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**Orphanages:**

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## **An Historical Overview**

**The Role of Orphanages in Child Welfare Policy**

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**ORPHANAGES: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**  
**A Discussion of the Role of Orphanages in Child Welfare Policy**

**Family and Children's Services Division**  
**Minnesota Department of Human Services**  
**March 1995**

## **ORPHANAGES: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

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## **ORPHANAGES: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper provides an overview of the origin and evolution of the role of orphanages in the United States. It reviews how orphanages began in the United States and traces their history and evolution. It follows the shift in policy from institutionalization of destitute children without parents to the provision of financial assistance to poor families so that they could care for their children. The paper also details how the development of child welfare policy led to a gradual abandonment of traditional orphanages and the reliance on a wider continuum of services; i.e., foster care, group homes, and residential treatment. Finally, the contemporary notions of "orphanages" are discussed, and an analysis is provided on what role they might have in the continuum of child welfare services.

Throughout its history, America's debate about welfare reform has grappled with the question of poor women and their children. One concern seems to be how to remove women from welfare in ways that do not harm innocent children. Periodically, the subject of orphanages becomes part of this larger national discussion.

Recently, the discussion of the role of orphanages took on new life as proponents of welfare reform introduced the Personal Responsibility Bill, a welfare reform bill soon to be debated in Congress. One measure of this bill would eliminate the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments to unwed mothers. If these mothers were then unable to care for their children, the children could be placed in orphanages.

The media quickly presented the question as a battle of images. Some remembered Oliver Twist and Dickens' portrayal of orphanages as grim warehouses where destitute children begged for food. Liberal child advocates viewed the call for a return to orphanages as absurd. For others, the term "orphanage" reminded them of Father Flanagan's successes with youth in places like Boys Town. Conservatives suggested that, for many children, life in a modern day orphanage could be a better alternative than living in homes full of neglect and abuse.

## **EARLY BEGINNINGS**

The first orphanage was established in the United States in 1729 to care for White children, orphaned by a conflict between Indians and Whites at Natchez, Mississippi. Orphanages grew and between 1830 and 1850 alone, private charitable groups established 56 children's institutions in the United States (Bremner, 1970). Some theorize these orphanages were established in response to health epidemics (cholera, tuberculosis and influenza), wars, influx of immigrants into a particular geographical area, growing urbanization, and poor economic times. Others theorized that the establishment of these institutions were for a variety of other reasons:

- institutions were viewed as an advance over the colonial conditions of relief provided for children which allowed them to be housed with adult criminals and deviants (Downs, 1983).

- creation of these institutions was a way in which the rich could exercise control over the poor. Many believed that "punitive conditions and isolation from family made possible by institutionalization would coerce children into obedient labor market behavior...the functions of children's institutions were to train and rehabilitate young people and also provide a model for the moral reform of society" (Downs, 1983).

- labor market conditions played a significant role in the growth of institutional care during the nineteenth century...industrialization and mechanization eventually reduced the relative demand for unskilled child labor" (Downs, 1983). At the time, vast numbers of young people were entering the country as immigrants. The net effect of these trends was an oversupply of child labor. Communities became concerned about what to do with these youth. Thus, institutions were created to house children who were not needed in the labor force.

These theories linked the establishment of orphanages to the country's socioeconomic problems. Financial concerns rather than the concern for children's welfare dominated discussion.

Orphanages were also seen as a stabilizing force in the country during times of upheaval or rapid social change. These institutions were seen as a place to teach values to the children of the disenfranchised population thus preparing them to become self-reliant adults.

A great number of children placed in these institutions were not fully orphaned. In fact, from 1847 to 1869, a review of the Protestant Orphan Asylum in St. Louis, Missouri, revealed that only "twenty-seven percent of the children were full orphans. Sixty-nine percent of the children had one parent, the other parent being deceased or absent. The single parents were equally divided amongst fathers and mothers. Four percent of the children had both parents" (Downs, 1983). These orphanages appeared to serve a population of disadvantaged children whose parents were having difficulty providing them with adequate care.

Many of the children were in these institutions for less than a year. Most children returned to their family or friends. However, "thirty-two percent were placed out as indentured servants" (Downs). Often children were placed away from home even when they had parents and the parents had objected to the child's placement as an indentured servant.

While these statistics refer to conditions only in a single institution, one can reasonably argue that the situation was similar in other institutions. Thus, it appears that orphanages did provide a temporary place of relief for the family. However, children were not always returned home and could be "indentured" to other persons or families or sent to other areas of the country where manual labor was needed. Examples include the orphan trains organized during the early 1900's by the Children's Aid Society to transport children to the rural West to provide assistance to farmers and ranchers.

It should be noted that a great number of these institutions were founded by wealthy members of society as acts of charity. Many of the resources used to operate these early institutions were from charity dollars, arising from the donors' genuine interest in providing services to the poor. However, when decisions about children's placements had to be made, such benevolent interests did not always guide decision-making. For example, in numerous situations children were placed as indentured servants in remote areas of the country despite parents' pleas to have their children returned home. These actions seemed to arise from attitudes that the less fortunate do not have the capacity to provide adequately for their children.

During the 1890's, American Indians were facing the extermination of their families and the destruction of their culture. The government viewed American Indians as being uncivilized and made a series of decisions founded on the belief that Indian Tribes were unable to provide for their young. Consequently, there was large scale removal of thousands of American Indian children from their communities to boarding schools, mission schools, and orphanages as part of a policy to assimilate American Indians into white society. In an attempt to civilize these children, many youth were sent away to boarding schools, were not allowed to speak their language and were forced to learn English. Many children were

beaten and abused in an attempt to break their spirit. Additionally, Indian children were removed from their families and adopted by White families at a much higher rate than any other children in the nation.

## **A SHIFT IN DIRECTION**

### First White House Conference on Children

The first White House Conference on Children was convened by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909 so that "those engaged in the work of caring for dependent and destitute children could exchange ideas and experiences" (Cole, 1990). Conference participants concluded that, wherever possible, the child should be placed in foster families and not in institutions. The consensus of this conference was that "home life is the highest and finest product of civilization. Children should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons...This consensus has formed the basis of child welfare theory ever since" (Jones, 1993).

After the conference "financial legislation authorizing mother's pensions was passed in many states. This assistance preserved the home and prevented placement for a substantial number of children" (Cole, 1990). However, these pensions did not apply to all families. Women who were considered immoral or who were thought to have bad characters were not offered financial assistance.

However, the conference's conclusions had little impact on the number of children being placed in institutions. In fact, the number continued to rise in subsequent years. It was not until 35 years after the conference that the number of children in orphanage care finally dropped below the 1909 level (Jones, 1993). The increase in children placed in institutions during that time may be attributed to a variety of reasons, including the two world wars and the Great Depression in the first half of the century. It may also have been due to the fact that the concept of "the mother's pension was based on the simplistic notion that the majority of children were placed because their parents didn't have enough money. This view ignored the other incapacities of parents or the challenges to parenting that some presented" (Jones, 1993).

### **Social Security Act of 1935**

Passage of the Social Security Act in 1935 resulted, in part, from the federal government's efforts to assist states to provide care for children. The Aid to Families with Dependent Children program provided financial assistance to families so that they might be better able to care for their families at home and avoid having their children taken out of the home and placed with other caregivers. It was seen as another step toward reducing the number of children placed in

institutional settings.

Although the actual numbers of children needing out of home placements continued to rise, these new efforts to provide welfare to poor women with children reduced the need to use orphanages as places to house destitute children. Several other factors also played a role in the decline of orphanages. These factors included:

1. professionalization of social work;
2. regulation of child care institutions;
3. the movement toward de-institutionalization; and
4. turnover of childcare workers.

### **The Experience of Children of Color**

During the 1940's and 1950's, children of color were removed from their families at a much higher rate than White children. In Minnesota, "where the proportion of minority population is small...the number of minority families represented in foster care population is three times as high as their proportion in the general population." (Bremner, 1974) The practice of placing minority children at a higher rate in Minnesota seemed to mirror placements across the nation. Many believed that this higher rate of minority families may be linked to the fact that for children of color "placement was the initial service rather than a planned decision after attempts to provide community-based therapy" (Bremner, 1974). This practice appeared to be in direct contrast to what may have been needed by these children being placed. "Although the rate of child welfare services to Negro children was higher...behavioral and emotional problems were reported for a considerably smaller proportion of Negro children...This raised the question for some professionals that whether placement of minority-group children is precipitated by poverty and lack of supportive resources, rather than disruptive family relationships or perceived hazards to the child" (Bremner, 1974).

The removal rate of American Indian children from their families continued to be even higher than average. This was partly due to the poverty of American Indian families forced to live on reservations and to the fact that social workers tended to assess Indian home life based on their own cultural standards of what families should be. In most cases, White families adopted Indian children taken from their homes and these children lost contact with their own history and culture.

### **RISE IN CHILD WELFARE REFORM**

The decade of the sixties witnessed renewed national efforts to secure the basic civil rights of all individuals and to reduce discrimination based on race and gender. Concurrent with this effort was a movement to de-institutionalize individuals and



guarantee disabled groups the right to live in the least restrictive setting. Instead of being placed in institutions, children were more often placed in foster care families. Thus, "from 1961 to 1977 the number of children in foster-family care rose from 165,000 to 364,000" (Jones).

In 1962, the concept of child abuse was reintroduced. By 1973, all 50 states had mandatory reporting laws. A new emphasis on protecting children brought about an increase in the number of children in foster care because of neglect or abuse.

In the 1970's, professionals began to question the effectiveness of orphanages, especially as a way to address the complex problems of teens. Available data suggested life in an orphanage did not reduce a teen's struggle with deviancy, but in some cases, increased the juvenile's propensity to engage in such behavior. This provided support to the movement to shut down existing orphanages.

However, a few orphanages which were also considered to be residential treatment centers remained in business; i.e., the Villages, Boys Town, Maryville, etc. These institutions that evolved to meet the needs of children in residential settings were either group or family style homes. The purpose of these homes was to provide children who had failed in numerous placement settings with a stable structured living environment. Thus, their use was limited. These homes have social workers and psychologists on staff or the homes transport the children to the services. Many of the children receiving services at these homes are not orphaned in that their parents are living and in some cases retain legal custody.

Professionals in a variety of disciplines began to believe that the very nature of institutions was in direct contrast to human nature. "Characteristics which all institutions have in common are order, precision, form, and an aspect of changelessness which obviously require considerable discipline in their preservation. Human beings, on the other hand, are mobile creatures - individuals; and essential to their innate sense of freedom to be individuals is a certain lack of conformity in all matters of life" (Bremner, 1970). In fact numerous studies began to show that children raised in an institutional setting suffered from "the inability to bond, inability to effectively problem solve, inability to turn to others for help, poor peer relations, disciplinary problems, disruptive behavior" (Ford, 1990). Another study interviewed children living in institutions and "the overwhelming pattern...is that children do not consider institutions supportive places to reside. The children who were living in institutions at the time they were interviewed felt less comfortable, loved, looked after, trusted, cared about, and wanted than children in any other form of surrogate care or than children who had been returned to their original families" (Bush, 1980).

There was insufficient evidence about the issue of whether long term placements in residential settings could help teens deal with problems. There was insufficient

evidence that life in an institution had a positive impact on children. Thus, during this period, more and more children were placed with foster families.

The rapid increase of children entering foster homes brought the system to a state of crisis by the late 1970's. The crisis was related to the escalating costs of out of home placement, the dwindling number of foster parents, and the longer periods children spent in foster care placements or drifted from one placement to another without ever returning home. Additionally, the children entering foster care appeared to be increasingly disturbed. Many suffered from psychological problems associated with abuse, abandonment or neglect. Thus, the system did not appear able to handle the more severe problems of these children and provide them with the necessary services.

An important effort to reunify children with their own Indian families took place in 1978 with the passage of the Federal Indian Child Welfare Act. Indian Tribes initiated the act in response to statistics which documented the disintegration of Indian families through placement of Indian children in adoptive and foster homes. This Act gave preferences in adoptions to the child's extended family, then to other members of the child's tribe, and finally to other Indian families. The Act also authorized the establishment of child and family service contracts with Indian tribes and organizations on or near the reservations. Tribes were also given the right to intervene on behalf of a child in state court proceedings.

In 1980, Congress passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act. This act was to establish a program of adoption assistance, to strengthen the program of foster care assistance for needy and dependent children, to improve the child welfare, social services, and aid to families with dependent children program. It was significant because it stressed the importance of placing a child in the least restrictive and most family-like setting. The Act discouraged out of home placements and called for the return of children to their family as soon as possible.

In addition to the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, family preservation services were introduced. Workers were encouraged to use a child's relatives as responsible partners in meeting a child's needs. Eventually, passage of the 1993 Family Support and Family Preservation Act established as a central tenet of national policy, the fact that preventing out-of-home placement through more support to families should be the primary goal of child welfare policy.

### **Contemporary Issues**

The number of children in out of home placements continues to increase. "At the end of the federal fiscal year 1993, an estimated 464,000 children were in foster care in the United States, an increase of about 66 percent from FY 1986" (Zimmerman, 1994). At the same time, the number of foster care homes

continued to decrease. "In 1992 there were 101,000 family foster homes in the United States, a 29 percent decrease from 1972 when there were 142,000" (Zimmerman, 1994). Thus, the foster care system is grossly overburdened and quite often there are not enough homes to meet the needs of children.

The characteristics of the type of children placed in foster homes at the end of FY 1990 were "40 percent White, 40 percent African American, and 12 percent Hispanic. At the end of FY 1990, a little more than half of children in foster care were between 1 and 12 years old; 15 percent were less than a year. The percentage of infants entering foster care increased from 10 percent in FY 1986 to 16 percent in FY 1990" (Zimmerman).

Locally in Minnesota, more children enter out of home care each year. From 1984 to 1992, the number grew from 11,725 to 18,096, an increase of 54 percent. Of the 18,096 children placed in out of home care in 1992, fifty percent were foster care placements and the other 50 percent were in emergency shelters, group homes, and residential treatment centers. The costs to provide foster care for one child in 1992 was \$9,490.

In 1992, there was a disproportionate number of African American and American Indian children placed in out of home care. African Americans constitute 3 percent of Minnesota's child population, but African American children in out of home care account for 19 percent of the total number of children in care. American Indians represent 2 percent of Minnesota's child population, but American Indian children in out home care account for 12 percent of all placements.

The number of children in Minnesota entering care was about evenly divided between boys and girls. Fifty-two percent of these children in out of home care in 1992 were adolescents from 13 to 19 years old. Twenty-five percent were children under 6 years of age.

Even with all the emphasis on the need to reunify children and providing supports to children in out of home placement settings that will help them and their families resolve their problems, there still remains a group of children who might be considered "orphaned" by contemporary standards. These are children whose parents may have lost their parental rights and have become wards of the state, or children who cannot live at home because of the severity of their problems, or who live in family homes with continued abuse and neglect. Quite often, these children have had numerous placement failures and end up living in a group home or treatment center for a long period of time. They are not suitable candidates for adoption or may have been in failed adoptive homes. In the true sense, they are the children in society with the most need for support and care.

Two residential facilities that provide services for these children are Maryville Academy in Illinois and Boys Town which has facilities in several states. Maryville Academy has 17 locations around northern Illinois serving 12,000 youth each year. "The children are 65 percent Black, 25 percent White, and 10 percent Hispanic" (Laskas, 1994). These children live in same-sex groups of ten, in brick cottages and are supervised by live-in houseparents. The annual budget for Maryville is \$53 million and the majority of the money is state and federal dollars. The remainder is collected through fundraising efforts.

Boys Town operates group homes in Nebraska, New York, Florida, Texas, Nevada, Louisiana and California. According to information provided by Boys Town, youth are provided everything they need...food, clothing, a home with a family that loves and cares for them, medical and psychiatric care, special education and tutoring, career training, on-the-job experience, job placement, athletic competition, travel to and from natural families when possible, and spiritual development in the faith of their choice.

Some of the characteristics of the children accepted at Boys Town are:

- Children who need long-term residential care.
- Children with behavioral or family problems so serious they have tried all local remedies and need to be removed from their home community.
- Children between 10 and 17 years old.
- Children whose needs can be met in an open, family-style nonrestrictive environment.
- Children whose parent(s) or guardian agrees to maintain his or her legal relationship.
- Children from any state.

The residential program serves approximately 1100 boys and girls each year. The annual cost for one child is \$40,150. Boys Town receives funding through public support, program service revenues, and interest/dividends/gains from the Father Flanagan Foundation Fund.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

The new Personal Responsibility Bill has been proposed by members of the Republican party as part of their "Contract with America." It has raised once again the question of the role of orphanages, this time as a way to address welfare reform. The new bill would make grants available to states to build and run orphanages for those children of unwed mothers who, because they lost their welfare benefits, could not care for their children.

The following are some issues the bill raises.

### **1. What population of children would be served through the Personal Responsibility Bill?**

The Personal Responsibility Bill is a proposal for welfare reform that cuts welfare benefits to young unwed mothers and rolls the savings back to the states so that they can build orphanages to care for these mothers' children. This paper has shown that the use of orphanages as a way to provide for destitute children whose parents do not have enough money to care for them is flawed. In fact, orphanages were gradually replaced by Aid to Families with Dependent Children to enable parents to stay at home and care for their children. Society has turned away from the notion that children must be taken from parents because they are poor. Recent polls show that 82 percent of Americans believe we have a responsibility to help the poor.

### **2. How do children and adolescents do in orphanages?**

Institutionalization does not meet the emotional, psychological, or physical needs of children and adolescents. "The majority of research on long-term childhood institutionalization, involving multiple caregivers has been shown to lead to important social deficits and problems in interpersonal relationships" (Ford, 1990).

### **3. How do the costs of building orphanages compare with other forms of care for children?**

The costs for building and maintaining orphanages are high. Some of the best run institutions estimate the annual costs of maintaining this kind of institutions can be as high as \$1,000,000 yearly and the numbers of children who live there may be a small group of ten or twelve. The monthly AFDC benefit with food stamps for a mother with one child in Minnesota is \$425 or \$5,100 annually. In 1992, the Minnesota costs for a child in a foster home for one year was \$9,490. In the same year, the

costs for a child in a group home was \$28,835. The costs for placement in a residential treatment center was \$41,610. It would seem from an analysis of these figures that the costs of orphanages do not outweigh their benefits. It is doubtful that the public would support such costly alternatives.

4. Is there a population of children in society that would benefit from a long term placement in a modern day orphanage?

This paper has shown that there is a small population of children for whom reunification with their families or adoption may not be an option. These children may need long term out of home placement in a structured, stable, and caring environment. Perhaps these children could benefit from living in a modern day orphanage.

5. In Minnesota, what are the needs of children that are not currently being met through the current substitute care system?

One population of children whose needs are not being effectively met are those children who have had multiple placements and are in need of structure but not the emotional intensity of a family.

## **SUMMARY**

This paper discussed the role orphanages played in society. It provided both an overview of the development of child welfare policy and a view of out of home placements today. The paper also detailed the modern day costs of placing a child in an institution. Finally, it provided a discussion on what role orphanages might have in child welfare service provision.

In presenting some history about the development of orphanages in the United States, this paper revealed that:

- Orphanages once served a necessary and worthwhile purpose of providing for children's basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing when parents were either dead or absent. As society progressed, it accepted a responsibility to provide financial support to parents as a way to keep children with their families. The need for orphanages declined.
- With the rise of enlightened child welfare policy, child welfare advocates replaced the institutional models for caring for children needing out of home placements with a broader continuum of more family-like settings, including family foster care, group homes, and residential treatment centers.

- Long-term placement of children in an institutional setting may negatively impact a child's ability relate to others.
- The number of children in out of home placements has increased annually.
- A disproportionate number of children of color are placed in out of home care.
- Some contemporary form of orphanages may still be useful as a long term care placement for children who cannot grow up in more family-like settings.

Unfortunately, too many of today's children still lead terrible lives, reflecting the failure of their families and society's effort to provide them with proper care and nurturance. Policy-makers need to continue to debate the issues of how best to address their needs. However, if the debate about the role of orphanages in today's society becomes confused with the complex issues related to reforming welfare, it is doubtful that this debate will be a constructive one or that many children will be well-served.

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