

Chapter 16

Needs Assessment of Asylum-seeking Children in St. Petersburg

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Introduction

This chapter is based on the results of two research projects by scholars from the Center for Independent Social Research in St. Petersburg in 1999-2000 and in 2001¹.

The first of these studies was devoted especially to the assessment of the needs of children from asylum-seeking families and was commissioned by UNHCR. The research was undertaken in order to assess the needs and problems of children (under 18 years old) of refugees and asylum seekers in the psycho-social and educational fields in St. Petersburg and work out the recommendations on further efforts with this target group. The second study, which was carried out in 2001 was supported by the Swedish organization "Rädda barnen" and was focused on the broader topic of needs assessment of children of all types of forced migrants. For this reason, my focus here is mainly on the results of the first study while the data collected in the second study will be drawn on to provide typical examples and apt illustrations.

Process and methods of the research

During both projects researchers visited several families to learn more about cultural traditions, family structure, living conditions, problems and strategies of coping with the situation, of the groups involved. They also visited sewing and hair-dresser courses for female refugees at the Red Cross, as well as English and Russian language classes and kindergarten there. Observations in the markets, where many Afghan men work, were also carried out in order to understand better the families' life conditions. People from the communities were also involved as co-researchers and interpreters.

During the project, data was also collected through interviews:

- *Interviews with experts (21) such as:* officials at the St. Petersburg and Leningrad region Migration Service, employees at St. Petersburg's Branch of the Red Cross, teachers and directors of the schools where refugee and asylum-seeking children are studying, leaders and members of ethnic communities, leaders of NGOs, officials from the City Committee for Education and the District Department of Education.
- *In depth interviews with teenagers* 13-18 years old, 5 interviews and several discussions in family group interviews. All informants differed with respect to family composition, marital status, employment status, income, and involvement in community life.

- *In depth interviews with parents (7)* These also reflect different experiences and the current situation of families. Parents were from Afghanistan, Jordan, Rwanda, Iraq, Ethiopia; the number of children per family ranged from 1 to 6.
- *Focus-group discussion (1) with 5 Afghan women* who attended the courses attached to the Red Cross (interpreter used).
- *Survey questionnaires for formal interviews* with parents and teenagers:
 - 48 questionnaires with parents.
 - 51 questionnaires with teenagers.

The situation of asylum seekers in St. Petersburg

Statistics and research sample

The research was focused on asylum seekers living in St. Petersburg. According to the Migration Service data, the following numbers were registered on 1 October 1999:

- *94 families of refugees and asylum seekers with 260 children under18, among which there were:*
 - *60 asylum-seeking families*
 - *11 families* who had applied for refugee status and had *passed the initial consultation.*
- Most of the *families* were from Afghanistan (90-95per cent).
 - 100per cent of the refugee children and 90.1per cent children of asylum seekers were Afghan.

The number of asylum-seeking families with children who came from Iraq, Rwanda, Jordan and Ethiopia was smaller but they were also included in our study (Table 1)

Table 1: Distribution of children by age, country of origin and status of parents

Country of origin	Status	Number of children	0-5 y.o.	6-10 y.o.	11-15 y.o.	16-17 y.o.
Afghanistan	refugees	35	7	15	11	2
Afghanistan	asylum s.	156	40	53	48	15
Jordan	asylum s.	2			2	
Iraq	asylum s.	2		2		
Rwanda	asylum s.	2	1	1		
Subtotal		207	48	71	61	17
Afghanistan	initial cons.	40	17	16	5	1
Algeria	initial cons.	1				1
Iraq	initial cons.	3		1	2	
Congo	initial cons.	1	1			
Sudan	initial cons.	1	1			
TOTAL		253	67	88	68	19

Source: Guerassimova et al., 2000

In addition, to this data I would like to add that of the 94 families with children who were registered with the Migration Service:

- only 19 families were single- parent families.
- one child was without parents and (officially) accompanied by his or her brother.

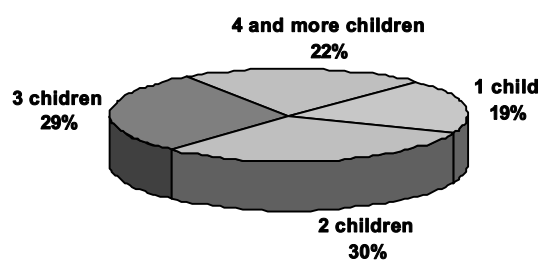


Figure 1: Distribution of families (Registered in Migration Service) by number of children (in per cent)

Source: Guerassimova and others, 2000

In this chapter, I will say a few words about the general situation of the asylum-seeking families in St. Petersburg and I will dwell on the issues which concern the situation of children in more detail.

Legal status

Only high status militants or political activists have any real chance of obtaining *refugee status* according to "The Law of Russian Federation on refugees". The article on status of *temporary residence* has not yet been passed and the number of asylum seekers and illegal migrants is thus extended artificially. This means that since the status of temporary residence does not officially exist, people who did not get refugee or asylum-seeking status have no other status and their stay at RF territory is therefore illegal as they have no reasons to stay. The process of status determination might last several years. This means that applicants have a semi-legal status which prevents them from finding appropriate jobs or otherwise plan for their future.

People with the status of refugees and asylum seekers have to register with the Migration Service every three months in order to obtain residence registration or documents for work or study. At these intervals, they thus have to renew their residential registration, or change medical insurance and other documents connected with residential registration. Only 35 per cent of families according to the parents' survey and 27.5 per cent of families according to the teenagers' survey had residential registration and about half of them were not registered at their home.

Documents and registration are rather frequently requested by police and other authorities, especially from men. All members of the family, as a rule, are registered in the same document and it is dangerous to leave home without documents, so members

of the families have to keep together. It is less risky for women and children to go out alone. Sometimes men use their children as so called “visa”: they take their children with them in order not to be arrested. In that way children can be involved in situations of aggression and violence.

Legal issues are vital because problems with legal status and registration cause problems with housing, medical care as well as employment and affect the children’s educational possibilities.

Occupation and income

Our data shows that about 40per cent of women and 60per cent of Afghan men have higher education. But now they have almost no possibility to apply their professional skills and earn money in a legal way.

Almost all Afghan men in St. Petersburg work in the market as vendors or loaders, Jordanian and Iraqi men work as service staff in snack-bars. They work without permission, which is a reason for fines, arrests, beating by police and confiscation of goods. A man can earn 100-300 USD per month in this job. Young men work as loaders in the market and earn less.

Most women run households and care for their children. Educated women would like to work and earn money for support of the family but the only available job is in the market and it is traditionally male. The best jobs they can find are workers for the Red Cross, or in the Afghan café. Some of them cook food at home and then their sons sell it in the market.

Assessing the financial state of the families is quite difficult. According to information about income given by informants, the average income per person in Afghan families is about 20 USD per month. There are reasons to doubt this data because in the interviews it turned out that some families pay more for rent than they earn. They probably do not count financial support from relatives or friends as income (18per cent of our informants are supported by relatives and friends). Observations made by researchers at the homes of refugees and asylum seekers, however, does confirm the fact that a majority of these families live in a situation of financial shortage and poverty.

Housing and Living conditions

On average, half of the family income is spent on rent. The cheapest housing is in a hostel, where a room costs 15-20 USD. Separate apartments rented by asylum seekers cost from 200-300 USD per month. According to the parents’ survey,

- about 30 per cent live in a hostel,
- about 60 per cent - rent an apartment.

Living conditions are rather bad. It is common for three to four people to live in one room. The worst situation we met was when 14 people shared a two-room apartment and nine people lived in one room. Such crowding means that there is no place for children to study or play. When individuals of different genders live in one room (often even with their parents) it could also cause undesirable emotional pressure. It is also dangerous for inhabitants’ health: tuberculosis is one of the most wide-spread diseases

among migrants from Afghanistan. In some dwellings, sanitary conditions are very poor, without hot water or a bathroom, and there are rats.

Some families from our sample have already moved ten to fourteen times in the past eight years. On average, a family moves twice a year. 40 per cent of our informants (parents' survey) had been living in their apartments less than six months at the time of the study.

Nutrition and health

According to information given by a Red Cross worker, about 80 per cent of asylum seekers need regular medical assistance. Almost every Afghan woman suffers from anemia. As parents said, children under the age of 12 are sick an average of five to six times a year. Medical assistance at the Red Cross is limited to help people with the most common and dangerous diseases. There are no particular specialists such as speech therapists, neuropathologists or dentists, who are needed badly, especially for children. The Red Cross has agreements with some medical services and often sends patients to them or to the district polyclinic. Asylum seekers know about it and do not want to spend money for an "odd" trip to the Red Cross in order to be sent somewhere else; especially in the situation when each trip in the city is rather dangerous and very stressful for them. From their point of view, medical assistance should ideally be provided directly by a polyclinic nearby but sometimes they cannot get care there because they lack residential registration. Schools and kindergartens provide elementary medical help and a check on the children's health.

Parents pointed out the absence of fruits in their children's rations and complained that food assistance includes products that they are not accustomed to use such as buckwheat instead of rice or pasta, for example.

There is a problem with infants' nutrition: it is rather expensive and mothers cannot get it from district polyclinics because they are not registered.

Assessment of children's needs

Notably, educational and psycho-social needs of the children are not considered to be a first priority by parents and experts; they are only considered after more serious problems with registrations, housing, job for parents, money, medical assistance are addressed. It reflects on children in different ways such as the absence of a clear strategy for education, psychological tension, and difficulties adapting to the Russian language and culture.

The questionnaire for teenagers asked "What is the most serious problem for your family at the moment?" They ranked their problems as follows:

- 38.5 per cent financial problems
- 16.9 per cent - problems of a divided family
- 15.4 per cent - housing problems
- 6.2 per cent - absence of documents
- 4.6 per cent - employment
- 4.6 per cent - uncertainty of the future

When teens were asked about their personal problems: “What is the most serious problem for you personally?” they responded as follows:

- 38.4 per cent - problems connected with education (they could not attend or they had at trouble school).
- 13.9 per cent - financial problems
- 12.3 per cent - lack of documents.

Regarding children in general, the mothers stressed the following main problems for children (in interviews and at the focus group discussion):

- Poor housing conditions and lack of space for children.
- Age gap between asylum seekers' children and their classmates that causes psychological difficulties.
- The schools demanded high additional costs.
- No normal relaxation on holidays; almost all children spend their summer holidays in the city although they have poor health and awful living conditions.
- Poor involvement in extra-curricular activities because of a shortage of money and lack of information about free hobby groups, clubs, etc.
- Lack of time to learn their native language and culture.
- Fear of police caused by constant check-ups at hostels, schools and in the markets.

I will elaborate on some these problems in more detail below.

Educational needs

Legal provisions and official position of the city authorities

Under the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the Russian Federation Law “On Education”, every child under the age of 15 has the right to free secondary education irrespectively of the parents’ citizenship, status or registration. Article 43 (part 1) of the Russian Federation Constitution follows article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes the right to education among other basic human rights.

Based on these legal regulations, the municipal Committee for Education made a decision to admit all children to state educational establishments in St. Petersburg. When interviewed, one official from the Commission for Education said that the refugee and asylum-seeking children must be admitted to educational establishments, with all documentation confirming the fact of their registration at the Migration Service. If the refugee has no such documents, the parents must approach the District Committee for Education for a paper that will be regarded as a document allowing the child to be admitted to a kindergarten or a primary/secondary school, but without the official registration of the fact of their admittance to school.

Admittance to educational establishments and certification

24 of the children in the study who were between 2 and 6 years old could potentially attend kindergarten. Only 13 children actually did so. Kindergartens are not very popular among parents, since the majority of mothers do not work and feel little need for this service. This is especially typical for religious families and families with many children.

For those who do attend, parents feel that it helps their children to learn Russian and that it is a good preparation for school. This was confirmed by our survey: all the children who attended Russian kindergarten are now going to school. A majority of these parents - at least the fathers - have a higher education. They usually occupied high positions in Afghan power structures and that is why they had to emigrate when the political regime changed. Some of them had studied in the Soviet Union and can therefore speak Russian rather well. Russian kindergarten was not perceived by them as dangerous compared with those migrants who less were acquainted with Russian culture.

Residential registration and medical certificates are necessary documents for a child to be enrolled in kindergarten. Parents, who wanted to enter their children, may face the problem of not having the necessary medical certificate or having one only in their native language. As many of those interviewed did not know that the Medical-Social Service at the Red Cross could help them, they had the document translated for a charge (10 USD). In general, however, parents did not report having had any significant difficulties when enrolling their children in kindergartens.

The number of school aged children in the study was 63 (of 92 involved). 54 of them attended school (85.7 per cent). The teenagers in the study were enrolled in twelve different schools in the city.

A child needs the same documents to be admitted to a school as to kindergarten: residential registration or a document about official registration in municipal bodies, or a document from the Migration Service. That is all, according to the directors of the schools whom we interviewed. Parents were, however, not as optimistic concerning the availability of education as the representatives of the city and school administration were.

The majority of the parents noted that they faced certain difficulties when trying to place their children in school. The most frequent problems were the following:

- the lack of residential registration and necessary documents
- expenditures for medical certificate
- poor knowledge of the Russian language among children which affects studying and poor knowledge of the Russian language among adults for establishing contacts with the school administration.

In one of the interviews, one informant thus mentioned that his children were admitted to school only "after presenting some things" to the director. Another family had to spend about 30 USD for school building maintenance so that the child could be admitted to the school. Some families had to spend much more. Many parents treat the placement of their children to school as the favor done by the director personally.

Difficulties caused by legal issues

According to the director of one school, the main problem with respect to these children is the limited term of validity of the documents (three months) and the constant need to update them. Compliance with this rule is controlled by the District Department for People's Education (RONO) and by the police. The inspectors come to check the students' documents about four times a year - twice by the RONO and twice by the department of passport control at the police authorities. Shortly before such inspection, the children rush to get the necessary documents and many thus do not attend school for

a few days. The director therefore suggested that registration for the entire academic year would be more appropriate.

One of the serious problems connected with school and education is the lack of library facilities. If the children do not have registration, they are not allowed to borrow books from city libraries and therefore cannot prepare for their Russian literature classes.

Financial difficulties

The majority of asylum-seeking families lives in a situation of financial shortage and needs special forms of economic support. Most such privileges for school children are granted by schools. According to the information given by the Committee for Education, when a refugee child has been admitted to an educational establishment and entered in the files, he or she is eligible for a number of privileges *pari passu* with other students. These privileges include a monthly transportation ticket and free breakfasts at school. Children from families with more than three children under 18, and low income families, are entitled to this assistance. Most of our informants do not pay for breakfasts, monthly tickets and school guards.

If students are not registered in school documentation, they may not get the student's card that is necessary for getting a monthly ticket. Some children who were born in the country of origin do not have a birth certificate in Russian that is needed to buy monthly transportation ticket at a low price.

Every class excursion costs about 1-1.5 USD. Many parents can hardly afford to pay for it and sometimes their children stay at home. The children then feel excluded from the collective and cultural life of the school and the city. Notably, five of the 19 interviewed teenagers who attended school (i.e. 20per cent) had never joined the class for excursions or cultural events.

Every party or holiday at school is about 1 USD; 25.5per cent parents do not pay for it because of a lack of money, which sometimes causes conflicts with other parents or teachers.

Language Competence

The survey of teenagers indicates their language competence as they themselves estimate it:

Russian language:

37.3per cent understand and speak Russian fluently or fairly well;

23.5per cent can read Russian fairly well;

19.6per cent can write Russian fairly well.

Mother language competence:

94.1per cent understand well;

92.2per cent speak fluently or well;

37.3per cent teenagers can read well

29.4per cent can write well

19.6per cent of the interviewed teenagers are semi-literate or illiterate.

In other words, more than 60per cent of the teenagers recognize that they lack a sufficient competence in understanding and speaking Russian. Importantly, in addition, almost 20per cent of interviewed teenagers are semi-literate or illiterate. 80per cent of

their family and relatives do not speak Russian. For communication with parents almost all children use their native language.

Russian and English courses at the Red Cross as a rule are attended by people between 8 and 18 years old. Many children speak English better than Russian at the first stage. English courses are very popular and children ask for a more extended program.

Russian language courses at the Red Cross are not as effective to help children who are between 10 and 15 years old to overcome the language gap with Russian peers. The courses in this form are more suited for housewives or newly arrived migrants who need basic language knowledge for elementary communication.

Teachers' attitude and assessment of pupils' progress

Teachers mostly seem to show tolerance and goodwill with respect toward refugee children. According to the teachers, refugee children actively communicate with their classmates. In many teachers' opinion, Afghan children "are very clever and gifted", and they therefore have no problems with their studies. The children study well, they understand all the tasks. Their written Russian, however, in the teachers' opinion, remains the main problem for these children. 36.8 per cent of Afghan schoolchildren (from the teens' survey) did not know Russian at all when they first entered school.

In one school in St. Petersburg, all the asylum-seeking children study in a special class with so-called "compensating education". It differs from the ordinary class by the individualized teaching according to the pupil's ability. The director of the school said in the interview: "It's only the name; they have the same program. There are only fewer pupils in the class, so I can pay more attention to them" (eleven students are in this class in comparison to the usual number of 25-30 students). Some experts, however, would not agree with the claim that fewer students is the only difference of the class with compensating education. There are also disadvantages of this system, in terms of: social and language segregation of the students, which gives these types of classes very low status among other pupils and teachers and seem to affect their chances to continue in other educational institutions, which amounts to institutional discrimination.

Parents' opinion

According to parents, the educational level at the St. Petersburg schools is obviously higher than what the children could reach in their native country. Practically all parents expressed the wish that their children study.

However, a relationship between teachers and parents is rarely established. In some schools, the class leader and the school administration have no contacts with the parents of the asylum-seeking children, because mothers in these families do not speak Russian, while fathers work much and are in no way connected with school. In general, however, all interviewed parents answered that teachers treat their children "well" and "benevolently". Only three informants consider that the teachers demonstrate roughness and tactlessness towards the children.

Parents had the following suggestions for a better organization of the children's education:

- 41 per cent of the parents believe that their children should study with Russian children but almost all of them at the same time think that they should be taught the native language and culture.
- 26.8 per cent of the informants would like their children to study with their compatriots, according to special programs developed for refugees.
- 6.5 per cent of the respondents expressed the wish that their children attend a school with religious Muslim education.

In comparison, teenagers seem to be less concerned about this issue. Out of 19 teenagers interviewed:

- 6 (33 per cent) want to have more compatriots in their classes (five of them want to study in nationally homogeneous class),
- 3 (16 per cent) do not want it and
- 10 (51 per cent) do not care about it.

The younger children would like to go to school where there are Afghans already, but school authorities are against such a concentration of asylum-seeking children, because they would require more attention, they would speak Afghan among themselves and would form their own isolated group.

Teenagers as a vulnerable group

51 questionnaires with Afghan teenagers (aged 11 to 19) were conducted. One of the main problems with them is that there are those of school age in the asylum-seeking category who do not attend school at all (see Table 4). Their parents explained this as a problem of documents and the family's financial situation, but in depth interviews disclosed many other reasons. Documents are not the most serious obstacle; there are others:

- *Mismatch of the knowledge of the Russian language and the teenagers' age.* We can see that teenagers are the most vulnerable group with respect to access to education. All children who arrived in Russia before the age of 9 attend school at the moment. However, teenagers who arrived to Russia when they were 12 to 17 years old cannot learn Russian easily and school authorities register them unwillingly because they would be placed in the 1st or 2nd grades. Among 54 children who attended school, 19 are older than their classmates (35.8 per cent). It causes discomfort in communication and difficulties in finding friends among peers. There were two teenagers among our informants who refused to go to school because of the big age gap between them and their prospective classmates.
- *Age limits.* As school education in Russia is guaranteed until the age of 15, school administration has the right to refuse all children over 15. Newly-arrived teenagers who are older than 15 have the only option of taking the courses offered by the Red Cross.

On other hand, there are additional *cultural factors*, which prevent newly arrived teenagers from attending Russian schools. There are different typical scenarios for males and females. Teenagers over 15 are considered to be adult enough to undertake traditional "adult" work: at the market for men, and in the household for women. These

adolescents thus have the choice of either going to a class where children are much younger or working, either at home or in the market.

Both working teenagers and those who stay at home are rather isolated in their ethnic circle. The former communicate mostly with co-workers in the market, the latter with relatives. A big part of these teens pointed out that they wanted more opportunities to communicate with Russian peers than they currently have. One third of the working teenagers want to study. They also would like to work in a technical profession in the future and hope to attend evening courses, for example, to become drivers or technicians. In addition, 3 out of 12 teenage girls who are currently staying at home would like to go to school.

Leisure activities and relaxation

The children were asked about what their interests are, and the answers are listed below

- Painting
- Modeling
- Sports and sport games (football, basketball)
- TV, videos
- Science (Biology, Math)
- Native language - courses attached to children's room (Red Cross)
- English language - courses attached to children's room (Red Cross)
- Computer
- Music, dancing

19 of the 51 teenagers attend different courses (sports, language, on school subjects). The most popular courses that the teenagers want to attend are:

- English,
- computer courses,
- sports,
- native language courses.
- boys like football and different kinds of games and competitions
- swimming (popular among both boys and girls).

In conclusion, the main difficulties that asylum-seeking children have in pursuing their interests are the following:

- Financial problems (inability to pay for courses, or obtain free entry)
- Social problems (small number of free courses, lack of information about them)
- Cultural obstacles (especially for young women who are not allowed to go alone in public spaces)
- Psychological problems (fear of police while moving to the courses, parents' lack of understanding of children's development needs)

One of the most serious problems is the children's summer break. Almost all the interviewed children spent their holidays in the city with few outings to the countryside.

In our sample only one teenager had been to a summer camp organized by NGO. Working teenagers have no holidays at all.

Conclusion

As both studies showed, asylum-seeking families in St. Petersburg live under rather poor and limiting social conditions which cause health problems among asylum-seeking families, including mental health problems. Realization of the right of children to an education is complicated because of legal issues. However, educational needs of children are often satisfied and the children almost have no psychological problems in schools with teachers and have rather good relationships with their peers. The language problems, however, still matter for many families and it is especially important for children for whom language troubles cause problems in communication with their peers, which is a very important part of socialization. In addition, for some of the older children, a mismatch of age and the grade in the Russian schools make attending school difficult. We could thus generally characterize the conditions under which asylum-seeking families with children live as fairly tolerable even though there are several problems, which have no real solution in the city/country under the present circumstances. As mentioned above, these are primarily problems of employment and education, general living conditions and health care.

On the other hand, it is no secret that people who are officially granted the status of asylum seekers form just a small part of the whole quantity of migrants living in the city. According to qualified estimates the number of illegal migrants – people who did not apply for any status (for instance, economic migrants) or those whose status applications were rejected, but who remain in St. Petersburg are between 300,000 and 1 million, which is about 10-20 per cent of the city's population. Importantly, these illegal migrants sometimes live in even worse conditions than asylum seekers and refugees who were described above; they have much more difficulties in placing their children in schools because of their illegal status. Thus, what we have described in this chapter is just the smaller and in some sense, the better part of the “iceberg”, referring to the situation of forced migrants in contemporary St. Petersburg and Russia. Even though this conference is primarily concerned with the situation of asylum-seeking children, we believe that a “humanistic” approach requires us to pay more attention to investigating the situation of the broader group of children from the families of forced migrants in Russia. Some studies in this field are those of for example Guerassimova and Pachenkov (2001) and, Brednikova and Pachenkov (2002) and we look forward to sharing these findings with colleagues and interested experts in the near future.

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¹ Text is based of two analytical reports written by K.Guerassmova (2000) and by K.Guerassimova and O.Pachenkov (2001). Please note that the legal situation has changed since that time and the humanitarian status was adopted by the RF which changed the position of many international migrants for better. It is worth noting that about 80per cent of those who had been involved in the study migrated to third countries over the next 2-3 years.