The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Leads in Youth Murders

By Alexandra Odynova

September 22, 2010



Russia has the worst record in Europe and Central Asia on homicides of young people, ranking ahead of Albania and Kazakhstan, and the world's highest youth suicide rate, according to recent reports.

Experts attributed the grim statistics to social problems such as violent programming on state-run television, which they said undermines young people's sense of value for human life.

The rate for violence-related deaths among people aged 10 to 29 in Russia is 15.85 per 100,000 individuals — 34 times higher than in Germany, the World Health Organization's European bureau said in its first report on youth violence.

The findings, presented Tuesday in London, said 40 young people are murdered daily in the 53 countries surveyed, bringing the annual number of killings for the age group to about 15,000 in the greater European region. Eighty percent of victims are males, the report said.

Albania ranked second, with 11.2 deaths per 100,000 people, while Kazakhstan was third with 10.66 deaths. Germany had the lowest rate, with 0.5 violent deaths per 100,000 young people, the report said.

Young Russian and Turkish migrants contribute to the German rate more than ethnic Germans, the study added, linking this to "factors relating to social disintegration and culture (such as parenting styles and masculinity norms)."

Homicide is the third most common cause of death, following road incidents and suicides, for the surveyed age group, the report said. Chronic poverty in some countries and the global economic downfall also contribute to the death rate.

Knives and other sharp weapons are the most frequent murder weapons in the region, accounting for about 40 percent of the homicides perpetrated by youngsters, the study said. In Russia, another 21 percent of the victims were beaten by blunt objects, 20 percent strangled and 10 percent shot to death.

"Exposure to adversity in childhood is also associated with greatly increased risks of alcohol and drug misuse, depression, suicide, smoking, risky sexual behavior, physical inactivity and obesity," the report said.

"There is renewed concern that the recession will increase mortality from homicide and suicide," the report said. It called the deaths an "enormous loss to society," and said many murders could be averted by proper social and criminal justice policies.

An Interior Ministry spokesman said Wednesday that regular police reports include no data on the age of perpetrators, but admitted that the study looked plausible.

"There is nothing surprising in those figures. It's common knowledge that the level of crime is higher in Russia than in European countries," the spokesman, Oleg Yelnikov, told The Moscow Times by telephone.

His words echoed a study released by UNICEF's Russian office last week that said the mortality rate among adolescents in Russia was four times higher than in most European countries.

Moreover, the suicide rate among Russian minors is the highest in the world and three times higher than the global average for this age group, said the report, called "Adolescent Mortality in the Russian Federation."

"About 45 percent of young women and 27 percent of young men in Russia have thought, at least once, about committing suicide," UNICEF said in a statement.

Boris Altshuler, head of the children's rights watchdog Right of the Child, said the data in both reports look realistic.

"The main reason for such figures is that no one cares about children in Russia," Altshuler said by telephone. "There is no social environment for them."

In particular, he cited violence and other questionable content in popular entertainment,

particularly on state-owned television channels, which encourage dangerous behavior among impressionable young people.

Anna Balayeva, a psychologist who works with young offenders at the Perekryostok support center for teenagers, also said Russian society cultivates tolerance toward violence, which causes young people to develop a low regard for human life.

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