
AdvocacyNet
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GLUE-SNIFFING RUINS YONG LIVES IN NAIROBI

August 17, 2007, Nairobi: David followed the routine practiced by thousands of homeless children in Nairobi every day. He took out a handkerchief, dipped it into a bottle of paint thinner, put it to his nose and inhaled deeply. Asked what he was doing, David replied: "Dinner." David was sniffing paint-thinner to suppress his hunger and ward off the cold.

An estimated 60,000 children live on the streets of Nairobi, and almost all are addicted to some sort of inhalant. Their ordeal has been graphically portrayed in blogs by Jonathan Homer, who is volunteering this summer as an Advocacy Project Peace Fellow with the Undugu Society, a prominent Kenyan group that provides educational and social support for street children.

Undugu has targeted glue-sniffing as a focus for its advocacy, and Mr. Homer has met scores of young addicts like David in his work. "These are boys who should be playing games at recess and learning their multiplication tables," wrote Mr. Homer in one recent blog. "Instead, they're living on the streets of a slum and spending most of their time in a delirious buzz."

Undugu has been supporting street children for the past 30 years, and its achievement was recognized on Friday at an opening ceremony for a new headquarters, attended by Kenya's Vice-President. This was due to be followed on Saturday by a soccer tournament for street boys, opened by rehabilitated glue-sniffers.

Undugu is making a major shift by adding advocacy to its programs and Mr. Homer's blogs have helped by putting a human face on addiction and defining the challenge.

"Glue needs to be taken off of the streets because of its health effects," said Joseph Nandwa, an Undugu Field Officer. "It leads to death, it leads to crime, it leads to a subculture, it gives street children a bad reputation that makes people not want to help them."

Part of the problem is that the laws on inhalants are enforced less strictly than those regulating other drugs, such as marijuana. Anyone who sells an inhalant to a minor, knowing that it will be abused, is subject to three years in prison. But there has not been a single recorded arrest.

In addition, inhalants are not specifically covered by laws like the Children's Act and the Narcotics and Psychotropics Act, which regulate the sale of drugs to children. Undugu is pushing for inhalants to be included.

As part of the new advocacy drive, Undugu staff have visited the anti-narcotics units at two of the main police stations in Nairobi, and found them to be unaware of the laws. As a result, Undugu plans to hold workshops for police officers, monitor enforcement practices and keep track of arrests. “It is our job to make people take glue seriously,” said Mr. Nandwa, from Undugu.

Undugu is also planning to launch a major campaign to sensitize street children to the effects of glue. This includes a poster campaign and workshops for youths who have been weaned away from gangs and encouraged to form Street Associations under Undugu’s guidance. The Undugu model encourages children to reach out to their peers, and the Associations have been successful in stopping glue-sniffing among their members.

Another organization that works to rescue Kenyan street children, Made in the Streets, has also called for a long-term publicity project, similar to the ‘quit smoking’ movement in the United States.

The bigger challenge, all agree, is the poverty and social pressure that force children out on the streets in the first place, and prevent them from enjoying their right to education. Undugu seeks to address this by providing free education to 850 disadvantaged children and training 400 youths in informal skills each year.

* For Jonathan Homer’s blog, including the profiles of David and other street children, visit <http://advocacynet.org/author/jonathan/>

* For more information about Undugu, visit <http://advocacynet.org/page/undugu>

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