

System fails millions of homeless kids in Russia
By Peter Graff

MOSCOW, Feb 20 (Reuters) - Russia is letting millions of orphans and homeless children slip through the social net and fall prey to drugs, crime and illiteracy, Prosecutor General Vladimir Ustinov told parliament on Wednesday.

Russia has 700,000 registered orphans and children with no parental supervision, but Ustinov said experts believe the real number is two or three million.

"If we judge the spiritual and physical health of the nation by our youth, it will be no exaggeration to say the health of the nation is in danger," he told the State Duma lower house.

A barrage of statistics shows a system that is failing to protect children, and getting worse. Children are increasingly likely to become both criminals and victims of crimes, he said.

"Ever more frequently we come across cruel treatment of children, their economic and sexual exploitation and trade in minors," he said. His office has prosecuted 190 cases of children being sold in the last five years.

More than 1.14 million children were picked up by police for crimes last year -- twice as many as a decade ago.

Russian teenagers were 7.5 times more likely to be addicted to hard drugs than adults, yet there was no system in place to compel them to receive treatment for addiction.

Russia is not only failing to keep its children off the streets, it is failing to keep many of them in school.

For years Russia was proud of its high literacy rate. "But now, thousands of children are not passing through educational institutions," he said.

"We often find teenage offenders whose education doesn't match their age. Often they can't read at all."

A decade of post-Soviet economic decline has taken a severe toll on Russian families, with steep declines in life expectancy, and explosions of drug use and other social ills.

But many also say the hidebound Soviet-era welfare system has not moved with the times, especially in cases of children.

Hundreds of thousands of workers in three ministries focus on child welfare,

and although there are horror stories of some orphanages, most are well run and properly equipped.

But little aid is offered to families themselves, foster care is rudimentary, and children who are not assigned to institutions have scant access to public help.

Nearly all of the thousands of children living on the streets of Moscow come from other parts of the country and are barred from the capital's schools or orphanages.

Ustinov said President Vladimir Putin had written to parliament saying: "There are many (child welfare) programmes that produce no results. Either the programmes are bad or the bureaucrats are useless."