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Father taking son to school early morning in Haiti.

Preventing Family Separation and Promoting Reintegration

Baseline Report Findings Inform Program Design in Haiti

A baseline survey, grounded in the perspectives of children and families, was used to design a care reform program to prevent family separation and promote sustainable reintegration.

CHANGING THE WAY WE CARE IN HAITI

Changing the Way We CareSM (CTWWC) is working to catalyze a global movement that puts families first and puts an end to the institutionalization of children. It believes that children thrive best in safe and nurturing families.

CTWWC seeks to promote systems change for care reform through three main pillars: 1) prevention and family strengthening or preservation, 2) alternative care and 3) transformation or transition of residential services (see Figure 1).

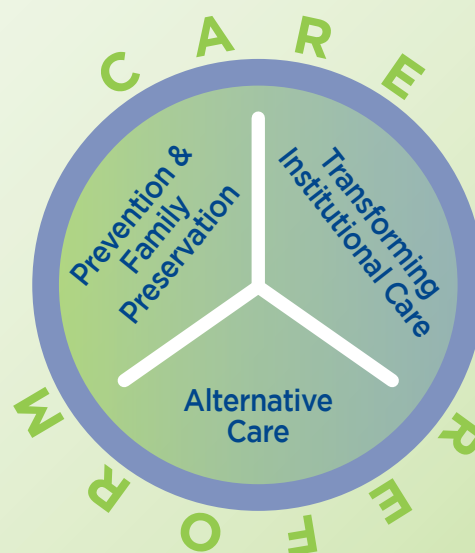


Figure 1 The three pillars of care reform

In 2017, CTWWC piloted a small program in the Ouest (West) department of Haiti with the goal that “children stay in or return to safe and nurturing family structures.” With similar goals, Chanje Jan n Ede (CHANJE), the Haitian Creole version of Changing the Way We Care (CTWWC), has been operating since October 2021 in Haiti’s South Department (Département Sud), one of Haiti’s ten departments, through four areas of activity: child protection in the community, family strengthening, case management, and facilitating the transition from children’s homes to family-based services.

CARE REFORM CONTEXT IN HAITI

CHANJE works in Haiti’s South Department (Département Sud), one of Haiti’s ten departments. As in all parts of Haiti, poverty has increased in many communes in the South Department, due to a range of political, economic, social and climate change factors.ⁱ Nearly 800,000 residents call Département Sud home and the capital, Les Cayes, is the third largest city in the country. Département Sud communities rely on agriculture, fishing, and commerce. Like the rest of Haiti, Département Sud has been battered by multiple shocks, including a 7.2 magnitude earthquake in August 2021.

Département Sud residents are especially vulnerable to climate change due to the department’s long coastline and low-lying plains, which routinely flood. Poverty, a key driver of child separation, has increased in many communes, according to the Inter-American Development Bank.ⁱⁱ

Families bear the brunt of these stresses. One of the consequences is an increase in family separation. Over the past few decades, the number of institutionalized children and children’s homes or Residential Care Centers (RCCs), commonly referred to as orphanages, has increased in Haiti. According to IBESR, Département Sud has more than 2,000 children living in RCCs in at least 48 facilities. In absolute terms, the number of RCCs in the area is second only to the Ouest department, which has an overall population several times larger than Département Sud.ⁱⁱⁱ

In recognition of the harm experienced by children in residential care, and in line with international commitments, Haiti has pledged to promote family-based care. IBESR is committed to the prevention of family separation and promotion of family-based care. The first option should always be to prevent family separation and support children to remain with their family, except when this is not



CHANJE staff and other child protection actor representative in the field conducting RCC evaluations and visits. Leiva/Silverlight, Oscar for CRS

Chanje Jan n Ede has a strategic partnership with the Institut du Bien-Être Social et de Recherches (IBESR), the national agency responsible for child welfare, and support from the Vista Hermosa Foundation.

in their best interests. The next option is to identify family-based alternative care, such as foster care. In 2013, IBESR introduced foster care guidelines and monitoring tools, with foster care support being implemented by child welfare partners and monitored by IBESR. Efforts are also made with the adoption of a moratorium in October 2018, prohibiting the opening of new RCCs in Haiti.^{iv}

While the country, through IBESR, promotes family-based care and alternatives to placements in orphanages, the Institute faces many challenges in care reform. Some of the challenges include lack of adequate resources and capacity to monitor and enforce the standards of care, lack of a legal framework and policy to support deinstitutionalization of children, and the development of family-based and

community-based care alternatives.^v IBESR often counts on its child protection partners, such as CHANJE, to inform initiatives, provide family support services, build capacity and awareness.

BASELINE SURVEY DESIGN

In order to design an appropriate intervention that strengthens families to prevent separation and promote reintegration, CHANJE designed a baseline survey with the objective of understanding the context in which children separate from their families, and the process of entering RCCs in South Department.

The baseline survey objectives were to:

- understand families' (caregivers and children) perceptions of child-family separation.

Table 1 FGDs and SSIs conducted by type of informant

Groups	Focus Group Discussion		Semi-structured interviews	Total	
	Woman/Girl	Man/Boy		Planned	Realized
IBESR			2	2	2
Protection Committee	1	1		2	1
Child Protection Partners (UNICEF, CRFAPS, Terre des Hommes – It, SOS Children's Villages)			5	5	3
Head of Residential Care Centers (RCCs)			5	5	1
Families in the community	2	2		4	4
Children in the community	1	1		2	2
Children in Residential Care Centers (RCCs)	1	1	X	2	2

- identify existing institutional and community solutions to the phenomenon of family separation.
- assess any existing reintegration processes that exist, to build on existing practice.
- gather and analyze RCC managers' perceptions on concept of family reintegration and transition.
- identify potential awareness raising strategies to improve the prevention of family-child separation.

The study used semi-structured interviews (SSIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). Table 1 shows the sampling and participants.

Focus group discussions lasted approximately two hours and were conducted by a facilitator and a reporter. Semi-structured interviews lasted about 60 minutes, with audio recording and notes.

Several limitations were noted. This was a small sample size and findings cannot be extended to the general population. It was not possible to conduct SSIs with all the planned participants because of scheduling conflicts. There were funding and time constraints to a larger scale survey. However, the findings have been informative and gathered rich qualitative data that has been useful for design of the program.

The results of this survey will be used to measure the overall impact by the end of the project in 2024.

SURVEY TOOLS

The survey tools were qualitative and asked respondents about their perspectives on the following issues:

- the causes of child and family separation, and what might prevent family separation.
- the positive and negative aspects of a child living in RCCs, based on personal experience of the (local) RCCs.

- the factors that make some families keep their children in family care, despite facing challenges.
- the difference in children's treatment in their family and in residential care as a factor in child and family separation.
- the elements of community-based interventions that are successful in preventing child and family separation.

FINDINGS

Overall, the study reiterated what was known about separation factors. A previous study conducted by Lumos^{vi} found that about 80% of the 32,000 children living in Haitian orphanages have at least one living parent.

Causes of separation

The qualitative responses from FGD respondents identified the following as the main causes of separation in their view, ordered from most frequently to least frequently mentioned:

- Financial instability (poverty): many families who struggle to provide for their children's basic needs resort to sending them to RCCs, hoping they will receive better care and education.
- Family challenges, especially for children from single-parent families or families where there is conflict; participants highlighted challenges such as conflict in the family, lack of parental guidance and lack of monitoring children when away from home, abrupt changes in family structure (death of a caregiver). Participants also shared that young single mothers could be more prone to placing children in RCCs.
- Disability or chronic illness: children with disabilities or chronic illness are more likely to be separated from their families. When a child (or household member) has a disability or illness requiring specialized care and support, caregivers may face barriers to access/afford services; caregivers may feel overwhelmed by the burden of caregiving and turn to RCCs

for better care and treatment; stigma linked to disability.

- Challenging behaviors: some families may not have the skills or resources to manage the behaviors or their children or youth such as disobedience, aggression, delinquency; children running away (boys are more affected).
- Lack of basic services in communities.

Economic factors were the most frequently mentioned factor leading to child-family separation, followed by living in a single-parent family.

Respondents noted that even when the household economic situation alone did not cause separation, there have been recent factors that have played an important role in separating children from their families, notably the high cost of living, issues of access for economic activities due to road blocking protests in Martissant, and subsequent loss of resources and economic activities.

“My family lost their business, the only source of income we had. The orphanage became the only option for me to continue going to school.”

- Child living in RCC

Protective factors to separation

Participants also shared insight on why some families keep children in family care despite hardship:

- Age of caregivers: older parents/caregivers, even while struggling financially, may prefer to have their children at home;
- Strong emotional attachment;
- Guilt or shame about giving up parental responsibilities.
- Fear of the unknown: “what could happen to my child out of my sight?”

Impacts of living in residential care on children

All FGD and SSI participants stated that RCCs can provide certain key services to the child, such as access to school, health, food, etc., that some families struggle to provide for their children, because of family poverty and/or limited access to basic services in their community.

“The difference between the orphanage and my parents’ home is that here I have more access to food and education because of my parents’ lack of economic means.”

- Child living in RCC

The most frequently mentioned challenges of family care according to them are:

- the parent may be unable to fulfill their family obligations for economic reasons.
- there may not be sufficient local services for the child.
- the parent may not have sufficient parenting skills to manage relationships within the family or be neglectful.

“In some cases, there is no school in the area where the parent of the child lives. The child had to leave the area to be able to access education. And the only alternative for the parent of such a child is to find an orphanage.”

- Protection Committee member

However, there was a strong feeling that maternal and paternal affection is irreplaceable.

“Children are more fulfilled and open within their families because the emotional side is fulfilled. However, children in institutions feel inferior, whereas those who grow up in their families have a higher self-esteem.”

- Child protection partner

“I would like to go see my parents once in a while. Even though I have access to education here in the center, I still miss my parents.”

- Child living in RCC

“If I lived with my parents, they would give me what I want. On the other hand, in the center I can't ask for a special gift. Sometimes we don't even have one. While our parents will make the necessary sacrifices to give us some.”

- Child living in RCC

“The parent can send the child to an orphanage because of a disability.”

- Protection Committee member

“I came to the orphanage because my father left my mother to marry another woman and my mother did not have enough money to take care of me.”

- Child living in RCC

Respondents believed that the family is the safest place for the child, where he or she can be protected from abuse.

Types of separation

Respondents talked of both voluntary and involuntary separation.

In the case of voluntary separation, the parent decides to send the child to a children's home or another type of placement (usually with family members or with other people who can provide/promise a minimum of care in exchange for services such as domestic work.).

In the case of involuntary separation, the child may decide to go elsewhere to fill the gap. Often, children go live on the street, with other mostly run-away friends or with other family members. Boys are more likely to do this, according to respondents, although girls do so also. Boys can sometimes end up in gangs.

Some participants in both child and adult FGDs also mentioned that abuse perpetrated by family members may cause the child to leave home. Physical abuse was the most common.

The consensus was that, if certain conditions are met in the family, it is the best place for a child.

This survey has shown that although the economic situation alone is not the central element in the separation of children from their families, it is the backdrop to the problem of separation. In such circumstances, solid support for families must be developed to strengthen care within the family. The factor of violence, as discussed in the survey, is also a significant factor in the phenomenon of child separation.

DESIGNING A PROGRAM BASED ON SURVEY FINDINGS

The baseline survey recommended the following activities that may help strengthen a project that promotes family care and a transition of services for children's homes:

- Creation of Child Protection Committees, including participation from key community actors (e.g., local leaders, youth groups), to monitor violence against children within families in the communities and to prevent separation.
- Support families economically (money and training) to help them have sufficient means to fulfill their responsibilities towards children. Economic strengthening of families is a fundamental element in the process of changing the way they can care for the children in their families.
- Train parents on parenting skills to manage relationships within the family. Children often complain about the way their parents care for them, often it is a lack of good information that is at the root of this problem. Parent training can really strengthen the parent-child relationship in the process of family reunification.
- Prior to any intervention, conduct an initial assessment in the families involved to better understand the family's situation or condition to better tailor the intervention to the family's needs and build on existing strengths. Prioritize case management on a case-by-case basis.
- Support the creation of spaces in the community for children and young people to exchange information and skills to support their development, especially young girls.
- Transformation of RCCs into institutions that promote family-based care.

CONCLUSIONS

The recommendations will be used to design a program that will benefit children, their families, and communities, by demonstrating what works to keep families together. This includes ensuring that families have access to the support systems needed to raise their children. The data will be shared with IBESR and made available as a learning resource as child protection actors in Haiti strive to support IBESR build capacity and awareness.

ENDNOTES

- i https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_831179.pdf
- ii Pokhriyal, Neeti, et al. "Estimating and Forecasting Income Poverty and Inequality in Haiti using Satellite Imagery and Mobile Phone data." Inter-American Development Bank, (2020): 1-44.
- iii https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Haiti%20Trafficking%20Report%20FRENCH_web_V220SEP.PDF
- iv <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/press-releases/unicef-mourns-death-15-children-orphanage-fire-and-calls-end-institutionalization>
- v EMBLumos - Funding Haitian Orphanages JUNE17.pdf (bettercarenetwork.org)
- vi https://lumos.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/Children_In_Institutions_Haiti_FR.pdf

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Need to know more? Contact Changing the Way We Care at info@ctwwc.org or visit changingthewaywecare.org.



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