



FIRST PERSON

Outreach Gives Options to a Runaway

At-risk runaways still have an opportunity for an education



Photo: USAID/Virginia Foley

Some at-risk children, like 10-year-old Avdesh Chouman, prefer life on the street.

Avdesh says he wants to be a movie star, but thanks to the classes, he also has a head-start on other options.

Avdesh Chouman says he's 10 years old. He's a runaway who lives at New Delhi's train station, where he sleeps, gathers plastic for money — and attends school.

Avdesh became involved with social workers from Salaam Baalak Trust, who visit the train station daily to talk to newly arrived runaways. Established in 1988, Salaam Baalak Trust is a USAID-supported organization that provides New Delhi's street children with food, security, medical treatment, shelter and education. It also offers a 24-hour hotline for children in distress, as well as a comprehensive HIV/AIDS awareness program.

Declining invitations to move into one of Salaam Baalak Trust's four shelter homes, Avdesh prefers to use public bathrooms and sleep on the station platforms, where he can earn about \$2.00 a day selling plastic waste products. Then he can do what he really loves to do — go to the movies. But he is still able to access Salaam Baalak Trust's services, and he attends classes at the train station. About half of the boys approached by Salaam Baalak Trust on station platforms choose to join the estimated 2,500 children who live on New Delhi's streets.

Since he became associated with Salaam Baalak Trust, Avdesh has expanded his interests beyond movies; he now likes to study, read, write and draw as well. Avdesh says he wants to be a movie star some day, but thanks to the classes, he also has a head-start on other options.