

Study finds orphanages are viable options for some children

December 18 2009

A Duke University study of more than 3,000 orphaned and abandoned children in five Asian and African countries has found that children in institutional orphanages fare as well or better than those who live in the community.

The findings contrast sharply with research that associates institutions with poorer health and well-being, and the policies adopted by many international agencies/governments.

"Our research is not saying that institutions are better. What we found is that institutions may be a viable option for some kids," said study leader Kathryn Whetten, director of the Center for Health Policy at the Duke Global Health Institute. "As the number of orphans continues to rise worldwide, it is vital not to discount orphanages before assessing whether they are harmful to the millions of children for whom they care."

Whetten's research team compared the physical health, [cognitive functioning](#), emotion, behaviour and growth of orphaned or abandoned children ages 6-12, half of them living in institutions and the other half dwelling in the community. The study found that children in institutions in five countries reported significantly better health scores, lower prevalence of recent sickness and fewer emotional difficulties than community dwelling children. These findings suggest the overall health of children in orphanages is no worse than that of children in communities.

The research team has been following the 3,000 orphans involved in the study for three years, and they plan to continue tracking them into their late teens and early 20s to determine how their childhood affects their life course.

Published today in the interactive open-access journal [PLoS ONE](#), this is one of the most comprehensive studies of orphans ever conducted. Data were collected between May 2006 and February 2008 from children and their caregivers in 83 institutional care settings and 311 community clusters. The study assessed five culturally, politically and religiously-distinct countries that face rising orphan populations. Sites included Cambodia, Ethiopia, Hyderabad and Nagaland in India, Kenya, and Tanzania.

"Very few studies cross a span of countries like ours does," said Whetten. "The design flaw of past studies is that they compared a small number of orphanages against community houses. Those limited results can't be generalized to other places."

Some of the most influential studies on child institutions were conducted in eastern bloc countries. But the greatest burden of orphans and abandoned children is in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern and Southeastern Asia.

Of the estimated 143 million orphans and abandoned children worldwide, roughly half reside in South and East Asia, according to UNICEF. An estimated 12 percent of all children in Africa will be orphaned by next year as a result of malaria, tuberculosis, pregnancy complications, HIV/AIDS and natural disasters, according to the World Health Organization.

The Duke study included less formal institutions in Asia and Africa that were not studied before, and not easily recognized. Researchers spent the

first six months meeting with members of each community to identify and map orphanage locations. In Moshi, Tanzania, the research team found 23 orphanages, after initially learning of just three from local government officials.

"What people don't understand is that, in many cases, the institutions are the community's response to caring for orphaned and abandoned children," said Whetten. "These communities love kids and as parents die, children are left behind. So, the individuals who love children most and want to care for them build a building and that becomes an institution. These institutions do not look or feel like the images that many in this country have of eastern bloc orphanages, they are mostly places where kids are being loved and cared for and have stable environments."

The research findings run contrary to global policies held by children's rights organizations such as UNICEF and UNAIDS, which recommend institutions for orphaned and abandoned children only as a last resort, and urge that such children be moved as quickly as possible to a residential family setting.

"This is not the time to be creating policies that shut down good options for kids. We need to have as many options as possible," said Whetten. "Our research just says 'slow down and let's look at the facts.' It's assumed that the quality of care-giving is a function of being institutionalized, but you can change the care-giving without changing the physical building."

Whetten said more studies are needed to understand which kinds of care promote child well-being. She believes successful approaches may transcend the structural definitions of institutions or family homes.

"Let's get beyond labeling an institution as good or bad," she said. "What

is the quality of care inside that building, and how can we help the community identify cost-feasible solutions that can be delivered in small group homes, large group homes and family homes?"

More information: PLoS One: "A Comparison of the Wellbeing of Orphans and Abandoned Children Ages 6-12 in Institutional and Community-Based Care Settings in 5 Less Wealthy Nations";
[dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0008169](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0008169)

Provided by Duke University

Citation: Study finds orphanages are viable options for some children (2009, December 18)
retrieved 19 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2009-12-orphanages-viable-options-children.html>

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