



Charities and voluntourism fuelling 'orphanage crisis' in Haiti, says NGO

Charitable donations and volunteers from abroad are supporting Haitian orphanages where children are vulnerable to abuse, a report finds

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Charitable givers from the US who believe they are helping Haitian orphans are instead funding the abuse and neglect of children at orphanages in the Caribbean country, a report from the NGO Lumos has found.

At least 30,000 children live in privately-run orphanages in Haiti, a country that has suffered multiple natural disasters displacing many families.

More than a third of Haiti's 752 orphanages are funded by donations from abroad amounting to \$70m (£54m), 92% of which comes from philanthropic and charity givers

in the US.

But an estimated 80% of the children living in these facilities are not actually orphaned: they have one or more living parent, and almost all have other relatives, according to the Haitian government.

Lumos, the NGO founded by author JK Rowling, campaigns for an end to the institutionalisation of children. It believes this not only hinders a child's development, but makes them more likely to experience abuse.

Funds from foreign countries, especially the US, is putting thousands of children at risk from abuse and trafficking, found the report [pdf], released on 20 June. Under international law, child trafficking is "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation".

Networks of traffickers are suspected of recruiting and deceiving children into orphanages to gain money from abroad, the Haitian state research authority (IBESR) believes. Indeed, Lumos found evidence of parents believing their children would receive a better education in orphanages, orphanage directors paid "child finders" to recruit children to the orphanages, and in some cases families were paid \$75 to give their child away.

"Many parents are deceived into giving up their children, purely so that unscrupulous individuals can make a profit," said Lumos' CEO, Georgette Mulheir.

Haiti is known as a transit location and source of forced labour and sex trafficking: it is listed on the "tier 2 watch list" [pdf] by the US State Department, meaning the number of victims is very significant, and even increasing.

Lumos argues many Haitian orphanages operate as a business and a source of child trafficking.

"This orphanage business - where orphanages are established and recruit children to raise donations from foreigners - is becoming increasingly recognised globally as a form of trafficking," said Jamie Vernaelde, researcher at Lumos.

While most orphanages are founded with good intentions, orphanage "voluntourism" incentivises trafficking, according to Lumos. One volunteer told the NGO: "Each visitor paid a 'humanitarian donation' of at least \$350 and was required to bring two 50lb suitcases of 'supplies'. Approximately 120 such volunteers visited the orphanage annually."

The charity now believes Haiti is experiencing an "orphanage crisis" where the number of facilities have skyrocketed, incentivising the separation of families. Prior to the major Haitian earthquake in 2010, there were an estimated 300 orphanages. When the government reassessed in 2013, there were 752.

“It was this response to a real vulnerability but also a perceived idea that, after a humanitarian emergency, children are automatically orphaned,” said Vernaelde.

The report also reaffirmed the argument that orphanages cause significant harm to children. Growing up without personal care and a family environment can cause significant developmental and psychological delays. The last 80 years of research into the effects of institutionalised care has found deficits to the child’s “physical growth, cognitive function and social-psychological health”, according to the Lancet medical journal. As many as one in 10 children [pdf] who have been institutionalised commit suicide; one in seven become prostitutes.

Lumos met people who had lived in Haitian orphanages who described frequent beatings, deliberately withholding food and situations where they were denied the opportunity to learn English to prevent them communicating with foreign visitors.

As many as 35 out of 44 people who had lived in orphanages in Haiti interviewed by Lumos described being punished for allegedly misbehaving.

“She [the orphanage director] would beat us at night, always. She would take us to her room, put us on our knees with our arms outstretched holding rocks. Or sometimes she left us out in the sun until she remembered about us,” one interviewee recalled.

Another young woman resorted to prostitution to pay for her school fees. She had a child who was in an orphanage because she couldn’t take care of him. “She had spent 13 years in an orphanage. You’re seeing that whole cycle repeat itself,” said Vernaelde.

Lumos and other child rights charities such as Disability Rights International support the transition away from orphanages towards community-based services, which has been found to be less expensive and provides better outcomes for the children.

“It’s about strengthening families first, and not all children are going to be safe in families - we know that in any developed country - so there is a possibility of developing foster care in Haiti. It’s about investing in support services for all communities,” said Vernaelde.

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