

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **UNICEF: Young of Central Asia and Eastern Europe Suffering Blame and Banishment**

**VIENNA, 19 July 2010** - An underground HIV epidemic in Eastern Europe and Central Asia is intensifying at an alarming pace, fueled by drug use, high-risk sexual behavior and high levels of social stigma that discourage people from seeking prevention information and treatment, according to a new report released today by UNICEF.

The report, "Blame and Banishment: The underground HIV epidemic affecting children in Eastern Europe and Central Asia," highlights the issues faced by children living with HIV, adolescents engaged in risky behaviors, pregnant women using drugs, and the more than one million children and young people who live or work on the streets of the region.

Marginalized young people are exposed on a daily basis to multiple risks, including drug use, commercial sex and other exploitation and abuse, putting them at higher risk of contracting HIV. The trends are especially troubling, as the region is home to 3.7 million injecting drug users – almost a quarter of the world total. For many, initiation into drug use begins in adolescence.

Existing health and social welfare services are not tailored to adolescents at greatest risk, who are often exposed to moral judgment, recrimination and even criminal prosecution when they seek treatment and information on HIV.

"Children and adolescents living on the margins of society need access to health and social welfare services, not a harsh dose of disapproval," said Anthony Lake, UNICEF's Executive Director.

To reach and help young people living with HIV or at risk of HIV infection, medical and civil authorities need to establish non-judgmental, friendly services that address the special needs of marginalized adolescents.

In the Russian Federation, for example, over 100 youth-friendly service facilities have been established, providing reproductive and sexual health services, information, counseling and psychological support. The Atis health center in Moldova is another initiative that is showing promise and saving lives.

"We cannot break the trajectory of the AIDS epidemic in eastern Europe and Central Asia without empowering and protecting children and adolescents," said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS. "We must not rob them of their childhood."

"It is our responsibility to ensure that they have access to HIV prevention and treatment services."

An HIV prevention and treatment center in Tajikistan is breaking down barriers of mistrust to reach adolescent girls selling sex. As one young client said, "In the beginning, I did not believe that the medical check-up, the treatment and condoms would really be free of charge and anonymous. I thought it was another trap by the police. I agreed to go there with an outreach worker for the first time, but now I go there alone and encourage my friends to use the service as well."

A recent six-country UNDP study conducted in the region showed that many adults living with HIV fear the social stigma attached to seeking treatment more than they fear the disease, thus driving the epidemic further underground.

The stigma associated with HIV is not restricted to adults and adolescents. Young children living with HIV are routinely denied access to school and kindergartens, and when their status is known, they face rejection and abuse. Alla, the foster mother of an HIV-positive child, tells how her son was ostracized when someone leaked his HIV status to other families. "His classmates say that he is 'disgusting' and refuse to play with him," she said.

"This report is a call to protect the rights and dignity of all people living with or at risk of exposure to HIV, but especially vulnerable children and young people. We need to build an environment of trust and care, not one of judgment and exclusion," said Lake. "Only by reversing discrimination against people living with HIV, can Eastern Europe and Central Asia begin to reverse the spread of the epidemic."

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**Attention broadcasters:** Fifteen children aged between 12 and 18 from across Ukraine gathered in the capital Kyiv to participate in a OneMinuteJr video workshop, invited by UNICEF and the NGO "All-Ukrainian Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS". Many of the young Ukrainians taking part in this workshop are HIV-positive or have HIV-positive friends or family members. Each teenage participant has produced a 60-second duration film highlighting how HIV/AIDS is having an impact on their lives. The best films will also be shown in different venues at the Global AIDS conference in Vienna. Preview them at: [http://www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=EA932652EF17D4E2](http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=EA932652EF17D4E2)

### **About UNICEF**

*UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments. For more information about UNICEF and its work visit: [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)*

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