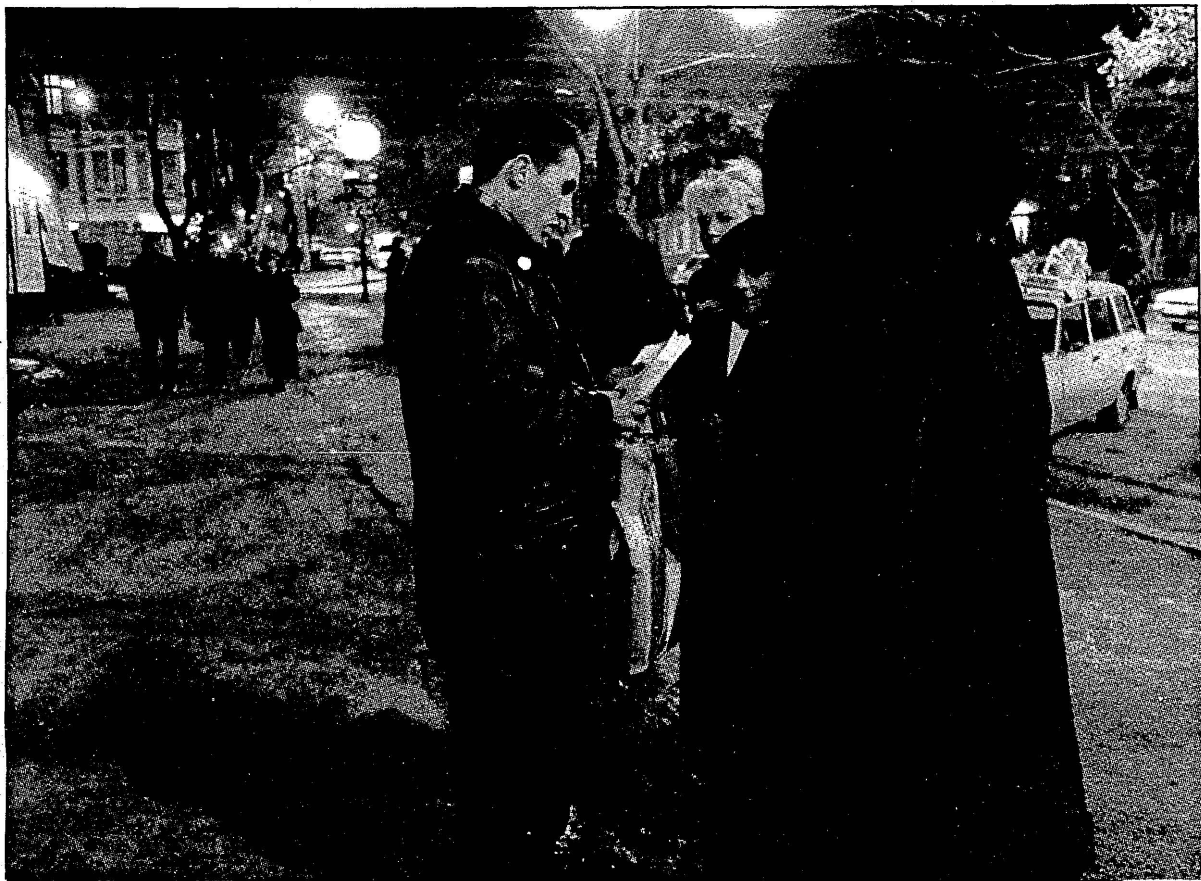




PETER BLAKELY-SABA / UNDP

Valerii Kiunov, a psychologist with the nongovernmental agency Faith, Hope, Love, handed out leaflets and condoms to prostitutes in Odessa.

Infected With Despair, AIDS

Ukraine's hopelessness fertile ground for disease

By **Theresa Agovino**
CHRONICLE FOREIGN SERVICE

ODESSA, UKRAINE

It was the worst night of the 23-year-old's six-month career as a prostitute.

The tall brunette shivered in the cold in front of a brightly lit Odessa casino waiting for clients as she recalled her encounter with a man who refused to keep his condom on.

"He just kept on taking it off and trying to have sex with me," said the woman, who didn't want to give her name. "He was crazy, and it was such a struggle to make him keep it on. I was terrified."

"It is better when they beat you."

The encounter would be horrifying anywhere in the world, but it takes on an especially sinister tinge in Ukraine, which has

the fastest-growing AIDS epidemic in Europe. The historic Black Sea port of Odessa is ground zero.

In 1994, only 44 people in Ukraine tested positive for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. That number shot up 30-fold in 1995 and in 1996 exploded to over 12,000.

Officials say the number of known HIV cases now stands at about 38,000. The real figure is estimated to be about 110,000, and some predict the number will skyrocket to 1.5 million by 2010.

That projection is especially chilling because cash-strapped Ukraine can afford to treat only 10 percent of its current 600 patients with full-blown AIDS. Experts say that by 2003, between 37,000 and 54,000 people will have progressed to that stage of the disease.

The epidemic reflects the cataclysmic upheaval in this country since the demise of communism almost a decade ago.

Despite nearly half a billion dollars in U.S. investment, the transition to a free market has been extremely rocky and the economy continues to falter. Unemployment is over 50 percent and inflation is rapidly increasing. The average wage — which is only occasionally paid — is about \$80 a month.

The slow pace of reform — blamed on corruption and Ukraine's difficulty in discarding communist ways of thinking — has delayed the second portion of an International Monetary Fund loan.

But the frustrations of foreign agencies can't match the despair of Ukraine's people.

Intravenous drug use has be-

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Chronicle Graphic

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come rampant as the population seeks a psychological escape from the ruinous economic situation.

About 80 percent of Ukrainians infected with HIV are intravenous drug users, compared with only 20 percent worldwide.

More and more people are turning to prostitution because no other work is available. The prostitutes, in turn, are often the unwitting conduits that bring the virus to the rest of the population.

The two key elements of the epidemic converge in Odessa, a lovely city where elegant buildings line broad boulevards.

As Ukraine's major port, Odessa is one of the main points where drugs enter the country from such places as Turkey and Afghanistan. The illegal trade is facilitated by the lax and corrupt customs controls now found in many post-Soviet nations.

Odessa is also a resort town, so it draws job seekers hoping to capitalize on the tourist trade. The lack of jobs forces them into prostitution instead. Sailors, tourists and the general population provide a steady stream of clients.

The 23-year-old streetwalker had hoped to find work in Odessa after her husband left her. She couldn't find a job, so she turned to prostitution.

"It isn't so much that you decide to become a prostitute. It just happens; you have no choice," said the young woman, who earns between \$700 and \$1,500 a month.

"This job has a very bad effect on me. I'm nervous all the time. I'm nervous about the clients, nervous about getting sick."

Valerii Kiunov is trying to do something about the perilous situation the women and their clients are facing.

A psychologist at Faith, Hope, Love, a nongovernmental agency dedicated to stopping the spread of AIDS among society's disenfranchised, Kiunov and his colleagues spend three nights a week reaching out to prostitutes. On this night, Kiunov has handed out condoms and pamphlets about AIDS prevention to 42 women.

The U.N. Development Program pays for the written materials he distributes and also for surveys and conferences that address the problem.

Reaching out to the prostitutes is difficult.

"We want them to trust us; that is what makes this program effective," said Kiunov. "But they don't trust easily. They have a lot of psychological problems."

The group must also contend with the fact that 48 percent of Ukrainians don't use condoms when having sex, according to a survey sponsored by the U.N. Program on HIV/AIDS, which coordinates all

U.N. agencies' activities to treat people with AIDS and to stop the spread of the disease.

Faith, Hope, Love estimates that 3 percent to 5 percent of the prostitutes in Odessa carry the AIDS virus. There are about 2,000 prostitutes in the city, but the number swells to 5,000 in the summer.

There is about a 10 percent turnover each year, so keeping the message about safe sex constant is essential.

The government has been sponsoring a public information campaign about AIDS, and Faith, Hope, Love has been out on the streets for about two years.

The rate of infection in Odessa has slowed. In 1996, there were 4,230 new cases of HIV reported. The number is expected to fall to 2,000 this year.

Kiunov said that is no reason to be complacent. "The girls never think it will happen to them. They are young. They don't think they will die."