

A FOLLOW-BACK OF MEN AND WOMEN WHO GREW UP IN ROMANIAN ORPHANAGES

N. Lie¹, D. Murărașu²

1. Bergen, Norway
2. Institute of Public Health Iasi, Romania

Abstract. Abandonment and institutionalization were studied retrospectively in 55 men and 20 women who had grown up in orphanages. The major causes of abandonment were being born by a single/unmarried mother or by poor parents. Family adversity and parental dysfunction was the major cause of only one fourth of the abandonments. More than half of abandoned children were admitted during the first six months of life, and only one quarter after age three. The average time spent in orphanages was 14 years for boys and 17 years for girls. No more than 25% of the boys and 12% of the girls were keeping in contact with the family during in-care. As many as 73% of the boys and 41% of the girls were physically abused and 23% of the girls and 17% of the boys were sexually abused in the orphanage.

Key words: abandonment of children, institutionalized children, physical abuse, sexual abuse, orphanages, dystrophics

Rezumat. Abandonul și instituționalizarea au fost studiate retrospectiv pe un lot de 55 bărbați și 20 femei care au crescut în orfelinate. Principalele cauze ale abandonului au fost sărăcia și părintele unic. Adversitățile familiale și disfuncționalitățile au determinat numai un sfert din totalul abandonurilor. Peste jumătate din copiii abandonați au fost internați în primele 6 luni de viață și numai un sfert din ei după vârsta de 3 ani. Perioada medie de timp petrecută în orfelinate a variat între 14 ani (băieți) și 17 ani (fete). Aproximativ 25% din băieți și 12% din fete au avut legături cu familia în perioada instituționalizării. În orfelinat, aproximativ 73% din băieți și 41% din fete au fost supuși unor abuzuri fizice și 23% din fete și 17% din băieți, unor abuzuri sexuale.

Cuvinte cheie: abandon copii, copii instituționalizați, abuz fizic, abuz sexual, orfelinate, distrofici

INTRODUCTION

The study has examined boys and girls who grew up in the Romanian orphanages where they spent their first 12-13 years under extremely inadequate conditions.

The purpose of the study carried on between 1995 and 1998 has been to investigate why children were abandoned and admitted to orphanages, and furthermore, to find out what happened to them during institutionalization. It has

been possible to find roughly 90 papers on in-care children, and there are certainly more. Nevertheless, there appears to be few systematic observations on the reason for abandonment, and few published studies examining the occurrence of physical or sexual abuse during institutionalization.

Levels of institutionalization

Estimates suggest that the number of institutionalized children in December

1989 was as high as 200,000 (7). After a temporary decrease, the number of institutionalized children appears to have increased during the last years as a consequence of unemployment and poverty. The number of residential institutions for children in Romania have been estimated as being 628 (7) up to 700 (13). In the district of Iasi, there were 31 different children institutions in December 1989 (7). Romanian orphanages are not orphanages *per se*. They take care of true orphans as well as children from families who are too poor to provide food, accommodation and education for their offspring. In this paper we use the term “orphan” and “orphanages” for both categories.

Maternity’s and pediatric wards

True orphans are mainly those whose mothers disappear from the maternity immediately after delivery, and whose identity is not known. These infants are not reported to the authorities by the mothers. The consequence is that they have no “identity”. Officially, they do not exist and have to stay for a prolonged time in the maternity. They are swaddled tightly with legs and arms in extension and positioned in supine in the crib (14). Until they get a birth certificate, they have to stay (sometimes for several years) in pediatric wards before they can be placed in an orphanage.

The House of Abandoned Children

In Romania there were 700 institutions for children in 1991, of which 112 housed children under the age of 3 y (13). Abandoned infants born in Iasi

were placed in House of Abandoned Children, after one month spent in maternity. They stay 3-6 months on the ward for newborns, and from 6 months to 3 years on the ward for small children or in one of the satellite orphanages. At least prior to the revolution (1989), the infants were kept crib-bound until two to three years of age. Caregivers provided minimal handling and no position changes throughout the day, leaving the infants without stimulation or opportunity for spontaneous movements for approximately 90% of the time (14). Developmental delays were observed in 85% of the young children who had spent more than six months in an orphanage (14). Haradon et al (5) have described the conditions: “*Every child who has been in these institutions for six months (or longer) has significant developmental delays. If you start in the salons for newborns, you simply have to walk from one to the other and watch them falling off the curves*”.

Macovei (9) assessed a random sample of 200 rural and urban institutionalized children at 3 years aged in the district of Iasi between 1976 and 1986. She found global delays among the institutionalized children, with length of time in the institution related to level of severity. The delays included physical delays, such as smaller height, weight, and circumference of the head, and generally less resistance to illness; lags in intellectual and psychological functioning, including language, comprehension, and cognitive skills; and decreased motor, living and social skills.

Vasilov (15) compared orphans from the House of Abandoned children in Iasi to children 3 year aged up to 7 year aged in follow-up surveys. At the first follow-ups (in 1986 and 1988), the orphans were significantly physically, cognitively and emotionally behind the controls. When the orphans received more and better food than they have received, the orphans were in better physical condition than the controls, but still significantly behind in intellectual and emotional development. In a multi-centre study of Romanian institutionalized children, carried out in 1991, a third of the 1-3 year children were reported to suffer from developmental delay (13).

Centres for dystrophics

If the children are “dystrophics” (a term used in Romania for protein-caloric malnutrition including marasmus, general malnutrition, low birth weight, failure to thrive, and growth retardation), they are placed in a centre for dystrophics (13).

Hospitals

Children of all ages with chronic physical or mental diseases are placed in hospitals, for instance in Iasi district to the House of Handicapped and Mentally Retarded Children in Hirslau town. Usually, the children die after a short time; the few who survive usually stay in the hospital for the rest of their life.

The House of Children Budai

Approximatively 400 schoolchildren are living there. This orphanage is representative for Romanian residential institutions. It has three main buildings;

the girls’ hostel, the boys’ hostel, and the school building. The school has a sport ground, a playground, woodwork workshops, shoemaking workshop, a small vegetable garden, and a small farm with pigs. Sometimes the children themselves participate in farming. The products are used to improve the children’s food. The children work together with the staff in the canteen and in the kitchen. Since 1998, the House of Children Budai has a minibus (a donation from a humanitarian foundation) which can be used for excursions.

In the hostels, the rooms have iron beds and two wardrobes. In the boys’ hostel eight boys, and in the girls’ hostel six girls live in each room. The children are grouped in rooms according to gender and level education. Only a few children with enuresis live in two or three rooms according to gender but with mixed ages. At the hostels ground floor there are a library and a reading room with TV, and toilets and showers with old and partially out of water pipes. In each hostel there is a room where supervisors stay during the night. Every night, three male supervisors work in the boys’ hostel, and three female supervisors look after the girls. The House of Children Budai has a school for the orphans living in the hostels. On the ground floor of the school building there are a TV room with an amplification station and a gym hall with a tennis table. Different festivities, contests between pupils and between orphanages and different sport activities take place here. Usually, every week on Saturday or

Sunday the children are watching films. There are 20-30 pupils in each class. According to schedule, the teachers take care of the children from eight o'clock a.m. till lunchtime at 12 o'clock. After lunch the children return to the classroom to do their homework for the next day. They stay at school until seven o'clock in the evening, when they have dinner. Afterwards they are looked after by supervisors till the next morning. In the school in Budai, the children complete the 5th to 8th grade of elementary school.

A head master, a deputy head master, administrative personnel, teachers, educators and supervisors take care of the children. Pedagogues look after the children and keep the contact between the orphanage and the school for those who are studying outside the institution. In general, the staff is stable. Some educators and pedagogues have attended short refresher courses particularly designed for social workers. Thus, they have got special training in taking care of institutionalized children. Most pedagogues, educators, supervisors and administrative staff have no special qualifications for the care of children.

A nurse visits the orphanage regularly. She has her office in one of the hostels. There is no particular school doctor. A physician can visit the children when he is called.

Parents, other relatives and friends can visit the children, without restrictions. Periodically, e.g. in the summer holidays, the children may stay with their family, or visit friends (if they have any).

Charts

According to Stephenson et al (13) and Groze et al (4), there are no records with birth dates, medical history and information about parents and families that would provide information about a child's history of admission to long-term care institution. Usually, each orphanage creates and keeps its own records and copies of these do not follow a child from place to place. Most charts contain only two lines of information (4). There has been no attempt to track children through the system. Consequently, data are not consistently available regarding the age of the child at first admission or the total number of institutional placements.

Authority

The first two centres were until recently under the authority of the Ministry of Health and the House of Children was under the authority of the Ministry of Education. Today, all are under the authority of Child Protection.

MATERIAL

The sample consists of 55 boys born in 1976 and girls born in 1977. They had all fairly normal intelligence and no severe physical or mental handicaps. The majority of children were not true orphans. Most had parents who were not able to take care of the children for different reasons.

The male age cohort was first investigated. When the corresponding female age cohort should be studied, it turned out that it included only two persons. Therefore, girls born 1977

were chosen. Even this age cohort was very small.

The orphans were admitted from the district of Iasi in Moldova, a region in the north-eastern part of Romania. Since the subjects in the present study grew up in the district of Iasi and were born 1976-1977, some may have been included in the material by Macovei (9) and some may also have been among the orphans studied by Vasilov (15), both studies quoted above.

After the House of Abandoned children from Iasi, the boys and girls stayed in different institution for small children (Halaucesti, Verseni, Popricani, Bogdanesti, Cozmesi). Before they started the 5th grade of elementary school, at an average age of 11, the boys were placed in House of Schoolchildren Budai. Before 1989, the rule was that only boys were placed in Budai, whereas the girls were placed in another orphanage. In 1989, this was changed. This was done in order to improve the social relationship between boys and girls. The purpose was to reduce homosexual activities among the boys in House of Schoolchildren Budai. This explains the dominance of boys in the age cohorts. All spent the last part of the in-care time in Budai. The orphanage is situated 25 km from Iasi city, the third largest town in Romania.

At an age of approximately 15 years, many left Budai parts of the year to go to school elsewhere, e.g. vocational schools, high schools, colleges or universities. However, they still belonged to the orphanage and were supported by the government through the agency of the orphanage as long as

they were studying. Those who close higher education had to study in Iasi, where they lived in students' hostels. In these hostels, the orphans lived in special rooms. They were known in the hostels as "the pupils from orphanages".

When the subjects graduated (or left school without graduation), they lost the financial support (and also food and accommodation) which they received from the government through the orphanage. Some continued their studies mainly to have a prolonged period of financial support. The governmental support is provided in order to stimulate orphans for education. In reality, only very few make use of this opportunity.

METHOD

In interviews with the cases, only those who entered the orphanage as a schoolchild knew age at abandonment and reason for institutionalization. Most reliable information regarding the family and the first years of life was obtained from family members when they were known and available. The records of the House of Children Budai, as well as the staff, provided information about the cases after arrival, i.e. age of about 11 for boys and 12 years for girls. Mates from the orphanage also provided information regarding abuse in the institution.

RESULTS

In order to prevent institutionalization, it is important to know why children are abandoned. Most of the children were not true orphans because they had known families, but were

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abandoned as a result of social and economic reasons. In this material, all subjects came from poor families with low social status, unemployment and many children. The families have multiple and complex social problems. Many of the orphans are unwanted children, born out of wedlock by young, single mothers. Death of one or both parents, physical and mental disorders as well as alcoholism, and family adversities were other reasons. In Table 1, it has been examined which

problem was mainly responsible for the abandonment.

“Single mother” means either a mother who was not married, a mother who lived with a man who was not the father of the child, a mother who was divorced, or a mother whose husband was dead. Two cases came from disorganized families with a father who lived in bigamy. “No information” represents two boys whose mothers disappeared from the maternity just after delivery, and for whom no information whatsoever was available.

Table 1. Reasons for admission to orphanages

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Single mother	24	43.64	14	70.00	38	50.67
Family poverty	14	25.45	4	20.00	18	24.00
Family adversities	6	10.91	0		6	8.00
Parental illness	6	10.91	0		6	8.00
Parental alcoholism	3	5.45	2	10.00	5	6.66
No information	2	3.64	0		2	2.67
Total	55	100.00	20	100.00	75	100.00

X^2 (5 df) = 7.739, n.s.

Table 1 shows that the most common reason for abandonment was having a single mother (43% of the boys and 70% of the girls). Many (24-25%) were also placed in institutions because of the family’s financial hardship, e.g. large number of young children whose parents could not support them. These two problems were the cause of abandonment for approximately 68% of the men and 90% of the women.

Disorganized family or alcoholism was only the cause of abandonment

for 14% of the cases. Very often, there was a combination of adversities, for instance a single mother who was too poor to support herself and the baby and an alcoholic father who rejected the child.

As can be seen in Table 2, most children were admitted to the orphanage in the first year of life (51% of the boys and 75% of the girls). Only two (both boys) were admitted after the age of 12 years; at follow-up one was in prison and the others were searched for by the police.

Table 2. Age at admission to orphanages

Age	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	n	%	n	%
0-6 months	28	50.91	12	60.00	40	53.33
7-12 months	0		3	15.00	3	4.00
1-3 years	10	18.18	1	5.00	11	14.67
4-11 years	15	27.27	4	20.00	19	25.33
More than 12 year	2	3.64	0		2	2.67
Total	55	100.00	20	100.00	75	100.00

$\chi^2 (4 \text{ df}) = 11.248, p < 0.05$

Of the females, 60% were admitted during the first half year of their lives, and no girl was admitted at an age of more than 12 years. The difference between boys and girls is statistically significant.

Research has shown a relationship between time in orphanages and later problems; those who have the longest institutionalization have the most poor prognosis. It has therefore been examined how many years the subjects spent in orphanages.

Table 3. Distribution of years spent in orphanages by boys (n = 55) and girls (n = 20)

	Years in orphanages																					
	1	4	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22			
Boys	1	1	4	2	1	1	2	2	4	4	5	3	4	3	4	7	6		1			
Girls							1	1	1	3		1	1	1	2	2	3	4				

It is shown in Table 3 that the range for boys is from 1 to 22 years, with a mean of 14.26 years. The range for girls is 10 to 21 years, with a mean of 16.90 years.

The fact that 23 boys and girls have spent more than 18 years in orphanage, in spite of the decision that they are dismissed at age 18 is easy to explain: those who are in school belong to the orphanage until they have finished the studies. The reason

for the short institutionalization for some of the boys may be that some were admitted quite late (Table 2). It is noteworthy that the majority of those who leave the orphanage have been in care for a very long period (average 14 to 17 years).

Research has shown that contacts with family and others during institutionalization are important for the well-being and the development of the children and also for the prognosis.

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Table 4. Contact with the family

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
No contact	19	43.18	10	58.83	29	47.54
Sporadic contact	14	31.82	5	29.41	19	31.15
Good contact	11	25.00	2	11.76	13	21.31
Total	44	100.00	17	100.00	61	100.00

X^2 (2 df) = 1.66, n.s.

It can be seen in Table 4 that almost half of the orphans had no contact with their families whatsoever. Almost one third had a sporadic contact. Only 25% of the boys and 12% of the girls had a good contact with their relatives. The difference between boys and girls is not statistically significant.

Most research in orphanages has been carried out in a period when some physical punishment was usual and considered normal and not worthy of note and few or nobody could imagine that children could be deliberately hurt. Today, it is a general opinion that physical child abuse is a serious problem in families and in institutions.

Table 5. Physical abuse

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Severe/frequent	7	15.91	1	5.88	8	13.11
Some	25	56.82	6	35.29	31	50.82
None	12	27.27	10	58.83	22	36.07
Total	44	100.00	17	100.00	61	100.00

X^2 (2 df) = 5.442, n.s.

As shows in Table 5, 16% of the boys and 6% of the girls had been exposed to severe physical abuse. In addition, 57% of the boys and 35% of the girls had suffered from at least some physical abuse in the orphanage. The difference between boys and girls is not statistically significant.

Physical abuse was committed by older orphans, by supervisors and teachers and by policemen (outside the orphanage). Older boys often beat younger boys for different reasons. Sometimes, the big boys took the food from the small boys, sometimes it was

part of a punishment and sometimes it was just done for amusement. Some boys reported that they had been tightened up to a traction bar in the sport ground, or in trees in a small forest close to the orphanage and then they had been beaten. In holidays, young orphans tried to leave the orphanage when older boys returned from schools and were aggressive.

Whereas physical punishment was common in institutions not long ago, it was considered totally impossible that children were sexual abused. Table 6 shows that this is not true.

Table 6. Sexual abuse

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Severe/frequent	3	6.82	2	11.76	5	8.19
Some	4	9.09	2	11.76	6	9.84
None	37	84.09	13	76.48	50	81.97
Total	44	100.00	17	100.00	61	100.00

X^2 (2 df) = 0.542, n.s.

It can be seen in Table 6 that 7% of the boys and 12% of the girls had been severely or frequently sexually abused in the orphanage, while 16% of the boys and 24% of the girls had experienced some sexual abuse. In addition to what is reports by the cases, information from close friends or staff in the orphanage and from the registers of the orphanage have been used. The difference between boys and girls is not statistically significant.

At follow-up in early adulthood, two of the seven men who had been sexually abused were in prison for sexual abuse of small children and one man for homosexual activities. The two women who were reported to be prostitutes had both been sexually abused in the orphanage.

DISCUSSION

Sample

It would have been a major advantage if it had been possible to study a randomized sample of all children abandoned in a specific area in a specific year, i.e. in Iasi 1976 or 1977. Unfortunately, no registers are available. As already mentioned, the often incomplete files do not follow the child when he/she is transferred from one orphanage to another, leaving

information only regarding the last orphanage.

Of infants in the maternities in Iasi in 1976-1977, some may have been dystrophic (see above) and have been placed in centres for dystrophic. Of these, many will died of the dystrophy while some will have caught AIDS (due to contaminated blood plasma injections) and have grown up (if they survived) in a special hospital in Iasi. Those with physical and mental handicaps were placed in institution for chronically handicapped children. In the orphanages, some have been adopted and those may have been negative as well as positive selections. Maybe the sample is rather representative for abandoned children in Moldova.

Whether one gender is more often abandoned than the other, and whether girls (or boys) are more often adopted, accepted in foster homes, or united with the biological family, cannot be answered in this material.

Reasons for abandonment

Since each orphanage creates and keeps its own records and copies do not follow a child from place to place, data are not consistently available regarding the age of the child at first

admission or the total number of institutional placements.

Being born out of wedlock by a single and very often teenage mother was the most frequent cause of abandonment, followed by poverty. This corresponds to the findings in the multi-centre study from Romanian orphanages; social factors (low socio-economic status) and unmarried mother were frequent reasons for institutionalization (14).

Since 75% of the children were abandoned because the mother was single and/or too poor to care for the baby, it is likely that support to the mother/family could have prevented many abandonments. Three thirds of the out-of home-reared children could have lived in their homes with financial assistance and community social support. The same is true for orphans in Greece; “orphanages rarely have orphans” (1).

Age at admission and length of institutionalization

Only two boys were admitted after age 12; both had a particularly poor prognosis. One was in prison at follow-up and the other was searched for by the police. It could be interpreted as if institutionalization at an early age as well as a very long time in the orphanage protect against future problems. This is most likely not true. It is much more likely that an antisocial behaviour was the reason for later institutionalization and not a consequence of institutional rearing. Probably, the parents placed the boys in orphanages because they could not

handle their acting out behaviours at home.

Contact with the family

For about half of the subjects there is no information regarding keeping the contacts with their families. It is most likely that these had no contact whatsoever. It seems that only a minority had such a close contact that it was helpful after discharge from the orphanage.

Physical and sexual abuse

It is obvious that the subjects have not only suffering by emotional, social and sensory deprivation, but also by abuse.

More boys than girls had been physically abused. However, there was in The House of Children Budai special precaution to protect the girls. Without this protection, the gender difference may not have been present. More girls than boys were sexually abused (24% versus 16%). The rates are considerably higher than those observed in an Australian normative sample, i.e. 4.63% for women and 3.76% for men (10). They are also higher than the rate of boys and girls combined (16%) in ordinary children's homes in Finland (6). Nevertheless, the rates in the orphanages may be too low. Cases may have been unwilling to admit sexual abuse. In contrast to non-institutionalized children, for whom families monitor school and day care while school and day care personnel monitor families, in-care children do not have extensive contact with adults independent of the setting where abuse occurs. Moreover, staff

members of the institution are often hesitant to report abuse because of fear of job loss or discrediting the institution. Maltreatment of children in residential care is frequently overlooked (11).

Particularly in-care children with special handicaps tend to be abused.

The definitions of abuse used in the study was the person's own subjective view, just as it has been in other studies (12). It is therefore difficult to compare rates. In a study in USA (12), the incidence of neglect and abuse was 1.78% in the family and 4% in institutions. It was assumed that the number of complainable situations may have been substantially larger than the number reported in the survey data. Nunno (11) found that the frequency in US institutions was two to three times the rate in the general population.

Obviously, the placement of children in residential facilities does not ensure that they will be safe from abuse. The findings indicate that sexual abuse in the orphanage was related to later sexual crimes in boys and prostitution in women. The belief that children are better protected against abuse in institutions than in the family is not correct. "Despite the best intentions of program managers, all too often children are victims of maltreatment in the very institutions which are operating to care for their needs. These children are largely voiceless and at the mercy of adults who operate the institutions or agencies" (2).

Acknowledgements

The study was made possible by funding from the International Scholarship Section, the Research Council of Norway. It was carried out at the Occupational Health Department, Institute of Public Health, Iasi (head: Doina Popa). The authors wish to express their appreciations to the director of The House of Children Budai and the staff of the orphanage and to Foundation "The Children's Future", for valuable assistance and to the ex-orphans who were willing to participate.

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