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Child Abandonment and its Prevention



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Introduction

Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) clearly states that every child has “the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents”. When a child is abandoned, this right is violated. Infants and young children are those most at risk of being abandoned. This is concerning, as a child deprived of a stable upbringing in his or her early years of life may experience difficulties in terms of emotional and behavioural development. Despite the importance of understanding the extent, causes and consequences of child abandonment, there is a distinct lack of research in this area. Such studies are essential in order to develop effective prevention programmes and strategies aimed at protecting those most vulnerable in our society.

Defining child abandonment

In a sample of 10 EU countries (Denmark, France, UK, Bulgaria, Romania, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Poland), there is no clear legal definition of child abandonment. The lack of a clear definition, and the ambiguity regarding what constitutes child abandonment, raises challenges for research and practice concerning this phenomenon. For the purposes of the current EU Daphne funded project, two definitions of child abandonment were employed, namely open abandonment and secret abandonment. *Open abandonment* is defined as a child being knowingly left behind by his or her parent, who can be identified, and whose intention is not to return but to willingly relinquish parental responsibility. Further, no other family members are able or willing to take on the responsibility to parent and care for the child. *Secret abandonment* is defined as a child being secretly left behind by his or her parent, who *cannot* be identified, and whose intention is not to return but to willingly relinquish parental responsibility anonymously.

The extent of child abandonment in Europe

Research has found that child abandonment is one of the key reasons why children under the age of three are placed in institutional care. A comparison of children in institutions revealed that in Western Europe only 4% were abandoned, as opposed to 32% of children in institutions in Central and Eastern Europe. Romania, Hungary and Latvia had the majority of children in institutional care who were abandoned, while Denmark, Norway and the UK reported child abandonment as being a rare event.

It is difficult to establish the true extent of open and secret child abandonment across Europe, as only some countries maintain national statistics regarding these phenomena and, where this information is maintained, data differs depending on the child's age group and the definition of child abandonment used.

As part of the current EU Daphne-funded project on child abandonment and its prevention, government departments from all 27 EU member countries were written to, requesting information in relation to open and secret abandonment. Of the 22 countries who responded, Slovakia had the highest number of children (aged 0-3) who were openly abandoned (4.9 per 1,000 live births), followed by the Czech Republic (4.1 per 1,000 live births), Latvia (3.9 per 1,000 live births) and Poland (3.7 per 1,000 live births). Across all 22 countries surveyed, there was very little information (if any) regarding the number of children abandoned outdoors or in public places. Additionally, the majority of countries do not keep national records of the number of children (aged 0-3) abandoned at maternity units. Where countries do keep records, Slovakia had the highest number of children abandoned per year at maternity units (3.3 per 1,000 live births), followed by Poland and Lithuania (1.7 per 1,000 live births), and France (1 per 1,000 live births).

Addressing secret child abandonment

The approaches to addressing secret child abandonment across the EU vary. In some countries it is no longer illegal to abandon a child, on condition that the child is left somewhere safe. Special baby hatches are made available in some European countries, where mothers can leave their babies anonymously and safely. In France, women have the right to remain anonymous to their babies after giving birth in a hospital. This is referred to as 'accouchement sous X' and no legal ties between the mother and baby can ever be established as a result of it.

In terms of the UNCRC, there is much debate surrounding these approaches to child abandonment, and there is a significant lack of research regarding whether they actually save lives or encourage

parents to abandon their children. Additionally, although the assumption is often made that it is the mother who leaves her infant at a baby hatch, there is increasing evidence that this is not necessarily true. It is frequently men or relatives who leave infants at baby hatches, which begs the question of what has happened to the mothers and have they consented to abandoning their children. Due to the anonymous nature of baby hatches, they carry with them several further implications. Firstly, children left behind in this way have no



Baby hatch in Florence
(Photographed by M. Kolankiewicz)

way of determining their family medical history. Secondly, the father's paternal rights are denied. Thirdly, the opportunity to place the baby in other relatives' care is completely removed, as there is no way of tracing the child's family. Nevertheless, in the Czech Republic, 41 'baby boxes' have been introduced since 2005, and 40 infants have been left there by their parents. In Hungary, 40 infants have been left in incubators since the programme was launched 10 years ago. In Slovakia, 23 infants were left in baby hatches between 2004 and 2010. In Lithuania, 13 infants have been left at 'baby windows' since 2009, and in Poland, 31 infants have been left in baby hatches since 2006.

Causes of child abandonment

Primary causes of child abandonment have been found to be poverty or financial hardship, being a single parent, post-natal depression, a lack of sexual health education, poor knowledge regarding family planning, restrictions regarding access to abortion, the child having some form of disability, pregnancy as a result of rape, abuse or force by partner, and a lack of services and resources to support parents who have children with disabilities.

In Bulgaria, research found that the majority of parents do not want to abandon their children. However, when confronted with poverty, illness or social exclusion, they often make this decision, thinking that they are acting in the best interests of the child. In a study that interviewed 75 parents who had recently openly abandoned their children (aged 0-3) at a local institution, the reasons for abandoning the children included homelessness, lack of food, no heating during winter, and not enough nappies. Additionally, 41% of the sample already had four or more children in their family and felt that they could not afford any more. The study also found that 72% of the sample consisted of mothers from the Roma community, who reported being asked by staff at the maternity unit if they wished to

keep their child, and stated that a member of staff completed adoption forms for them as a matter of routine.

Research in Romania also found that parents may 'relinquish' their children due to pressure from staff at the hospital. This often occurs if the mother lacks identity papers, which can prevent the official registration of the child's birth. In other countries, mothers may be encouraged by medical staff to relinquish their child if they are HIV positive, abuse drugs, are not married, or are very young. These findings suggest that children are often abandoned not because their parents do not want them, but rather because of the lack of support available to parents on a number of different levels.

Preventing child abandonment

There are a number of actions being taken by countries in the EU to help prevent child abandonment. These include:

- Social assistance
- Day care facilities
- Mother baby units
- Family planning services
- Counselling services for the mother and/or the whole family
- Financial support
- Programmes that focus on high risk families
- Parent 'training centres'
- Helplines to support mothers in need
- Guidance on preventing child abandonment at maternity units
- Social workers in maternity units
- Training of hospital staff to be able to recognise and manage high risk situations

However, this is just the beginning and a lot more still needs to be done.

Child abandonment in Romania

In an attempt to regulate adoption and the situation of children in institutions, Romania adopted in 1993 the abandonment law (Law no.47/1993) according to which children in institutions who were not visited by their parents for 6 months, would be declared abandoned and therefore adoptable. The application of this law led to numerous abuses and contributed to the corruption in the adoption field (in particular intercountry adoption) prior to 2001, when a moratorium on intercountry adoption was introduced.

The new legislation on the protection of children rights and adoption adopted in 2004 abolished the abandonment law.

As regards the number of children left behind in maternities or other hospital units, the number has decreased from 5130 in 2003 to 1315 in 2010. It is interesting to note that the highest drop was recorded between 2004 (4614 children left in hospitals) and 2005 (2580 children in hospitals), the year when the new legislation started to be implemented and possibly as well as a result of the national public awareness campaigns aimed to prevent child institutionalisation and abandonment (2001-2004).

The most recent figure of the number of children left in hospitals is from the first half of 2011: 748 children, out of which 226 were reintegrated into their natural families, 2 with their extended families, 285 in foster care, 18 placed with families other than relatives or foster families and 52 in residential care.

According to the child rights act, children under 2 years old cannot be placed in residential care. In the case of those children that appear to be in residential care, the reasons may be that they are placed in emergency reception centres (until placed with families) or have special needs and it was difficult to find a placement family for them.

In order to improve the capacity to implement the child rights act provisions on children left in hospitals, the Ministry of Health and the National Authority on the Protection of Children Rights issued a ministerial order aiming to regulate the relation between maternity / paediatric hospitals and child protection directorates.

However, due to the current economic crises and its impact on the public sector as well as on population in general, it is important that efforts are intensified despite scarcity of resources in order to avoid unnecessary children's stay in hospitals or other forms of residential care.

For further information

http://www.copii.ro/alte_categorii.html