

Russia's child criminals also sinned against prosecutor

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by Bernard Besserglik

MOSCOW, Feb 20, 2002 (AFP) - Russia's state prosecutor Vladimir Ustinov drew a grim picture Wednesday of the condition of the nation's young, reporting a relentless increase in the number of crimes committed by and against children.

Russian police took in more than 1.1 million minors for questioning last year, 310,000 aged 12 or under, including 1,600 who were subsequently accused of murder, Ustinov told reporters after parliamentary hearings devoted to the problem of Russia's runaway, homeless and abandoned children.

Around 300,000 of the children were found living rough in railway stations, at airports, and in the cellars of buildings, Ustinov said, calling for greater coordination between social ministries and law enforcement agencies.

Some 185,000 of the children were arrested for crimes and misdemeanours, including 14,800 for theft, 6,000 for armed robbery, and 3,000 for grievous bodily harm, Ustinov said. Around 45,000 of them were illiterate.

"We record more than 30,000 crimes and misdemeanours a year committed by adolescents under the influence of drugs or drink," he said, noting that there is "still no establishment specialising in getting children off drugs, even though this was provided for in a law passed five years ago."

Since then, "we have done nothing to halt the spread of drugs among minors," he said, backing a proposal for the compulsory treatment of teenage addicts.

There are officially around one million homeless children in Russia, though experts believe the true figure could be twice as high.

The children are an easy prey for criminal groups, particularly in the drugs trade, and in some cases for child-sex rings, the prosecutor noted, calling for tougher punishments for child pornography and sexual abuse against teenagers.

Studies indicate that there are 40,000 children living on the streets of Moscow alone, often turning to crime and prostitution to survive. Ustinov went on to establish a clear link between the crimes committed by children and the mistreatment to which they are subjected, noting "increasingly frequent cases of sexual and financial exploitation."

In the past five years, he added, Russian authorities recorded 190 cases of parents seeking to "sell" their children for money, often for child-sex

purposes.

"Last year more than 4,000 adolescents died at the hands of criminals, and 4,600 others were seriously injured," he said.

On Tuesday Nikolai Makarov, deputy state prosecutor, estimated that the number of street children was nearer to three million.

Warning that the criminalisation of children in Russia had reached dangerous levels, he told a conference that the rights of children were "violated almost everywhere."

Of the children picked up for questioning last year, 345,000 had never been to school, he noted, adding that law enforcers had recorded more than 100,000 violations of children's rights.

The issue has risen sharply in the political agenda since January 14 when Putin called for urgent measures to tackle the problem of abandoned and homeless children which he said had reached alarming proportions.

The collapse of large sectors of Russia's economy and welfare structures in the 1990s led to a significant loosening of family ties, exacerbated by unemployment and alcoholism, leading to a massive upsurge in what experts are calling "social orphanhood" -- the abandoning of children by parents unable to cope.

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