relations” in Gültepe have also been highlighted in the literature related to the process of spatial and social restructuring. These results

are consistent with the literature and align with the findings of previous studies (Erman, 2017; Erman & Hatiboğlu, 2017).

5.1. Limitations

One of the significant limitations of this research is that young people were hesitant to participate in interviews, which may have limited the depth of information they were willing to provide. Additionally, the researcher is an outsider, and participants did not fully trust the researcher. While this did not prevent the collection of rich data, it may have impacted the candor of the information, potentially introducing social desirability bias. Moreover, due to COVID-19 lockdowns, there was a limited range of individuals available for interviews during the study. Several interviews took place at the Altındağ Youth Center. The participants recruited there were individuals who actively use the center's services, and they generally displayed less risky behaviors. This may reflect a sampling bias, but it also emphasizes the importance of youth centers as a protective factor.

6. CONCLUSION

The study indicates that young people in the Gültepe urban regeneration area engage in risky behaviors due to a combination of factors, including urban poverty, socioeconomic status, time spent in the neighborhood, and sense of belonging. Despite the high level of social interaction within the neighborhood, risky behaviors are perpetuated by a lack of trust and the absence of positive role models.

The findings indicate strategies for preventing harmful conduct among this demographic and protecting young people. These strategies include addressing inner-city poverty, eliminating social and economic disparities, strengthening community ties, promoting positive role models, and enhancing education and vocational opportunities. Moreover, it is crucial for parents to assume a more active role and establish closer, appropriate connections with their children to ensure their safety from risky behaviors.

Encouraging social activities such as sports and arts can help young people feel more connected to their communities, which is important for their sense of belonging. Urban regeneration projects should prioritize the needs of young people. To reduce risky behaviors, municipalities must move beyond physical infrastructure and implement targeted social work interventions. This includes establishing community-based social centers and deploying detached youth work (street social work) teams to engage with marginalized youth in their

own environments. Furthermore, given the displacement and exposure to violence identified in this study, trauma-informed counselling services should be offered, and neighborhood councils with genuine youth participation must be established.

To address risky behaviors in regenerated urban areas in Türkiye, a systematic and holistic approach is essential. This includes combatting poverty and economic disparities, creating a feeling of community, and assisting families and society. Furthermore, it is essential to promote positive role models and enhance educational and employment opportunities. There is very limited information available on disadvantaged groups in Gültepe, including children, the disabled, the elderly, sex workers, the homeless, and those in extreme poverty. Conducting future research on each target group can reveal their problems and needs, which is crucial for designing evidence-based social policies and tailored social work interventions that can begin to rebuild the social fabric torn apart by the regeneration process.

7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest between the authors.

8. FINANCIAL SUPPORT

This study did not benefit from any funding or support.

9. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MÇA, TT: Idea;

MÇA, TT: Design;

TT: Review;

MÇA: Collection and/or processing of data;

MÇA: Analysis and/or interpretation;

MÇA: Literature review;

MÇA: Writing;

TT: Critical review

10. ETHICS COMMITTEE STATEMENT AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY COPYRIGHTS

Ethical approval was obtained from the Hacettepe University Ethics Commission (Date: 03.12.2020, No: 35853172-300-E-0001348081).

The study complied with the principles of the ethics committee and necessary permissions were obtained in accordance with the principle of intellectual property and copyright.

11. USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) TOOLS

AI tools were partly used only for language editing in this study.

12. DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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