

At-Risk Youth in Odessa: Opportunities and Challenges Abbreviated Report



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Introduction

Children and youth form one of the most significant demographics of any society. They are the future leaders, parents and economic providers. Yet, children and youth also form one of the most vulnerable populations and are subject to increased risk for poverty and social exclusion while growing up. At present in Ukraine, youth poverty, unemployment, homelessness and rising HIV/AIDS infection rates continue to be significant issues putting youth at risk, prompting the need for action at both the local and national level.

Conditions of poverty are causing a series of social problems. Today approximately 9 million children live in Ukraine, an estimated 65 000 of whom live in state-run children's institutions.¹ Furthermore, an estimated additional 40 000 to 300 000 children are living on the streets of Ukraine.² Children are in state-run institutions and living on the street for a variety of reasons, such as family poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, drug use, abuse, domestic violence, abandonment and neglect. A recent report from UNICEF outlines Ukraine's most vulnerable children as:³

- Children from disadvantages families;
- Orphaned children and children deprived of parental care;
- Street children;
- Children with special needs or disabilities;
- Children of labour migrants;
- Children of parents representing national minorities, such as the Roma;
- Children with HIV/AIDS;
- Children from single-parent families.

Social spending was drastically reduced to coincide with economic hardships following Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Low-income families were then put at risk as wages declined and consumer prices increased. Social spending increased between 2000 and 2007 although benefits for children are insufficient and fail to meet the subsistence minimum.

The family situation is a primary factor in the socialization of a child. Children who have been deprived of parental care or receive improper or insufficient parental care are considered to be at-risk. Family poverty reduces life opportunities for children and increases the chances of abuse and neglect. In 2007, more than one third of households with children were considered poor. The poverty rate in families with one child was 27.3% in 2007. For families with two children the poverty rate was 40.6%, and 64.6% for families with multiple children.⁴

Social exclusion of at-risk children is a problem in Ukraine. Stigmatization and social divisions serve to marginalise some of Ukraine's most vulnerable populations. Childhood is a formidable time when

¹ <http://www.unicef.org/ukraine/children.html>

² Ibid

³ <http://www.unicef.org/ukraine/15358.html>

⁴ Ibid

a child develops a sense of self and an understanding of the world around them. Marginalisation of children during childhood may lead to long-term psychological issues.

High rates of alcoholism in Ukraine result in devastating social consequences. Children of alcoholic parents are both subject to neglect and more likely to begin drinking in excess themselves. Alcoholism has been attributed to rates of poverty and a poor economy with high rates of un- or under- employment. Alcohol is cheap to purchase, often cheaper than water. Most Ukrainians live in rural areas with little to do, high rates of unemployment, and poor living conditions.

For the purposes of this report, street youth and youth in orphanages will be the central focus. These youth come from a variety of situations, as previously mentioned. The effects of their situation will be discussed in greater depth in the following sections.

Street Youth

Youth turn to life on the street for a variety of reasons, the primary reasons for leaving home being abuse and alcoholism. Official or reliable data regarding how many children are living on the streets in Ukraine does not exist, although UNICEF estimates the number to be between 30 000 and 100 000.⁵ Young people who live on the street may live in abandoned buildings, in cars, under tables in markets, in heating ducts, under patios, in basements, sewers, or, in the warmer months, outside in parks. These conditions are often completely filthy, reeking of urine and littered with garbage. Such conditions are not conducive to healthy growth and development of youth and leave them exposed to many dangers on the street. Finding the means of basic subsistence is one of the risks street youth take daily. The process of income earning is progressive. Street children may start out begging and eventually move into stealing in order to support their needs and wants. As a result, street children are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

Ukraine has the highest HIV/AIDS rate in Europe. According to UNICEF, the HIV/AIDS rate is 1.46 among adults, 80% of whom are young people.⁶ The sharing of needles in drug use is the primary means of contracting HIV/AIDS in Ukraine. However, HIV/AIDS is also spreading quickly due to unprotected sex among young people. As a result, rates of children being born with HIV/AIDS is increasing. Youth living on the street are most at-risk of HIV/AIDS. In 2004, UNICEF tested 29 youth living on the street, 20 of whom tested positive for HIV/AIDS. 75% of all HIV-infected people will consist of young persons aged 20-34. The increasing HIV/AIDS rate in Ukraine is a growing concern that requires immediate attention.

Girls on the street are vulnerable to sexual predators or become involved in prostitution for lack of alternatives. Though contraceptives are available, they cost money, which the girl may or may not have and those hiring them may not want to use condoms. The risks to these girls include sexually transmitted infections, abuse, unwanted pregnancy and being trafficked.

⁵ <http://www.unicef.org/ukraine/children.html>

⁶ Ibid

Life on the street is a difficult life and one that is not conducive to the healthy growth and development of young people. Measures need to be taken to both prevent youth from ending up on the street and also to get street youth off the street and into stable and healthy living conditions.

The Orphanage

Orphanages are a form of institutional care and Ukraine's preferred method of child protection. Children in orphanages are provided with basic care: food, shelter, and clothing. Each child receives a bed, an education, regular meals, and clothing. Often, the provision of these basics is better than what children were receiving in their homes. However, the orphanage system is institutional in nature and is unable to provide all the aspects necessary to healthy development. The strict schedule, lack of leisure time, and lack of autonomy prevents young people from developing important life skills. For example, teachers and orphanage directors manage every aspect of the lives of the children in their care. A routine with regular meals is beneficial for children. However, such a rigorous schedule with minimal free time furthers the institutional environment. Children are obedient in their routine, but fail to learn time management skills. Once these children live independently they struggle with personal motivation and lack the ability to manage their own schedules.

Many youth from orphanages may go on to study at colleges or technical schools. Technical schools remain one of only options for youth from orphanages. In 2007, 34.6% of the students in these college programs were orphans and children deprived of parental care, 16.4% half-orphaned children, 9.8% of children from low-income families, and 3.3% from disadvantages families. However, these training programs have not evolved alongside Ukraine's economy. Increasingly, the skills and education offered in technical schools do not provide the students with marketable skills. The training they receive does not align with the current economy and hinders the students from finding employment upon graduation. Currently, the orphanages do not offer skills-based courses, such as cooking and cleaning. The colleges and technical schools fail to adequately prepare youth from orphanages for independent living or for gainful employment.

The Risks

Sexual activity is common among young people. However, social, moral, and mental immaturity prevents young people from foreseeing or fully understanding the consequences of their actions. Ukraine's rate of teenage pregnancy is approximately two to four times higher than that of other European states, with rates in the higher end of the spectrum in rural areas. Youth need improved education on the risks of sexual activity and safe sex practices. This education in combination with accessible contraceptives would help lower the increasing HIV/AIDS infection and teenage pregnancy rates.

Human trafficking is a significant problem in Ukraine, as the 2010 Trafficking in Persons Report refers to Ukraine as "source, transit, and increasingly a destination country for trafficking in human beings." A common method of recruitment used by traffickers in Ukraine is to offer youth a job. This job offer may be something as basic as fruit picking in Turkey or as glamorous as working as a secretary in Europe. At times, the job offer may be transparent, such as working in a massage parlour in the UK. If they accept, most likely they will have their documents taken from them and be

transported out of the country. Being in another country without papers leaves them helpless and totally vulnerable to those who brought them there. Or, if they remain in Ukraine, they will be subject to harsh working conditions, and make next to no money. Most often girls are trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, whereas boys may be trafficked for sex or for labour. Often, they do not know their rights or what options of help are available to them in these situations.

Those who avoid being trafficked face financial struggle of life after the orphanage. Struggling to make ends meet, some youth turn to alternative means of income, mainly prostitution or theft. Girls may live with a man simply to provide herself with a bed in which to sleep. Boys may become involved in various facets of gang activity, the drug trade, or theft.

The Legal Framework

Ukrainian law outlines three goals of social services: the social environment of the child, the development of the child, and preparation for adult life. These are formidable goals that seek to contribute to the wellbeing of at-risk youth. Ukraine's child welfare laws are based on a system developed during the Soviet era and many of the promises and provisions of this system are no longer feasible. Improved methods of informing local practitioners and adequate implementation of laws are required.

Not all children in the orphanages have Orphan or Child without Parental Care Status. Obtaining status is critical for children and youth to access government funding and be able to survive once they graduate from the orphanage. Ukrainian law allows for parental rights to be revoked if parents are unable to provide care and lists a number of reasons as to why a parent may be unable to provide care. This list includes, but is not limited to: imprisonment of the parents, parents with a physical or mental limitation preventing the provision of care, and the use of drugs. However, neglect is not included as a reason to revoke parental rights.

Once the child graduates from the orphanage system and either enters college or the workforce at the age of 16, they must fully support themselves. Usually, a college stipend is often not enough, even for the most frugal and careful budgeter, and due to their lack of status growing up, children in this situation do not have any savings to draw upon either. Financial aid is not granted to children without status, yet the process of obtaining status is arbitrary, expensive, and labour intensive. Often, due to bureaucratic delays, a youth is unable to begin receiving their stipend and other supports for an extended period of time. Children who do not have proper documentation may have difficulty receiving all the necessary documents. These youth often require a safe and responsible adult to advocate for them, help them navigate the government system, and obtain the proper document. Most at-risk youth do not have a responsible adult to advocate for them and so continue to live without the proper documents and support. In the absence of either parental support or government financial support, living independent is virtually impossible, forcing young people into risky situations in order to provide for themselves.

Recommendations: Preparation for Independent Living

Institutional care is the preferred method of care in Ukraine, despite the improved opportunities available to at-risk youth through family-based care. Financially, family-based care is more cost effective than institutional care. Institutional care fails to adequately prepare young people for independent living or provide youth with a consistent adult in their lives. All children should have the right to a family and care administered by the State should act as a good family would.

During childhood, a child should be developing the knowledge and skills necessary for adult life. Extra lengths must be made for children who are being raised in institutional care. Institutionalized children fail to develop skills crucial for successfully transitioning to adulthood and living independently. Children learn important life skills necessary to live independently, such as cooking, personal hygiene, conflict management, healthy relationships, and money management from in a home setting from parents or foster parents. These skills, along with their education, equip children to succeed in life. Even in an institutional setting, a child must learn life skills in order to successfully transition to independent living. If these skills are not taught through the daily routine of the institution, then life skills programming ought to be implemented. Programs and curriculum should be developed and implemented in order to help these children develop such life skills. Introducing programs designed specifically for life skills.

Youth who are in institutional care should be given opportunities to integrate with broader society as much as possible to assist their socialisation. Young people who are in institutional care have been removed from their family and often times local community, which causes increased levels of stigmatization and separation from broader society. This segregation is furthered by the fact that children in orphanages attend separate schools and do not have the opportunity to interact with their peers outside of the orphanage. Though this may protect the child at a young age from feelings of alienation or being different, it will affect them negatively as they get older. When the child is forced to integrate with broader society at the age of sixteen, they will have had little experience doing so and will not have developed the social skills at this point to effectively integrate. Stigmatization may be reduced should children from orphanages be more exposed to the broader society and vice versa. Not only would this be more cost effective, but children from orphanages would also receive a better education and stigmatization and alienation may be reduced. Therefore, children in orphanages should attend school in the broader community, rather than a separate school.

The process of leaving care is crucial to the future success and development of youth who have grown up in an alternative care environment. The amount of support a youth receives can have a great impact on their future career, family environment and general transition into larger society. If implemented well, after care support can facilitate a positive future for youth in these situations and be of great benefit to their overall development. This is an area of great importance in Ukraine, especially considering that the age of maturity is sixteen.

List of Recommendations

Based on the above stated information, here are a set of recommendations that would be effective to improve the life opportunities of at-risk youth in Ukraine.

1. All children entering State care should be granted status and have access to social services and financial support.
2. Neglect ought to be included in the legislation for cause of the removal of parental rights.
3. The government of Ukraine ought to legislate and interpret a definition of a disadvantaged family so that these families may receive government support and gain access to social services.
4. The age of majority for children in care ought to be raised to the age of 18 as a minimum with the option of extending care until the age of 25.
5. Improved shelter options for street youth should be established, avoiding institutional and punitive settings.
6. Family-based care should be the preferred model of care and children should be placed in foster families and foster-type homes rather than institutional care.
7. Life skills programs and curriculum should be developed and implemented for all children in care.
8. Children in care should be better integrated into the broader community so as not to be alienated from the rest of society.
9. Transitional houses should be established for youth leaving institutional care.
10. Mentorship programs should be established to connect youth with consistent and responsible adults.
11. Increase support and funding for educational and vocational programs for all youth leaving care.
12. A Leaving Care Plan ought to be developed for every youth phasing out of care.