

# A sharp deterioration in the conditions facing Russian youth

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Since the early 1990s, coinciding with the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Russian children and teenagers experienced a devastating decline in their social conditions, according to articles published in the *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*.

The articles, translated from *Noviye Izvestia*, report information provided by the State Statistic Committee and government agencies that follow the plight of children.

Aleksandr Baranov, a leading Russian pediatrician and chairman of the Russian Union of Pediatricians, stated in an interview that there are "almost no completely healthy children or teenagers" in Russia, whether they are from high-risk or well-off homes. He called this phenomenon "deceleration," the underdevelopment of children and teenagers, both physically and mentally.

Baranov said all indices of children's physical health worsened appreciably during the 1990s, including the main categories--weight, height, chest size and muscle strength. According to the central Military Medical Administration, 300,000 boys conscripted into the military are clearly underweight and unfit for service. Children in Russia are shorter, by 5 to 8 centimeters, than their counterparts of 10 or 15 years ago. Chest size has shrunk 5 to 6 centimeters, and whereas 10 years ago conscripts could easily perform 50 push-ups, today's Russian teenagers find it hard to do 10.

One out of two boys finish secondary school with some chronic ailment, and one out of four girls is biologically immature. According to the authors, "Among all age groups the most unfavorable health trends were noted in adolescents aged 15-17." General sickness in this age group increased to over 33 percent during the 1990s, with drug addiction making a tenfold growth between 1990 and 1997. The number of drug

abusers is unknown since only 10 percent of those with narcotic problems seek medical help.

The intellectual potential of the younger generation has declined substantially. Only one half of children in Russia are normal in their mental development. A major factor is nutrition. Many children and teenagers are practically starving, which is why many go into the army to be fed. School meals have been all but eliminated: in the Soviet Union 75 percent of school children were fed in school. Today only 25 percent of Russian students receive a meal.

By 1994, 21 percent of school children aged 15 to 19 had not completed a secondary education and were not attending school anywhere. According to Baranov, school reform in Russia has resulted in 2 million children not attending school. Those children are not only deprived of a school education, but also miss the opportunity to receive school meals and vaccinations to prevent various diseases. The lack of a family structure or a stable environment lead many youth to get involved in "rackets" and become easy prey to be drawn into the criminal world.

The family structure for millions of people has all but collapsed. The words "poverty" and "family" have now become inseparable, with 33.1 percent of families with children under 16 years old living below the miserable official government minimum standard of living. Of families with two children, 36.9 percent were impoverished. And almost 50 percent of families with three children, and nearly 75 percent of families with four or more children live in poverty.

According to the Russian authors, in present-day Russia to have a "large family" and to be "poor" are virtually synonymous. State subsidies for the unemployed and poor have been drastically cut, making them virtually ineffective. In 1997 single parents and

parents with several children made up 45 percent of the unemployed.

The other family pressures facing children are the growth of single-parent families. The divorce rate has increased 22.6 percent, and the probability that one or both parents will die has increased substantially, to 16.2 percent. Sixty-four percent of children born in 1997 could expect to lose a parent before they reach adulthood.

Between 1980 and 1987 Russia experienced a record 14 percent increase in the birth rate, the highest in 35 years, followed by a continuous decline between 1988 and 1997. The upsurge in the early 1980s provided a record number of teenagers in the 1990s who might under other circumstances have provided an influx of youth and energy to the society. The Russian authors ask the pointed question, "Exactly what kind of living conditions have been created for them?"

An obvious expression of the growth of poverty has been the increase in the number of orphans. At the beginning of 1998 600,000 children had either become orphans or were not under parental supervision. While many become adopted or have a legal guardian, over 25 percent live in children's homes or boarding schools. Since 1994, the network of boarding schools for children has doubled.

Other indices stated in the article were:

- Drug abusers among teenagers account for more than 75 percent of those infected with AIDS.

- Alcohol and substance abuse remains a constant problem facing teenagers, with alcoholism a longstanding problem within the Russian national culture.

- In 1997, the number of teenagers with syphilis increased 70-fold compared to 1990. The incidence of syphilis among girls 15 to 17 is twice as common as among women as a whole.

- In most advanced capitalist countries the mortality rate for children and teenagers is continuing to drop. In Russia the mortality rate has climbed for a decade. According to the *Noviye Izvestia* article, "If the current death rate in younger age groups continues, more than a quarter of today's generation of 17-year-olds won't make it to the age of 60."



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