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Children in Institutions
The Global Picture
The global picture of children in institutions

There are millions of children living in institutions worldwide. One estimate puts the total at up to **eight million**\(^1\) - though, given gaps in global statistics and indications that there are many unregistered children's homes, the true figure may well be much higher.\(^2\)

**The orphan myth**

We assume these institutions, or 'orphanages', are there to support orphans, **but over 80% of the children have a living parent.**\(^3\) The majority could be reunited with their families given the right support.

Although some institutions are well-resourced with dedicated staff, they cannot replace a family. **Eighty years of research has shown the negative impact of institutionalisation on children's health, development and life chances.**\(^4\)
Children in institutions: countries with data

Here are some examples of countries where data has been collected on the number of children in institutions. However, there is a scarcity of records on institutions and many countries are not covered here due to lack of data. Other countries have already made the transition from institutions to family-based care. Alternative care such as fostering is in place for children who cannot live with their families.
Dispelling the Orphan Myth

This map shows the percentage of children in institutions who **have at least one living parent**. Many of these children could return to their birth parents with the right support.
Poverty is recognised as the main driver of child institutionalisation in most countries. Parents who cannot afford to feed, clothe or send a child to school have little choice. 52% of children in institutions in Sierra Leone were there due to poverty.

In a study of maternity hospitals in Europe, staff in 75% of hospitals stated poverty as a possible cause of abandonment.

In China, babies are often abandoned because their parents cannot afford healthcare for them.

Children with disabilities are at a high risk of institutionalisation. This is often because families do not have access to the right support services or because there is no inclusive education in the local area.

Social attitudes may also have a negative impact. In some countries parents are encouraged to place babies with disabilities in institutions. In others children with disabilities are considered unlucky or cursed.

45% of children in Russian institutions have a disability.

In Europe, Roma children with no disabilities are often incorrectly placed in remedial ‘special schools’ for mentally disabled children, according to a European Commission report. In China, babies are often abandoned because their parents cannot afford healthcare for them.

90% of the 11 million ‘abandoned or orphaned’ children in India are girls.

In Malawi, over 50% of institutions reported directly ‘recruiting’ children by encouraging parents to place their children there.

In some countries poor parents are offered money to give up their children. Corrupt institutions and unethical adoption agencies profit from the children through donations to their orphanage or through child trafficking.

In many countries with institutions a relatively small proportion of the children are placed due to abuse or neglect, compared with other reasons.

In a survey of 11 European countries, 14% of children were admitted due to abuse or neglect.
THE SOLUTION

Institutionalisation of children is not a necessity – it is a choice. There are cost-effective alternatives that allow children to live in a protective family environment.

1. PREVENTING SEPARATION

Services in the community can prevent family separation and stem the flow of children into institutions. Examples include schools, healthcare, financial and legal support, services for parents and children with disabilities, parenting guidance, child protection and social protection, among many others. Fortunately, evidence suggests it is much cheaper to support a family with social services than to provide for a child in an institution.

2. REUNITING FAMILIES

80% of children in institutions have at least one living parent and reasons for separation include poverty, disability, access to education and emergencies. Many children can return to live with their birth families when the right community-based services have been put in place. However, it is critical to carefully prepare institutionalised children for the move and to ensure that each child goes to a protective environment that is in their best interests.

3. ALTERNATIVE CARE

Where it is not possible to return to their birth family (including cases of abuse or neglect), children can live in family-based alternative care with relatives, foster families or adoptive parents. All these potential caregivers must be carefully screened, trained and monitored to ensure the placement is protective and in the best interests of the child. Small group homes are sometimes necessary for a minority of older children.

THE TRANSITION

Many countries have already set up systems using a family-based model like this. Lumos provides experience and support for governments to divert resources into higher quality and more cost effective care, enabling children to live with a family where they feel loved and needed.

Read more: www.wearelumos.org/the-solution
Further reading:

Keeping children out of harmful institutions (Save the Children, 2009)

Children, Orphans and Families: A summary of research to help guide faith-based action (Faith to Action Initiative, 2014)

Global Facts about Orphans (Better Care Network, 2009)

Harvard Centre on the Developing Child

Video from Neil Boothby, US Government’s Special Advisor on Children in Adversity

Lumos website

References:

1 The number of residential institutions and the number of children living in them is unknown. Estimates range from ‘more than 2 million’ (UNICEF, Progress for Children: A Report Card on Child Protection Number 8, 2009) to 8 million (Cited in Pinheiro, P., World Report on Violence against Children, UNICEF, New York, 2006). These figures are often reported as underestimates, due to lack of data from many countries and the large proportion of unregistered institutions.

2 Csáky, C., Keeping children out of harmful institutions: why we should be investing in family-based care. Save the Children, 2009, p. 3.


5 There were 29,130 children in 703 institutions in 2007. However, a better monitoring system for numbers and conditions in institutions was recommended by the report which provided this data.


7 This figure only includes children under 15 years. See note 5: RELAF, 2010.


9 The 2002 census reported that there were 5,000 children living in collective homes’ including institutions. A UNICEF report in 2006 gave orphanhood as the main reason for 10% of children being placed in institutions in Paraguay. However, this could include those with one living parent or social orphans. See note 5: RELAF, 2010.


14 This is an estimate based on data from 4,314 children. Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic, Education System Statistical Yearbooks for the year 2016/2015. Prague, 2015.

15 This is a Lumos calculation based on information provided by the Moldovan Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health for the end of the year 2014.

16 This is an estimate based on data from a sample of 10 institutions across Moldova. Moldovan Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and Lumos, Strategic Review of the system of child protection in the Republic of Moldova, 2014.

17 Government of Bulgaria, Fourth monitoring report for the implementation of the National Action plan, 2014.


23 3,323 children and young adults were reported as living in institutions in 2012, though 25.9% were aged over 18. Hope and Homes, National Survey of Institutions for Children in Rwanda, 2012, p9.


27 Exact figures: 11,945, 23% orphans, from: UNICEF, Residential Care in Cambodia.

28 Numbers are not known, but estimated between 225,750 and 516,600. DEPSOS, Save the Children and Lumos website.

29 UNICEF statement, quoted in Haiti - Social: 80% of children in orphanages are not orphans’ Haiti Libre, 2013.


32 Poverty is the main factor pushing most children into institutional care” Better Care Network. Global facts about orphanages, 2009, p1.


38 UNICEF, Children and Young People with Disabilities Fact Sheet, 2013.


50 See note 2: Csáky, 2009.