

Childcare: the family and the state

A study of institutional and family-based care in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union

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This EveryChild report reviews progress in reforming childcare in the region over the 15 years since the ‘orphanages’ of Romania were revealed to the world, following the fall of the Ceaușescu regime in December 1989.

The first part of the report covers the historical background and context of the problem of institutional care in the region, discussing the reasons behind the predisposition for residential care – which exists all across the region, not just in Romania. This is largely caused by the huge influence exerted by the Bolshevik philosophy of the family, in which the state was seen as a far more reliable source of child upbringing than the only too fallible parents – and a way of creating the New Soviet Citizen who would ensure that the ideals of the revolution were carried through. The Soviet view was that, under the communist system, there were by definition no social problems, and this resulted in an ideological bias against social interventions to support vulnerable families, and social work was regarded as unnecessary.

The experience since the fall of the communist system in the late 1990s is reviewed, in particular the economic collapse that accompanied what is euphemistically and cynically called the ‘transition,’ and which devastated the economies of the region, bringing in its wake rocketing inflation and unemployment and the virtual destruction of the welfare safety net that was provided by the communist system.

Next, the report reviews the literature on the adverse effects on children’s physical and emotional development of institutional care.

The second part of the report reviews the current state of institutional care in the region, discussing in some detail the reasons why children are admitted to care, based partly on EveryChild’s own experience but drawing also on some of the many studies carried out in the region in recent years. It is concluded that, although poverty plays a very significant part in the causes on institutional use,

it is more an *underlying* reason, and other, social factors, such as family breakdown, the presence of multiple children in a family and other factors such as disability (of either parent or child), unemployment, single parenthood, alcoholism and drug abuse are all *precipitating* reasons. So, although the underlying fact of poverty is a powerful factor, the precipitating reasons are what tip a family over the edge from being able to cope to inability to cope.

There follows a section discussing entry into and exit from the institutional system, discussing particularly the heavy influence of the professionals and the top-down nature of decision-making; the particular problems of the over diagnosis of disability (and the corresponding dominance of the medical model of disability) and the over representation of children from minority groups in the institutions.

The report goes on to examine the question of how many children are in residential care. The data are unreliable, and the reasons for this are discussed: the most reliable source is the data assembled by UNICEF in the TransMONEE project, but even these figures are based on the official statistics and cannot be relied on. The total UNICEF figure is an estimated 715,000 and, although this is somewhat lower than the figure at the end of the 1990s, allowing for the falling numbers of children in the population of the region, the proportion of children in residential care has actually *increased* over the past 15 years.

Using local surveys and other material, the report provides the most accurate estimate to date: that the number of children in institutions is at least 1.3 million (80% higher than the current official estimate). However, the methodology used to produce this estimate is very conservative, and it is likely that the true number is larger: *at least* one and a half million.

The conditions for the children in the institutions are then discussed, with the most recent information gathered by EveryChild country offices, and there follows a discussion on how these conditions violate the rights of children as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Abuse, both physical and sexual, is a particularly severe violation of these rights, and this is also discussed.

The third part of the report examines the different responses to the 'orphanage' crisis in the region, starting with the well-meaning but unwise and unsustainable attempts to improve conditions in the institutions themselves. It goes on to discuss the different alternative methods of providing family-based care, starting with the reintegration of children in institutions with their own families, then foster care and adoption; international adoption is discussed but recommended only in the most extreme circumstances. The key to removing the need for residential institutions is seen, however, in the provision of preventive social services to support vulnerable families through a crisis so that they do not need to send their children to an institution. Throughout, this part is illustrated from EveryChild's experience of working in almost a dozen countries in the region.

But gate-keeping – the control of the mechanisms by which children are admitted – is also a vital part of the preventive process. Lastly in this part, the process of change is also discussed, in particular what lessons can be learned from the moves to reform in the region: what are the main barriers to change and how can they be overcome?

The final part of the report contains conclusions and recommendations. The key emerging issues are considered, including the serious rise of HIV/AIDS in the region - and outside it, particularly in Southern Africa, the Caribbean and in south east Asia. The report also considers particularly the implications for the various actors: governments (both in the West and in the region), NGOs and the major donor groups.

Finally, a full bibliography and list of resources is included.

The key message of the report is that, although news of the ‘orphanages’ in Romania emerged 15 years ago and much has been done in that time, *the scandal still exists.*

Furthermore:

- Children’s residential institutions are the predominant mode for children without parental care, not just in Romania but all over Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union;
- Overall, the *numbers* of children in institutions may have declined slightly since the collapse of the communist system but the *proportion of children in the population* in such care has actually increased;
- Because of inaccuracies and inadequacies in the official data, the numbers in care are much higher than has been recognised: we estimate that the true number is *at least 1.3 million* and probably more than one and a half million;
- Stays for children in residential institutions are seriously damaging to children’s development;
- The institutions exist for mainly historical reasons, based on a false paradigm;
- There are alternative, family-based ways of helping vulnerable children that do not have the disadvantages of large institutions;
- These alternatives are viable, sustainable and, far from being more expensive than the institutions as may be supposed, they are actually many times cheaper;
- EveryChild has a decade and a half of experience in helping to develop these alternatives and this has equipped us to be the leader in this field.

The report is not yet formally available, but we plan to publish it in the autumn. If you would like to receive a draft copy, please e-mail richard.carter@everychild.org.uk