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Changes in the spatial distribution of suicide and homicide in Russia

Abstract

The subjects of this article are homicides and suicides. These reasons of death, depending to a large extent on a lifestyle, included in the category of deaths caused by the external factors, have a high relevance in Russia. According to the statistics, among the 163,500 external deaths in Russia in 1970, 38,900 were caused by suicides, 9400 by homicides. Since that time, a number of unnatural deaths is constantly growing. Moreover, as a consequence of social transformation process, which begun after Soviet Union collapse, the new trend of depopulation appeared in the territory of Russia. The number of unnatural deaths reached 348,500 in 1995 (including 61,000 suicides, and 45,300 homicides). Changes of spatial differentiation of suicides and homicides in Russia are characterized for the period before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Key words: Russia, unnatural death, suicide, homicide

1. Introduction

The paper discusses changes in the spatial differentiation of, and factors affecting homicide and suicide rates in Russia before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. First we discuss global changes related to external causes of death, showing Russia as the country where the percentage of such causes of death is the highest. In addition to that, regional and local aspects of this phenomenon are described. A rapid increase in the homicide and suicide rates is shown in the context of the lack of a vision for the future, alienation of individuals, decline of the family, increasing crime and widespread alcoholism.

Death is a phenomenon determined by biological and sociological factors. Similarly too many other countries, in both Soviet and contemporary Russia the highest number of deaths was caused by internal factors. In the category of endogenous deaths, the main causes include cardiovascular diseases and cancer. This paper deals with homicides and suicides which are both included in the category of deaths caused by external causes. In 1999, Russia adopted the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems – 10th Revision (ICD-10), used by most countries of the world, and the data from the previous years were recalculated using the new principles (*Demografičeskij ežegodnik Rossii*, 2005). In the classification of the causes of death in demographic studies, only one cause of death is taken into account despite the fact that in many cases death occurs from a number of causes. In the Russian statistics, a final disease can mean an illness, an accident or a fatal injury.

Across the world, exogenous deaths, including homicide and suicide, have varying rates of incidence. For example, there is an observable tendency among women to die from external causes several times less frequently than men. Every year, less than 30 per 100,000 women died from other than natural causes in the United Kingdom or Mexico, with a higher such rate in Hungary (64) and the Baltic States, e.g. Estonia (66). The definitely highest number of non-natural deaths among women was reported in Russia (97). Worldwide, men died from external causes much more frequently than women, with slightly over 40 such deaths per 100,000 men in the United Kingdom and Israel in the first years of the 21st century, as compared with over one hundred in such countries as Poland (101) or Cuba (110). In selected Eastern European countries, this rate was two times higher, exceeding 200 in Ukraine (217). Russia remains a worldwide phenomenon as the country with the highest number of men who died from non-natural causes in the period in question (395 in 1995). It should be pointed out, however, that the WHO statistics are not complete and do not cover all countries, including those in a state of civil war.

2. Exogenous deaths in Russia before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union

In Russia, exogenous deaths are largely caused by lifestyle factors. Even though they do not play a significant role among the causes of death, their scale of incidence is a world record. In 1970 in Russia, 163,500 persons died from exogenous causes, including 38,900 murders and 9,400 suicides. In the subsequent years, the number of non-natural deaths in the Soviet Union steadily increased. In 1980, 229,000 exogenous deaths were reported, with 47,900 suicides and 17,900 homicides.

In terms of demographics, the systemic transformation initiated by the collapse of the Soviet Union triggered off depopulation processes. More and more areas are being depopulated, and the population losses are utterly incomparable with the situation in other countries. The number of external causes of death also rapidly increased. In the early 1990s, the probability of death as a result of an accident in the surveyed area was 9.5% (at the prevailing mortality rate, one death in ten was due to non-natural causes). 'An explosion of exogenous deaths' was recorded in 1995, with the greatest increase observable in Siberia and the Russian Far East (Becker, Hemley, 1998). The entire area in question was characterized by an excessive mortality of men. 1992 was the year when in the whole of Russia, Siberia and the Russian Far East men's mortality rate was higher than women's. Until then, more women had died than men, which could be attributed to their larger number. For instance, in 1988, in the whole of Russia which at that time had a population of 147,400,000, 1,569,112 people died, including 732,710 men and 836,402 women. At that time, the number of women was by 9,400,000 higher than men's (*Rossijskij statističeskij ežegodnik*, 2005). The subsequent years saw a strengthening of this tendency. Peak values in the category of non-natural deaths were reported in 1995, even though in the following years their number was only slightly decreased. In 1995, 348,500 people died in Russia from external causes (that is two times as many as in 1970), including 61,000 suicides and 45,300 homicides. In the following years, the situation was rather stabilized, with a similar number of non-natural deaths (and an observable, slightly decreasing tendency). In 2004, in Russia 327,100 people died from exogenous causes, including 49,400 suicides and 39,300 homicides (*Demografičeskij ežegodnik Rossii*, 2005).

3. Suicides

Suicides played a considerable role among sudden deaths in the researched area. Russia was one of the countries with a very high suicide rate in the analyzed period. For example, in 2001 its suicide rate was 39.7 per 100,000 of population, as compared to 15.2 in Poland and 11.3 in the United States¹. In Russia, the highest number of suicides was reported in the territorial units situated in the north, mainly Siberia and the Far East. It should be pointed out that there were no distinct differences in the spatial differentiation of suicides before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The typical methods of committing suicide included: hanging, drowning, poisoning and, less frequently, involved the use of firearms.

Men, whose resilience is lower than women's, more frequently than women took their lives. In 1994 in Russia, the suicide rate in the male population aged 50-54 was 139.6 per 100,000. In the area in question, taking such a decision was strongly correlated with the economic crisis, the accompanying changes in the labour market and reduced incomes. In 1988, 26,796 men committed suicide in Russia, and in 1993 – as many as 46,016. It is believed that the higher share of suicides does not result from a loss of work but from deteriorated living conditions. Despite their experience gained during many years of work, elder employees as a rule received lower salaries than younger ones who were better educated. Such a devaluation of human capital can facilitate the decision on committing suicide. Brainerd (2001) correlated the value of the suicide rate with economic characteristics such as the size of income or unemployment level. There is a strong correlation between the employment rate and the number of suicides in Russia; an increase by one percentage point reduced the suicide rate by about 3%, and only by as little as 1.3% in the United States.

Kposova (2000) studied the correlation between the divorce rate and the suicide rate. She proved that divorcees have more propensity to commit suicide than married couples and singles, and that divorce encourages more men to take such a decision than women. Suicides, particularly in the north of Russia, lead to changes in the mentality of those who learn about more suicide cases. Unlike natural death, which is accepted with sadness and humbleness, suicide leaves people with a sense of mystery even when its motives are known.

Although other suicide factors occurred in the researched area, they were extremely difficult to measure. There is a variance of opinion as to whether drinking alcohol leads to an increase in the number of suicides. The opponent of this thesis point out that the Soviet (and now Russian) authorities do not limit access to alcohol on purpose so that everyone can have some means to help them forget about problems of everyday life. Research indicates that people who drink too much alcohol tend to have oppressive suicidal thoughts not while drinking but after the effect of alcohol has ceased (*Figures and facts about suicide*, 1999).

Biologists, economists and sociologists are looking for an explanation of such high suicide figures in the researched area. Combined argumentation of experts from different disciplines can provide a fuller picture because specialized approaches can only highlight one aspect and fail to explain the situation in its complexity. Biologists point to the significance of the so-called light factor. A small amount of penetrating sun

¹ The share of suicides in Russia was higher than in Japan or Finland, where the share of non-natural deaths is traditionally high. A higher share of suicides is reported only in other countries which came into being after the collapse of the USSR (in Lithuania – 44.1 per 100,000 of population in 2000).

rays, especially in the north, tends to aggravate the mental state of the local population². An economic approach to suicide is based on the assumption that the decision on investing in one's health is possible when there are chances that the invested funds will generate a return. In Siberia and the Far East, the deteriorating material situation of people is caused by the diminishing state investments in these regions. Impossibility to cope with a difficult external situation leads to an increase in the suicide rate (Brainerd, 2001). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, increasing sections of the population showed a low degree of trust in politicians and employers, and very few people thought with optimism about the future.

Sociologists point to social factors. Durkheim (1958) put forward the thesis that suicide is not only a result of an individual's features, but is also determined by the society in which the suicide has lived. The breakdown of the family and religious ties leads to an increase in the number of suicides (Kennedy, 1998). Theories propose a finite number of variables which can help explain the different aspects of suicides in Russia. According to the economic approach, the suicide rate grows with age and unemployment as these two factors have a negative impact on incomes, while in the sociological approach suicide depends on the degree of societal disintegration, which also includes crime and divorce rates.

4. Homicides

Among non-natural deaths in Siberia and the Far East, homicides play an important role. On the basis of the data on the number of reported homicides and attempted homicides, an analysis of their spatial differentiation was carried out. They show changes in the number of homicides between 1990 and 2002. The highest number of homicides was committed in areas with the highest population density (i.e. in the European part of Russia). The spatial distribution of the homicide rate by the major administrative units is shown in Fig. 1 for 1990 (prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union) and for 2002. The highest number of homicides at the beginning and at the end of the analyzed period was reported in Siberia where the share of deaths as a result of murder in the 1990s was about a dozen times higher than in Western Europe (Chervyakov, 2002). In 1991, among the administrative units with a high homicide incidence rate there were: Tuva Republic as well as Kemerovo and Irkutsk oblasts, where in 2002 the number of homicides distinctly increased.

A high crime rate could be observed in those administrative units where large parts of the population were newcomers. For example, in the 1950s the Bratsk raion in the Irkutsk oblast had had a population of 40,000, while in 1970 the number of the population grew to 255,000 as a result of migration, to increase even further in the following decades. It is widely believed that the influx of a new population has led to increased crime rates in this area (Vašalova, Măgkov, 1998).

Among the factors responsible for increased homicide rates we can list the deteriorating material situation and lack of role models in the family, in many cases due to the absence of the father. In the Far East, the highest number of homicides and homicide attempts was reported in the Primorski Krai, where the number of murders rapidly increased in the analyzed period (from 402 in 1991 to 707 in 2001). Vladivostok, the capital city of the Primorski Krai, is one of the most dangerous Russian cities alongside with Moscow and Petersburg (Wasserman, Varnik, 1998). This is probably due to the high number of incoming population from other parts of the country (end of the Trans-Siberian Railroad) and from the neighbouring China.

² This thesis was corroborated by the research on suicides in Japan and Canada (Brainerd, 2001).

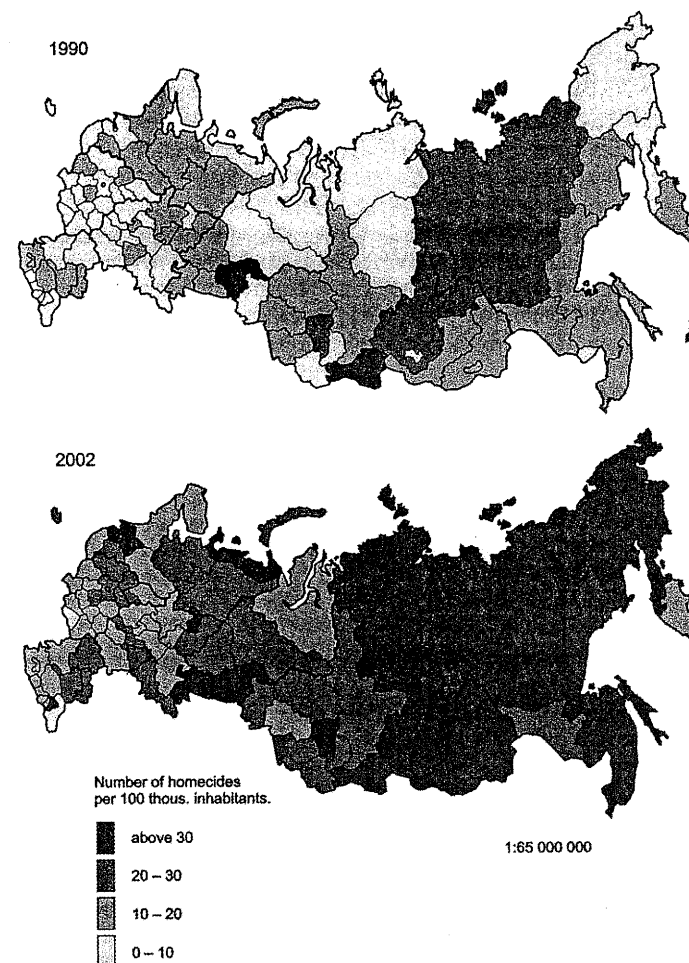


Figure 1. Homicides in Russia
Source: Demografičeskij ežegodnik Rossii, 2005.

On the other hand, autonomous units had low homicide rates. In 1990, among such entities there were many administrative units in the European part of Russia and the Jewish Autonomous Oblast situated in the Far East. In 2001, homicides in the autonomous okrugs were even less frequent, with 12 homicides committed in the Agin-Buryat, Evenk and Koryak okrugs. These regions are populated by people with well-established traditions who have a sense of community and understand their problems; also their populations are very small. At the other extreme, in the autonomous republics of southern Siberia, the homicide rate was constantly on the increase (in Tuva Republic, it grew from 146 in 1991 to 273 in 2001). Men's murders by women were as a rule committed at home, and women's murders by men were often connected with sexual assaults.

A large number of fatal accidents, homicides and suicides are committed in the Russian army. The first defensive strategy chosen by young males is failure to appear for the conscription board. Deteriorated psychological condition of the future soldiers is caused by the fact that the militia in Russia carries out regular searches for young boys who are trying to evade conscription. In 2002, General Vladislav Putin, head of the mobilization division of the General Staff, explained the zeal of the militia by the fact that during the autumn conscription alone, lasting from 1 October till 31 December 2001, the army was able to draft 195,000 recruits instead of the planned 220,000 (Chervyakov, 2002). Many of those who make up the Russian army suffer breakdowns and try to escape not as much from military duties as from the brutality of their superiors, violence and horrid living conditions. Many young people cannot cope with the psychological pressure, difficulties in adapting to the adverse natural conditions and inadequate living conditions. There are no official statistics about the number of deaths in the army other than those in war conditions. It is estimated that every year about 4,500 soldiers in Russia die from barrack shootings, accidents and diseases.

5. Suicides and homicides – the local aspect

The second-largest decrease of population in the entire Russian Federation occurred in Magadan Oblast. During the period between the censuses 1989-2002, the population decreased from 392,000 to 182,726, thus by 53.4%. During the field research in the Magadan oblast in the Russian Far East, three of the survey's questions were related to changes in crime, the number of homicides and suicides in the analyzed area.

When asked: *What changes do you see in crime after 1991?* The largest number of replies indicating a significant increase was given (72.5%). Young people present more divergent remarks on this topic, while older people opined that the number of crimes is very large and results from greater freedom enjoyed by the young people. During the research the local press announced that during one week in September 2004 in Magadan 34 criminal offences were committed, of which only 16 were detected.

When asked a question related to crime, namely: *What changes do you see in the number of homicides after 1991?* 55% of the respondents replied that their number increased slightly, 35% indicated a very large increase (total of 90% of responses indicating growth). The majority of the respondents indicated a clear connection between the number of homicides and alcohol consumption. One can also suspect that the high crime rate results from the fact that even after the closing down of labour camps, prisons were built in the area under investigation, and people released from prisons not infrequently decided to remain in Magadan Oblast.

When asked: *What changes do you see in the number of suicides after 1991?* a very large increase was indicated by 42.5% of the respondents and a slight one, by 35% (together 77.5%). A fairly numerous group (22.5%) replied that in the Far East always more people decided to take one's own life than in the European part of Russia. This is explained by the difficulties in adaptation to disadvantageous living conditions. The respondents opined that most often it is middle-aged men who decide to commit suicide.

The conducted community interviews helped to gain a better understanding of the underlying reasons for an increase in non-natural deaths. Homicides and suicides, especially in smaller places, could be explained by a sense of threat and hopelessness. The population find it difficult to cope in a new situation, due to such reasons as a rapid restriction of leisure opportunities, and especially owing to a lesser regularity of food supplies.

6. Summary

In Russia, both in the times of the Soviet Union and after 1991, suicides and homicides were among significant causes of death. In the period of systemic transformation, unfavourable demographic trends were reinforced. Such a high share of external causes of death is not encountered in any other country in the world. Non-natural deaths are particularly widespread in Siberia and the Russian Far East. In the researched area, socio-economic, cultural and natural (including climatic) factors play a considerable role among the numerous reasons for such a high share of deaths caused by external factors. It should be borne in mind that such high homicide and suicide rates in Russia should be attributed not only to rampant crime and alcoholism but also to the alienation of individuals, breakdown of the family, lack of any vision for the future. The problem of so many non-natural deaths is the result of a 'national trauma' and a side-effect of globalisation processes.

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