

Foster Care versus Modern Orphanages

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by Richard B. McKenzie

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A San Francisco-based think tank has proven the obvious: If disadvantaged kids are orphaned by their living but irresponsible or abusive parents, then moved from one foster-care placement to the next, they will fall behind in school and develop a substantial achievement gap compared to their peers from stable homes.



Dallas Headquarters:
12770 Coit Road, Suite 800
Dallas, TX 75251-1339
972.386.6272

www.ncpa.org

Washington Office:
601 Pennsylvania Avenue NW,
Suite 900, South Building
Washington, DC 20004
202.220.3082



The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestEd in San Francisco, which conducted the survey, found that only 37 percent of California children in foster care achieved grade level in math.¹ The children scored even lower than students with disabilities and limited English. The drop-out rate for foster care children in 2009-2010 was twice the rate for all California students — due to the foster-care kids moving through multiple cycles of extraction from their neglectful families to foster-care placements, only to be reunified with their families and then extracted again.² (A common phenomenon, as shown in the figure.³) And as the children change schools repeatedly, the required adjustments throw them further behind their peers in every school.

Judges and child welfare experts have aptly described foster care as “permanent temporary care” for many children trapped in the system until they age out of it at 18, ill-prepared for life. No wonder foster-care kids are disproportionately represented in the country’s prison and homeless populations, and are underrepresented among the ranks of college students and graduates, though the latter problem is now being remedied, at least partially.⁴

The Orphanage Option in the Past. Arguably, child welfare officials should understand that children need some stability in their lives, something that was once offered in orphanages. Back in the mid-1990s, a child welfare expert summarized conventional orphanage wisdom: “Orphanages damaged children: emotionally, behaviorally, and intellectually.” In response, I argued in a *Wall Street Journal* column that the orphanage where I grew up in the 1950s was hardly perfect but was far better than experts imagined. A large number of orphanage alumni responded, “Right on!”

I followed with a survey of 2,500 aging alumni who lived in 15 American orphanages prior to the mid-1960s, and guess what? The orphanage alumni at the time of my research had outpaced their age counterparts on education, income and attitudes toward life (and a couple of dozen other social-economic measures):

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- The alumni had a median income 10 percent to 60 percent higher than the general population in their age group; in part because they had a 39 percent higher college graduation rate.
- They also had substantially lower unemployment and crime rates.
- More than 85 percent of the alumni reported favorable or very favorable assessments of their orphanage days. A scant 2 percent reported unfavorable memories.

The vast majority of the alumni shuddered at the thought of spending their youth in foster care.⁵

When I was producing a documentary on *Homecoming: The Forgotten World of America's Orphanages*, in which aging alumni at four orphanage homecomings were filmed, the producers and cameramen were incredulous at the dominance of positive assessments of orphanage experiences they were recording.⁶ The screenings of the documentary at film festivals were met with tears and laughter, and disbelief among many viewers who thought that Charles Dickens had the last (and right) word on orphanages of the past, which were portrayed in the film *Oliver* as child labor camps where the children had to plead for "more gruel" while their care masters dined on lavish meals. His views on orphanages stand in sharp contrast to contemporary academic historians' assessments of past orphanages, which, generally speaking, improved the welfare of

children over what they otherwise would have had.⁷

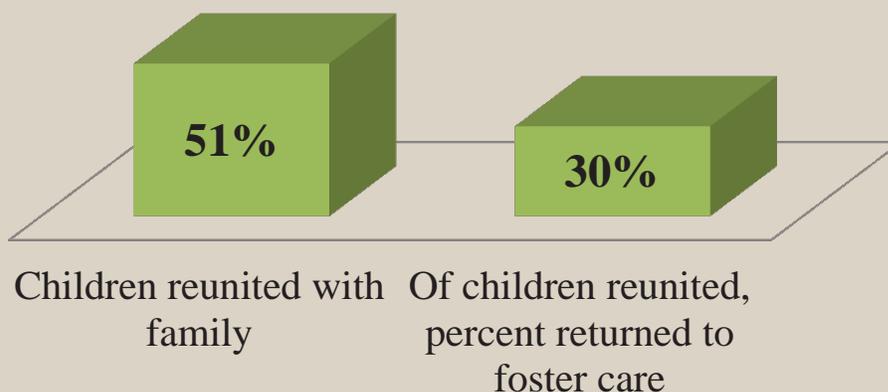
The Critics of Orphanages. While foster-care failures continue to surface, critics have returned to blasting orphanages everywhere with broad rhetorical brushes, calling them "poisonous," "dangerous" and "deadly" for children.⁸ Congress passed the Children in Families First Act of 2013, which is based on the blatantly wayward premise that: "Science now proves conclusively that children suffer immediate, lasting, and in many cases irreversible damage from time spent living in institutions or outside of families, including reduced brain activity, reduced IQ, smaller brain size, and inability to form emotional bonds with others."⁹

But Duke University Professor of Public Policy and Health Kathryn Whetten challenged these assumptions on all counts, citing her research team's discovery of favorable outcomes (on several behavioral, emotional, and health fronts) for children in orphanages in low-income countries in Africa and Southeast Asia compared with children in foster care and even in biological families.¹⁰ Whetten writes:¹¹

"Our team studied more than 3,000 orphaned and abandoned children in five Asian and African countries and found those age 5 and older doing as well in terms of emotional wellbeing, cognition, physical development and health as orphaned or abandoned children living with families. We and others have found as much abuse and neglect in family settings as in institutions. Children in extremely poor families often become child laborers...."

Surely there have been, and continue to be, bad orphanages in the world, but such could just as surely be said of biological family care, and certainly of foster care. Of course children can prosper in "loving and responsible families," as orphanage critics insist

Family Reunification from Foster Care



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Foster Family-based Treatment Association.

is the case, but therein lies the problem: Many families, biological and foster, fail miserably the test of being “loving and responsible.” Critics also don’t seem to understand that many of the studies they cite on the impact of orphanages from the mid-1960s could not be published today because they rely so heavily on small groups of “institutionalized” children (10 and 15 subjects), who were often from juvenile detention centers and mental institutions as well as orphanages, and who could have been clinical referrals, rather than randomly drawn from the relevant populations.¹²

Foster care and, to a lesser extent, adoption can be the worst care for some children. Among numerous cases that vary only in detail, sheriff’s deputies in Union County, North Carolina recently found an 11-year-old foster-care boy, handcuffed to his front porch shivering — with a dead chicken tied around his neck.¹³ According to the deputies, the conditions in the home were “deplorable” and the “smell” was horrific. The true shocker in the case is that the boy’s foster parents were also adoptive parents of four other children, ages 14, 13, nine and eight. The parents were charged with intentional child abuse, inflicting serious injury and false imprisonment, as well as cruelty to animals. The wife was a social worker who, because of her position, was also charged with willful failure to discharge her duty as a public official, as reported in numerous news accounts.

Undoubtedly, many foster parents go beyond the call of duty for the foster children in their care, but the continuing flow of news reports of derelict foster-care parents suggests the system is far from perfect in selecting foster parents and offering foster children the sense of permanence, security and “home” that all children need. The relevant child care issue is this: When adoptions and foster placements fail children, then what? Only more of the same? Should there not be alternative surrogate homes — call them orphanages, academies or whatever — where children abused by their biological families and the foster-care system can find a sense of home and community with closely monitored adults and other children who share experiences, and who then can rebuild their broken lives and spirits in a peaceful place? Doubt such places can exist today? Read on.

Crossnore: A Modern Orphanage. When critics have acknowledged positive life outcomes for alumni of orphanages of the past, they have retorted, “Well, maybe orphanages worked long ago, but they can’t today.” Really? I spent the fall of 2011 embedded in a self-proclaimed “modern-day orphanage,” the Crossnore School, hidden in the North Carolina Appalachian Mountains and home to close to a hundred children in all grades who openly talked with me about their life experiences, before and during Crossnore.

It can’t be done today? From my experience, recounted in a recent book, I say, “Go to Crossnore and be wowed!”¹⁴ Suspend preconceived conceptions of “institutions” drawn from the movies (where the word “institutions” is used to stifle serious debate on substance). The campus is nothing short of peaceful and gorgeous, especially when fall colors abound. The cottages look like lodges. The on-campus academy cannot be equaled in the wealthiest communities. Crossnore has an equestrian center (with rescued horses), a full fitness center, an athletic field with a court for every sport (including skateboarding), a bike for every child — and much more.

More importantly, the staff of this “modern-day orphanage” cares for children who have faced more disadvantages due to their families than my orphanage cohorts ever imagined:

- Nearly three-fourths of Crossnore children were abandoned and faced extreme poverty.
- Eighty-five percent of the children’s parents are drug abusers.
- Nearly half have been sexually abused.

Far too many have been rescued from traumas caused by serial foster-care placements.

But you would never know that was the case by watching the children at play on campus. From my stay, I came to realize that Crossnore largely lived up to its mantra, “Mountain of Miracles.” What “miracles,” you ask?

A seriously withdrawn 13-year old read on the fourth-grade level on admission, but she graduated from high school on time, and then went to community college.

One of the baby girls adopted from a Ukraine

orphanage had a wonderful life in rural America until at age 10 she was crushed by the death of her single adoptive mother. Crossnore took her in, brought her out of her shell, and found a third adoptive home after her second adoptive family decided not to keep her.

A teenage girl was admitted after enduring sexual abuse from age 8 to 11 from her stepfather. After years of truancy, she graduated on time and now attends community college.

A 12-year-old boy, who faced a tragic childhood because of his father's psychoses, developed a network of middle school drug dealers. When caught at 14, Crossnore took a chance on him and reversed his miserable school record. On high-school graduation, he became the first teenager to be hired on a major 2008 presidential campaign. He recently graduated on a full scholarship from an elite Northeastern university — with honors. (His twin sister, who managed to stay out of trouble, but stayed with her psychotic father and did not go to Crossnore, dropped out of high school at age 16.)

Since its founding in 1913, Crossnore has saved hundreds of kids from distressed lives with a simple child care philosophy infused into the campus culture by its remarkable head, Phyllis Crain. Her guiding principle was always to go beyond “care” and provide a place where “hurting children can regain their childhoods,” which accounts for the many points of beauty and playgrounds across campus. She insisted that education is “your meal ticket out of bad situations.”

Dr. Crain had a small sign hanging on her office door that spoke volumes, “Free Hugs, One Size Fits All.” When she walked across campus,

the kids in sight came running for the simplest of human pleasures, hugs freely and warmly given.

Unfortunately, Dr. Crain lost her twelve-year battle with cancer shortly after we filmed her for a short video now available on YouTube.¹⁵ Her legacy remains strong and is as vital as it is hard to accept: Children's homes can work today. They can work exceptionally well when staff members harbor a sense of mission fueled by passion to help the least advantaged among us.

Don't buy it? Well, suspend outdated orphanage images. Go to Crossnore, or Connie Maxwell Children's Home in South Carolina.¹⁶ For a glimpse of the good that can be done through orphanages in poor countries, go to Father Marc's Free the Kids in Haiti, which is home to 600 children (with a very long waiting list for admission) and notice the contrast between the care of kids inside and outside of the orphanages' walls.¹⁷

Conclusion. There is a need for a menu of care options, including adoption and children's homes. Foster care — with kids often going through up to a dozen or more placements before aging out of the system — should not be the only child care game in town.

Richard McKenzie is the Walter B. Gerken Professor emeritus at the University of California, Irvine, and a senior fellow with the National Center for Policy Analysis. He is the author of many books, including The Home: A Memoir of Growing Up in an Orphanage and most recently, Miracle Mountain: A Hidden Sanctuary for Children, Horses, and Birds Off a Road Less Traveled.

References and sources can be found in the online version at <http://www.ncpa.org/pub/ib136>.

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