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Research Article

Rethinking Street Social Work: A Theoretical and Ethical Analysis of Outreach Practice

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Abstract: This article examines the ethical and methodological foundations of street social work as a form of outreach practice. Street social work is defined by a supply-oriented, low-threshold, and spatially sensitive approach, shaped by outreach, linkage, and advocacy functions. Rather than pursuing comprehensive change, it seeks to improve individuals' living conditions within their existing physical and social environments. Accordingly, the quality of the relationship between social worker and client is as central as the intervention itself. Methodological features such as non-verbal communication, physical positioning, spatial awareness, relational equality, and continuity move the practice beyond technique, framing it as an ethical field of action that intersects with Kantian, utilitarian, and radical traditions in social work ethics. Street social work is therefore positioned not merely as an alternative to office-centred models, but as a holistic intervention that supports people exposed to social exclusion in line with human dignity, non-maleficence, respect for difference, the protection of human rights, and social justice. Ultimately, it should be understood not only as a field-specific practice tool, but also as an ethical necessity for advancing rights-based and socially inclusive social policies.

Keywords: Street Social Work, Outreach Social Work, Social Work Ethics, Low Threshold Services

1. Introduction

In recent years, street social work has attracted growing attention in the social work literature and has become an important field of practice, yet its conceptual, theoretical, and methodological contours remain insufficiently defined. Situated outside classical office-centred services, it refers to interventions conducted in public or semi-public spaces that are not pre-structured by the social worker and that involve face-to-face, proactive outreach to hard-to-reach individuals (Andersson, 2013, p. 68).

This descriptive framework alone does not clarify the professional status or necessity of street social work. Historically, early forms of social work emerged directly on the street through on-site outreach interventions and later evolved into office-centred professional models (Toseland, 1981). Worsening urban problems—such as social exclusion, poverty, migration, homelessness, and substance use (Lenhardt, 2024; Cano-Hila, 2019; Kaygalak, 2001; Şan & Küçük, 2018) have renewed the need for street social work. As more people live in public spaces or fall outside institutional support systems, this form of intervention has come to be regarded not merely as an option, but as a necessity.

International studies show that street social work functions as a distinct field within the continuum of social work, complementing office-centred services and contributing to the realisation of welfare rights (Grymonprez et al., 2016; Cortis, 2011; Clarke, 2004).

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They also emphasise its role as a critical instrument for advancing social justice, strengthening social inclusion, and giving practical expression to social work's ethical commitments (Andersson, 2013; Diebäcker & Wild, 2020; Hill & Laredo, 2019). [1]Taken together, these accounts suggest that what remains contested is not only the scope of street social work, but also the grounds on which it is justified as a professional intervention in public space. Put differently, the debate turns on the conditions under which outreach becomes ethically legitimate and professionally necessary, rather than merely expedient.

Against this backdrop, this article addresses how street social work can be conceptualised not merely as a technique for engaging hard-to-reach groups, but as a professional positioning that makes the ethical and political dimensions of social work visible in the field. From this perspective, street social work is not an alternative method; it is a component that complements office-centred practice and, in its absence, leaves professional practice incomplete. Through the practical knowledge generated in the field, it can also exert pressure for social policies to become more accessible and equal. Accordingly, the achievement of social work's holistic goals—reducing social inequalities, safeguarding human rights, and strengthening social justice—depends on the operation of this outreach component in coordination with institutional services.

As an outreach approach, street social work seeks to reach the most excluded segments of society and rests on three methodological requirements: relationship-based practice (a professional bond grounded in trust and continuity), voluntariness (informed consent and participation at the individual's own pace), and low-threshold access (minimising spatial, administrative, and linguistic barriers). This triad enables access that is both possible and sustainable within the fluid and precarious context of the street, while ensuring that interventions are conducted on a non-oppressive and empowering ethical basis grounded in respect for autonomy and dignity. In this way, street social work offers a distinctive terrain of practice that addresses the institutional limitations of high-threshold, office-centred interventions and enables the principles of human dignity, equality, participation, and social justice to be realised concretely in the field.

In line with this framework, the study aims to:

(i) clarify the definition, scope, and methodological principles of street social work;

(ii) elaborate its ethical–political claims through its historical development, objectives, and modes of operation at the micro, meso, and macro levels; and

(iii) demonstrate the complementary and connective role this practice assumes in relation to institutional services.

To pursue these aims, the article develops its conceptual framework through a thematic and interpretive synthesis of the street social work/streetwork/outreach literature. The synthesis is organised around concepts that structure the field's methodological and ethical–political claims—low-threshold practice, harm reduction, relational engagement and trust-building, linkage and accompaniment, and advocacy. Relevant sources were identified through multilingual keyword searches (English, Turkish, and German), complemented by citation tracking from seminal texts and key debates. The selected works were read comparatively with attention to:

(i) how they define the scope of street social work and justify its core practice principles; and

[1] By contrast, few studies in the Turkish literature address street social work directly. Although there is substantial research on homelessness, substance dependence, and children who live or work on the streets, most of this scholarship does not examine street social work as a distinct field of practice. Beyond a doctoral dissertation (Karaman, 2024a), a journal article (Karaman, 2024b), and a book chapter (Acar & Erbay, 2013), there are no comprehensive studies that analyse street social work in its conceptual, historical, and ethical dimensions. Existing publications largely treat it as a methodological model, while the profession's ethical–political orientations and its role in promoting social inclusion remain less visible.

(ii) how these principles are linked to ethical and political commitments at micro, meso, and macro levels. In line with the argument advanced here, recurring debates were synthesised around three interrelated dimensions: low-threshold access as an ethical stance; situationally and spatially sensitive accessibility in public and semi-public spaces; and advocacy-oriented outreach/community work that translates street-level knowledge into institutional and policy change.

The study positions street social work as a domain in which the profession's ethical obligations are tested in the field and, particularly from a radical ethics perspective, opens a discussion of how the principles of autonomy, voluntariness, dignity, social justice, and inclusion are concretised in relationships with excluded individuals. Street social work is thus approached as an ethical–political field of intervention that operates in integration with public services—including health, education, social welfare, and criminal justice—while making visible, and pressing to transform, those dimensions of these systems that produce inequality.

2. The History of Street Social Work

Outreach practices in social work draw on a range of historical sources, including charitable activities, field-based work by religious institutions, ideologically grounded social movements, and state home visits for supervision and control (Dynamo International, 2009). The historical origins of social work reflect a similar pattern. Emerging in the early eighteenth century in response to inequalities produced by industrialisation and urbanisation, social work first developed as field practice in the industrial cities of England and Western Europe. Its earliest forms were street-based, grounded in an outreach orientation (Toseland, 1981, p. 227), and later evolved through community-based approaches (Hill & Laredo, 2019; Ferguson, 2004). The street thus became a key arena in which the social and economic inequalities produced by capitalism were made visible and relief activities were concentrated (Diebäcker & Wild, 2020, p. 4; Hill & Laredo, 2019, p. 28; Andersson, 2013, p. 172; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 12; Gibson, 2011; Payne, 2020).

Over time, however, the prevalence of outreach practices declined for two main reasons. First, with the growing dominance of psychoanalytic approaches, priority shifted to individual casework and therapeutic interventions, and services were increasingly relocated to offices (Toper, 2022; Sağlık, 2021; Zubaroğlu Yanardağ & Özmete, 2017). Second, from the 1970s onwards, outreach came under criticism: social workers' proactive engagement in service users' living environments—bringing services into the field without a formal request—was portrayed as "civilizing" and "paternalistic" (Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2010, p. 207). Civilizing refers to attempts to adapt marginal forms of life to dominant patterns of citizenship and order, while paternalistic denotes the subordination of autonomy and informed consent to expert decision-making "for their own good". Proactive, supply-led interventions were thus criticised for turning social work into an instrument of social regulation. The resulting paradigmatic shift centred individual autonomy and encouraged practice only with those who actively requested help. Access to services became conditional on criteria such as age, income, registration status, or documented need (Lipsky, 1980; Hasenfeld, 2010). Individuals unable to apply through formal channels remained invisible, and situations of neglect, abuse, and extreme deprivation often went undetected (Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2010).

Despite this discontinuous trajectory, street social work—emerging as a specific form of outreach—has regained visibility in key areas of social concern (Mikkonen et al., 2007; Gibson, 2011). Social-science-based projects directed at youth gangs in the United States in the 1920s are particularly noteworthy (Meyer, 2020; Gibson, 2011, p. 87). Rather than excluding young people on the basis of gang membership, these projects treated them as actors in social learning and developed strategies built around establishing contact through existing groups. Social workers acted simultaneously as advocates for young people's interests and as mediators between them and wider society (Meyer, 2020, p. 207). From the 1950s onwards, an "open-door" approach and long-term, field-based relationships became

core methods in outreach to young people and gradually expanded from gangs to all children and young people in street settings (Gibson, 2011, pp. 86–87).

After the Second World War, alongside the expansion of institutional systems in health, education, criminal justice, and social welfare, street social work became more widespread (Szeintuch, 2015). For individuals who remained outside these systems, it constituted a complementary and critical arena of intervention (Hill & Laredo, 2019). Techniques of community organising, social action, and reform proliferated (Ferguson, 2004) and played an important role in improving service access for minorities, the urban poor, and older people. Working with local leaders, social workers developed advocacy- and representation-based interventions that contributed to the institutionalisation of street social work (Toseland, 1981).

Following a period of stagnation in the 1970s and 1980s, street social work regained momentum in the 1990s, particularly in youth work. One illustrative case is the growing visibility of street-focused interventions in Türkiye from the late 1990s onwards, largely in response to public recognition of children living and/or working on the streets. Early initiatives were often organised through mobile teams and were later shaped by more coordinated child-protection programmes under public authorities, including governorates, provincial branches of the Social Services and Child Protection Agency, and metropolitan municipalities (Sayıta, 2008; Karatay, 2002; Tunç, 1998). In this context, pilot implementations of a "New Service Model for Children Living and/or Working on the Streets" were launched in major cities through Circular No. 2005/5 (Prime Ministry of the Republic of Türkiye, 2005; Acar, 2010). In the literature, these practices have typically been discussed under the heading of "mobile team/mobile work," with a primary focus on "street children" (Acar, 2006, p. 71).[2]

Within this historical trajectory, Hill and Laredo (2019, p. 2) interpret the renewed momentum of street social work in the youth field as a strategic repositioning of social work within a neoliberal context in which the welfare state has weakened and individuals are increasingly left to confront social risks on their own. While street social work remains an intervention method targeting specific groups, it also constitutes an alternative form of solidarity and resistance to the social exclusion generated by neoliberal policies. In a period marked by stagnation in welfare-state institutions, its flexible, accessible, and person-centred structure reflects an effort to maintain a presence in the field while safeguarding the core ethical principles of social work (Grymonprez et al., 2016, pp. 468–469). It therefore serves a critical function in preventing social exclusion and promoting social inclusion by reaching groups that remain outside conventional services—people experiencing homelessness, migrants, sex workers, substance users, and marginalised youth (International Federation of Social Work [IFSW], 2014).

[2] In Türkiye, early public programme documentation on children living and/or working on the streets framed the "mobile team" approach as a first-contact, street- and school-adjacent mechanism designed to establish initial engagement and link children to a stepped service chain (e.g., street offices and first-step/coordination units) (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi [TBMM], 2005; Acar, 2010). The same documentation indicates that, in some programme designs, mobile work was conceived in coordination with municipal police/law-enforcement actors and that security considerations were incorporated into implementation planning; however, available accounts suggest that the extent and routine character of law-enforcement involvement varied across provinces (TBMM, 2005; Acar, 2010). Complementing these sources, the author's professional field experience in Istanbul (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2005–2012) included close observation of street-based team practices, notably outreach conducted by professional staff without routine law-enforcement accompaniment. In more recent years, a nationwide framework under the Ministry of Family and Social Services, Directorate General of Child Services (T.C. ASHB Çocuk Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü), has institutionalised *Çocuklar Güvende* (Children Are Safe) teams as a mobile child-protection and outreach mechanism. The relevant directive defines two core team functions—detection/referral (street- and school-focused) and monitoring—and requires a minimum of two social work professionals per team, provincial coordination arrangements, and planning based on risk mapping. In street- and school-focused detection/referral, teams conduct field scans and respond to reports, identify children and record case information in the Ministry's information system, carry out social inquiry and reporting, and channel children and families to appropriate interventions, including social assistance and protective and supportive measures; where necessary, cases are escalated for urgent protection procedures (T.C. ASHB Çocuk Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, n.d.; T.C. ASHB Çocuk Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2023).

Since the 1970s, growing interest in this field has enabled an expansion of practice and, in parallel, intensified efforts to develop professional standards and institutional networks (Mücher, 2010, pp. 45–46). Analysing this development requires close examination of the conceptual boundaries of street social work and its position within the broader field of outreach practice.

3. Outreach Social Work and Street Social Work: Conceptual Framework

In the social work literature, outreach social work is used as a broad concept for interventions in which social workers directly reach individuals in non-office settings who face barriers to accessing services. This approach aims to reach not only those who apply to institutions, but also groups who are unable to make a request or establish contact with institutional structures. Within this scope, one of the most prominent practices is street social work. As a more specific form of outreach, street social work adopts a place-sensitive mode of intervention for individuals who live or spend time on the street. Although the two concepts are sometimes treated as synonymous, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon tradition the term outreach denotes a more general process (Andersson, 2013). The naming, organisational forms and funding sources of these practices vary across countries (Mikkonen et al., 2007). Clarifying the structural and contextual characteristics of the practice is therefore crucial for making sense of street social work.

The first structural characteristic of outreach social work is that it targets individuals and groups who cannot establish contact with social service systems and who mostly experience complex psychosocial and socio-economic problems (Grymonprez & Roose, 2022, p. 27; Hofer, 2020, p. 208; Hill & Laredo, 2019; Hill et al., 2016; Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2012, p. 607; Rots-de Vries et al., 2010). Second, the social worker personally reaches the service user where target groups are located, establishes the relationship in the field and carries out the intervention in that space; it is a proactive, supply-led form of intervention that does not wait for an individual request (Meyer, 2020, pp. 202-204; Neuburg et al., 2020, p. 167; Grymonprez & Roose, 2019; Szeintuch, 2015; Gibson, 2011, p. 81; Thole, 2000, p. 129; Galuske, 1998, p. 245). These features are fundamental to all outreach practices. Within this framework, the main difference that distinguishes street social work from other outreach forms is that intervention is conducted predominantly in public spaces-streets, parks, playgrounds, train stations and similar sites. The fluid and permeable dynamics of public spaces provide a distinctive terrain of practice in which the core function is to identify needs in situ through trust-based relationships and to produce rapid and appropriate responses (Diebäcker & Wild, 2020; Segulin et al., 2019; Gibson, 2011; Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2010; Fitzpatrick & Jones, 2005).

The principle of low-threshold access plays a critical role in establishing trust-based, sustainable and meaningful relationships with service users in public space (Hofer, 2020, p. 207; Hill & Laredo, 2019; Höllmüller, 2017; Hofer, 2016; Hill et al., 2016). Effective outreach to the most disadvantaged groups depends on organising services flexibly and accessibly within individuals' everyday life spaces and on reducing admission conditions and access criteria as far as possible. Elements that make access more difficult-such as application forms, diagnostic criteria, preconditions or referrals-are removed or minimised (Mayrhofer, 2012, p. 151; Galuske, 2007, p. 274; Korf et al., 1999). Street social work thus stands out as a low-threshold practice model that seeks to reach the most disadvantaged street population. Along with other structural features of the intervention, low-threshold access shapes not only access processes but also the ethical and political orientation of the practice. Based on interventions carried out in the service user's own space, and that are proactive, supply-led and low-threshold, street social work enables an ethical and political stance that recognises individuals as subjects within their social contexts and structures intervention on the basis of autonomy and informed consent (Arhant, 2020; Segulin et al., 2019; Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2010; Mikkonen et al., 2007).

Another salient dimension of the low-threshold approach is that it goes beyond momentary support and builds relationships that enable service users to transition into more comprehensive and sustainable service systems (Segulin et al., 2019; Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Streetwork/Mobile Jugendarbeit [BAG

Streetwork/Mobile Jugendarbeit], 2018; Szeintuch, 2015; Andersson, 2013; Korf et al., 1999). Within this framework, street social work serves as a "transitional space/bridge" that is not limited to crisis intervention but facilitates participation (Wild, 2020, p. 94; Gardow & Deobald, 2020, p. 196; Gibson, 2011, pp. 10, 81, 105). By establishing relationships on an equal footing with hard-to-reach service users, it gains direct access to their experiences, thoughts and perspectives, thereby generating context-specific practice knowledge. This knowledge makes it possible to critically discuss why some service users do not or cannot connect to institutional services, to reveal the limits of existing institutional structures and to create a basis for redesign along the axis of accessibility (Arhant, 2020). Realising these potentials as concrete impact depends on effective linkage between street and institutional services; when long-term service connections are not established, support provided on the street remains temporary and the cycle of structural exclusion cannot be broken (Hill & Laredo, 2019; Grymonprez & Roose, 2019; Mayrhofer, 2012; Gibson, 2011, p. 121).

Having set out the basic definitions of outreach social work and street social work, it is useful to examine theoretical approaches developed in the literature to classify these practices systematically. Such classificatory efforts aim to reduce definitional ambiguities arising from diverse practice forms and to enhance conceptual clarity. One pioneering study in this direction is that of Korf et al. (1999), who divide outreach services into three subcategories and define street social work as "detached outreach". Outreach is treated as an overarching concept, while its subtypes are explained through criteria such as level of intervention, target group and institutional attachment:

- Detached outreach: interventions in which social workers, without being tied to a fixed service centre or institutional structure, contact individuals in public or semi-public spaces such as streets, bars, cafés, and train stations. The aim is to establish relationships, facilitate access to support systems or indirectly encourage behaviour change. Street social work largely overlaps with this category.
- Domestic outreach: practices that provide direct support in the home environment, primarily to older people and families.
- Peripatetic outreach: interventions carried out in institutions such as prisons, schools, hostels or social housing where individuals are located.

These classifications offer a useful framework for identifying the main modes of operation of outreach social work and for clarifying the position of street social work within this broader whole. Nevertheless, Andersson (2013, p. 68) argues that broad definitions encompassing very diverse target groups and contexts risk obscuring the distinctive characteristics of outreach or street social work. Defining outreach services in a clear and well-delimited manner, she suggests, will both increase professional effectiveness and strengthen methodological foundations (Andersson, 2013, p. 184). In this respect she proposes the following definition:

> "Outreach work is a social activity that aims to establish contact and provide linkage to existing resources. This activity is conducted in environments that are not controlled or organised by the fieldworker and is directed at individuals and groups who are normally difficult to reach and who are in need of easy access to support."

Within this framework, street social work represents a more specific form of practice carried out in public or semi-public spaces such as streets, parks and underpasses. This definition, while summarising the common features of outreach approaches, also makes visible the ethical, structural and methodological foundations of street social work. Once this conceptual framework for outreach social work has been clarified, it becomes possible to proceed to a discussion of the specific aims and target group of street social work.

4. The Aims and Target Group of Street Social Work

Street social work practices began in the early twentieth century with interventions targeting urban poor youth and, from the 1970s onwards, expanded to people who use substances, individuals experiencing homelessness, sex workers and migrants (Diebäcker & Wild, 2020, p. 4; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 25). Today this form of service focuses on highly heterogeneous and disadvantaged groups such as individuals with mental health problems, people released from prison and their families, older people, victims of violence, disasters or war, people experiencing homelessness and children who live or work on the streets (Hill & Laredo, 2019, pp. 6, 12; Szeintuch, 2015; Mücher, 2010). Because classical office-centred models are predominantly grounded in structured, institutional and result-oriented interventions, they fall short in responding to the needs of this target group, which is characterised by complex problems and difficulty in complying with rigid service criteria (Karaman, 2024, p. 53; Mikkonen et al., 2007). By contrast, street social work-by virtue of its low-threshold character, supply-led orientation and capacity for direct contact in the field-develops a flexible and inclusive mode of intervention that can establish initial contact with individuals who remain outside the system and have become invisible, while respecting their current living conditions (Meyer, 2020; Hill & Laredo, 2019).

Within this framework there is a direct relationship between the target group of street social work and its aims. In demand-led service models, access to support is often conditional upon requirements, thresholds and compliance criteria, forcing those who wish to benefit from services to adapt themselves to the existing system (Diebäcker & Wild, 2020, p. 1; Diebäcker, 2019, p. 542). Due to its supply-led structure, street social work does not seek to adapt individuals whose ways of life conflict with dominant norms; rather, it aims to contribute to their ability to lead a more humane life under their current conditions (Diebäcker & Wild, 2020, p. 1). The primary aim is not compulsory change, but co-constructing the conditions that make change possible and supporting the person's participation in this process in line with their own life rhythm and level of readiness (Hill & Laredo, 2019; Andersson, 2013).

Because its target group largely consists of marginalised service users facing structural barriers, street social work extends beyond a model that merely provides individual support. Knowledge generated through direct encounters in the field with people who cannot be reached by office-centred services is used to reveal and transform the structural barriers that institutional arrangements create in access to services (Stoik, 2020; Krisch, 2008). In this way, the relationship established with individuals not only fosters personal empowerment but also increases the public visibility of marginalised populations, nurtures collective awareness against exclusion, challenges practices of othering and, at the meso level, makes institutional practices more inclusive and, at the macro level, reduces social exclusion and strengthens social justice (Szeintuch, 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 18; Meyer, 2020; BAG Streetwork/Mobile Jugendarbeit, 2018). These functions are enabled by professional roles grounded in advocacy and public relations (Hill & Laredo, 2019, p. 11; BAG Streetwork/Mobile Jugendarbeit, 2018; Killian & Moritz, 2020, p. 405), which are crucial both for making individual experiences visible and for enabling excluded groups to reconnect with social systems. Accordingly, the aim of street social work is not confined to directing people who live on the streets towards a life deemed merely "appropriate" or "non-threatening"; with its objectives of creating safe spaces, ensuring stability, building relationships and supporting access to resources, it constitutes an empowering, multidimensional and holistic intervention process (Gibson, 2011, p. 81; Bodenmüller & Piepel, 2003, p. 76). From a functional perspective, the aims of outreach social work practices can be grouped along three main axes: making contact, establishing linkages and advocacy (Stoik, 2020; Haag, 2020; Segulin et al., 2019; Grymonprez et al., 2016; Andersson, 2013; Gibson, 2011; Dynamo International, 2009; Mikkonen et al., 2007, pp. 20-23).[3]

[3] All classifications and explanations presented in this section are developed by the author, drawing on the shared approaches to the aims of social work found in the referenced literature.

- Making contact; constitutes the socio-political basis of street social work and is the starting point of the intervention process rather than a goal in itself. Its main objectives are early intervention (timely identification and response to social and health problems), risk reduction (mitigating risky behaviours through information, counselling and referral), emergency support (meeting basic needs under unstable conditions), building social support systems (creating continuous and reliable support networks) and empowerment (strengthening the self-confidence, self-awareness and self-respect of people who live on the streets).
- Establishing linkages; expresses the capacity of street social work to connect individuals who have remained outside the system with existing services, particularly where institutional services cannot reach or are ineffective. Core activities include providing information and motivation about available services and analysing barriers to participation by collecting qualitative data on why existing systems are not sufficiently inclusive, then developing solution strategies on this basis.
- Advocacy; demonstrates that street social work goes beyond responding to individual needs and takes on the struggle against structural inequalities. Key activities are producing and communicating knowledge-systematically gathering data on living conditions and needs and presenting them to decision-making mechanisms-and promoting participation by supporting the active involvement and representation of the target group in policy-making processes in the name of social justice.

The ability of street social work to realise these aims depends on meeting specific methodological requirements. It is therefore necessary to address these requirements and the methodological foundations of street social work together with the intervention process.

5. Methodological Foundations and Intervention Process of Street Social Work

A review of the literature on *in situ* outreach social work suggests that this field still rests on a comparatively limited methodological discussion base (Payne, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2000, p. 262). Andersson (2013) characterises it as a "strange" contradiction that, although social work historically emerged as a street-based practice, *in situ* outreach has remained secondary in methodological and conceptual terms. Kirkpatrick (2000) locates a key source of this gap in the fragmented way field-based practices such as street social work are addressed within issue-specific domains—such as homelessness, substance dependence, youth, or sex work—which rarely cumulate into a cross-field methodological debate.[4] Nevertheless, the existing literature and accumulated practice experience point to two core elements shaping the methodological foundations of street social work: the ethical principles of the profession and the distinctive characteristics of the public and semi-public spaces in which interventions take place.

The first element, the ethical framework, encompasses not only intervention ethics—such as professional boundaries, voluntariness, confidentiality, autonomy, and non-maleficence—but also broader values including respect for human dignity, social justice, self-determination, and human rights (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2024; IFSW, 2014; International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014). Because street social work is frequently conducted with individuals who have experienced social exclusion or negative encounters with social service systems, this ethical stance functions both as a normative framework and as a constitutive principle of practice. One of its strongest features is its emphasis on relationships in which service users are recognised as dignified, valuable,

[4] In Türkiye, street- and outreach-oriented practice has largely been framed—both in service delivery and in the academic literature—through the lens of child protection and "mobile work/mobile teams" focused on street-involved children, rather than as outreach or street social work as a distinct cross-field practice tradition. This framing has also contributed to the kind of issue-specific fragmentation identified by Kirkpatrick, limiting the extent to which methodological knowledge accumulates into a sustained cross-field debate.

and unique subjects (Gibson, 2011; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 12). While this principle is central to all social work, hierarchical office-centred services often struggle to realise it in practice. By contrast, street social work is offered to individuals and takes shape only with their acceptance; without a non-hierarchical, horizontal relationship, communication cannot begin. Equality-based relationships are therefore a precondition for access and intervention. The horizontal relationships built in the field form the basis for sustainable interaction grounded in mutual trust and enable the realisation of initial contact (Wyss, 2020).

The second element shaping the method of street social work is the "street" itself—that is, the specific conditions of public and semi-public spaces where intervention occurs. These spaces are not merely physical locations but social arenas that shape the form, nature, and limits of practice. Street social work is therefore not understood as a service consisting solely of one-to-one interactions with service users, but as a relational intervention embedded in the multilayered physical, social, and political environments that structure everyday life (Galuske, 1998, p. 245; Gibson, 2011). Practitioners' strategic positioning is influenced not only by street populations' spatial practices, mobility, and relationships with space, but also by the attitudes of other actors, including local residents, security forces, and local authorities (Segulin et al., 2019; Hill & Laredo, 2019; Gibson, 2011; Galuske, 1998). This network of interactions situates intervention within a context characterised by unpredictability, risk, flexibility, and constant readjustment; professional relationships, intervention tools, and reflexes are shaped under these conditions (Rabe-Kleberg, 1996; Clarke, 2004; Wild, 2020). Consequently, the method of street social work rests not only on technical knowledge and skills, but also on the capacity to read spatial contexts, operationalise ethical principles in practice, and sustain a flexible yet principled stance in relationships with service users.

In line with this ethical and spatial framework, the first step of intervention involves a multidimensional analysis of space (BAG Streetwork/Mobile Jugendarbeit, 2018; Dynamo International, 2008). The street functions as a dynamic arena of observation and analysis in which social relations unfold, hidden needs and deprivations become visible, and opportunities for intervention emerge (Gibson, 2011, pp. 113–115). This analysis includes mapping the physical environment—such as accessibility, safety, infrastructure, and flows—and examining the everyday practices of target groups, their relational networks, and their positioning within the city. In this process, social workers adopt the stance of observers and temporary guests, maintaining reflexive positioning and attentiveness to power asymmetries (Diebäcker & Wild, 2020; Meyer, 2020; Stoik, 2020; Wyss, 2020; BAG Streetwork/Mobile Jugendarbeit, 2018).

The second step is the construction of the professional relationship between social worker and service user (BAG Streetwork/Mobile Jugendarbeit, 2018; Dynamo International, 2008). In street social work, practitioners' positioning as accessible, consistent, and reliable figures is critical to successful intervention (Gibson, 2011, p. 125). From the initial encounter onward, the aim is mutual recognition, trust-building, and sustainable interaction. Relationship-building relies not only on verbal communication but also on physical and emotional continuity in space, the accurate reading of non-verbal cues, and the creation of safe or temporary spaces for counselling (Haag, 2020; Wild, 2020; Diebäcker, 2019, p. 544). Maintaining continuity in street settings requires particular effort due to the mobility of both environments and service users (Bekaroğlu Doğan, 2024). Over time, service users observe and evaluate practitioners' stability and approach, gradually developing familiarity with a consistent and reassuring presence (Wild, 2020; Gibson, 2011, p. 125). Practitioners' physical positioning and body language in public space also play a decisive role in shaping how they are perceived. As Haag (2020) metaphorically suggests, the street is a "living room" for the service user and a space of "visiting" for the practitioner, requiring respect for psychosocial boundaries and for the social order created by service users themselves (Wild, 2020).

The psychosocial conditions of service users are equally critical. Encounters often occur at moments of acute social exclusion and vulnerability (Andersson, 2013). While some interactions coincide with explicit requests for help, many individuals are defensive, distrustful, or withdrawn. Initial contact may be perceived as an intrusion into private space and provoke reactions such as anger or aggression (Andersson, 2013, p. 179), posing risks for service users, practitioners, and the continuity of intervention (Wild, 2020). Practitioners must therefore closely monitor verbal and non-verbal signals, time interventions appropriately, and ground first contact in sensitivity to individuals' readiness. Respecting signals for distance by withdrawing rather than persisting aligns with trust-building, voluntariness, and ethical practice (Haag, 2020; Diebäcker, 2019; Andersson, 2013). Conversely, when help is explicitly requested, timely responses contribute to consolidating trust (Toseland, 1981).

Once trust-based interaction is established, the continuity and depth of intervention are shaped by the opportunities and constraints of spatial context. The transitory and unpredictable nature of public space, combined with the presence of multiple actors, requires practitioners to remain professionally alert and to adapt intervention strategies to situational conditions (Wild, 2020; Andersson, 2013; Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2010; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 12).

This dynamic context also defines key risk areas. Violence is among the most significant risks encountered (Wild, 2020, p. 92; Dynamo International, 2008) and may appear in direct or structural forms, following Galtung's (1969) conceptualisation. Direct violence includes assault, threats, harassment, self-harm, or aggressive reactions towards practitioners, while structural violence manifests through institutional barriers to basic needs, exclusionary spatial policies, and restrictive service regulations (Arhant, 2020; Diebäcker, 2020; Gibson, 2011, pp. 142–143; Dynamo International, 2014; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 44). For street populations, migrants, sex workers, substance users, and those living in deep poverty, these layered forms of violence often become an inseparable part of everyday life. Street social work must therefore be conducted with ethical grounding and situational flexibility that accounts for both visible and hidden forms of violence in public space. In this context, sustainable intervention depends not only on professional knowledge and skills but also on practitioners' capacity for real-time assessment, risk management, and ethical decision-making (Segulin et al., 2019; Dynamo International, 2014, 2009; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 18).

Beyond methodological foundations, street social work requires multilayered preparation at individual, institutional, and political levels. A critical individual dimension is practitioners' professional autonomy (Dynamo International, 2009; Clarke, 2004; Rabe-Kleberg, 1996), understood as the capacity to respond effectively to unforeseen situations, develop creative interventions, and make rapid decisions based on field expertise and sensitivity to urban dynamics (Dynamo International, 2014, 2009). For autonomy to be realised, planning frameworks must allow sufficient flexibility. While flexibility enhances autonomy and legitimacy (Clarke, 2004, p. 221), it also entails risks of arbitrariness. Ethical principles therefore provide boundaries that secure consistency, legitimacy, and sustainability of practice (Wild, 2020, p. 98).

The effective enactment of individual competencies further depends on institutional support mechanisms. Sustainable and institutionalised street social work requires regular supervision, in-service training, and team models that facilitate knowledge transfer between experienced practitioners and newcomers (Wild, 2020; Andersson, 2013; Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2010; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 12). Team diversity in terms of experience, ethnicity, and gender is particularly important in multicultural urban contexts, as cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication are central to effective intervention (Mikkonen et al., 2007, pp. 17–18). Gender-sensitive team configurations also enhance trust and safety in work with highly vulnerable groups.

Although street social work operates outside institutional settings, its effectiveness and sustainability depend on continuous interaction with them. Interventions are closely linked to referral mechanisms, institutional resources, and social policies.

Street social work emerged precisely because existing systems were unable to address the needs of certain groups (Karaman, 2024, p. 53; Grymonprez & Roose, 2019; Mikkonen et al., 2007). Its role therefore includes linking individuals to services. However, when institutional structures fail to provide lasting and responsive solutions, interventions risk becoming temporary and ineffective, leaving practitioners to build what Gibson (2011, p. 107) describes as a "bridge to nowhere." Meaningful outcomes thus depend both on the existence of institutional infrastructures and on their capacity for accessibility, inclusiveness, and change.

Finally, street social work requires a supportive socio-political framework. Two factors currently hinder the development of such support. First, people living on the streets are often excluded from perceptions of the "deserving poor" and are associated with irregular or off-system lifestyles, undermining rights-based access to services and threatening sustainability (Grymonprez & Roose, 2019, p. 34; Maeseele et al., 2012; Whiteford, 2008; McNaughton, 2008; Arnold, 2004; Fooks & Pantazis, 1999). Second, street social work does not readily produce short-term, quantifiable outcomes; its impact lies in long-term relationships and qualitative transformations in life-worlds (Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 12). Evaluation must therefore move beyond conventional performance indicators and attend to qualitative changes in living conditions (Andersson, 2013). Without addressing these structural constraints, it will remain difficult for street social work to consolidate itself as an effective and sustainable intervention model in social policy.

The following section analyses the complementary, transformative, and critical dimensions of street social work within the broader field of social work, with reference to the profession's ethical foundations.

6. Beyond Method: The Ethics and Politics of Street Social Work

Social work practice is grounded in an ethical framework that reflects the profession's core values and sets the direction and limits of intervention from the micro to the macro level. While social work ethics draws on Kantian traditions that regard the individual as a rational and autonomous subject, it has also been institutionalised within utilitarian public policies and welfare systems (Banks, 2021, p. 70; Dominelli, 2009). This dual grounding places social workers in a structural tension between protecting service users' rights and fulfilling bureaucratic roles related to the supervision of public resources and the maintenance of social order. However, the ethical foundations of social work extend beyond autonomy and social utility. They also encompass radical commitments to questioning structural inequalities, opposing oppressive systems, and advancing social justice (Banks, 2021, pp. 70–71; Clark, 2006; Dominelli, 2002). The centrality of justice thus renders the professional role of the social worker particularly complex, defining not only non-maleficence and support for autonomy but also active contribution to a more just and inclusive social order as core professional obligations (Hatipoğlu, 2011).

One of the primary fields in which this ethical framework is concretely embodied is street social work. In the literature reviewed here, street social work is defined as a process of reaching marginalised groups—such as people experiencing homelessness, young people living on the streets, sex workers, migrants, and substance users—and connecting them with service networks. Whereas office-centred services often reproduce structural and symbolic thresholds, street social work seeks to overcome these barriers through a supply-oriented approach, low-threshold organisational forms, place- and context-sensitive outreach modalities, and advocacy-oriented practice. The discussion that follows focuses on three features shaping the ethical–political dimension of street social work: low-threshold access; spatially and situationally sensitive positioning; and community work and advocacy.

The foremost feature enabling street social work to be understood as an ethical–political position is low-threshold access. More than a technical condition of service acceptability, low-threshold access facilitates interventions that are responsive to individuals' circumstances by overcoming the structural

barriers produced by classical office-centred services. From this perspective, low-threshold access constitutes an ethical approach that foregrounds self-determination, autonomy, voluntariness, human dignity, social justice, and inclusion. Particularly in work with marginalised groups, it renders the foundational values of social work visible in practice (Diebäcker & Wild, 2020; Galuske, 2007). The exclusion of these groups often stems from the incompatibility of their ways of life with dominant social norms (Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 17). Low-threshold access transforms intervention into a process aligned with service users' lived realities by addressing cultural and structural barriers (Szeintuch, 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 18). It positions the practitioner not as an authority figure but as an egalitarian and supportive actor. Intervention is organised as a relational process that promotes active participation in decision-making, is grounded in informed consent and autonomy, and creates space for solutions that are meaningful within the service user's own life context rather than imposing externally defined goals (Arhant, 2020; Segulin et al., 2019; Hill & Laredo, 2019; Storø, 2013; Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2010).

The second defining feature is the social worker's spatially and situationally sensitive positioning in the field without imposing themselves on service users. In supply-oriented interventions, acceptability depends on respecting the dynamics of the spaces in which individuals conduct their everyday lives. Spatial and situational sensitivity is therefore a methodological necessity for establishing relationships and creating meaningful connections. Depending on the target group's needs, prior experiences with institutions, and the practitioner's relational approach, the social worker's presence in public space may be perceived either as supportive and trustworthy or as intrusive and controlling (Gibson, 2011, pp. 182–191). It thus becomes a methodological responsibility not merely to be present, but to reflect continuously on when, how, and with what intention one is present—to remain visible when invited and to withdraw when contact is not desired (Haag, 2020; Diebäcker, 2019; Andersson, 2013). This perspective supports an understanding of street social work defined less by access itself than by accessibility (Gibson, 2011, pp. 181–192; Grymonprez et al., 2016, pp. 468–469). An access-centred approach risks privileging service delivery over consent and turning street social work into an instrument of public control.[5] By contrast, an accessibility-centred approach structures intervention around voluntariness, autonomy, empowerment, and inclusion (Diebäcker & Wild, 2020, p. 1). In this sense, the supply-oriented principle constitutes an ethical stance that aligns practice with individuals' temporal readiness and spatial realities (Gibson, 2011). The relational strength of street social work lies precisely in this ethical–political orientation, which prioritises relationship and support over pressure and regulation (Diebäcker, 2019).

The third feature—supply-oriented community work and advocacy—highlights that belonging to a street population results not from individual deficits or choices but from structural inequalities, exclusionary policies, and institutional gaps (Hill & Laredo, 2019). When trauma and marginalisation are detached from their political and structural contexts and interpreted as individual failure, affected lives are removed from rights-based policy frameworks and reduced to compassion- or charity-based responses (Grymonprez & Roose, 2019; Tam, 2012; Clarke, 2004). Such approaches contradict the principles of justice and inclusion central to the radical ethical foundations of social work. In contrast,

[5] In Türkiye, street- and school-focused "mobile work" with children living and/or working on the streets has largely been framed within child-protection programming under mobile teams/mobile work, and the limited public documentation and regulatory texts at times position law-enforcement/municipal police as a complementary component (e.g., TBMM, 2005; Prime Ministry of the Republic of Türkiye, 2005; Acar, 2010). From the perspective of street social work's low-threshold, consent-based, and trust-centred positioning, this framing risks shifting outreach toward a security/public-order rationale and making practitioners' presence legible as surveillance rather than support. However, given the genre-limited nature of available sources, the author's field experience in Istanbul (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2005–2012) and ongoing oral-history interviews indicate practices in which law-enforcement accompaniment was not uniformly routine and in which work extended beyond first contact toward relationship-based outreach, accompaniment and linkage, harm reduction, and advocacy. These accounts underscore the need for empirical clarification of how street-based work is actually enacted, including the visibility and role of law-enforcement in outreach encounters.

low-threshold accessibility combined with community work and advocacy reorients intervention towards a rights-based, social-justice-centred framework. In this way, the methodological strategies of street social work function as transformative tools that make excluded individuals' claims to rights publicly visible (Banks, 2021; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Diebäcker, 2019; Grymonprez & Roose, 2019).

Within this framework, advocacy operates on two interrelated levels. First, it strengthens the representation and participation of excluded communities in the public sphere through their own voices (Hill & Laredo, 2019; Friedman et al., 2014; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 18). Second, it contributes to structural change by conveying practice-based knowledge from the field to policy-makers (Szeintuch, 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2007, p. 18). Because street-living groups are often unorganised and lack institutional representation, low-threshold approaches are essential for enabling participation. Knowledge generated through direct, horizontal relationships with hard-to-reach groups feeds into social policy design by exposing and challenging the structural barriers that produce exclusion. Transformative impact is possible only when these structural dynamics are rendered visible and open to change; reducing individuals to labels obscures inequality, whereas politicising lived experience requires the advocacy capacity intrinsic to street social work (Arhant, 2020; Meyer, 2020; Diebäcker & Wild, 2020; BAG Streetwork/Mobile Jugendarbeit, 2018; Szeintuch, 2015).

On this basis, street social work cannot be reduced to a mere method. In terms of its aims, target groups, and strategies, it occupies a distinctive position shaped by the ethical principles of the profession and carries an explicit ethical–political claim. As a complementary interface operating in coordination with office-centred services, it establishes contact at otherwise inaccessible thresholds, generates trust and consent, facilitates engagement with institutional pathways where appropriate, and feeds practice-based knowledge back into service and policy design. When this connective function is absent, the ethical horizon of social work cannot be fully realised and the coherence of practice, access, and justice is undermined. Treating street social work solely as a technical "alternative" risks obscuring the deeper social critique and justice-oriented commitments embedded in the practice. Meeting these multilayered ethical responsibilities requires not only theoretical and ethical knowledge but also a high level of ethical awareness, professional disposition, and sustained commitment (Wyss, 2020; Reutlinger, 2020; Diebäcker & Wild, 2020, pp. 8–16; Cefaï, 2014).

7. Conclusion

Within outreach social work practices, street social work constitutes a distinctive, place-sensitive form of intervention situated outside institutional frameworks. Although its terminology and scope remain contested in the literature, at its core it refers to interventions based on access, communication, and mediation to resources in settings not directly organised by the social worker. By focusing on individuals and groups who are difficult to reach through office-centred practices and who require low thresholds and flexible conditions, street social work assumes a complementary role that strengthens social inclusion.

Within this framework, the methodological principles underpinning street social work are clearly articulated: a non-imposing, supply-oriented approach; spatial sensitivity, non-hierarchical and equality-based relationship-building; attentiveness to public space and community dynamics; continuity and consistency, low-threshold access; openness to non-verbal communication; and the strategic use of physical positioning. Taken together, these principles elevate street social work beyond a mere technical variation and render it visible as a professional stance grounded in ethical principles. In this sense, principles such as consent, voluntariness, low-threshold accessibility, confidentiality, and professional autonomy do not operate solely at the micro level of relationship-building; they also structure meso-level coordination within the street's actor ecology (e.g., municipal units, policing or municipal enforcement, schools, NGOs, and community networks) and establish ethical parameters for

how practice-based knowledge may legitimately inform macro-level social policy design. These principles provide practitioners with both orientation and capacity for action in fields characterised by intense ethical dilemmas.

The ethical principles of social work, informed by Kantian, utilitarian, and radical traditions, encompass respect for human dignity and autonomy, the promotion of welfare, and the advancement of social and environmental justice (Banks, 2021, pp. 70–71). Street social work concretises these principles in the field by recognising individuals not merely as "persons in need," but as dignified subjects with agency over their own lives. Intervention begins from where the person is, grounded in respect for their experience. Attending simultaneously to micro, meso, and macro levels strengthens the connection with a radical ethical orientation, through which individual problems are understood in relation to structural inequalities. In this way, street social work operates as a political practice that translates individual experiences of victimisation into claims on the social plane.

As demonstrated in this study, the principles of outreach, low-threshold access, and supply orientation make it possible to establish contact with individuals and groups whom office-centred services fail to reach and to generate rights-based support by linking them to institutional systems. When this function is carried out in coordination with office-centred services, a feedback loop of warm referral and information flow from the field to institutions can emerge. When this complementary link is absent, however, the aims and ethical principles of social work cannot be fully realised, and the integrity of practice, access, and justice is weakened. For this reason, street social work should be positioned not as a merely functional option, but as a principled necessity for achieving the profession's holistic aims. Taken together, these considerations indicate that the decisive question is not simply whether services "reach out," but under what ethical and institutional conditions street presence functions as support rather than as an extension of control.

Street social work thus becomes meaningful not simply through "going outside," but through the kind of presence it authorises in public space. Where low-threshold accessibility is not safeguarded by consent, confidentiality, and professional autonomy, street presence risks shifting from support to gatekeeping and, in security-oriented contexts, to surveillance. The policy task, therefore, is to institutionalise an ethical infrastructure of trust: binding guarantees that access does not depend on prior application or compliance; clear limits on public-order rationales in outreach encounters; and organisational arrangements that protect continuity, such as stable field teams, accountable warm-referral mechanisms, and coordination that preserves consent. Evaluation should follow the same logic, prioritising continuity of engagement, harm reduction, and demonstrable gains in rights access over simple counts of contacts or referrals. In predominantly office-centred systems, including Türkiye, these safeguards constitute the minimum conditions for developing street-based practice without reabsorbing it into mechanisms of control.

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