OVERVIEW

Boys and girls living and/or working on streets of Hanoi face multiple dangers that threaten their wellbeing and stifle their future prospects. They are at risk of being exploited for labour, being enticed into criminal activity or being sexually abused by paedophiles.

To tackle these issues, Blue Dragon has a team of outreach workers who work on the streets to identify street children, develop trusting relationships and encourage them to accept our help. If they accept, these children are able to move into our emergency accommodation where they receive shelter, nutrition, psychosocial support, health care and legal advice. Once they are no longer in crisis, we try to reunite the children with their families. Occasionally it is not possible for the children to go back to their home communities as there is a lack of opportunities available, or a special reason for them to stay in Hanoi. In these cases we look at appropriate housing options within their extended family or community before we offer them a place in our long-term accommodation. As the majority of street children are male, Blue Dragon operates shelters in Hanoi where boys can focus on developing themselves, learning, and preparing for their futures.

This fact sheet captures Blue Dragon’s knowledge of street children and our experience in addressing the issue.
THE PROBLEM

Hanoi is home to a large number of street children who are sometimes referred to as "street connected children". The exact figure is extremely difficult to obtain as the flux of children moving in and out of the city constantly changes. Government sources differ on the number due to varying definitions of street children. Blue Dragon defines street children as children who:

i) have left home and live and/or work on the streets, or  
ii) live with their families and work on the streets to earn money

Hanoi has a dearth of services for street children and government policy puts responsibility for “dealing” with them largely in the hands of the police. Children who live and work on the streets have few avenues for meaningful help outside Blue Dragon and, because of their experiences, tend to view institutional support in a negative light.

Children are routinely picked up and placed in state run accommodation for months at a time. These children go to great lengths to conceal themselves to keep their freedom and continue earning money to survive. Because working on the streets during the daytime increases the risk of being caught by police, children prefer to work at night. As a result, they are much more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. To further reduce the risk of being picked up by the police, street children find isolated and dangerous places to sleep, such as on bridge pylons high above the ground, on park benches, in 24/7 internet cafes where they are often exploited, or with gangs who offer “protection”.

[Image of a boy with bottles and bags over his shoulder]
Since early 2012, there has been an increasing phenomenon of adult men, both Vietnamese and foreign, preying on Hanoi’s street children for sex. These men befriend boys and offer them a place to stay, long term or overnight, and some money in return for sex. Some children are reporting to Blue Dragon that their sexual abuse is being photographed and filmed. With the burgeoning of social media platforms, paedophiles use the internet to find and groom vulnerable children for exploitation. Blue Dragon has worked on several cases where paedophiles force children to use drugs, most notably methamphetamine, to cope with the pain of the sexual abuse. These boys can be as young as 11.

Compounding the lack of services and the increase in sexual exploitation is the growing phenomenon of rural children leaving their homes to come to the city. Blue Dragon’s experience in working with runaway children is that family breakdown and domestic violence, sometimes coupled with extreme poverty, are the main factors causing children to travel to the city in search of a better life. However, once on the streets, they find themselves targeted by the authorities for arrest and detention or by paedophiles for sexual exploitation. After being exploited or becoming involved with criminal activity, the children become difficult to reach, and the chances of a successful reunion with their family are extremely low.
BLUE DRAGON'S RESPONSE

In response to this growing issue, Blue Dragon has established a dedicated crisis care team of outreach workers, led by a former street kid who was himself rescued by Blue Dragon in 2003 at the age of 15. The team work in pairs to find and approach street children in Hanoi every night of the week. The crisis care workers form a friendly relationship with the children and encourage them to open up about their situation. Blue Dragon encounters and approaches an average of 110 new street children every year.

Our priority is to understand the reasons why these children are spending time on the streets and encourage them to move to our emergency accommodation where we can better care for them. Once in Blue Dragon's care, a team of social workers, psychologists, teachers and carers provide a wide range of quality services such as nutrition, health care, psychological support, and activities such as gardening, cooking lessons, and football. In addition, Blue Dragon assists children to obtain legal documentation such as birth certificates so they can access government services. Since the opening of the emergency accommodation facilities in 2016, we have accommodated over 150 children, with the length of stay anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. However, the priority is caring for the children, and therefore they can stay as long as they need.

After the initial emergency care period, we aim to reunite the children with their families. But first, the children must trust us. When this relationship has been established, we can reach out to the child's family to try and understand the underlying reasons for why their child left home and help to resolve any conflicts.

As at December 2018, Blue Dragon has reunited over 512 runaways with their families. When a reunion is not in the best interest of the child, we work with the child and their family to provide alternative accommodation in one of the Blue Dragon shelters. These shelters offer a stable and nurturing environment where children can begin the difficult process of recovering from trauma, prepare themselves to return to education and build a better life for themselves. Around 30 children stay in these shelters and receive holistic and comprehensive support each year.
Social workers and carers are always present to guide and counsel children in these shelters. The children living there each have their own individual schedule and plan for development, but come together for a family style dinner each evening. This is an opportunity for them to talk and connect, and to learn skills to prepare them to live independently. Blue Dragon creates a safe environment to grow and develop by strengthening their relationships and support networks.

Along with this love and care, Blue Dragon considers education and training the key to breaking the poverty cycle. We cover the children’s education and training expenses so they can either attend school or undertake vocational training courses. Our goal is for them to become confident adults who are capable of leading a fulfilling life for themselves and for their families.

In addition to providing direct services for children in need, Blue Dragon is working with government partners to systematically address some key dangers for children in Vietnam. Under the former Penal Code, male victims of sexual abuse were not offered the same protection as female victims. From 1 January 2018, revised articles pertaining to child sexual abuse in Vietnam's Penal Code came into force. Blue Dragon took the leading role in this revision of the law to make sure that, for the first time in Vietnam's history, boys and men can be recognised as victims of rape and sexual abuse.

In a watershed case, a Vietnamese court found a foreign paedophile guilty of sexually abusing young boys in September 2018. He was sentenced to three years in prison, followed by deportation. Hanoi police, with the assistance of Blue Dragon, caught the paedophile in May 2018, marking the first case to be tried under the revised Penal Code. Blue Dragon’s chief lawyer collaborated with the prosecution on this landmark case to guarantee a conviction. The "guilty" verdict marks a huge step towards enforcing the new Penal Code whilst acting as a deterrent to potential paedophiles.
HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM?

What we do know:

It is notoriously difficult to get reliable and current statistics about street children in Vietnam. In 2006, The Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA) estimated that there were 23,000 street children throughout Vietnam and 1,500 in Hanoi. This is one of the most quoted and recent figures.

An estimate by Hanoi’s city authorities corroborates this, placing the number of street children in Hanoi at 1,500 as of 2010. According to a study conducted by the Management and Sustainable Development Institute (MSD) in 2013, 92.5% of street children in Ho Chi Minh City had been sexually abused at least once and 98.3% of street children in Ho Chi Minh City had used drugs or substances at least once (beer, cigarette, marijuana, methamphetamine, adhesive, among others). The same study estimated the number of street children in Vietnam to be at 22,000.

BLUE DRAGON’S IMPACT

Annually Blue Dragon:

- rescues an average of 110 children from the streets and provides psychosocial support for them,
- reunites over half of them with their families, and
- provides emergency accommodation for 60 street children.