



## Surviving the Streets in Romania

An estimated one thousand children live alone on the streets of Bucharest, Romania. Many sleep in subway stations and parks until being run off by the police. In Romania, there are few social programs available to help struggling families, and some children are forced out of their homes by poverty and abuse.

Daniela and Voda are part of a successful peer education project implemented by the Romanian Anti-AIDS Association (ARAS) through USAID's Romanian Family Health Initiative. The peer educators help street children access free or low-cost medical services including HIV testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

What makes their outreach effective is that they, like the other peer educators, lived on the streets at one time. Voda, a peer educator for two years, first heard about ARAS at a shelter. Initially reluctant, Voda eventually decided to give the peer educator role a try. His friend Daniela became involved after watching ARAS volunteers at work.

Daniela and Voda were among the first thirty to be trained as peer educators. Voda explains, "We have a strategy. At the first meeting, we talk with the kids and become friends. Explain to them that I've lived on the streets. By the second or third meeting, we can give them information on STIs, HIV, other things."



Photo: JSI

Romanian street kids mug for the camera during a chat with a peer educator.

Launched in September 2001, USAID's program works directly with street children in Bucharest through trained peer educators to inform and educate them about health, especially HIV/AIDS and other STIs. In addition to the psychological hurdles they face, homeless youth are vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, STIs, and drug use.

According to Daniela, suspicion can be an obstacle. "Getting them to HIV testing centers is difficult because they don't trust you and they don't believe they are sick. We take four or five at a time for testing because they are more comfortable going as a group."

"The work is not easy, especially with kids who are high on drugs. Sometimes they catch a bit of information that will help them later," Voda says. "They learn about health, not just about STIs. That's one part, but it's life education. We try to change their lives a little."

**ARAS has branches in eight major Romanian cities including Bucharest, which reaches approximately 800 street children per year.**

Each participant in the program has an amazing individual story. "Until ARAS, I lived on the streets," says Daniela, who ran away when she was eight to escape physical abuse. "It feels good working with street children, showing them that there is a possibility to change your life."

In addition to outreach work, the project has created a forum with other non-governmental agencies to address STIs and other health needs of homeless youth, and has conducted research on the behaviors of street children so that data is available to health and social service authorities.

