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Investigators See Alarming Rise in Number of Missing Kids

By Allison Quinn

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Activists have long complained that children from orphanages do not have enough social protections, making them especially vulnerable to such unsavory phenomena as trafficking and forced begging.

The Investigative Committee has sounded the alarm over a rapid surge in cases of children going missing without a trace, most of them from orphanages.

In 2013 alone, the agency recorded about 14,000 reports of children having disappeared, with 230 criminal cases launched in connection with such reports, according to a statement on the committee's website.

"The unsupervised location of these children on the streets greatly increases the risk of crimes committed against them or their involvement in illegal activities," the statement said.

In 2013, more than 450 criminal cases were opened in connection with children having been

forced to beg in the streets for money, Interfax reported Tuesday, citing the Interior Ministry's press service.

The situation of runaway minors was discussed by high-ranking government officials late last week at a round table organized by the Investigative Committee. The meeting was attended by police, representatives of the Education Ministry, the Health Ministry, child protective services, psychologists and activists from various nonprofit organizations.

Activists have long complained that children from orphanages do not have enough social protections, making them especially vulnerable to such unsavory phenomena as trafficking and forced begging.

Participants in last week's round table echoed these concerns, saying it was crucial that urgent measures be taken to stem the tide of such cases and introduce a system of public oversight.

Russia's orphanage system — with more than 3,000 state-run facilities nationwide, according to the watchdog Rights of the Child — has been widely criticized for allowing too many vulnerable children to fall through the cracks.

Horror stories about the maltreatment of children in orphanages have abounded in recent years, and such abuse was cited by investigators as the primary issue provoking children to run away.

In March, investigators in Perm opened a case over allegations that several orphaned girls had been raped and abused by a group of five other minors at at a children's home. Investigators later determined that the director of the home was fully aware of the abuse but did nothing to stop it, according a statement on the committee's regional website.

The director of the boarding school was subsequently dismissed from her duties, and the case against both her and the five accused rapists is ongoing. She faces up to two years in prison for withholding information, and each of the accused faces up to six years on the charges of rape.

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