The Moscow street children project
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More and more young people are living on the streets of Moscow and getting involved in substance abuse and crime. The authors outline the effort being made by the International Health and Temperance Association to organize a response to this rapidly growing problem.

Of the 2 million children who live in Moscow, 250,000 are 11–18-year-olds who are, or are in danger of becoming, street children. In Russia as a whole, an estimated 50,000 children run away from home each year. In 1993, 5505 serious crimes were committed in Moscow by adolescents, of whom 1029 were not residents of Moscow. This reflects the fact that there is a growing number of vagrants and homeless people in Russia today.

In social, political and economic conditions which foster unemployment and crime, young people increasingly seek escape in the illusory world of drugs. It is estimated that 5 million young Russians have tried drugs and 500,000 are regular users. Child addicts are neglected and feel particularly useless, with no place in society.

The Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1959, states that “the child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity”. Hundreds of activists in the International Health and Temperance League and other organizations based in Moscow are working towards this goal. They include the Moscow City Council, the Department of Juvenile Crime Prevention and the Central Directorate of Internal Affairs.

The cornerstone of the approach used successfully in the past by the Association has been to bring children together to do useful work. In earlier days this led to the “school factories” in Russia, the student farms in Georgia, the “agricultural brigades” in Kazakhstan, the children’s workshops in the Ukraine, and the industrial training companies in Leningrad (St Petersburg) in which children made and sold clothing and footwear, built furniture and did repair work. With the rapid changes we are now experiencing, however, the number of adolescents with neither home nor school nor institution to take care of them is continually rising. As a result, many young people feel forced to resort to criminal activities.

The Moscow street children project aims to bring together the efforts of a large number of federal, municipal, social, charitable, religious, commercial and other organizations to overcome these problems. The project consists of the following eight areas of activity.
■ **Problem analysis.** In 1993, 40,271 adolescents were arrested in the streets and other public places; 7,437 of them were intoxicated, which is 42% more than in 1992. Of the 3,640 who drank spirits, 354 were admitted to hospital, 995 were put in care by the police, and 11 were recognized as chronic alcoholics. One in every six of the crimes recorded in the city was committed by an adolescent. From 1983 to 1992, the number of 14–17-year-olds in Moscow increased by 25%, but the number of crimes committed by people in this age group increased by 100%. As a first step towards counteracting these alarming trends, data must be gathered and analysed, particularly with regard to drug abuse. The Interior Ministry, as well as organizations concerned with education, health and welfare must make a concerted effort to obtain the necessary information.

■ **Analysis of existing services.** The relevant medical, legal, welfare, educational and other municipal services need to be analysed, as well as the work being done by voluntary groups. Recently there has been a proliferation of shops selling spirits at all hours, and this is thought to be directly linked to the rise in the number of street children and adolescent crimes. At present there is no proper treatment system for adolescent alcoholics and drug addicts.

■ **Project management.** A committee has been set up and a scheme has been devised to coordinate the work done by the relevant federal, municipal, commercial and social organizations. Negotiations on which organizations should carry out which aspects of the project are under way. The Russian Academy of Medical Science, one of the television channels and a number of businesses have expressed interest in participating.

■ **Priority action.** In the first place this involves training social workers, teachers, physi-

- cians, sociologists, psychologists, law enforcement officers and volunteers. Courses are run almost every month in Moscow on how to teach "morality and health" to children. Educational and other institutions will be involved in such activities as forming anti-narcotics units, improving communication between parents and their children, setting up health and leisure centres and publishing information.

■ **Financing.** In the first place the project will rely on government allocations for drug addiction clinics, children’s health centres, and the necessary educational, welfare and law enforcement services. One of the commercial banks has opened a special account for the street children project in Moscow. The Russian Academy of Medical Science in Moscow has volunteered to provide treatment for a few dozen children, and other sponsors and donors are being sought, both within Russia and internationally.

■ **Expansion.** A special report on the current situation in Moscow will be prepared and forwarded to member organizations of the International Health and Temperance Association in other cities of the Newly Independent States, so that other initiatives can be started.

■ **Legislation.** Proposals will be formulated to improve the legislation protecting children, increase the legal responsibility of the state and its institutions for the welfare of children, and establish legal incentives for entrepreneurs to help solve the problem.

■ **International collaboration.** Collaborative links are being established with WHO and the International Organization of Good Templars, which are providing valuable opportunities for information exchange and mutual support.
We have rights that must be recognized and respected under all circumstances. We have the right to be loved, to be looked after, to be protected. No to war, yes to peace; we do not want to be prisoners of war. Each of us has the right to a nationality: our parents or those who act in their stead must advise us, guide us, respect us. There must no longer be child victims of war, of famine, of drugs, of prostitution, of lack of medical care, education, protection, and affection. We demand that the Convention on the Rights of the Child be adopted, signed, ratified, and, above all, applied in all countries of the world.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 (UNGA document A/RES/44/25). A summary was prepared by children of various countries and transmitted by them to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The above copy was written out by Robert Neil, aged nine.