Anything is better than a tent when temperatures drop to well below freezing at night. Refugees do not always have to move great distances to have their lives changed for ever. This family fled a mere 30 kilometres to avoid the worst of the fighting and now live, with their 80-year-old mother, in an abandoned railway carriage. These personal tragedies, and resilience in coping with hardship, are part of the true picture of disasters today. Azerbaijan, 1994. Ian Berry/Magnum

Focus 10 Coping back in the USSR

Most vulnerable groups in the former Soviet Union survived as a result of the comprehensive state-run security net. Much of this net is still in place, but it is quickly disintegrating as republics attempt to take over management and financial responsibility while making enormous political and economic changes. As in famines, where people find a range of ways to cut consumption and increase income in order to survive, within the former Soviet system there were, in essence, 14 support factors or coping mechanisms for the most vulnerable.

The most important, and most worrying, factor linking all these coping mechanisms for the most vulnerable is that 11 of the 14 depend on State funding. All States are facing increasingly severe financial constraints. Cuts are bound to be made and "non-strategic" expenditures are likely to be cut first.

Pensions

An old person's pension is paid to all those who have worked.

For women the retirement age is 55; for men 60. Since 1991, as inflation has climbed, the pension amount has increased rapidly and in most republics it is reassessed every three months. In 1991, the average pension was around 90 roubles a month. In March 1992, it was between 300 and 400 roubles a month. By late 1993 in the Caucasus, for example, inflation had taken it to 9,000 roubles a month. In many republics, there have been problems with pension payments during the past two years. In some countries - Kazakhstan and Armenia for instance - pension payments were interrupted in 1992 because of the lack of bank notes and problems of adjusting to a republic-run rather than Soviet-run system. Pensions are also paid to widows, disabled people and other groups. These are usually much smaller than the old-age pension and suffer from the same problems of payment. In Uzbekistan, a decision was taken in 1992 to pay all pensions - invalid, old-age, veteran - at the same level: at that time, 350 roubles a month.

Income supplement

The State pays a regular benefit to women for each child. The way this benefit is paid varies slightly from State to State. In 1992, it stood on average at around 1,000 roubles per child per year, but the figure was later substantially increased. In Kazakhstan, for instance, families receive 3,200 roubles/child/year for those under three years of age and 2,200 roubles/child/year for those between three and 18 years.

Ration coupons

Two sorts of food coupons exist:

Entitlement coupons, which allow people to buy a set ration at set prices in State-run and -subsidised shops. In Kirgizstan, for instance, the monthly ration for each person is:

Sugar	250-300 grams
Cereals	300-400 grams
Flour	1 kg, when available
Vegetable oil	300 grams
Matches	5 boxes
Cigarettes	3 boxes of 20
Soap	1 bar
Vodka	1 litre
Detergent	300 grams

In many instances the goods are not available. As the situation has worsened in some republics, this type of ration has been extended to ensure that particular basic supplies - usually just bread - are available free or at purely nominal prices to all within certain groups, such as pensioners, "social cases", displaced people.

A second type of coupon is issued to certain vulnerable groups such as pensioners and large families and used to subsidise the price of a hot meal in the government-owed canteens called Stolovye. The coupons will not buy a full meal, but increase the chances of poor people being able to afford one hot meal a day. The value of these coupons is not keeping up with the increase in meal prices.

Selected free medical care

Some forms of employment entitle people to free medical care. this is available to many collective farm workers, for instance. Registered invalids and war veterans are also entitled to free care and prescriptions. One result of declining economic conditions, especially for state employees, such as doctors and nurses, has been for those administering previously free services to begin making charges, such as for consultations, drugs, or even bed linen in hospitals.

Other work benefits

While the situation of industry and agriculture is changing fast, collective farms previously provided housing free. Other types of factories offered free or subsidised housing, while certain groups of workers - in defence, research, nuclear power - used to be compensated for their isolation or rewarded for their loyalty with a range of benefits in kind.

School and factory meals

Most republics provided food through the nurseries and schools in some form or other and, as most children attend nurseries, this system could provide wide coverage. Children attend all day and received a free meal in the middle of the day.

Schools work two shifts, taking children from 07.30 to 13.30 or from 13 30 to 17.30. In Kirgizstan, children of poorer families are provided with coupons which entitle them to free food at school at lunch time. In Tadjikistan, younger children get a free hot meal at lunch time. In Kazakhstan, free lunches for all children were introduced from the beginning of 1992.

As well as subsidised canteens, over-ordering of food supplies - ostensibly for canteens - allowed factories to offer workers subsidised food in addition to normal salaries.

Factory schools for local community industrial complexes run schools for the children of their workers. Others in the community can also attend these schools and in general they get the same free meals that the state school provides. The key point, however, is that this service is paid for by industry, not the State

Milk kitchens

All polyclinics - the standard multi-role Soviet health centre serving several villages or one part of a town or city - run milk kitchens. All children up to the age of two years are entitled to receive milk products at these kitchens, every day. In some republics the service is provided free of charge and in others is only free to large families and other "vulnerable families" Fresh milk, made up dried milk, cheese and yoghurt are given, for consumption on the premises. The normal ration is around one litre per child per day.

Soup kitchens

The municipalities, the Salvation Army and the Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies of many republics run canteens where identified needy families can receive a free hot lunch or trade in their meal coupons against the price of a meal.

Cheap-price shops

A number of republics have started to open up cheap-price shops to channel clothes and essential household goods to large families. Families with five or more children may receive a ration card which entitles them to buy a certain quantity of clothes and other items at these shops

Hospital stay

The length of patient-stay in hospitals in the former Soviet Union is much longer than in Western ones, and often people will be hospitalised for ailments treated in the West by out-patient departments or at home. In many ways, hospital-stay is used as a family-support mechanism. In theory, people get free meals in hospital. Sick children are cared for so that working mothers do not have to stay off work.

Children's homes

State-run children's residential homes take in orphans, abandoned children and children from broken homes. They also take in, for short stays, children from poor families who cannot support them. This often happens for a few months over the winter. The children of students may also be cared for like this. This service is free.

Hoarding

Hoarding food "just in case" is an essential part of life in all former Soviet republics, reflecting not just people's experience of Soviet shortages but also generations living through tough winters and unreliable harvests. Many vulnerable groups, particularly old people, are now in an extremely poor condition with little or no reserves because they have had to use stocks hoarded prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, in order to get through the past three winters.

Rural-urban exchange

In many parts of the former Soviet Union, the industrialisation of the past 70 years was overlaid on essentially rural and peasant economies run on near-feudal lines. Thus most families have some connection with rural areas and agriculture, allowing some private food purchase. In the Central Asian republics in particular, strong family links still exist between the urban and rural populations. Urban families with country relatives fair much better than those without.

Household gardens

Household gardens, around the towns and in the countryside, are absolutely essential to family survival. Except for city flat-dwellers, many people have a garden of 20 metres by 20 metres, where they grow vegetables, keep chickens, rabbits and sometimes small pigs, and have fruit trees. Families grow crops from home-produced seed, and preserve and store their own produce. Often enough produce is grown to provide for all the vegetable needs of a family through the winter. The use of private gardens is being encouraged by many states. In Kazakhstan legislation has been passed requiring rural administrations around cities to make land available, for a small rent, to all city dwellers who want to grow vegetables.

Free market

Small stores and stalls are to be seen all over the former Soviet Union selling household goods and agricultural products. The prices are far higher on these stalls than in the state shops, but queues are shorter, more goods are available and supplies are more reliable. In the northern republics, people will often queue up to buy goods in the state shops and sell them at an increased price in the streets. In most republics, people

are also to be found selling their household goods and personal possessions on the streets or in informal weekly markets for specific items, from houses to cars or clothes.

Vulnerable groups

Seven key vulnerable groups already existed within the old Soviet system and are being adversely affected; they can be expected to face increasing problems over the next few years. *Old-age pensioners*, particularly those who are living alone. Demographically, it is the northern republics which have the largest proportion of old people. In the Central Asian republics, with significantly-younger population profiles, isolated old people are much less numerous and are concentrated in the cities, among the European populations who do not live in indigenous extended-family structures.

Large families. Families of six or more children are common, particularly in the Central Asian republics.

Families with disabled children. Such families face larger costs and problems of working or queuing for goods or rations because of family needs.

Invalids unable to leave their homes. Invalids are dependent on others to take advantage of rations, free meals and other support systems.

Urban families. Town families with no rural connections or gardens cannot obtain or grow even small amounts of vegetables to supplement diets of low nutritional value.

The new unemployed. A fast increasing group, especially those with no vocational training, and including many of the former "intelligentsia".

Ex-prisoners. Former inmates are released with no means of getting housing, jobs or social assistance.

The new vulnerable

The conflicts and crises of the past few years, as the Soviet system collapsed, created two other new groups which are clearly vulnerable.

Refugees. People who have crossed the new borders between former Soviet states as a result of conflict, political or ethnic pressure, or from simple hunger. Many refugees are not entitled to state benefits and have no political rights. They will be an even lower priority, as the needs of state citizens increase and they are able to be expressed through the newly-democratic nature of States with increasingly-free media.

Displaced people. Unlike refugees, people displaced by conflict, pressure or hunger normally retain the right to any surviving state benefits, though they always have increased short term needs. Many displaced people will move in with relatives or friends, or find housing with people of the same ethnic background. In the longer term, given the burden of extra people in a home, as economies decline and state provisions fall this can create a new group of vulnerable people: host families.