

What Is the Special Significance of Comparing Development Indicators of the USA and Russia?

How Russia has lower maternal mortality and child mortality rates compared to the richest and most powerful country?

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It is a matter of deep concern in the USA that the maternal mortality rate of the country has declined alarmingly in recent years. However there is very less realization of this fact or of stagnation of other development indicators of the USA outside this country, except among development academics. What is no less significant is that around the same time Russia has registered important development gains and in the context of some important indicators it has actually surged ahead of the USA.

In any comparison of two countries, generally human development indicators are likely to be higher in the richer country, and these are even more likely to be lower for any country facing constraints such as those created by sanctions and hostile policy of more powerful countries. In this context the comparison of the USA and the Russia Federation reveal some interesting aspects.

Child mortality, or under five years of age mortality, measured per 1,000 live births, is widely considered to be a good indicator of health in any country. In this context it is useful to see the UN data which tells us that for the latest year 2021 the child mortality rate was 5.1 in the Russian Federation, while it was 6.2 in the USA. Hence Russia has been able to achieve a lower child mortality rate despite being confronted with very difficult conditions compared to the USA which enjoyed the most favorable and even hegemonic conditions at the world level.

If we see this data for the period 2000-2021, then in the USA this declined from 8 in year 2000 to 6.2 in 2021, while in Russia this declined from 20 to 5.1, a very significant reduction. In comparative terms, Russia was much behind USA in this respect but surged ahead over the first two decades of this century.

In year 2000 Russia trailed behind the USA very significantly, its child mortality rate being 20 compared to 8 for the USA. Yet within two decades, a time when Russia faced several sanctions, Russia managed to achieve a child mortality rate lower than USA.

In the case of infant mortality (or mortality under 1 year of age per 1000 births), according to Macrotrends data, the infant mortality in Russia declined in a big way from 19 in 2000 to 4.8 in 2023, while during the same period infant mortality in the USA declined from 7.2 to 5.4, so that Russia which had been far behind the USA now had a lower infant mortality rate in 2023.

In the case of maternal mortality rate or MMR (reported per 100,000 births), according to UN

data, from year 2000 to 2020, this declined very significantly in Russia from 52 to 14, while that of the USA actually increased from 12 to 21. Thus during this period, according to UN data, Russia was recording a very big decline of 6.66% per year while the USA was recording not a decline, but instead an increase of 2.88% per year in maternal mortality rate.

According to Macrotrends data, from 2000 to 2017, the maternal mortality rate of the Russian Federation declined from 56 to 17, while this rate increase in the context of the USA was from 12 to 19.

In both these sets of data, it is common that the Russian Federation starts at MMR much higher than that of the USA, and despite facing difficult conditions, reaches a lower MMR than the USA within two decades or even earlier.

Initially some persons tried to draw attention away from rising maternal mortality in the USA by saying, wrongly, that this is due to late pregnancy, but if this was the case then the MMR would have risen similarly in other rich countries. However as a report in the Scientific American noted ('Why maternal mortality is getting worse across the USA') if the MMR for USA is compared with the MMR of comparable rich countries, then it is almost double for the USA (about 24) compared to other rich countries (about 12). What is more this is, to a considerable extent, due to the higher rates for blacks and even more particularly Native American and Native Alaska communities in the USA. In the case of these natives the MMR almost tripled during 1999-2019.

A study by Northwestern University, reported in Northwestern Now, has also debunked late pregnancy as a cause by pointing out that higher MMR is being reported in all age groups of mothers, including young age groups, in the USA. This study has reported even higher increase of maternal mortality rate between 2014 and 2021 in the USA. The study has also confirmed much higher mortality rate among blacks compared to the national average. Dr. Sadiya Khan who was involved in this study has emphasized that maternal mortality is largely preventable and to achieve lower rates it is important to improve health infrastructure and surveillance.

According to official USA figures for percentage of people in poverty in the USA, this number is 11%. According to official Russian figures for people living in poverty in the Russian Federation, this is 9%.

According to official figures for the number of homeless people in the USA, this is 653,104. According to official figures for the number of homeless people in Russia this number is 11,300. This may be an underestimate.

Leaving aside comparisons, some other significant development achievements of Russia may be noted.

During 2000-2019 according to UN data the life-expectancy in the Russian Federation increased significantly from 65.3 years to 73.2 years. According to Macrotrends data, this increase was from 65.4 in 2000 to 72.98 in 2023.

The increase of income or GNI per capita in Russia during this period was very significant—from \$1,710 in year 2000 to \$4,450 in 2005 to \$9,980 in 2010 to \$11,610 in 2021. On the contrary when the Russian economy was acting much under western influence earlier during year 1991 to year 2000, there was a huge decline from \$3,440 to \$1,710.

The Human Development Index of Russia improved from 720 in 2000 to 822 in 2021.

Thus as far as the welfare and progress of the people of the Russian Federation in the first two decades is concerned, this appears to have done remarkably well, despite many hurdles being placed in its path by the most powerful countries, despite constant vilification and criticism. In some important respects, this performance has been better than that of the richest and the most powerful country.

However the performance of Russia in some other contexts including reduction of inequalities and democratic reforms has not been encouraging.

The quality of democracy in the USA has also been in decline, causing much concern. Inequalities in the USA are incredibly high.

Some weaknesses of Russia and the USA from a development perspective are common—both have high levels of inequality and both spend a high share of their budgets on weapons and military.

However a big question remains as to what explains the ability of Russia to emerge ahead of the USA in the context of some important development indicators despite the fact that the USA has much higher GNP per capita and hegemonistic powers at world level, while Russia has suffered under sanctions and other constraints imposed on it, such as the sabotage to destroy its prominent pipelines for supplying energy to Europe.

While development economists and experts will no doubt answer this question in more capable ways, what can be stated even at this preliminary stage is that Russia, its leaders and people, appear to have shown much higher commitment regarding some key national goals.

These important development achievements of the Russian Federation during the 21st century also reveal how unfair the relentless criticism and vilification of Russia in recent years has been. It would be much better for the USA and its European allies to see Russia in a much more balanced way, appreciate its real achievements, raise objections only when there are serious problems and try to settle them in peaceful ways, instead of carrying out very dangerous proxy wars, sabotage and relentless disinformation against Russia, very unfortunate and unethical tendencies that can also spiral out of control.

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