

# The American Dream Is Alive and Well – among Orphanage Alumni!

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*Over the last several years, national media have reported discouraging news on the survival of the American Dream.<sup>1</sup> One study found that a sizable majority — just under 60 percent — of Americans have lost hope that they will achieve the American Dream. They are even more discouraged about their children's futures. A recent study suggests a cause: The percentage of Americans earning more than their parents did at the same age has plunged since the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>*



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Many Americans believe the economic system is “rigged” against them and their children. They accept as fact that only the wealthiest of Americans have improved their financial condition over the last half-century at the expense of all others — and that upward economic mobility has been and remains hamstrung by entrenched poverty, crime and welfare dependency, and an array of trade, regulatory and tax policies designed to benefit top income earners.

In contrast, surveys and interviews I conducted from the late 1990s to as recently as summer 2016 found a substantial majority of Americans who came of age in orphanages, or “children’s homes,” from the 1920s to the present — and faced multiple family and foster-care hardships — believe they have lived, and are living, the American Dream.

The critics of modern orphanages — in contrast to 19th-century Dickensian workhouses — range from Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) to novelist J. K. Rowling, and their prescriptions include eliminating such institutions in the United States and discouraging Western support for them in developing countries. There are surely institutions that provide poor care, inadequate education and harmful environments for their charges, but *most of the orphanage alumni I have surveyed avow that the list of hardships they have overcome did not include their orphanage experiences.* Indeed, a substantial majority express deeply felt affection for their stays in their “homes” and claim their orphanage experiences *contributed* to their success.

## Success in Life

What is the American dream? People will answer that question differently, depending on their values and life experiences; but most Americans would agree that achieving their dream requires such things as education, steady work and a stable family life. It also requires, or leads to, a positive attitude toward life.<sup>3</sup>

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In the mid-1990s, I surveyed more than 2,500 adult alumni of 15 American orphanages on their life outcomes and assessments of their institutional experiences. In the summer of 2016, I surveyed just over 400 alumni from six orphanages clustered in North and South Carolina, ranging in age from 20 to 97 and averaging 66, with their admission to their orphanages stretching back as far as 1925 to as recently as 2012. [See table for survey details.]

Regardless of age or time of survey, the results were remarkably consistent: on measures of education, income and attitude, orphanage alumni scored better than the general American population, even though, in the most recent survey, the average children’s home stay was 8.5 years and 70 percent report living in poverty prior to their admission to an orphans’ home. (Though I call them orphans, most of the older alumni were in children’s homes due to familial economic hardship, rather than the loss of parents, whereas younger alumni came from troubled circumstances.)

**Education and the American Dream.** Take “Dexter,” for instance.<sup>4</sup> As a young boy in the 1990s, he knew firsthand family poverty and homelessness, and emotional abuse from a parent diagnosed with psychosis. In his tweens, he found he could make more money distributing drugs in his middle school than mowing lawns. At age 14 he was caught distributing and was arrested in school. His probation officer persuaded a “self-proclaimed modern-day orphanage,” which rarely considered children with criminal records, to take a chance on him.

A year behind when he was admitted to the children’s home. Dexter graduated from high school on time with a full scholarship to study political science at his state’s flagship university. He turned down the prestigious scholarship to take an unpaid job with a presidential campaign, in short order obtaining a paid position. The summer before the election, he was offered another full scholarship to attend one of the nation’s elite Northeast universities to study international politics. He graduated with honors.

Dexter’s educational experience is not unique: The aging alumni surveyed in the mid-1990s reported a college graduation rate 39 percent higher than the rate for their age cohort in the general white population.

<b>American Dream Survey, Summary Statistics</b> (Alumni from Six Orphanages, 2016)	
<b>1. Total respondents</b>	<b>401</b>
<b>2. Average age</b>	<b>66</b>
Age range	20-97
Under 50	13%
<b>3. Average year of arrival</b>	<b>1959</b>
Range of arrival years	1925 - 2012
Average years in orphanage	8.5
<b>4. Lived in foster care</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>5. Lower and poverty income classes before home admission</b>	<b>71%</b>
<b>6. Lower and poverty income classes today</b>	<b>2.5%</b>
<b>7. Middle and above income classes today</b>	<b>88%</b>
Top income class today	6%
<b>8. Very favorable and favorable assessments of children’s home experience</b>	<b>80%</b>
Unfavorable	1.8%
Very unfavorable (The rest, mixed assessments.)	0.3%
<b>9. Very strongly agree or agree they have lived the American Dream</b>	<b>82%</b>
Have not lived the American Dream (The rest, “not sure.”)	5%
Very strongly agree or agree the American dream remains viable for today’s generations	88%
<b>12. Average happiness rating on scale of 1 (not happy at all) to 10 (very happy)</b>	<b>8.86</b>
Range of ratings	1-10
Mode	10
Median	9

Average students also fared better. For example, “Shellie” was a confident 18-year-old and a recent high school graduate when I interviewed her in 2011, working at a part-time summer job and looking forward to cosmetology school. Before going to her children’s home, she lived in poverty with her “pill head” mother, as she described her, three sisters, all by

different fathers, and a parade of men in the home. One of her sister’s fathers sexually abused her.

“The best thing my mother ever did for me, at age eleven, was to run him out of the house when she caught him in my room,” Shellie told me. “But, by my early teens I became almost a full-time truant. I could skip school because my mother was too out of it to know what I was doing, and I didn’t like school.”

Child welfare eventually took Shellie away, and sent her to several foster homes before placing her in a children’s home at age 16, more than two years behind in school. Yet, with a large measure of tutoring, emotional support and focus on her course work, both in-class and online, Shellie graduated on time. By contrast, Dexter’s twin sister remained with their psychotic father. She dropped out of high school as soon as she could. She did get her G.E.D. — about the same time Dexter received his university diploma.

**Work and Family.** In an era of supposedly stagnate income mobility and the prevalence of talk of the tight grip of the “cycle of poverty” on economic advancement, the alumni in my most recent survey report that, on average, they have moved up more than three “rungs” (quintiles) on the national income ladder from where they started before their orphanage admission. Remarkably:

- Some 87 percent of the alumni responding report their household income is in the middle fifth or higher income tiers.
- Nearly half report they are in the top two income tiers (“upper middle” and “upper”).
- Only 0.3 percent report they live in poverty today, and only 2 percent are in the “lower income” category (the next level up from poverty).

Most of these individuals started in poverty. Take two examples from the 1990s survey. In the 1920s, “Martin” was taken from a backwoods southern farm to his orphanage because “our father died and our mother was an invalid.” He graduated from his orphanage’s high school, went into the military, married and spent 43 years as a technician at the Carnation plant in a town near his orphanage.

“Herman” knew “dirt poverty” that came as the child of a single mother with menial work skills in the early 1940s. His mother gave up custody when he was a toddler to the county welfare department, which placed him in a sequence of several failed “welfare sponsored homes” (now called “foster care”). Eventually, he was placed in a rural North Carolina orphanage of over 300 children who worked in on-campus farms and shops operated with a handful of supervising adults. He went to college with help from a well-to-do Charlotte couple, then to officer’s training school and into the Navy for three years. After military service, Herman married, began his career as a financial adviser and stockbroker, had two children and retired after a successful 50-plus year career.

In the main, these children’s homes graduated good, responsible, upstanding American citizens.

**Living the American Dream.** Over the last several years, national media have repeatedly reported that a substantial majority of Americans have lost hope in their achieving the American Dream. They are even more discouraged about their children’s futures.<sup>5</sup>

In the most recent survey, I asked orphanage alumni whether they had lived (or are living) the American Dream. I left “American Dream” totally undefined; thus, the alumni reported according to their concept of the “American Dream.”

- In dramatic contrast to findings from a recent poll of the general population, an astounding 82 percent of the alumni respondents report that they have lived (or are living) the American Dream, while only 5 percent have not (or are not). (Most of the rest of the respondents indicated they could not say.)
- An even higher percentage, 88 percent, attest that the American Dream remains achievable for younger generations.
- Only 3 percent had doubts about the American Dream remaining viable today.

When asked how happy they are today on a scale of 1 (not happy at all) to 10 (very happy), the average response was 8.86 (with a range of 3-10). The most frequent response was 10.

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### Orphanages and Their Critics

The alumni in my early surveys were not drawn from “Cadillac orphanages.” On the contrary, a substantial majority (at least 87 percent) lived in orphanages in the 1960s and before, when they had to work long hours in their orphanages’ farms, dairies, kitchens and laundries, making their homes largely self-sufficient. They lived in “cottages” that often housed one or two dozen children who slept in group “sleeping porches” and were supervised by a single adult “housemother.” The orphanages still operated on tight budgets from private contributions — before the 1970s when homes became ever-more dependent on and controlled by federal and state child-care dollars and a mountain of regulations that have driven up costs.<sup>6</sup>

**The Role of Orphanages in Alumni Success.** A number of the surveyed alumni offered assessments of their institutional experience — mostly positive, but a few negative. Typical comments include:

- A female alumna in her late twenties simply said, “I love [orphanage name].”
- Another alumna in her thirties wrote, “Thank you [orphanage name] for all that you did for us.”
- An alumna in his early seventies, in a common reflection, said, “I cannot imagine where I would be today if I had not been sent to [orphanage name]. Here I received all the lessons I needed to be successful throughout life. I love this children’s home still today.”
- A male in his mid-seventies expressed religious sentiments others shared (several of the homes were supported by denominations), saying, “I was blessed that my mother made arrangements for me to enter [orphanage name]. [My orphanage] allowed me to recognize the benefits of self-discipline, hard labor, competition, responsibility and the education that enabled me to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”

Some of the assessments were mixed. Although the alumni with foster-care experience often (but hardly always) had favorable views of their foster care, they

generally gave more positive assessments of their orphanage care than their foster care. Among the few unfavorable assessments of orphanage life, these two comments are representative:

- A male alumna in his early sixties, who gave the only “very unfavorable” assessment of his orphanage experience among his cohorts, remains vexed today by his worse memory, saying, “I was raped at [orphanage name] by the boy who slept in the bed beside mine and no one did anything about it even though it was reported.”
- A female in her mid-sixties wrote, “Retired and financially secure at this stage of my life but have had a hard time with intimacy and emotional connectivity even though I’ve been married to the same man for 43 yrs. Also, I feel like I never found my niche in life.”

Those with positive assessments attributed their success in life to:

- The education they received (often from on-campus teachers who were more qualified than teachers who taught in surrounding county school);
- The work ethic they developed from extensive work demands;
- The life challenges they had to overcome because of their Spartan orphanage conditions;
- The moral values that were pressed on them because their orphanages were often faith-based and tied to churches and synagogues;
- The comradery they developed from living and working with many other children who understood their past life difficulties; and
- The inspiration to live a “good life” provided by dedicated on-campus adult mentors.

**The Evolution of Institutional Care for Children.** The precipitous drop in the count of orphanage alumni responding to my surveys in the 1990s and this year can be largely attributed to the closing of many orphanages, to their gradual conversion to treatment centers over the last four decades and to deaths of the remaining aging alumni:

- Three of the six homes have continued to provide long-term care for mainly disadvantaged (as distinguished from seriously troubled or traumatized) children, although the children they admit today often have physical and emotional problems beyond poverty not generally faced by children admitted to orphanages in the 1960s and before.
- The other three homes have either morphed into “treatment centers” (which means they often serve traumatized kids) or have, since the early 1970s, evolved into the equivalent of “state foster-care agencies,” administering collections of foster homes and group homes spread over large sections of their home states.
- One home is totally private (and gave up state funding to avoid misguided state controls on children admitted and length of stays); the others rely on state child welfare dollars for upward of 50 percent of their revenues.

Children’s homes are no longer self-sufficient due to government regulations. For instance, they can no longer ask children, even in their mid-to-late-teens, to use a mower with more than one and a half horsepower, which effectively means they cannot ask children to do much serious work around campuses with acres of grass. This type of restriction is not imposed on biological and foster parents.

**Foster Care or Orphanages?** Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling is a recent self-appointed orphanage critic, tweeting that “Orphanages cause irreparable damage [to children in their care], even those that are well run.” She paints orphanages as “nightmarish institutions” where young children are “caged” day and night.<sup>7</sup> Many child welfare experts share Rowling’s sweeping damnation of orphanages, both in the United States and abroad. Their solution: Shutter them all.

Rowling’s tweet is part of her campaign to discourage “voluntourism,” under which volunteers from advanced countries spend their “vacation days” working in, say, African and Haitian orphanages by cooking, providing hygiene instruction, and reading to the children.<sup>8</sup> In effect, Rowling argues that such warm-hearted charitable efforts unavoidably

set back the emotional and physical development of disadvantaged children by reducing the relative costs and elevating the relative quality of care in orphanages, making them comparatively more attractive care options.

Like many other orphanage critics, Rowling claims that children would be far better off with “loving and responsible” biological or foster parents than in “cold and loveless institutions.” However, she is dismissing the central child-welfare problem of the ages: the dearth of loving and responsible parents. Many parents, biological and foster, are simply unloving and irresponsible, too often emotionally, sexually and physically brutalizing the kids in their care.

Child-welfare expert Kate Whitten at Duke University has assessed the outcomes of orphaned children on a number of physiological, psychological and behavioral measures in five very low-income countries in Africa and Southeast Asia. Professor Whetten summarizes her findings to date:<sup>9</sup>

“Basically, in our five-country study, following approximately 3,000 orphaned and abused children permanently separated from their parents for over ten years, those children living in group homes (or orphanages or whatever you call them) do as well or better on every physical health, mental health and cognitive measure that we have [than children in biological intact families]. In addition, those in group homes experienced less exposure to sexual and physical abuse while in the homes (they experienced more before entering). These findings have been confirmed by a separate National Institute of Child Health and Development-funded study of 3,000 similar children in Kenya, which also found that children’s human rights were less likely to be violated in group homes than in individual family settings. A third NICHD-funded study found similar results out of China, and I just read another study out of Uganda showing that depression rates and anxiety were lower in group-home-based kids.”

**The Federal Government Prefers Foster Care.** The *Family First Prevention Services Act of 2016*, sponsored by Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT), was passed by unanimous consent in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2016, but did not come up for a vote

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in the Senate. The bill would cause federal dollars to flow solely to foster care and “treatment centers,” which admit only seriously abused and traumatized children in need of therapeutic medical treatment and penal care, often attributable to the children’s poor family *and* foster-care experiences. Federal funds would not go to any child welfare alternative that smacks of an “orphanage,” and that admits children who are deemed “normal,” or need only a stable and safe place to grow up, rather than those who need medication and “behavioral modification” to coexist with others.

Yet, many foster-care children move among multiple — not infrequently, a dozen or two — foster-care placements before aging out of the system at 18. They make court appearances for each new placement with their few possessions in plastic bags (causing them to be known as the “plastic-bag brigade” among judges and social workers). They are required to adjust to multiple schools and families in which they can be treated as adjunct and dispensable family members, often without being told where their siblings live (few foster parents will take on the burden of multiple siblings).

Worse yet, foster-care children have no say over where and when they will be placed and can be given little notice (at times, only 24 hours’ notice) of their reassignments, possibly to another foster placement; but possibly back to one or both of their dysfunctional parents, who may have faked rehabilitation, only to later be pulled from them for another cycle of foster-care placements.

Of course, many foster parents provide exceptional care to their charges, but a problem with efforts to close children’s homes (through, say, Hatch-type policies) is that it would increase the already excessive demands on the foster-care system. The resulting greater demand for placements will cause social workers to dig ever deeper into their stable of available foster parents, who are in short supply, and to call on progressively lower income, less adept foster parents who will be subject to less oversight as social workers’ caseloads rise.

Those who want to close orphanages and place disadvantaged children in foster care should consider

some disturbing statistics:

- More than 60 percent of foster-care youth age out of the system at 18 without a place to live.
- Half of those aging out are incarcerated within two years, and four-fifths of death-row inmates have lived in foster care.<sup>10</sup>
- By contrast, the orphanage alumni I surveyed in the mid-1990s reported an incarceration rate one-third that of the general white population and most arrests were for drunk driving, while long stints in prison were rarely reported.

The first large-scale study offering health comparisons for children in the general population based on a nationally representative sample of more than 900,000 U.S. children, published in *Pediatrics*, included 117,000 children in foster care. The study reports that:<sup>11</sup>

- Foster-care children face double to triple the risks of coming down with asthma, obesity, and hearing and vision problems than their counterparts in the general population (including children in impoverished families).
- They are five to seven times more likely to have behavioral, depression and anxiety problems than children in general.

The study is careful to avoid attributing the children’s problems to their foster care. However, given the many reported problems in the foster-care system, most notably multiple placements, it would not be unreasonable to suspect that foster care is an auxiliary contributor to many foster children’s medical and behavioral problems. Thus, it would be prudent to maintain the type of long-term care options orphanages of the past provided.

### Conclusion

Michael Morgan, who was one year behind me at my own orphanage, points out the irony of J.K. Rowling’s orphanage claims:<sup>12</sup>

“Harry is an unhappy, bullied, and abused orphan, fostered by an aunt and uncle for the first eleven years of his life. He wears cast-off clothing, sleeps in a closet, has no friends and is ostracized,

marginalized and ignored as a matter of course. He has no sense of self-worth, practically no personal possessions, he has never known affection and his future is as bleak and lonely as his past.

“It is an institution, Hogwarts, that saves our protagonist. He makes friends, becomes a leader, accepts responsibility, and displays a willingness to sacrifice himself for a greater good. He is introduced to sports, a moral code, social skills, and educated for success in life. For the remainder of the series, his foster home is something he has to endure. Hogwarts is his ‘Home.’”

Rowling’s fictitious description of Harry Potter’s orphanage life reflects more accurately the reality of experiences for the vast majority of the surveyed alumni than does her activist child-care policy claims.

Granted, there have been orphanages in the United States and around the world that have been child-care horror chambers, but the same claim can be made of families, both biological and foster. But no one proposes to model modern child-care programs on the worst examples of orphanages of the past or present.

Two stark facts remain self-evident, given the current state of child welfare:

- First, disadvantaged children have different needs. The country needs a menu of care options, just to fit children’s undeniable varying needs with their care.
- Second, foster care, adoption and treatment centers can work well for many children, but hardly all. Children’s homes have proven they can be one of a menu of care options — and must be, given the size of the country’s child-welfare problems.

What might explain the orphanage alumni’s success? Many responding alumni were first taken out of bad environments and often placed in pretty darn good circumstances where many bad influences were held at bay, outside of their homes’ campuses, enabling them to find their own paths toward their pursuit of the American Dream.

What can be done to slow and reverse the ongoing “fading of the American Dream,” and the several

corrosive social and economic effects of the growing pessimism in the country? Child-care pundits and policy makers have a standard list of corrective policies: improve education (especially in the worst school systems in poor neighborhoods), reduce drug and alcohol addiction, promote job-creating tax and regulatory policies, and so forth.

My findings suggest two rarely mentioned and unheralded (and, for many, unsettling) policies. First, drawing a lesson from the country’s child-care past: Do no harm. Adoptions and out-of-home placements with families should be maintained, but we need foremost to set aside proposed child-care policies that will likely lead to a further acceleration of closures of the few remaining children’s homes.

Second, adopt child-care policies that will encourage community groups and churches to return to their important mission of caring for the children in their midst through the development of modern and improved children’s homes. The children’s homes of the past were hardly perfect, but they had records of care that are worth celebrating, as a substantial majority of their alumni attest today. If you think quality child care cannot be provided in children’s homes today, go to the campuses of the Crossnore School in the mountains of North Carolina and/or Connie Maxwell Children’s Home in central South Carolina, and expect to be astounded.

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### Notes

1. Aaron Blake, “The American Dream Is Hurting,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2014.
2. The study found that babies born into middle-income households in 1940 had, at age 30, a 92 percent chance of earning more than their parents. In 1992, the percentage was down to 52 percent, as reported by Bob Davis, “Barely Half of 30-Year-Olds Earn More Than Their Parents,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 9, 2016, citing Raj Chetty et al., “The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940,” Department of Economics, Harvard University, working paper, 2016.
3. *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt reports that James Truslow Adams coined and popularized the expression the “American Dream” during the first years of the Great Depression. Adams defined the expression as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone.” David Leonhardt, “The American Dream, Quantified at Last,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2016.
4. Richard B. McKenzie, *Miracle Mountain: a Hidden Sanctuary for Children, Horses, and Birds* (Irvine, Calif.: Dickens Press, 2013), chapter 7.
5. Aaron Blake, “The American Dream Is Hurting,” *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2014; and David Leonhardt, “The American Dream, Quantified at Last.”
6. For a comparative review of the regulatory environments of children’s homes in six states, see Margaret Wright McFarland, “Who Will Mow the Lawns at Boy’s Town: Labor Laws in an Institutional Setting,” in Richard B. McKenzie, ed., *Rethinking Orphanages for the Twenty-First Century* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998), chapter 12.
7. J. K. Rowling, “Isn’t it time we left orphanages to fairytales?” *Guardian* (U.K.), December 17, 2014.
8. Sarah Ruiz-Grossman, “J.K. Rowling Breaks Down Why Volunteering At Orphanages Can Cause More Harm Than Good,” *Huffington Post*, August 25, 2016,
9. Personal correspondence with Kate Whitten, August 30, 2016. For more on Kate Whitten’s orphanage research, see “The Global Health Initiative at Duke University.”
10. Shenandoah Chefalo, *Garbage Bag Suitcase: A Memoir* (Traverse, Mich.: Mission Point Press, 2016). Statistics compiled by the Anne E. Casey Foundation.
11. Kristen Turney and Christopher Wilderman, “Mental and Physical Health of Children in Foster Care,” *Pediatrics*, October 16, 2016.
12. Aaron Blake, “The American Dream Is Hurting,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2014.