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Abandoned Children Born to HIV-positive Women: Analysis of the Situation in Russia



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*Программа
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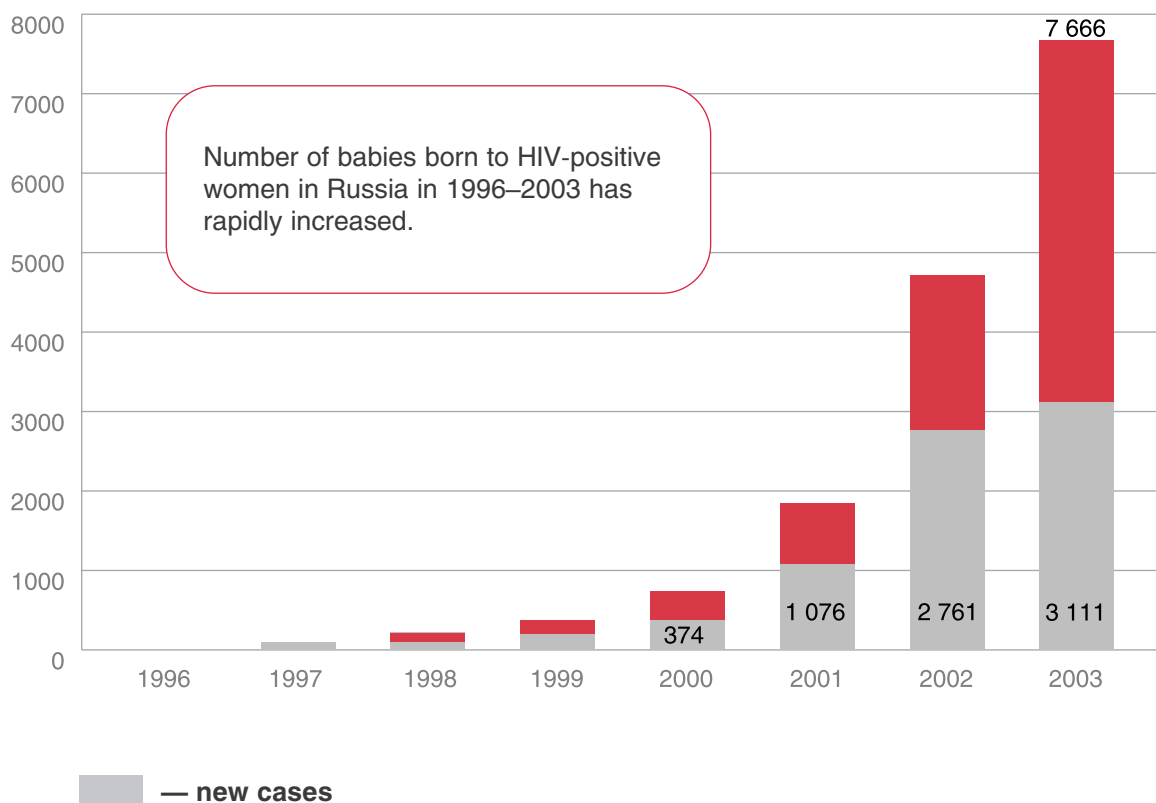
E. Voronin, A. Vinokur, T. Intigrinova

The problem of child abandonment in Russia has grown dramatically during the past three years as a result of the rapid spread of HIV infection and increase in the number of children born to HIV-positive women. The data below are indicative of the situation:

- Out of approximately 8,000 children that have been born to HIV-positive women in the Russian Federation, almost 7,000 (i.e. 90% of the total number) were born in 2001–2003 (Figure 1);
- Infants born to HIV-positive women are 9 times more likely to be abandoned at birth compared to other infants (Khaldeeva 2003) (Figure 2).

Surging rates of new HIV infection, exponential growth in the number of babies born to HIV-positive women, and above average rates of infant abandonment by HIV-positive mothers, suggest that HIV may significantly worsen Russia's already growing orphan problem.

Figure 1.
Total number of children born to HIV-positive women in Russia in 1996–2003



Source: HIV infection. Bulletin No. 26. Federal Scientific and Methodological Center for HIV/AIDS, 2004. p. 16

Figure 2.
Percentage of abandoned babies by mothers' HIV status, St. Petersburg, Russia, 2002

Women	Number of births	Number of abandoned babies
HIV-positive	485	43 (9%)
HIV-negative	37 621	354 (1%)

N. Khaldeeva, S. Hilis, E. Vinogradova, E. Voronin, A. Rakhmanova, A. Yakovleva, D. Jason, R. Ryder. 2003. *The Lancet*, 362:1981–82.

Currently one of the most acute challenges related to child abandonment by HIV-positive women is the issue of so-called "boarder babies" who remain for months or years in hospitals, waiting for placement in childcare institutions. The difficult conditions under which they are raised pose a serious threat to their long-term health and psycho-social development, a situation which requires a review and response by the Russian government. Russian health and care services for these children are often inadequate and frequently violate the basic rights of children guaranteed by Russian legislation.

Support of children under government care



! Life conditions of many abandoned children born to HIV-positive women violate the children's rights and pose a threat to their future health and social development.

Care

Approximately 1,000 infants born to HIV-positive women in the Russian Federation have been abandoned and left in state-run hospitals and orphanages since the beginning of the epidemic. In many regions, care is inadequate and services are not available to meet the child's most basic health and social needs. After spending several months in maternity hospitals, "boarder babies" are usually referred to children's hospitals, where they await confirmation of their HIV status¹ or transfer to specialized care institutions for HIV-positive children. Due to the limited number of these institutions, children may spend months or even years in these hospitals.

Unlike healthcare facilities, where the babies are held, childcare institutions offer more opportunities for child development. Unfortunately, due to very high levels of stigma in Russian society and misinformation about HIV infection and modes of transmission, most traditional childcare institutions are reluctant to admit children born to HIV-positive women. Additional complicating factors include: (a) lack of clear recommendations regarding referral procedures for children born to HIV-positive women to childcare institutions of the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education, and (b) an underdeveloped foster care system.

¹ In Russia all children born to HIV-positive women are considered to be HIV-positive. HIV status is confirmed when a baby is between 18 and 36 months of age. In 2000 the average percent of confirmed HIV-positive status amounted to **19.3%** (Sokolova 2003). Thus, in over 80% of cases preliminary diagnosis is not confirmed. Provision of high quality prophylactics to all HIV-positive expectant mothers might reduce percentage of HIV infection transmission from mother to child to even lower extent (1–2%).

Currently, nearly half of abandoned children born to HIV-positive women stay in hospitals for extended periods, sometimes up to several years, without reason. The period from birth until three years of age is the most important stage in a child's development. While they await placement, abandoned babies are routinely deprived of appropriate educational and social support, and as a result, often develop lifelong mental and physical disorders.

These practices contradict the Constitution of the Russian Federation (Part 1, Article 7) and other provisions of Russian legislation, in particular the Family Code of the Russian Federation (Article 122, 123) as well as a number of international documents ratified by the Russian Federation, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although the Family Code of the Russian Federation puts the priority on family-based care, boarding children for extended periods of time represents formidable obstacles for realization of this priority. While babies are accommodated in hospitals, their placement into adoptive families is impeded whereas physical and mental disadvantages become an additional constraint on the future adoption.

Treatment

A Russian child who is confirmed to have contracted HIV even further complicates his fate. As demonstrated above (Sokolova 2003) less than 20 percent of children born to HIV-positive women in Russia contract HIV. Although not all of these children require immediate treatment, in many regions of the country, due to shortage of skilled staff and funds allotted to procure antiretroviral drugs, access to high quality treatment even for this limited number of children is not always available.

Over the past several years, highly effective therapies for people living with HIV/AIDS, including children, have become available internationally. Although there is no cure for HIV infection, reliable access to high-quality antiretroviral medication, adequate treatment and care services, and mechanisms to ensure treatment adherence can significantly improve the quality of life for HIV-positive children, allowing the vast majority of them to lead healthy and productive lives. Unfortunately, these conditions are not always met in many Russian regions, and as a result, many HIV-positive children have no hope for a healthy life.

Social Impact of Child Abandonment



!! Only 30% of childcare institutions alumni are successful in their social adaptation. Unnecessarily long in-hospital boarding of children born to HIV-positive women may lead to even lower level of their adaptation.

Child abandonment by HIV-positive mothers will increasingly pose a burden on Russian state and society, especially as increasing numbers of Russian women become infected. Young women of childbearing age represent the group with the fastest-growing rate of new HIV infection in Russia, and heterosexual transmission of HIV now represents more than 20 percent of all new infections.

Despite significant investments into the extensive network of the state care institutions, many orphans and abandoned children in Russia face lifelong social, health, and developmental problems. Only 30 percent of graduates of educational institutions for children in state custody successfully adjust to adult life (Zaretski 2002:54). Social adaptation of so-called "boarder babies" may be even lower. Unnecessarily long in-hospital stays leading to physical and mental disadvantages will inevitably pose additional challenges to the social adaptation of these children over the long-run. Unless the "boarder babies" are immediately provided with markedly improved care during their early years, their social support in the future will require much higher budgetary expenditures than are required for children graduating from traditional facilities. Emphasizing foster care placement and adoption for children born to HIV-positive mothers in Russia early after birth would significantly improve the chances that these children could lead productive lives.



Russian children abandoned by HIV-positive women should have the same opportunities as all Russian children to live long, productive lives. With proper treatment provided to expectant mothers during pregnancy and childbirth, the vast majority of children can avoid infection. If they receive proper care, treatment and support during their childhood they will be able to contribute to Russian society. Family-based care is the most adequate institution to meet a child's physical, mental and emotional needs. Support to all forms of the family-based care including foster, adoptive and biological families should become the main priority for state policy.

Several important measures should be taken to improve the quality of care and treatment of abandoned children born to HIV-positive mothers who are currently in state care, including:

- Implementation of programs aimed at raising the awareness of institutional staff on HIV infection and modes of transmission;
- Increased funding for antiretroviral treatment for children in need;
- Provision of regular professional development to medical personnel on issues related to treatment of HIV infection in children; and,
- Development of clear recommendations regulating transfer of children with no clinical indicators of hospitalization to childcare institutions under the supervision of both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education.

These measures would allow not only to improve the care and support services offered to abandoned children born to HIV-positive women, but would also serve to mitigate the negative impact of HIV infection on Russia's already difficult demographic situation. Addressing this problem directly fits into a number of priorities stated by President Putin in his annual Address to the Federal Assembly, such as: improving the health of the nation, eliminating childhood homelessness, reducing the crime rate, overcoming the demographic crisis and observing constitutional rights of citizens, including the rights of the child. These targets should become a shared priority for a number of state agencies, State Duma committees, and the Russian national policy at large.

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Dr. Evgeny Voronin is a prominent physician, Head of the Russian Center for HIV-positive Expectant Mothers and Children of the Ministry of Health and Social Development of the Russian Federation, author of a number of monographs on the treatment of HIV infection in children.

Anatoly Vinokur is a Senior Policy Analyst at Transatlantic Partners Against AIDS. A. Vinokur holds an M.D. and MPH from Vladivostok State Medical University, and MPH from George Washington University's School of Public Health and Health Services.

Tatyana Intigrinova is a Policy Analyst at Transatlantic Partners Against AIDS. T. Intigrinova holds MSc. in Anthropology and Ecology of Development from University College London (UCL), UK.

TRANSATLANTIC PARTNERS
AGAINST AIDS

Transatlantic Partners Against AIDS (TPAA)

Gazetny per. 5, 3-d Floor
125993 Moscow, Russia
Tel.: +7 (095) 956-05-78
Fax: +7 (095) 229-76-49
Website: www.tpaa.ru

Transatlantic Partners Against AIDS (TPAA)

928 Broadway, Suite 800
New York, New York 10010 U.S.A.
Tel.: +1 (212) 228-89-07
Fax: +1 (212) 228-90-63
Website: www.tpaa.net

Transatlantic Partners Against AIDS (TPAA) is an independent, non-governmental organization that leverages the political, civic, scientific, and economic resources of North American, European, and Eurasian partners to combat the rapid and devastating spread of HIV/AIDS in Russia, Ukraine and neighboring countries.