

Russian Teen Suicide

For many, the massive country of Russia still remains a mystery. While communism is discussed and talked about in school, few Westerners truly know what goes on inside the country, even though the Iron Curtain came down long ago. A recent article found in The Washington Post reveals a rather bleak reality that still haunts Russia: teen suicide. Russia remains the third highest country in the world when it comes to teen suicides. To put that statistic in more manageable numbers, an average of five Russians younger than the age of 20 kill themselves each and every day.

Many reasons exist although chances are no two reasons are the same when it comes to the why Russian youth continue to take their lives. Psychiatrists contribute the high rate to alcohol abuse, domestic violence and extremely strict parenting techniques that continue to haunt Russian households. “At home, you order, you enforce, you punish your kids instead of trying to understand them,” said Anatoly Severny, a Russian child psychiatrist. “Schools use what I call repressive pedagogics. Kids are forced to do everything.” Also, because the sheer size of the country, teenagers who feel depressed and could use the help of health professionals often come up short; there simply are not enough child psychiatrists to span the far reaches of the country.

In addition to the lack of health care professionals, there is also a lingering stigma when it comes to seeking help from a psychiatrist or psychologist. This is a leftover mindset from the times of Russian communism when such professions were used for punishment rather than mental help. To this day, there is a mistrust of mental health care professionals that often prevent families from seeking help.

Most recently, Nastya and Liza, two 14-year old girls and best friends, decided to take their own lives together. Relatives are still trying to figure out what caused the girls to jump off the roof of a building. They came from a smaller town in Russia; their school class only had 25 students. Both had joined the Glee club and recently had stopped attending classes. The school set up a makeshift memorial for the girl’s for a week and then tore it down, moving on and leaving the memories of the fragile girls behind.

Although advocates are working hard to introduce suicide prevention programs into Russian schools, they are continually met with closed doors and uninterested attitudes. Anatoly Severny remains hopeful, however, that one day Russia can reverse the trend and help students to see a brighter future.

Discussion Questions:

Based on what you know about Russia from history classes, why do you think the suicide rate remains so high?

What needs to happen for the suicide rate to fall?

What are some universal issues that teens have to deal with no matter where they live? Why are some overcome by these issues?