

## Impacts of urbanization process on mental health

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### ABSTRACT

*Urbanization is such a process that it leads to the growth of cities related to industrial and economic development. It also causes some changes in labor division and human behaviors. Besides, urbanization may cause problems such as stressful life events, poor social network, and rapid growth of cities because of immigration. All of these factors may negatively affect mental health, which makes it a prominent process that should not be neglected. The aim of this was to review the difficulties stemming from urbanization -an important problem for both urban people and immigrants- and its negative impacts on mental health. (Anatolian Journal of Psychiatry 2008; 9:238-243)*

**Key words:** urbanization, mental health, immigration

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### Impacts of Urbanization Process on Mental Health

Urbanization is defined as the increase in the number of cities and urban population. Urbanization is not only a demographic movement. Therefore, when describing urbanization, social, economic and psychological changes that constitute the demographic movement should be considered. Based on this, comprehensive definition of urbanization can be made as follows: Urbanization is a process that leads to the growth of cities due to industrialization and economic development, and that leads to urban-specific changes in specialization, labor division and human behaviors.<sup>1</sup> In that way, urbanization is a forced and inevitable demographic movement and this process should not certainly be neglected.

In a moving population, the process of acquiring urban characteristics and isolation from rural life in terms of economic and social aspects starts together with urbanization. This is a cultural transformation process and besides the

development of urban culture, city dwellers should psychologically, physically, and behaviorally be in harmony with this process.

In developed countries, urbanization is an old process and it was formed in parallel with industrialization, technologic reforms, and infrastructure services, and it still continues. In underdeveloped and developing countries, this process is more recent and has been rapidly experienced in a short time.<sup>2</sup> Especially in developing countries among the problems, which have been faced in the last 30-35 years, are the rapid increase in population and rapid urbanization. In these countries, annual increase in average population varies between 2-3%, whereas urban dwellers have increased from 14% to 50%.<sup>1</sup> In our country, urban population rate increased significantly from 59% to 64.9% between the years 1990 and 2000. Urban population increased from 20 million to 44 million between 1980-2000 in Turkey. Urban population increased to 65% in 2000, but it was 45 % in 1980.<sup>3</sup> According to 2007 population

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census results, 70.5% of the residents in our country are living in cities. Urban population is 50 million, whereas rural population is 20 million.<sup>4</sup>

Because of rapid urbanization, in short period, urban population has increased violently. This situation leads to negative impacts on social, economic, and psychological characteristics of people and groups living in cities. It can be said that social, economic, and political factors are key variables for the relationship between urbanization process and mental health.<sup>5</sup> Recently individuals seem to prefer living in small countryside, maintaining their work in cities in order to minimize the negative impacts of rapid urbanization.

Urbanization involves social drift and social residue concepts that may explain prevalence of urban mental disorder. Social drift is defined as the tendency of certain individuals to migrate to certain areas, whereas social residue expresses residual groups remaining at certain areas after migration of population.<sup>2</sup> Relative impacts of these concepts depend on primarily pushing (as a result of poverty in rural areas) or pulling (because of better job opportunities) immigrants to cities. The forces that cause people to leave their original areas and to dwell cities are defined as push and pull effects.<sup>6</sup> Reasons for push to cities are divided into two as the change and the stagnation factors. Technical unemployment among the change factors and reduction in useful land areas due to rapid population increase known as the stagnation factor lead to people's flowing to cities. Abandonment of rural areas due to push factors is more difficult and violent process for immigrants themselves. Among the reasons that pull people from rural areas to cities (pull urbanization) are better education, health, employment opportunities and higher life standards.<sup>2</sup> As the factors that push people from rural areas to cities do not depend on individual's own preference, these factors threaten and affect persons' mental health more negatively when compared to pull factors. The impacts of such urbanization are often harmful to mental health.

This paper will review the effects of urbanization process on mental health.

### **How does Urbanization Threaten Mental Health?**

Rapid growth of cities due to immigration leads to:

- Overcrowding and increase in population with an under-standard life,
- Unemployment, poverty,
- Crime,
- Pollution,
- Cultural change, conflict, estrangement, isolation,
- Child employment,
- Disintegration of families,
- Rapid increase in shanty houses, living in poor home environment, decay in aesthetic structure,
- Traffic problems,
- Uncertainty of future, and anxiety. Thus, negatively affected mental health of individuals.

All of the above-mentioned factors give rise to:<sup>2</sup>

- Some mental disorders
- Suicide
- Homicide
- Drug or substance abuse
- Violence
- Coronary heart diseases
- Traffic accidents

Negative impacts of urbanization on human were debated many times. Today, the number of people who think that big cities bring happiness rapidly decreases, whereas the number of people who fear and worry about developments in cities gradually increases. The relationships between large and small groups in cities mostly bear the traces of disagreement, tension and displeasure as well. It has been accepted that interpersonal relationships are quieter both in villages and in small rural areas.<sup>7</sup>

Life-style differences between abandoned areas and destination areas emerge as a cultural conflict. Common aims with the new living area disappear, especially during initial periods. An aimless and hopeless life-style leads to insensitivity, disinterested and aggressive behaviors. Eventually, balance and order of the community deteriorates. People live on their own in accordance with their own rules. Individuals, who come from rural areas and live away from traditional culture and values, are influenced by urban way of life, which may include unhealthy, selfish, and egoistic tendencies.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, immigrant persons may undergo identity problems. Together with the urbaniza-

tion process, urban dwellers have difficulty accepting immigrant people and therefore, adaptation of immigrants to urban life gets more difficult and is affected more negatively. Thus, these persons feel refused and stranger to city life.

Difficulty in having relationship, estrangement, and failure in being attuned in big cities cause increased violent behavior through isolation and externalization.

Limiting factors in villages and towns, small number of population, the same social status among persons, close relationships and neighborhood provide a common control of relations and social solidarity. Thus, aggressive behaviors, violent events and crime rates decrease.<sup>8</sup>

### **Slum Problem, Violence, and Unemployment**

One of the main problems resulting from immigration from rural areas to urban districts is slum problem. Slum leads to important problems as well. Especially, they form inadequate environment for children. These negative conditions may affect children and may provide basis for personalities that tend to commit crime. In addition, as parents in cities have to work, the control of family on children attenuates so that children may imitate bad role models and may join groups that are liable to crime. Thus, these children may show substance and alcohol abuse, play truant and show behavioral disorders such as aggressiveness. Houses and buildings with inadequate housing environment in slums, and problems such as unemployment, environment, and traffic may result in disharmony.<sup>9</sup>

Discordant structure in slums and maladjusted life-style may cause intense hate and revenge feelings. Such individuals may express their hate via violence.<sup>8</sup> Intensive disobedience, hostility to parents and authority, telling lies, burglary, fraud, playing truant, aggressiveness, fighting, torture, incitement, sexual behavior disorders, and alcohol and drug addiction may be seen in aggressive persons. Factors such as deterioration in economic status and unemployment play an important role in violent behavior.<sup>7</sup> The characteristic of population, demographic movements and social changes have roles in psychosocial aspects of violence. It is reported that rapid demographic change and economic development reduce violent behavior.<sup>1</sup>

The young person, as an obscure unemployed

person, comes downtown by the attractiveness of the city. Lack of family support, being unemployed, social class difference, and prevalent crime factors in cities make suitable environment for crime. A low level of economic status in community, even if it is indirect, affects adaptation to city-life negatively.<sup>7</sup>

Unemployment and the threat of unemployment may expose an attack against the social identity and welfare of individuals. The relationship between unemployment and mental disorder cannot be well understood; however, unemployment may trigger mental disorder in predisposed persons.

Whatever the conditions, any migration exposes immigrant people to mental stress. Therefore, there is the possibility that the balance, which the/an individual made in his/her originally adapted environment, may mildly or heavily, continuously or discretely deteriorate in the new environment.<sup>10</sup> The balance formed over hundreds of years in the life of a rural person comes under the risk of decaying through the immigration to town. A rural individual, who tries to express his /her personality in town, and to behave independently, however, mostly fails to obtain what he/she wants and becomes unhappy. Such a failure causes both psychosocial and economic distress. Lack of harmony resulting from an isolated life-style in town is accepted as the augments of behavioral diseases. Briefly, rural person has an "identity" and it is important for him. Conversely, urban person can be accepted as "any body".

Various factors such as noise and humidity are also reported to affect mental health negatively.<sup>11-14</sup> It is obvious that houses with adequate room and environment are crucial for general health and wellness.

### **The Relationship between Living Environment and Mental Health**

Several models that explain the relationship between mental health and immigration to towns and environment are presented. One of them is the model described by Chu et al.<sup>15</sup> That model contains five components which affect wellness status. These are: (1) control over internal environment, (2) home design and care quality, (3) important escape opportunities (4) crime and the fear of crime and (5) social participation. In the study of Guite et al.<sup>16</sup> five factors were reported to predict bad mental

health and vitality. These are noise stemming from neighbors, perception of crime, feeling of overcrowding at home, lack of satisfying green areas and failure in joining public activities. It is evidenced that these factors determine mental health. In addition, using green areas and at least at the best walking in the daytime without fear affect the mental health of people positively.<sup>16</sup> Together with urbanization, security problems became visible and this caused feeling of violence-based fear. Endangering the safety of children and increase in the number of drug-addicted persons made urban dwellers more suspicious with the feeling of fear about fellows who threaten their security.

According to another opinion, the relationship between mental health and immigration to town can be explained by three models.<sup>2</sup> In the first one, cultural transformation resulting from transition from a traditional rural area to modern industrial society is suggested as the main reason for psychological disorder. According to that approach, there are two cultural systems as rural and urban, and transition from rural culture to urban culture is very stressful. The second one is associated with production of psychiatric symptoms due to urban life per se. That theory accepts modernization as the source of personal stress and accentuates two points: i. Urbanization and industrialization lead to social derangement. ii. From psychological point of view, traditional life-style of village is healthier. According to these theorists, development is regressive and urban life limits freedom and as a result destroys humanist feelings. The third model is associated with the view that stress results from the changes in economic system which erases labor without providing enough opportunities for the workers who are in the modern production site.<sup>2</sup>

### **Urbanization, Urban-Life and Mental Disorders**

Highly stressful way of life and poor social support systems are more prominent in towns than in rural areas.<sup>17</sup> All the above-mentioned factors may underlie the negative impacts of urbanization on mental health. It is considered that urban environment affects mental health during the early periods of life and that in the later periods it increases general tendency to schizophrenia.<sup>18,19</sup> In a study performed in Istanbul, neurotic disorder was surveyed in dwellers, immigrants from rural areas of Turkey and immigrants from other countries and it was

found that disease rate is higher in immigrants from rural areas (59%). In addition, the children of immigrants show more prominent maladaptive reactions.<sup>20</sup> Together with immigration, increase in unemployment, decline in economic status, and increased encounter with stress lead to viral diseases and poor feeding. Viral infections during prenatal period and poor feeding are among the early risk factors associated with schizophrenia.<sup>21</sup>

It is considered that there may be a biologic synergism between genetic tendency and participation in the urban life.<sup>22</sup> In addition; both urbanization level and familial tendency (describing delusions and/or hallucinations in family history requiring psychiatric treatment) increase the risk of psychiatric disorder independently of each other.<sup>23</sup>

In another study, it is reported that being born in town or living in town during childhood period increases the risk for the development of psychotic disorders in the future.<sup>19</sup> Schizophrenic patients show more tendency towards immigration which may affect their mental health negatively.<sup>24</sup> In another study, an increased relationship was shown between rapid urbanization rate and psychosis and depression rate both in men and women.<sup>22</sup> Triggering factors such as death and disease of close family members or residence into orphanage before the age of twelve are seen as the factors strongly associated with depression in both urban and rural areas.<sup>25</sup>

It is also demonstrated that not only schizophrenia but also other psychotic disorders such as bipolar disorder are more prevalent in urban life. In bipolar cases, it is reported that increase in the impacts of urban environmental factors increases the severity of psychotic symptoms. In bipolar disorders without psychotic symptoms, there is no effect of urbanization.<sup>26</sup>

Countryside dwellers use primary health care services, specialist physicians, health-related technologies and other health and social services less often than town dwellers.<sup>27,28</sup> Therefore, psychiatric patients in rural areas have less chance for the psychiatrists' help. It seems likely that people living in rural areas probably with the contribution of depression face with worse health conditions, chronic illnesses, and poverty more than urban people.<sup>29</sup> It was found in studies that prevalence of depression is higher in rural areas when compared to urban areas. Studies demonst-

rating higher suicide rates in rural areas are in accordance with these studies.<sup>30,31</sup> However, the reason may be that while healthy persons migrate to towns, persons with health problems maintain to live in countryside. Nevertheless, some studies reported that affective disorders and suicide attempts are more prevalent in urban areas in which social support systems are poorer.<sup>32</sup> Reasons such as unemployment, economic regression may reveal suicide tendency.

Studies investigating the differences in substance abuse, substance addiction and mental disease rates between urban and rural areas demonstrated that substance abuse or addiction gradually increases in rural areas and rural individuals with mental disorders avoid seeking help or treatment for their conditions because of the anxiety of "labeling". Due to that anxiety, individuals have more tendency to use

alcohol or substance to heal their symptoms of depression and/or anxiety themselves.<sup>33,34</sup> In contrast, there are studies demonstrated that substance abuse is more prevalent in urban areas.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, various studies demonstrated that rapid urbanization and urban life have a series of negative impacts on individuals' mental health. Factors such as unemployment, abandoning traditions, estrangement, slum life, uncertainty of future, social isolation, incomplete social support come up against us as characteristics of negative impact. Therefore, rapid immigration from rural areas to cities should be kept under control. Urbanization process is a problem not only for immigrants but also for domestic people in cities. On the other hand, while treating mental diseases due to rapid urbanization, there should be efforts to prevent mental health.

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