

V. GROWING SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Independence and the attendant economic difficulties have engendered a host of social problems new to Central Asia and exacerbated pre-existing problems. An increasing incidence of suicide among young people exemplifies the growing sense of hopelessness brought about by the economic and social problems. In addition, substance abuse problems such as alcoholism, a deeply engrained social problem in the former Soviet Union, have grown. Drug addiction, for example, is being magnified by international drug trafficking. Overshadowing these are the generally growing crime rates, especially crimes involving young people. Youth crime follows the rising incidence of unemployment among the young.

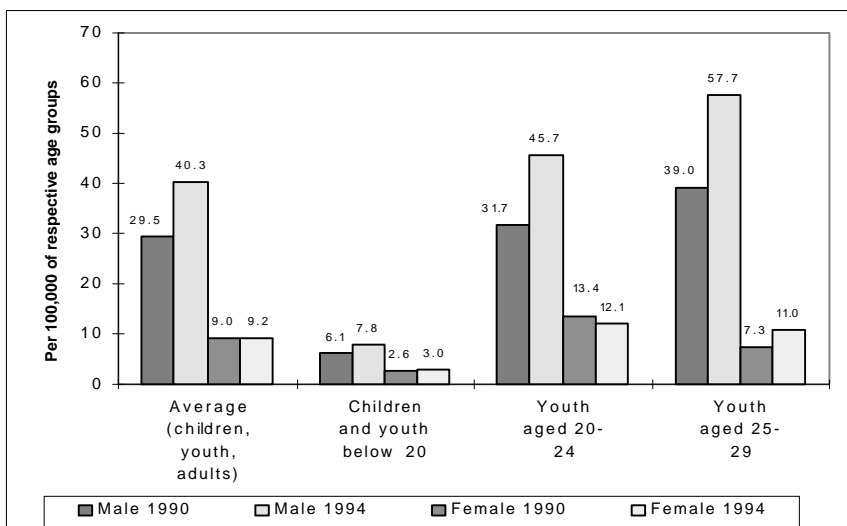
Social problems have had a severe impact on children, particularly on vulnerable groups. In the socialist system the state enterprises and the family divided the responsibility of caring for children. The governments maintained a variety of programs designed to protect the development of children. In some real sense, compared to other societies, responsibility of the family for child development diminished. Independence and the difficult economic transition brought with it a rapid collapse of most government support programs such as preschool centers, milk kitchens, family allowances, and special-care facilities for disadvantaged children and youth. This collapse of social support during a time of growing need has posed severe problems for different groups of children, especially those without family support, including orphans and street children.

A. GROWING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

1. Suicides, Alcoholism, and Drug Addiction among Children and Young People

Reflecting the difficult and changing social and economic situation in Kazakhstan, suicides committed by children and teenagers are increasing. From a level of 6.1 suicides per 100,000 children below the age of 20 in 1990 for boys and 2.6 for girls, the incidence increased by 1994 to 7.8 for boys and 3.0 for girls in Kazakhstan; the increase of the suicide rate among older males is even higher (Graph 22). Suicides by girls occur less frequently than by boys but more frequently than suicides by other females. Some observers suggest that this progressive increase in suicides is related to endemic substance abuse especially alcohol that exacerbates difficulties in coping with unemployment, poverty, family problems, and the general lack of confidence that the future will bring an improvement to one's personal or family situation. The severity of the problem has been noted since 1993 by an increasing number of calls from children to a hot-line to provide counseling set up by the Almaty city administration.

Graph 22: Suicides among Children and Young People in Kazakhstan



Source: National Statistical Committee, Ministry of Interior

A special problem that has been disclosed only recently is the high number of suicides and violent deaths among young inductees in the army of Kazakstan. These have been ascribed to an atmosphere of insecurity including physical and moral humiliation by older soldiers.

Substance abuse problems are often thought to precipitate many suicides. Alcoholism in particular has been regarded as endemic in Soviet lifestyle. The Kyrgyz Multipurpose Poverty Study (KMPS) found in 1996 that 37.6 percent of men and 13.4 percent of women drink.¹ A different survey in 1996 found that 30 percent of all suicides involved alcohol abuse. Periodic attempts by the Government to reduce alcohol consumption had little or no impact before the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the newly formed Republics have not seriously tried to tackle the problem.

Extensive research in OECD countries shows that families are often burdened by those who have a substance abuse problem. Among divorced women in the Kyrgyz Republic, a primary reason reported for the demise of marriage is an alcoholic husband who is likely to be physically abusive. Local observers correlate the increase in crime with the growing problem of alcohol abuse among both men and women, especially among the younger generation. Unemployed rural youths migrating to the city are said to be particularly vulnerable to alcohol abuse and the drift into urban crime. Age specific data are not available but evidence suggests a major increase of alcohol abuse among the young.

Drug abuse appears to be a newer problem, but no less serious. In mid-1997 in Kazakstan, 6,000 people were officially registered as "drug-addicts", in the Kyrgyz Republic the comparable figure was 2,500 for 1996. As in many countries, young people do not perceive the risks of taking drugs. Journalists surveying 100 students in Almaty in July 1997 reported that 90 percent of them tried illegal drugs. In Kazakstan, the incidence of drug-related crimes has more than tripled between 1990 and December 1994. Apart from their own addiction, children are affected by the growing substance abuse of their parents and siblings.

Central Asia has become an important source of drugs for the European drug market and social problems attendant to drug trafficking

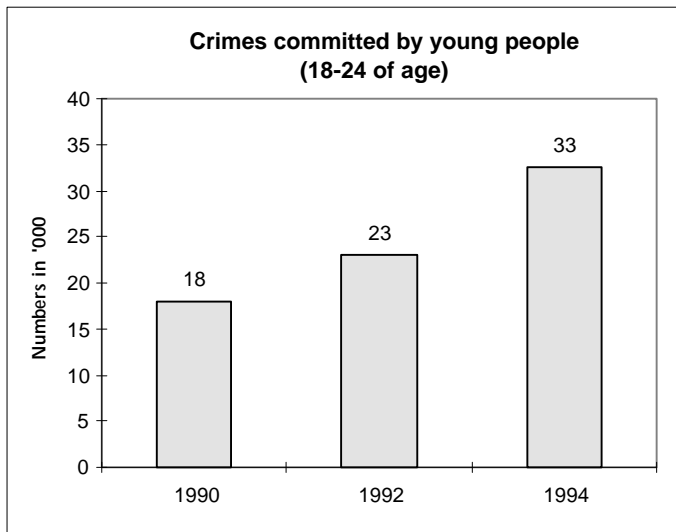
¹ Alcoholism varies considerably across ethnic lines. In Kazakstan, for example, the number of ethnic Russians who drink was fourteen times higher than the number of ethnic Uzbeks who drink.

are surfacing. Opium is grown in the Kyrgyz Republic; the region was a major producer of medicinal opium poppies during the Soviet period. In 1992, the Government outlawed growing opium in response to concerns of the international community. Nevertheless, economic decline and unemployment have given rise to the illegal production of opium, marijuana, and hashish, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic are way-stations for drugs grown elsewhere in the region particularly in Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

2. Increasing Youth Crime

In the general climate of weakening social fabric and increasing poverty, crimes committed by children and young people have increased dramatically since independence (Graph 23). By 1996, in Kazakhstan, the number of people convicted of a crime had more than doubled since independence. In the Kyrgyz Republic, 1,605 cases of juvenile crime were reported in 1995; an increase of 11.5 percent in just one year. In Kazakhstan, the number of crimes committed by young

Graph 23: Increasing Youth Crime in Kazakhstan



Note: Underreporting is believed to be present especially since 1993, particularly for crimes committed by the young people and children.

Sources: Ministry of Interior, National Statistical Committee

adults from 18 to 24 years increased from around 18,000 in 1990 to 32,600 in 1994. Most of the crimes such as theft or robbery are poverty related, but aggravated crimes of assault including murder and rape are also on the rise. Much of the crime involving children reflects young people organized in gangs and living in the streets of the bigger cities.

In response to growing criminality among young people, the Governments have responded by resorting to the criminal justice system. In Kazakhstan, for example, severe penalties have been established for crimes committed by teenagers. A special police unit responsible for dealing with problems involving children under 14 has been created. This response is unlikely to touch the root causes of the problems, or even adequately deter the increase in youth crimes. The existing system is inadequate for crime prevention and for social rehabilitation. There are, for example, no juvenile courts in Kazakhstan that can treat children significantly different from adult criminals.

3. Fragmentation of the Family

The problems of this transition period, including poverty and unemployment, decreasing social assistance, and the closure of child-care centers have resulted in increasing stress on the family and decreased family welfare. The extended family has been weakened by large-scale emigration in which many relatives have moved to other countries, thus reducing the number of people on call for support or assistance. The nuclear family is increasingly left to its own limited resources to deal with a growing number of problems.

One result has been family fragmentation, with increasing numbers of family members living in separate locations. Conforming to Soviet norms, the divorce rate has always been relatively high in Soviet Central Asia; about one in every three marriages ends in divorce. Moreover, emigration and internal migration in search of work have resulted in separations for many families that are popularly believed to be unofficial divorces. At a minimum, 1 out of 4 children in the urban areas of Central Asia live in single-parent households. Kazakhstan at the beginning of 1994 had 155,000 single mothers raising more than 200,000 children. Although there is no legal discrimination against single parents or children born to single parents, children growing up in single parent (usually female-headed) households under current economic conditions face a higher risk of being poor due to the difficulties which their mothers face in the labor market.

B. THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Under the Soviet system, the state accepted considerable responsibility for child development and child care. In addition to the comprehensive social service delivery system, the state maintained specific social assistance mechanisms, including monetary transfers, in support of families and children. These social protection systems are faltering, programs are reduced, and the real value of most allowances has fallen. At the same time, the targeted beneficiaries are also those mostly affected by the weaknesses of the social and economic systems and most likely to become poor. Children who are especially vulnerable to the changing situation are those without parental care, orphans and street children, and handicapped children. In addition, the increasing number of teenage pregnancies is likely to result in a growing number of children being raised in environments that cannot fully satisfy their developmental needs.

1. Neglected Children and the Homeless

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the weakening family structure and the eroding education system have resulted in a growing number of neglected children. Schools work in shifts, day-care facilities are closing, families separating, and parents are being forced to look for additional sources of income. All of these result in a lack of supervision and care for children. A growing number of children spend much of the day alone at home. There is a general perception that many children "never see their parents". This growing number of neglected children has been identified as a serious problem by the Council of Women, Family, and Demographic Problems in Kazakhstan.

The more egregious problems are those that have resulted in completely neglected children; children without homes. In the extreme, these children live literally on the streets without support of family or society. The resources of the state are quite limited for providing real assistance, and in many cases the problems are compounded by directing the children into the criminal justice system.

2. Street Children

Before independence, street children were not common in the cities of Soviet Central Asia. Poverty was cushioned by a comprehensive safety net and society was highly controlled. Indeed, living in the streets was perceived as a criminal activity. The situation has changed drastically in the last few years. The Kyrgyz Children Fund has reported 600-800 children, mostly boys, between 6 and 14 years living on the streets of Bishkek during the last two years.¹ Apart from children who have no shelter and live completely on the streets, city administrators also note a growing number of children with some shelter, but still living by day on the streets. In some cases they travel daily from nearby villages. By international standards the number of homeless children might not be regarded as very high, especially compared to the total of 3.9 million families and approximately 3 million teenagers. But the problem is a powerful indictment of the new social and political institutions as failing to safeguard the most vulnerable in society.

Photo 17: Street Children in Bishkek



1 Unofficial estimates of the homeless women and children put the total number in Bishkek at 2,500.

Family problems that have resulted in children making their homes in the streets include alcoholic parents, family-centered violence, the death of parents, and simple poverty and hunger. In some cases, it has been found that street children had previously been sold or pawned by their families or guardians and had fled from their new situations. Most street children do not attend school, many are illiterate and face uncertain health conditions in unsafe and insecure living environments. Typical activities of street children include working at bazaars or in kiosks, selling newspapers, working in small-scale industries, and begging.

With reduced and sharply limited fiscal resources, local governments face severe difficulties in coping with the increasing problems of street children. Private initiatives and NGOs are emerging to help street children, but their current impact is quite limited. As one example, in Bishkek, the Kyrgyz Children's Fund is opening a center where children can come to rest, eat, and bathe.

3. Children in Detention Centers

Reflecting the Soviet legacy that living outside the highly structured social order was a crime, most street children who are found without proper parental support are detained in special camps. The number brought to these detention centers is increasing. In 1995, in the city of Bishkek alone, 1,200 children were being kept in detention centers. This is three times more than in 1992. For Almaty the Kazak Ministry of Interior reports for 1994 and 1995 more than 5,800 children (mostly children without parental care) were detained annually by police officers. By mid-1996, Kazakhstan maintained 19 camps for such children. The centers are supposed to care for the children for 30 days while their home environment is being investigated. After 30 days, the children are to be sent either to orphanages, to their original families, or into some other family situation. Teenagers above 14 years may, however, be sent to prison colonies.

Street children are basically dealt with under the criminal justice system. There is, however, a growing perception that this must be changed. Professionals agree that conditions in detention camps and prisons are neither favorable for child development in general, nor for the solution of the serious problems of these children. Apart from the human rights aspect, the mix of children with different kinds of problems in many cases has led to children being trained as criminals by

older teenagers in the camps. The same is true of teenagers who are kept together with adult criminals. In response to the need, the Governments of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic plan to establish juvenile courts, improve conditions in prison colonies, provide education and rehabilitation for young delinquents, and establish homes for children in need of them. Throughout 1996, however, the lack of funds stalled needed reforms and staff training.

4. Deteriorating Care for Orphans

The difficult history of the Soviet Union means that the country has always had to deal with a large number of orphaned children. Especially after World War II, many children who lost their parents were placed in children's homes. Reflecting investment during Soviet times, there are a considerable number and variety of special facilities for orphans in Central Asia. Currently, these facilities are supported by financially strapped provincial budgets.

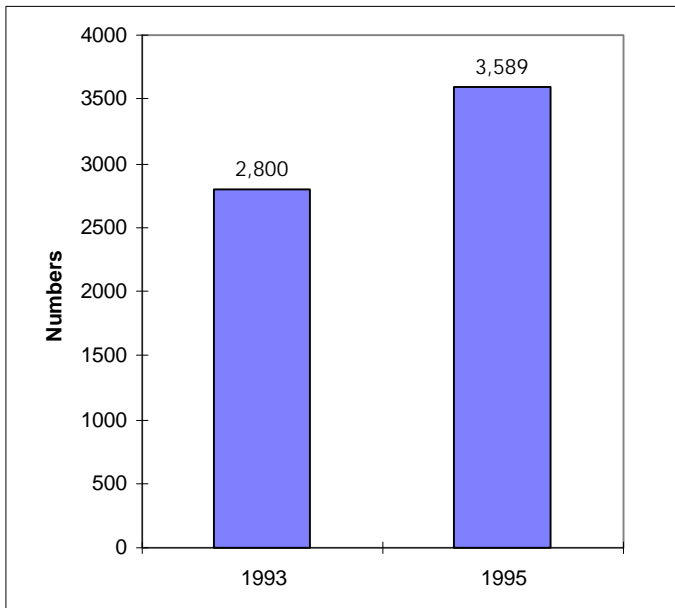
Box 9: Grim Situation for Kyrgyz Orphans

Children in Kyrgyz orphanages are often handicapped, live in buildings with little or no utility services where hygienic conditions are appalling, and receive minimum attention from staff, according to Reuters on 12 December 1996. A nurse at one of the orphanages who is paid \$15 a month, explained, "we don't have medicine, clothes, or vitamins to give them." The Orphanage Director said when a child dies at the orphanage family members sometimes "cannot even come to bury the child." A Norwegian worker with the Save the Children agency in Kyrgyzstan said the situation is "worse than in Romania," where the horrible conditions in orphanages are well publicised in the Western press.

Since independence, increasing poverty and the disintegration of many families means that the number of children without parental care, living in orphanages, has increased. In Kazakhstan, for example, between 1993 and 1995 the number of orphans in boarding schools

rose 28 percent from 2,800 to 3,589 (Graph 24). In the Kyrgyz Republic, between 1991 and 1994, the number of children in orphan boarding schools increased by 69 percent.

Graph 24: Growing Number of Orphans in Kazakstan



Sources: National Statistical Committees, Ministries of Education, Ministries of Labor and Social Protection

The directors of orphanages complain that a growing number of children are just being “left in the maternity home” by young mothers unable or unwilling to take care of their babies. In some cases this follows the birth of a child with mental or physical handicaps. (see below). Most notably ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazak children are being found in orphanages for the first time. Prior to independence, Central Asian family values demanded that an abandoned child be taken in by a relative. As a result of the enormous economic stress experienced by families during transition, this ancient indigenous custom is no longer fully observed.

Increasing budget constraints have caused conditions in orphanages to deteriorate rapidly and some facilities have closed. In Kazakstan, for example, 2 of 11 boarding schools for orphans were closed between 1993 and 1995. Local authorities find it increasingly

difficult to maintain boarding schools. In some orphanages in Chui Oblast of the Kyrgyz Republic, for example, the numbers of children have doubled, whereas local government funds for the support of these children has all but ceased. In some documented cases, staff have not received salaries for as long as six months. The facilities are thus operating on an involuntary "volunteer" basis, a situation that cannot be maintained.

5. Decreasing State Support for Handicapped Children

In the Soviet Union, it was customary to place mentally retarded or physically handicapped children in orphanages or other such special facilities. These facilities were notorious for acting simply as care centers and did not attempt to deal with the human development problems exemplified by their charges. As noted earlier, these homes are now supported by local governments which lack the financing capability of the former Soviet Union. The conditions for these children are particularly grim; they require special attention, which they are certainly not receiving. Families in the Soviet Union were not accustomed to accepting responsibility for children who are handicapped or who have special needs. With respect to mentally disabled children neither families nor the State were accustomed to meeting the children's needs. Currently parents are called upon to care for their own children; however, families are ill-prepared to assist the children in developing to their individual potentials.

Because of the high incidence of environmental degradation and alcohol consumption, the number of disabled or handicapped children as a percent of all children is relatively large in Central Asian societies. In early 1996 Kazakhstan reported a total of 120,000 disabled children, under the age of 16, about half of whom were classified as mentally ill. This corresponds to 5 percent of all children in the country. Disabilities are often linked to environmental factors and the rapidly failing provision of natal health care. Kazakhstan reports that each year approximately 20 percent of all newborns have some pathological condition at birth, 7 percent have clearly identifiable birth defects, and 16 percent face some manner of retarded growth.¹

1 In the Kyrgyz Republic statistics show a decline in the number of handicapped children. This appears to reflect the closure of facilities and other changes in the health sector and not improvements in the general health situation.

Before independence, a comprehensive network of homes and boarding houses for mentally and physically handicapped children was developed. Many of these, especially in rural areas, were linked to elementary schools. This system had a number of positive features, but also some definite drawbacks. The governments, by providing special education (mostly in boarding schools) and health care to disadvantaged children, freed families from the burden of caring for these children, and thereby afforded parents (especially mothers) the opportunity to work in the formal labor market. As a result, most of the disadvantaged children attending schools stayed apart from their families and parents did not participate in the care of their own children. In the boarding houses, children often lacked emotionally supportive relationships and received little useful training. Overall, there were few attempts to integrate those children into society.

With the erosion of public financial resources at local and central levels and the diminishing capabilities of enterprises to finance social assistance, most schools and centers for disadvantaged children have closed. Scholarships for vulnerable or disadvantaged groups of children (orphans or the handicapped) are being abolished. Based on data from Kazakhstan's Ministries of Health, Education, and Social Protection in 1995, only 11 percent of handicapped children attended special schools. The number of handicapped children accommodated in boarding schools between 1991 and 1995 decreased by 38 percent from 107,454 to 66,664, and the number of boarding schools declined by 36 percent from 1,540 to 982. Handicapped children living in rural areas face even more difficult circumstances because only 22 of the 122 facilities for children with mental or psychological disabilities are located there. The situation in the Kyrgyz Republic is similar.¹

During this transition period, most families with disadvantaged children face the full costs of their care. This has placed tremendous burdens on the family, especially on women who bear most of the burden of child care. For the children, the new situation has ambiguous developments. The families are often ill at ease with their new responsibilities. Reflecting some of the prejudices of the former Soviet Union, bearing a retarded child is considered shameful for many fami-

1 In the Kyrgyz Republic, the number of pedagogical staff for physically disadvantaged children declined by 40 percent between 1993/94 and 1994/95, and the number of special boarding schools decreased from 29 in 1985 to 19 in 1994. The number of disabled children who received special treatment and care, including outpatient treatments, declined from 93 percent of all such children in 1991 to 60 percent in 1994 (ADB 1996: 1/67).

lies. Fathers especially appear to be experiencing psychological problems with the new situation of living with their retarded children. Social workers report that up to 80 percent of husbands leave their families when a disabled child is born. Over the longer-term, as families accept the primary responsibility for raising their own children, these children may receive more emotional affection and mental or physical encouragement. It seems unlikely, however, that families can successfully meet these new challenges without some public support for training and facilities.

**Box 10: Retardation Blamed Largely on
People-made Problems**

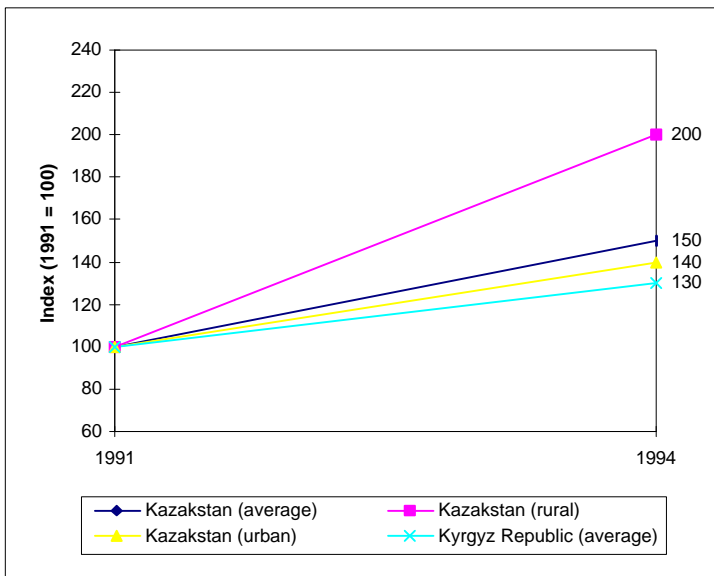
Across the former Soviet Union much of the mental retardation of children has been attributed to people-made factors, especially environmental pollution in the Aral Sea and in company towns. The high incidence of retardation and disability is aggravated by the high consumption of alcohol, smoking, and worsening living conditions. In few places is the phenomenon more drastic than in the Semipalatinsk region where radiation from the testing of nearly 500 nuclear weapons under the former Soviet Union and the nuclear fallout from nearby China has taken a huge human toll. This is in terms of physical disfigurement, diseases such as cerebral palsy and cancer, and in mental retardation. Mental and physical problems of children have greatly increased since 1960. Officials estimate that one in five children born during the past 30 years has been affected in some fashion by nuclear fallout.

6. Increasing Number of Teenage Pregnancies

The economic and social problems and institutional upheaval attendant upon independence have weakened the contact of young women with the health-care system. As one result, while overall birth rates are going down, the number of teenage pregnancies has sharply increased. In Kazakhstan, for example, the number of reported teenage pregnancies has increased by almost 150 percent from 1991 to 1994 (Graph 25). In the Kyrgyz Republic, by the mid-1990s, births to

unmarried young women between 13 and 17 had increased by more than one third over the levels seen in the 1980s.¹ This phenomenon raises the prospect of increasing numbers of children being raised by women with less maturity and fewer financial resources to provide for them. Children born to teenage mothers will surely face a greater likelihood of living in a poor family with less access to health and education services.

Graph 25: Increasing Teenage Pregnancies



Note: Data for the Kyrgyz Republic are for the years 1989 and 1994

Sources: National Commissions on Women and the Family, National Statistical Committees

A problem, contributing to the rise in teenage pregnancy, and one that focuses attention on the social roots of youth crime, is the reported increase in prostitution by young women. Indeed, prostitution of very young girls is being reported. A survey among school girls in Almaty has suggested that prostitution is apparently regarded as an

¹ A related problem is the widespread recourse to abortion by teenagers. An estimated 8 percent of all abortions are performed on girls under 19 with one third of all teenage pregnancies terminated by abortion.

acceptable profession by the majority of those interviewed to cope with the serious economic problems in the family. The rise in prostitution is not only a spur for increased teenage pregnancies, but also exacerbates the problems of sexually transmitted diseases.¹

The increasing problems of teenage pregnancy and prostitution are directly related to the closure of after-school care facilities for young people, eroding family ties, and increasing unemployment and poverty. In addition, local experts stress that growing social problems such as alcoholism have contributed to these negative developments. The problems call for not only a reinvigorated public health system and sex education in schools, but also an easing of the economic and social pressures on the family. The latter are likely to come only with time, thus heightening the importance of public sector measures such as those conducted through the health or education systems.

Officials have begun to deal directly with the problems, in part through attempts to introduce sex education in schools. Kazakhstan has recently introduced the newly developed subject "Ethics and Psychology of Family Life" in its school curriculum. Additional assistance for retraining health workers and opening family planning and consultation centers has been provided by development aid of the United Kingdom. These centers offer gynecological services and anonymous counseling to women and are also concerned with sexually transmitted diseases.

1 In the Kyrgyz Republic the incidence of reported cases of syphilis more than doubled from 1995 to 1996, rising from 78 cases per 100,000 people to 164.8.