



Research article

Estimating the number of children in formal alternative care: Challenges and results[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 August 2016

Received in revised form 1 November 2016

Accepted 23 November 2016

Available online 1 June 2017

Keywords:

Alternative care

Residential care

Foster care

Institution

Global

Administrative

ABSTRACT

Given the relatively large body of literature documenting the adverse impacts of institutionalization on children's developmental outcomes and well-being, it is essential that countries work towards reducing the number of children in alternative care (particularly institutional care), and, when possible, reunite children with their families. In order to do so, reliable estimates of the numbers of children living in such settings are essential. However, many countries still lack functional administrative systems for enumerating children living outside of family care.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a snapshot of the availability and coverage of data on children living in residential and foster care from some 142 countries covering more than 80 per cent of the world's children. Utilizing these country-level figures, it is estimated that approximately 2.7 million children between the ages of 0 and 17 years could be living in institutional care worldwide. Where possible, the article also presents regional estimates of the number of children living in residential and foster care.

This work represents an important step to systematically identify and compile sources of data on children in alternative care and provides updated global and regional estimates on the magnitude of the issue. Its findings contribute to raising awareness of the urgent need to strengthen the capacity of countries to improve national systems for counting, monitoring and reporting on these vulnerable children.

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1. Introduction

Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) affords every child the right to “a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development” and requires that parents or those responsible for the child “secure, within their abilities and financial capabilities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Additionally, Article 18 of the CRC states that “Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). However, there are many conditions under which parents might find themselves unable to fulfil these obligations, rendering their children without proper parental care and protection. In such situations parents may decide that they are either unable or unwilling to provide necessities such as food, clothing, shelter, health

[☆] This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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care, protection and/or education, or the State may intervene to remove their children. Such situations can result from a number of wide-ranging stressors including poverty, health issues, household or community violence, stigma, emergencies, or substance abuse, to name a few. Furthermore, children may be separated from their families as a result of parental death. This loss of parental care and protection may result in children having to live in alternative care arrangements. Article 20 of the CRC stipulates that States Parties are responsible for ensuring such care in situations where children are “temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

While there is considerable variability in both living conditions and caregiving environments across different alternative care settings, research has provided strong and consistent evidence indicating that nearly all domains of development are profoundly affected when children experience institutional care, with impacts ranging from impaired social and interpersonal development, including difficulties with forming secure attachments to caregivers, to delayed cognitive and language development (van Ijzendoorn, Luijk, & Juffer, 2008; van Ijzendoorn et al., 2011). Such children are also at heightened risk for psychopathology and exposure to abuse (see, for example: Barth, 2002 as cited in Beckett et al., 2006; Browne, 2009; Dozier, Zeanah, Wallin, & Shauffer, 2012; Ellis, Fisher, & Zahaire, 2004; Johnson, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2006; Nelson, 2007; Pinheiro, 2006; Roy, Rutter, & Pickles, 2004).

The wide recognition of the adverse impacts of institutionalization on developmental outcomes and children's well-being has led many countries to undertake efforts to reduce the numbers of children living in alternative care (particularly institutional care) and, whenever possible, to prevent institutionalization in the first place, or to reunite children with their families. Accurate and reliable estimates of the numbers of children living in alternative care are essential for countries to meet these objectives. Whether such data are available or not is, to a large extent, a reflection of how well the system functions to capture and record children in alternative care. This information can then be used to strengthen (or develop) national monitoring systems, to improve service provision and implement child care systems reforms that promote family strengthening and reunification. In addition, the availability of accurate and disaggregated data can directly inform government policy and practice in support of deinstitutionalization, by providing clear information on the characteristics of children placed in formal alternative care settings. This can also then be used to assess gaps in information and in service provision or interventions for children vulnerable to family separation in order to reduce the placement of children in formal alternative care.

While knowing how many children are in formal alternative care is crucial to inform policies and programming at country level, global and regional estimates of the number of institutionalized children are also key tools for international agencies and others to advocate for the reform of child care systems. In much the same way that global estimates on other issues such as child mortality, vaccination coverage or violence against children have been utilized, recent and accurate estimates on how many children are living in different alternative care arrangements in the world can help relevant international agencies and organizations ensure their efforts are appropriately targeted in supporting governments to work towards deinstitutionalization of children and to strengthen child protection systems, with a focus on the most vulnerable children such as those living in alternative care.

While the majority of the available research literature has focused on documenting the conditions of children living in alternative care (particularly institutional care) and its potential effects on child development and functioning, there have been only a few previous attempts to quantify the number of children living in different alternative care arrangements. Furthermore, available estimates have often been published with limited information on the methods used to obtain these, leaving room for doubts about their reliability and actual coverage. An often-quoted figure dating back to the 1980s suggested that between six and eight million children lived in residential care worldwide; however, the method of calculation remains unclear (Defence for Children International, 1985 as cited in Tolfree, 1995). The latest global estimate, published in 2009, put the number of children in institutional care at more than two million, with Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) having the highest reported figure at around 800,000 children in institutional care (United Nations Children's Fund, 2009). More recently, the Transformative Monitoring for Enhanced Equity (TransMonEE) project estimated that more than 1.4 million children were in formal care (i.e., either residential or family-type care such as foster care or guardianship) in 2012 in 22 countries of CEE/CIS and the European Union (TransMonEE, 2014). In Latin America and the Caribbean, an estimate published in 2013 based on data from 27 countries in the region put the number of children in residential care at around 240,000 (Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia, 2013).

Given the need for recent and accurately documented figures on children in alternative care, the present study has two main objectives. The first is to provide a broad overview of availability and coverage of administrative records of children living in alternative care, according to some basic criteria, across all regions of the world. The second is to utilize the existing country-level data in an attempt to generate global and regional estimates of the number of minors living in both residential and foster care. Countries are sub-divided into seven regions grouped by geographical concentration in which the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has an active programme presence (see Table 1): Eastern and Southern Africa (ESAR), West and Central Africa (WCAR), Middle East and North Africa (MENA), South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific (EAPR), Latin America and the Caribbean (LACR) and Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS). In addition to these seven regions, comprised mostly of low- and middle-income countries, the UNICEF classification also contains an additional group of 39 mostly high-income countries, hereafter referred to as industrialized countries.

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