



BULGARIA

Evaluation of the Family for Every Child Project in the Region of Shumen, Bulgaria

Has deinstitutionalization improved the situation of children in Bulgaria?

Evaluation Manager: Elena Atanassova, Child Rights Monitoring Specialist, UNICEF Bulgaria

Authors: Joanna Rogers, Elayn M. Sammon, Luba Devetakova



EDITORIAL INSIGHT

This evaluation was commended for its profound influence on the rights of children in Bulgaria, as well as for its multiplier effect across Eastern Europe. By providing crucial evidence, the evaluation helped to reverse the longstanding historical practice of institutionalizing children in Bulgaria, thus helping to restore children's right to family relations, except where this is contrary to their best interests.

The panel valued the evaluation's clear purpose to generate evidence that could inform the Government of Bulgaria's decisions in relation to ensuring the sustainability and scaling up of alternative approaches to institutional care in the country. The evaluation further strengthened the position of UNICEF in Bulgaria.

© UNICEF/Bulgaria /2015 Workshop in Veliki Preslav, Bulgaria provides children with a space to share their experiences and the opportunity to acquire new skills, through physical activities, for coping with challenging situations at school and in the family.



Residential institutional care has long-term negative consequences for children's physical, psychological and emotional well-being. Yet some parents are driven by economic, social and cultural pressures to place their children in institutions. In 2010, following national and international outcry over the poor conditions in children's homes across the country, the Government of Bulgaria adopted the Vision for Deinstitutionalization of Children in Bulgaria. This five-year national strategy sought to end children's institutionalization and move towards a more family-centric system of care.

To support the strategy and its action plan, UNICEF Bulgaria set up the Family for Every Child project in the Shumen region, in partnership with the national and regional governments. The project, which ran from 2010 to 2016, aimed to help strengthen the national child protection system to secure the best interests of the child in every case. More specifically, it aimed to develop a network of core services to support families, reduce the number of children entering institutional care and, ultimately, close the Home for Medical and Social Care for Children (HMSSC) in Shumen. A 2016 evaluation of the project concluded that much had been achieved – and establishing core support services such as family counselling centres (FCCs) had been key to this – but longer-term challenges remain.

PURPOSE

The Family for Every Child project aimed to demonstrate that viable alternatives to institutionalization exist, and that as long as a network of suitable support services is in place, deinstitutionalization is achievable. UNICEF Bulgaria commissioned this evaluation to establish whether the project had been successful, looking beyond the main goal of closing the Shumen HMSSC.

APPROACH

The project evaluation used a mixed methods approach to capture a range of perspectives on service delivery for children and their families and on the performance of UNICEF. The evaluation focused not only on the closure of the Shumen HMSSC, but also on the development of a system of infant foster care in the region and the creation of a new FCC service.

Representatives of government partners, non-governmental organizations and UNICEF, as well as staff of the newly created support services in Shumen shared their experiences of the project through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Other data sources included project-related documents, case file reviews and administrative data. Owing to time constraints, it was not possible to interview project beneficiaries (children and adults in contact with the FCC service).

KEY FINDINGS

Closure achieved, but longer-term outcomes unclear

The Government closed the Shumen HMSSC in 2015, with the support of the Family for Every Child project. Most of the infant home's 150 child residents were placed in a family environment, usually foster care followed by adoption; other children were reintegrated with their families. There were no major differences in outcomes for girls and boys, but children with disabilities were more likely to remain in a formal residential care setting than be adopted or reintegrated with their families. Children with disabilities were also 16 times more likely to die upon leaving residential care than those without disabilities.

All the activities of the FCC were aimed to prevent abandonment, with the idea that there is nothing better for a child than growing up in a family.

– Key informant, municipality level, quoted in evaluation report

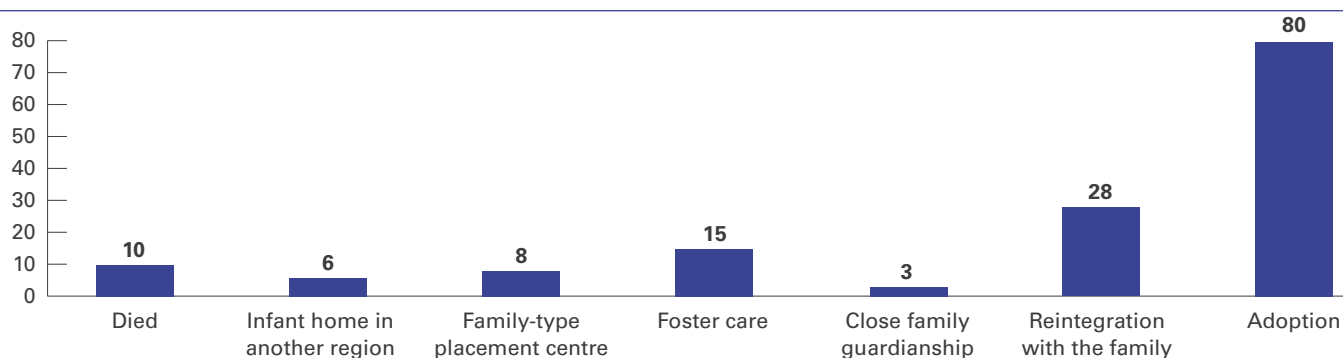


TABLE 1
Outcomes for girls and boys leaving the Shumen infant home

	GIRLS, N=64	BOYS, N=86
Adoption	59%	50%
Reintegration with the family	17%	19%
Close family guardianship	0%	3%
Foster care	13%	8%
Family-type placement centre	3%	7%
Infant home in another region	2%	6%
Died	6%	7%

Note: Sample size: children with disabilities n=53; children without disability n=97.
Source: Shumen Regional Directorate of Social Assistance (RDSA) and author calculations.

FIGURE 1
Outcomes for children moved from Shumen infant home



Source: Shumen Assistance RDSA and author calculations.

The well-being of some of the children moved from the Shumen HMSCC was not tracked beyond their initial placement, so there is an incomplete understanding of how they fared in the longer term. Alternative arrangements should be made for monitoring outcomes for children in areas where the capacity of statutory authorities is limited.

Core support services reduce child institutionalization

The Family for Every Child project established three community-based FCCs in the Shumen region to support parents who were considering relinquishing their children. FCCs deliver family support services in response to individual, family and community needs. As well as working directly with pregnant women and families to assess their needs, the centres offer services such as parental information and education sessions, counselling, family planning and access to medical care. By offering support from early pregnancy, FCCs may help to reduce the number of women who intend to relinquish their child at birth. Incomplete data and anomalies in data collection mean it is not possible, however, to definitively assess how effective FCCs have been in preventing family separation. Further work is needed to help FCCs and other services become fully effective in preventing separation and ensuring the well-being of younger children.

The infant foster care service has been a valuable addition in Shumen and is now a fundamental part of the care system in the region, welcomed at all levels. It was key to closing the Shumen HMSCC, both through finding foster placements for children already in the infant home and by facilitating the fostering of newborns directly



from the maternity ward. Additionally, it facilitated foster care for newly relinquished children who would previously have been placed in the HMSCC. Of 107 children placed in foster care over the course of the project, 30 came from the HMSCC, 33 were newborns from the maternity ward and 44 were children relinquished by their families.

UNICEF intervention welcomed

Government partners at the national, regional and local level appreciated the Family for Every Child project. The project clearly supported the Government in achieving closure of the Shumen HMSCC; its associated technical, financial and administrative inputs were valued and seen as important in supporting statutory services for vulnerable children and families, and for finding alternatives to institutional care.

INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

Although the Family for Every Child project enabled the closure of the Shumen HMSCC, the evaluation was unable to determine conclusively that it had contributed to the long-term well-being of children and to improved child development. The evaluation has nevertheless been very influential in informing national policy as well as the strategic positioning of UNICEF with regard to child protection and, in particular, deinstitutionalization.

Informing national policy on deinstitutionalization

The evaluation's findings and recommendations informed the updated action plan for implementing the Government's Vision for Deinstitutionalization of Children in Bulgaria. The evaluation also paved the way for an analysis of the country's child protection system, jointly commissioned by the Bulgarian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and UNICEF. Carried out by an independent team of international and national researchers in 2019, the analysis – considered the most comprehensive record of Bulgaria's child protection system – proposes wider reforms to better protect child rights in the country.

Informing UNICEF strategic positioning and planning

The evaluation has strengthened the positioning of UNICEF in Bulgaria, which is now viewed as a model country with regard to the deinstitutionalization of children under 3 years of age. As well as informing the development of the UNICEF Country Programme Document for 2018–2022, the evaluation has reaffirmed the importance of programming for risk prevention, early intervention, family support and provision of alternative care in a family or close-to-family environment.

Clarifying the role of family counselling centres

One suggestion from the evaluation is to clarify the role, responsibilities, mandates and objectives of FCCs to secure the sustainability of the services developed by the Family for Every Child project. Initially, many stakeholders viewed the new services in Shumen as 'UNICEF services' and there was little sense of local ownership, so vital to ensuring sustainability. Once FCCs were recognized as a state-delegated service, able to receive formal referrals from statutory child protection departments, local authorities were supported to gradually take full responsibility for the management and further development of FCCs. This has led to better monitoring of outcomes within the statutory system.

Documentation and analysis

The evaluation recommends systematic documentation of successful service interventions to inform the deinstitutionalization process, and replication or scaling up of associated support services. In response, the critically important methods and approaches of the services established in Shumen were distilled, emphasizing key original features such as flexibility and outreach.



The municipality values the activity and hopes that UNICEF can manage to make it a state-delegated activity

– Key informant, municipality level, quoted in evaluation report



Also recommended is an analysis of the cost of Shumen's child protection system as a whole and of its individual components, to gauge the potential for the state to take on the system and expand its coverage to other regions. Linking cost analysis to evidence of the child protection system's efficacy has already helped to ensure sustainability of the project's achievements.

Monitoring well-being and progress

As the evaluation could not establish that all children who had left the Shumen HMSCC were doing well in their subsequent placements, it called for an audit of their well-being and development. This was carried out by the Agency for Social Assistance. The situation of children moved out of other infant homes is being monitored by child protection departments.

Enabling the ongoing monitoring of well-being and development outcomes for children could support the Government of Bulgaria in moving towards a national, integrated, child-centred system of child protection and family support. Following the evaluation, the monitoring system was aligned with the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children to ensure child well-being.

Reaffirm relevance

The evaluation recommends that service users are regularly consulted to affirm that the services provided remain relevant. This has been incorporated into case management to help ensure that the specific child protection priorities in the communities served are being addressed appropriately, particularly in light of changing contexts.

Training and professional development

A structured, modular system of training and continuous professional development for FCC staff has been implemented to strengthen the outcomes of the FCC model of service provision – and the potential to replicate it elsewhere. Comprehensive guidelines are in place for conducting outreach work in marginalized communities.

Case management

The evaluation recommends setting up a simplified case management reporting interface to provide the Government and its development partners with data for monitoring, evaluation and planning purposes. A national case management system would improve both the coherence of interventions and the collection of data at the national level. Standardized assessment and case management frameworks would reduce the administrative burden on caseworkers and help to ensure more efficient and effective service delivery. Development of case management mechanisms to support intersectoral working, which would contribute to realizing the vision of an effective national network of services, should build on the practices employed in Shumen.

The reform of Bulgaria's social services is ongoing. It is anticipated that the adoption in March 2019 of an entirely new Social Services Act will lead to an improvement in case management mechanisms.

LOOKING AHEAD

UNICEF should consider how it can consolidate and develop its efforts to move beyond deinstitutionalization, towards a child protection system focused on protection from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. This should include strengthening the relationship between child protection and social protection systems.



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BOX 1 INFORMING POLICY FOR THE DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION OF CHILDREN

The evaluation has proved very influential in informing national policy and UNICEF's strategic position. This has led to:

- an updated action plan for the Vision for Deinstitutionalization of Children in Bulgaria, based upon the evidence generated by the evaluation
- a comprehensive analysis, in 2019, of Bulgaria's child protection system
- stronger positioning for UNICEF in Bulgaria
- a new UNICEF Country Programme for 2018–2022
- an audit of the well-being and development of the children moved out of the Shumen HMSCC, and alignment of the related monitoring system with the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children
- stronger linkages between the Government and UNICEF

Looking ahead, the challenge for UNICEF is to move towards a child protection system more focused on protection from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. The evaluation also recommends setting up a simplified case management reporting interface.

