

"Survey of Runaway Youth in the Urals"

For some time we have tried to gather information on runaway Youth in the Soviet Union. Youth Support became involved in a variety of projects with the "Lenin Children's Fund". Those successfully completed included training programmes for Medical and Psychotherapy staff; Exchanges for Russian teenagers who spent time in London Schools; enabling gifted students to pursue degree courses; talking to Soviet Youth in schools and social clubs; advising on sexual and emotional health. We have published a number of essays and comments written by Russian Youth in this Journal. Our last and most exciting project was to have been the establishment of a 'Youth Support House Urals' - a counselling centre with residential refuge attached which would specifically cater to incest victims, abused youth and emotionally disturbed teenagers - most of which had hitherto been dealt with punitively if at all. One of the establishments which we visited regularly in the planning of our centre, was the hostel for runaway youth (see page 5) - the plight of these young people deserved our attention. The Soviet Union went through a period of intense turmoil and then ceased to exist during the period of our study. We began planning the study in 1991 at a time when the state was still communist, still poor but to a degree stable. The rouble was officially three or four to the pound and the hierarchy of local officials was present, albeit confused in the typical Russian style. There were few runaways, few street children, prostitution 'rich men's tarts'. During the following year the economy and society were overturned, all values seemed to be lost, children and youth were being left to fend for themselves in Moscow and the main railway stations were hiding places for young runaways who resorted to survival sex. It became acceptable for girls in reasonable families to earn the equivalent of their father's yearly salary by spending a few nights as call girls for rich tourists. This is not the first, and sadly probably not the last time that social upheaval has caused a surge of street children - the same thing happened in the wake of the Russian Revolution -

For us the result of political and social unrest meant that our survey material was out of date and unreliable as soon as it was collected. The funds put aside for our projects became worthless overnight and the hierarchy of colleagues we were working with collapsed resulting in the loss of important data.

" The kids there walking about who were free, well you could call it 'free' I suppose - Oh there were so many children. There were the Besprisornik - the dispossessed children - walking the streets, ...so many children, ...hopeless, ...

... they were afraid we would all die. It was so dangerous in Moscow. No food, children foraging in the street. There were different gangs trying to survive. One was the 'Papringunchi' - the jumpers. they lay in the snow wearing white sheets so you wouldn't see them and they had springs on their feet and they would suddenly spring up and rob you when you passed. There were such terrible rumours - another gang threatened to spit on you and give you syphilis if you didn't give them your food and money, or your boots. I had nightmares about them."

From "Retracing the Echoes"
(Youth Support Publications)

We had planned to survey 50 girls and 50 boys from Moscow and the same number from the Urals. The Moscow data and that on the Urals girls has been 'lost'. Nevertheless, we do have limited data on the Urals runaway boys which is set out below with the provisos that it may not be representative of any other part of the country and it also may be 'time expired'. For these reasons I have not attempted to set out the study in formal 'scientific' style but confine this report to narrative form for general interest only.

Data collection - We decided to use a simple questionnaire which was adapted from the HEAADS medical encounter form used in Los Angeles and supplied to us by Julia Pennbridge. Many of the research instruments used by the US team proved too sophisticated for our use for several reasons. We required an easily translatable form which for example would not categorise sexual practices too finely running the risk of confusing the patients or administrators of the questionnaires. The level of medical care, access to laboratory and sophisticated diagnostic tools was very limited in the area, thus we confined our health comments to general problems.

Questionnaires were prepared in London but administered by Dr Andrei Smirnov who had visited Youth Support House for

orientation and training and was permanently based in the Urals town of Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinburg). The boys were all interviewed in the detention centre / temporary children's home which was featured in our video recording (see above) and they had mainly been picked up by the militia from the railway station and off the streets. One of our Urals students Boris Slobodkin translated the records back into English.

Results:- Age and Family - The average age of the sample was 15 with the youngest runaway being 11 years old. They had on average two siblings and mainly came from two parent families often with a grandmother or both grandparents present -most had both mother and father in the household. These are unusually large families from the Russian point of view and thus there was some overcrowding and pressure on the young boys to leave.

Pattern of 'runaways' - Half ran away within their own town - a large industrial provincial town; 25% from another town in the same region and 25% from another region involving very long distances. 85% had only been away from home for 2 months and 15% for a year or more; most ran only once (50%); 40% 3 times and 10% a high number of times (max 25 times).

Activities/Crime - Sixty percent were involved in crime including all the long term and repeat runners, 23% were involved in gangs. Two of the older boys had managed to obtain some work.

Sexual Experience - Only 15% had experienced sex and the youngest intercourse was 13 years - thus this was not a largely sexually experienced or exploited sample. Only one boy of 14 had been involved in prostitution. All of the other reported sexual

"How old are you Alyosha?"

"Thirteen"

"Just thirteen - How do you like it here? Are you pleased you were found?"

"Yes, at first I thought this was a bad place, but now I think they're all right. I have to stay until my parents come"

"Do you want to see your parents? Why did you leave home?"

"I want to go home. I left because my friends were going. My friend had been badly beaten at home. I was found by the Militia and they ran off"

"Your friends must be frightened. Are you worried about them?"

"Yes, I worry very much. They are still travelling. I don't know where they are and I don't know what will happen to them. ..."

experiences were heterosexual involving vaginal sex.

Drugs - Only one boy took drugs - the same boy who had been involved in prostitution. 60% drank alcohol and the same percentage smoked. Alcohol was also used as a way to keep warm.

Health - 35% of the boys were suffering from malnutrition and 40% were significantly depressed.

Reason for leaving

home - 40% left after a family row but 50% left because their families turned them out or abandoned them - most did not wish to leave. 10% admitted to being bullied.

Comments - Overall the reasons leaving home are much the same as in other groups of runaways. When I spoke to individual boys and girls I did find that many had been physically abused although in the questionnaire answers this feature was masked by 'family rows'. Many of the children were from very poor rural households where physical chastisement was accepted as part of the norm. The economics of family life with children being turned out to fend for themselves is similar to the patterns seen in some South American street children.

For many years abuse of children, particularly sexual abuse was hardly spoken of and certainly not officially reported in the Soviet Union. Medical personnel are very aware of the

high level of incest and sexual abuse which does exist in overcrowded disordered families. Some of the rural areas are particularly affected. Dr Vadim Romanov, a gynaecologist who spent a 6 month training period at Youth Support described a high rate of incest and girls of 9 and 10 who became pregnant.

"...We were driving down yet another Leninski Prospect in a God forsaken town in the northern Urals. The incongruity, the contrast of new and old Russia was vividly apparent as the little old wooden houses, with their decayed carved ornamental windows and a few struggling Birch trees stood out starkly against the background of chimneys, cooling towers and smoke from the metal works - the heaviest metal plant in the region, that which produced the first steam engine in the Soviet Union - and placed conveniently right in the centre of town; Right where it can pollute the air to the fullest extent and prematurely blacken the ancient houses while it prematurely ages the inhabitants - that is, those who live long enough to age. The childhood leukaemia rate is the highest in the region due to the pollution.

Dust clouds pirouetted across the station square as a group of ragged children with pinched wind-tanned faces scuffed their worn through shoes as they patiently waited in the queue for the circus. The scene seemed from a past era, colourless except for the clown's face on the side of one of the trailers. Many of the faces looked eastern, definitely Asian rather than European with a good number of Romany people .. and I thought how caravans of performers must have travelled these towns for centuries. Here the travelling circus was still a major source of entertainment even in the nineties, no videos or computer games ... no arcades of bleeping toys. Just a dilapidated group of trailers with a motley set of circus animals, a camel who fell asleep and wouldn't get up for the children, a rather moth-eaten lion, a few horses ... but enough to bring some excitement into the children's lives.

And while I was resigning myself to being in a such austere, poverty ridden surroundings, another contrast glared out .. as we entered the station hotel - a typical communist post war building which could have been anywhere in the USSR - and walked through to the restaurant for a meal ... We had been expected and a special table was laid out on the balcony, overlooking the main floor. The four course meal which followed was one of the best I had eaten in Russia with touches of unexpected elegance - the swirls of carrot and cucumber flowers parodying the swirls of dust outside in the real world...."