



Severe punishment of children by staff in Romanian placement centers for school-aged children: Effects of child and institutional characteristics

Adrian V. Rus^{a,*}, Ecaterina Stativa^b, Jacquelyn S. Pennings^c, David R. Cross^d, Naomi Ekas^d, Karyn B. Purvis^d, Sheri R. Parris^d

^a Southwestern Christian University, OK, USA

^b The Institute for Mother and Child Care "Alfred Rusescu", Bucharest, Romania

^c Elite Research, LLC, Carrollton, TX, USA

^d Texas Christian University, TX, USA

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to determine whether children's characteristics and/or institutional characteristics were predictors of severe punishments (including beatings) and/or frequency of punishments that children received from staff in Romanian institutions. The data was hierarchical with institutionalized children ($N = 1391$) nested within 44 institutions, and the measurement of punishments by the staff and frequency of punishments had a binary distribution. Thus, multilevel logistic regression models were used to examine the effects of individual and institutional level variables on reported punishments and to account for the clustering of the children within institutions. Two general patterns of results emerged. First, regarding individual level variables, it was found that: (1) amount of time spent by children in their current institutions had a significant effect on the probability of being punished by staff and the frequency of this punishment; (2) the probability of being punished was higher for boys than for girls; and (3) having no siblings in the institution increased the odds of being punished several times. Second, regarding institutional level variables: (4) being in placement centers for school-aged children with a traditional type of institutional organization increased the odds of severe punishment compared to a familial/mixed type. The results of the present study highlight the importance of understanding the consequences of institutionalization in a broader way, where children not only experienced early severe psychosocial deprivation as documented in other studies, but also high levels of severe punishments administered by institutional staff.

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Child abuse has been recognized as a widespread problem in residential care institutions in the West (Ellonen & Pösö, 2011; Gallagher, 1999; Hobbs, Hobbs, & Wynne, 1999; Rindfleisch & Rabb, 1984; Sen, Kendrick, Milligan, & Hawthorn, 2008). Consequently, abuse has been attributed to a blend of many factors such as substandard education, training, supervision, and selection of staff; poor management of these institutions and inappropriate organizational cultures; failure to identify staff that abused children; and a lack of responsiveness regarding children who abused other children (Colton, 2002).

* Corresponding author address: Southwestern Christian University, Behavioral Sciences Department, 7210 NW 39th Expressway Bethany, OK 73008-0340, USA.

Abuse and punishment in Romanian institutions

In Romania, the widespread abuse (emotional, physical, or sexual) of institutionalized children gained broad public awareness because of coverage in the international mass media in the 1990s following the end of the communist regime. This abuse was systematic and pervasive among Romanian placement centers in the 1990s, and was perpetrated by both institution staff and children (Stativa, Anghelescu, Palicari, Stanescu, & Nanu, 2002). In this study, we examined severe psychological and physical punishments administered by staff (i.e., institutional staff including administrative personnel, educational/care staff, and night attendants).

Emotional abuse of children in institutions included depriving institutionalized children of authentic emotional relationships (by not talking to the child); keeping them in a permanent state of insecurity and uncertainty (by using blackmail and threats); punishing them for behaviors that are normal behaviors for their age; setting unreasonable rules and requirements; using ridicule and humiliation (including when the child had enuresis); ignoring children's performances; making them wear inappropriate clothes for their age; interdiction on leaves, family visits, recreational activities, or camping trips; denying children of their favorite toys; and/or not providing opportunities for children to make their own choices and decisions. Physical abuse administered by staff incorporated light (including spankings, punches, kicks, or ear and hair-pulling) and severe physical beatings (including with a plank or a wet rope); washing the child's face with a lot of water and soap; withholding of meals or desserts; physical isolation (making the child stand in a corner, sit on a chair all alone, or isolating the child from other children when they were playing); and/or submission to various tasks considered humiliating by children (e.g., mopping the floors in the corridors, cleaning the toilets and shower rooms, sweeping the dormitory and courtyards, watering the flowers, or canteen duty). Although not addressed in this study, children were also subjected to sexual abuse by staff and/or other adults who were or were not in contact with them through the institution (Stativa et al., 2002). This study provides a report on severe punishments in placement centers for school-aged children, rather than abuse per se, and it is important to note that many of the punishments children experienced could include both emotional and physical abuse.

The majority of studies conducted on children living in Romanian institutions (Zeanah et al., 2003) or with histories of adverse life experiences in orphanages and adopted by families mostly in the United States, Canada, or United Kingdom, have mainly focused on deprivation and neglect and their consequences on the children's physical and psychological development. Yet, many of the institutionalized children experienced not only early severe psychosocial deprivation but also high levels of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.

Branches and types of internal organization of Romanian institutions

Many institutionalized children started their journey through the protection system by placement in cradles (leagăne; long-term residential care for children ages 0–3) that were created by the Romanian government to house all young children whose parents were unable to raise them. After 3 years of age, most of the children who had not been absorbed into families were placed in houses for children/orphanages (case de copii), including houses for preschool children (case de copii preșcolari) and for school-aged children (case de copii școlari). Most of these placement centers were established on organizational and operational principles that were inappropriate for meeting children's needs (Castle et al., 1999; Children's Health Care Collaborative Study Group, 1992; Johnson et al., 1992; Rutter et al., 2007; Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, & Nelson, 2009; Stativa et al., 2002; United Nations Children's Fund, 2004; Zeanah et al., 2003). In addition, children older than 3 years of age with severe physical or mental problems were placed in institutions for children with disabilities (cămine spital) for "irrecoverable" and partially recoverable children and commonly located in isolated places. Over time these different institutions were renamed, reorganized, and/or replaced with new types of residential facilities, which complicated the understanding of the reform process.

Given this dismal state of child care institutions, following the amendment of the legislation on child protection residential institutions (Government Ordinance 26/1997; Law 108/1998) most of the very large institutions were either closed or reorganized according to principles that respected the children's needs (for a more complete review of reform periods, see Rus, Parris, Cross, Purvis, & Drăghici, 2011). Also, new forms of child protection were developed or extended (e.g., family-type services, residential and day care services). The restructuring process also culminated by demarcation of three distinct types (i.e., traditional, familial, and mixed) of placement centers/houses for school-aged children. Familial type centers best reflected the modernization of the institutions and were most desired by authorities. Efforts were made to place children in these types of facilities rather than the traditional type.

The traditional centers (based on Law no. 3/1970) were common before the reform period began, and some continued to operate well into the reform process until all were eventually extinguished. These were characterized by two important features (a) size of buildings and (b) internal organization of buildings (Stativa et al., 2002). First, they were located in huge buildings, housed a large number of children, and followed the model of the austere boarding schools of 150–200 years ago, where very crowded spaces only allowed for monotonous, boring activities performed together by all the children. They were former castles or orphanages (in an advanced state of degradation, where not much could be done to transform them into appropriate living spaces for children), or in new, three- or four-story apartment buildings with 14–20 bedrooms on every floor. Overall, these buildings were inadequate for the purpose they served. Second, the internal organization of the spaces did not serve the children's needs. Specifically, the dormitories were very big, with about 8–10 beds, and children slept in the same room irrespective of their age where there was almost no furniture or ability to create personal spaces

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