

The Health Office of the City of Düsseldorf on General Health Conditions (1946)

Abstract

The harsh living conditions in the postwar period, especially in large German cities, had very negative effects on the health of the population. The diet of infants and children was terrible across the board. Children were underweight and susceptible to illness. A lack of shoes and clothing prevented older children from attending school on a regular basis. Most apartments were dilapidated and offered no protection against the elements. Heating and sanitary installations were lacking, as was furniture. Malnutrition, poor housing conditions, and a lack of hygiene were compromising people's productivity and their ability to resist disease.

Source

A. General verdict on:

1. The average health and nutrition of babies, infants, school-age children, youths, and adults.

a) Babies: Nutrition is very problematic and for the most part completely inadequate, owing to a lengthy shortage of foodstuffs, an irregular milk supply, a lack of vegetable and fruit juices. The ability of mothers to nurse has declined. Bottle-fed babies are often underweight and have little resistance to nutritional disorders and infections. Pneumonia is frequently seen. Mortality has increased during the last few months; the primary cause is assumed to be poor care, since bathing and the timely drying of diapers has not been possible because of a coal shortage.

b) Infants: Infants are, even more so than in 1945, underweight, have weak muscles, tire easily, and are susceptible to skin diseases and tuberculosis. Nearly all children are suffering from considerable anemia and are constantly hungry.

c) School-age children: Their nutritional state is on average poor; their appearance mostly pale and tired. In many cases, considerable muscle damage and poor posture are apparent. The children are underweight and tire easily. An inability to concentrate was often noted. Colds, measles, whooping cough, and skin diseases are very common. Twenty percent of new school children test positive on the Moro test. Every day, 10% of school children are absent because they lack shoes and clothes. Youths and adults are especially susceptible to diseases, they become nervous and apathetic.

2. Living conditions.

Living conditions are poor. Many basement dwellings appear unfit for humans. As a result of confiscations by the authorities and extreme rationing, apartments are small and very crowded; oftentimes several people – including sick individuals – sleep in a single bed. Many dwellings are damp and overcrowded; sometimes, 8 persons live in a small mansard apartment, 14 persons in 3 small rooms, 4 persons and a baby in one room. Moreover, many apartments are still dilapidated, un-weatherized, and lack adequate lighting. Lavatories are often absent, so that feces and urine have to be dumped outside. The harsh winter cold is making the housing shortage particularly tough, especially since most apartments could not be heated because of a lack of coal. Living together in such close proximity has caused lots of disease transmission and many quarrels. – The living conditions for tuberculosis patients are still relatively adequate, since the housing office has so far paid attention to those suffering from lung

diseases when allocating housing in under-occupied dwellings.

3. Hygiene in daily life, especially cleanliness, and a lack of beds, linen, and clothing.

Hygiene: Cleanliness in general is very poor. The care given to dress has declined. Because of the lack of necessary cleaning materials (scrubbers, floor rags, and soap), apartments can no longer be kept clean. Poor cleanliness, especially among children, as a result of a lack of soap, poor washing facilities, and also the absolute lack of options for boiling and heating, was consistently observed. This caused a marked increase in cases of scabies and furunculosis.

The lack of beds (several persons, adults and children together, are consistently sleeping in one room) is very great; the same is true of the lack of bedding, pillows, mattresses, linen, clothes, and above all shoes for school-age children. Because of a lack of mending material and sewing thread, clothes and linen cannot be repaired. Baby clothes hardly exist, and there is a great shortage of beds, linen, and clothing for tuberculosis patients. Loud complaints are heard especially about the lack of linen among tuberculosis patients who want to enter sanatoria.

B. Noteworthy observations regarding special diseases and dangerous manifestations, especially

1. An unusually large increase in infectious diseases.

a) Tuberculosis: The number of deaths from TB was 431 in 1946, compared to 267 in 1939. Per 10,000 inhabitants, that is 4.9 in 1939 and 8.1 in 1946.

b) Infectious diseases: small measles and mumps epidemics were fairly minor. – In addition, purulent skin rashes and colds continue to increase, and filth-related diseases (impetigo, vermin) as well as worms occurred more frequently.

2. Premature loss of bodily strength and a lack of resistance to diseases.

Strong, premature decline was especially evident in older and middle-aged working men and in menopausal women. Women in childbed recovered only very slowly after normal births and often remain anemic for a longer period and are not able to work. A more frequent occurrence of circulatory disorders, in part with a tendency toward fainting and the like, was observed.

3. Pronounced protein deficiency diseases.

An increase in underweight persons and occasional edemas were observed, as was an increase in urinary urgency, and a tendency toward bedwetting among children.

4. Drug abuse.

No special observations.

5. Abortion.

The increased occurrence of terminated pregnancies suggests that abortions are being performed.

Source: Jahresbericht 1946 – Gesundheitsamt der Stadt Düsseldorf, HSTA/Bestand NW 6/205, reprinted in Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945–63*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988, pp. 19–21.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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