

# Bridging the Gap between Childhood Institutionalization and Adulthood: A Qualitative Study from Five Transitional Centers in Armenia

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## Abstract

Previous research in residential childcare institutions (RCI) has focused primarily on child populations. While reaching the age of majority typically signals the end of childhood institutionalization, age restrictions often deny older, socially disadvantaged teenagers the opportunity to transition seamlessly into adulthood. To investigate the relationships that are fostered within transitional environments, we interviewed 24 male and residents housed in five “transitional centers” (TC) in Armenia in June 2024. Our results indicate that the nurturing relationships and intimate bonds fostered between and among residents and facility directors are critical for young adults whose adolescence was marked by abandonment, poverty, trauma, and strained familial relationships. Our findings suggest that Armenia’s TC offer a critical bridge between adolescence and adulthood and provide an environment within which socially vulnerable young adults can repair formative bonds to help them prepare for emotional, financial, and intellectual independence. Countries with orphan populations should consider integrating a TC component into their continuum of care to assure that their most vulnerable child populations receive support throughout young adulthood.

## Keywords

Armenia, Orphan, Residential Childcare Institutions, Transitional Centers

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## 1. International Child Protection Law

The “best interests of the child” (BIC) standard, the guiding principle in international children’s rights law, is used to guide placement decisions when parental care is compromised. Article 3 of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\) \(1989\)](#) provides that the BIC benchmark should consider the rights and duties of parents, legal guardians, or other legally responsible persons. Under this principle, a decisionmaker must give the child’s interest primary consideration. Scholars and practitioners who work in international child protection focus almost exclusively on those *under the age of eighteen*. Not surprisingly, the major treaties that address international child protection also delineate age prerequisites. Article 1 of the [CRC \(1989\)](#) defines a child as, “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier”. Article 27 of the [Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children](#) states that: “the present Guidelines apply to the appropriate use and conditions of alternative formal care for all persons under the age of 18 years, unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” While the Guidelines offer some guidance on “aftercare” ([Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, 2010: Section E](#)), post-institutionalization care is only for those children *who have not yet reached the age of majority*.

While institutionalization cannot be compelled in Armenia after a child reaches the age of eighteen, achieving adulthood does not necessarily mean that discharge from a residential childcare institution (RCI) is in a child’s best interest. If RCI care requires adherence to norms that form the basis of child protection, research and practitioners should advocate for care beyond the age of 18 to affirm that older orphan and otherwise socially vulnerable populations are equipped to live independently and are provided with the necessary foundation to survive emotionally, financially, and professionally. While the body of research related to the efficacy and effects of RCI is immense (see, for ex. ([Dozier et al., 2012](#))), few studies have explored older orphan populations and the transitional homes within which they reside following discharge from an RCI or other social situations that foment familial abandonment or relinquishment ([Yacoubian & Bardakjian, 2023](#)). These “transitional centers” (TC), or institutions that serve as a bridge between RCI and adulthood, are virtually non-existent in orphan literature.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, we are aware of no other countries that offer a TC experience other than Armenia. As our access to RCI in Armenia is now approaching our twentieth year, the TC model provided a stellar laboratory for expanding our understanding of childhood institutionalization.

## 2. Research Methods

The Society for Orphaned Armenian Relief (SOAR)<sup>2</sup> was founded in the fall of 2005 as a charitable organization to provide humanitarian relief to orphaned

<sup>1</sup>To our knowledge, Transitional Centers only exist in Armenia, and only our work has researched this population.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.soar-us.org/> (accessed July 11, 2024).

children living in Armenia. Since 2006, SOAR has established itself as the only charitable organization whose singular mission is to provide humanitarian assistance to orphaned Armenians around the world. In late 2007 and early 2008, SOAR launched its first two Chapters—in Los Angeles and Washington, DC. In 2009, a National Board of Trustees was created to annually review SOAR's fiscal operations and distributions. In 2010, SOAR launched its Sponsorship Fund, which today is the primary mechanism through which individual children's needs are supported. In 2016, SOAR expanded its mission, recognizing that, after a decade of helping children in residential settings, it was necessary to attempt to reduce the institutionalized orphan population in Armenia. Toward that end, SOAR established its Services to Children in their Own Home (SCOH) Fund. The SCOH Fund works with residential institutions to deinstitutionalize and reunify children with biological families and provides home-based services after reunification to reduce the economic, social, emotional, and professional barriers within the family dynamic that may trigger reinstitutionalization.

Since 2005, SOAR's work has impacted thousands of children, with the penultimate goal to provide institutionalized children with the same educational, emotional, medical, and social support as their non-institutionalized counterparts. Represented by 140 Chapters, 5 Junior groups, 2 College Groups, and more than 600 volunteers worldwide, SOAR supports 36 orphanages, special boarding schools, day centers, summer camps, and transitional centers in Armenia, Javakh, and Lebanon. SOAR prides itself on collaboration, creativity, cross-cultural respect, fiscal responsibility, and transparency. During the past 16 years, SOAR's impact has increased considerably. In 2006, distributions totaled \$60,000. Since 2015, SOAR has exceeded \$1M in distributions annually. SOAR's efforts not only address the major humanitarian constructs of education, emotional support, nutrition, health and hygiene, dental and vision care, and fundamental human rights, but our Programs offer educational curricula on a multitude of topics that stimulate intellectual curiosity and empowerment.

There are three types of RCI in Armenia: orphanages, special boarding schools, and transitional centers. The children housed in these institutions are either natural orphans (i.e., children who have no living family or whose parents have had their rights terminated) or social orphans (i.e., children with living biological parents who are unable and/or unwilling to care for them but whose rights have not been terminated). Children housed in Armenia's orphanages and special boarding schools are under the age of 18, while TC residents have typically reached the age of majority.

In the current study, data were collected in collaboration with SOAR, which opened its first TC in Gyumri, Armenia (hereafter "TCG") in December 2019.<sup>3</sup> SOAR's second TC, located in Yerevan, Armenia, opened in December 2022 and houses only females (hereafter "TCY"). SOAR's third TC, located in Yerevan, Armenia, opened in November 2023 and houses only boys (hereafter "TCB"). At

<sup>3</sup>SOAR's TC offer residential opportunities only to females, as healthy males have a compulsory two-year military commitment in Armenia upon reaching the age of 18 (<https://www.soar-us.org/>).

SOAR's three Centers, the residents are required to attend a college or university; are enriched by a variety of academic programs; volunteer with various charitable endeavors; learn essential life skills, including home and money management; build self-nurturance and self-confidence; and prepare themselves for emotional, fiscal, and professional independence. A total of 24 residents were interviewed in the current study: 11 from our three Centers,<sup>4</sup> four from Nakashian's Children's Support Center (NCSC),<sup>5</sup> and nine from the Our Lady of Armenia Center (OLA).<sup>6</sup> Data were collected confidentially after oral and written consent was obtained from each respondent. The interview was conducted in Armenian.

### Instrumentation

Phenomenology focuses on understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In a phenomenological study, a combination of methods (e.g., interviews, reading documents, or visiting places) is used to understand the meaning participants place on the phenomenon being examined. Phenomenology is a philosophy of experience, where the ultimate source of meaning and value is the experiences of humans. Phenomenology has three primary advantages: 1) It focuses on how people perceive an event rather than how the phenomenon exists in a vacuum; 2) It can provide a detailed understanding of a single event; 3) The data collected through phenomenological research are rich and allow for a unique understanding of the phenomenon.

A phenomenological approach was used in the current study to appreciate the significance of the RCI experience to the respondents and to best assess their perceptions about the TC within which they currently reside. In addition to age and length of time housed at the TC and at previous RCI, a Likert scale, or rating system, was used to evaluate attitudes, opinions, and perceptions about relationships among residents and between residents and the institutional directors. Respondents assessed their relationship with the institutional directors and their fellow residents across a four-point Likert scale: Always (1); Often (2); Sometimes (3); Never (4).

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Response Rates and Demographics

Of the 24 residents approached for participation, all (100%) participated, and all respondents completed the interview. While the sample size is small, these

<sup>4</sup>SOAR's TC are secular institutions and have no religious affiliation.

<sup>5</sup>NCSC is a private home in the Arapkir district of Yerevan that houses twenty-five teenage girls. In addition, they offer a Transitional Center "wing" for older residents who have outgrown the traditional orphanage.

<sup>6</sup>The OLA Annie Bezikian Youth Center in Kanaker, Armenia, houses girls between the ages of 16 and 22 who have outgrown the traditional orphanage and are transitioning to independent living. The Center is operated by the Armenian Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, a religious order of nuns established in 1847.

strong response rates are consistent with previous research conducted in similar settings in Armenia (Yacoubian, 2022b, 2022a; Yacoubian & Bardakjian, 2023, 2022; Yacoubian, 2021) and confirm that “hidden populations” can be accessed successfully when the relationship between researchers and respondents is based on trust and the organization facilitating the research has shown an unwavering commitment to the long-term benefit of the residents.

Of the 24 residents interviewed in the current study, 20 (83%) were female. The average of the 24 residents was 19.7 years old. All the residents were enrolled in an institution of higher learning. We emphasize that the TC residents are not “children” under any objective interpretation of international law. That said, we suggest that “child” protection of institutionalized populations should continue beyond the age of majority to facilitate socialization and independence and insist that policymakers and researchers consider older teenagers as part of the child protection rubric. We believe it critical that the “best interest of the child” standard be expanded to include both short- and long-term prosperity, which would absolutely require consideration of young adulthood.

### 3.2. Relationship between Residents and Institutional Director

As shown in **Table 1**, residents responded to 18 constructs measuring the relationship with their institutional director.<sup>7</sup> Based on this scale, mean scores closer to 1 indicate the strongest bonds with the director. One common validation technique for survey items is to rephrase a “positive” item in a “negative” way. Here, Statements 5a - 5f and 5h - 5r were “positive”, where an “Always” (coded as 1) Response would indicate the strongest possible relationship between resident and director. Statement 5g, was “negative”, such that if respondents were answering consistently, the mean would be closer to “4”. Interpreted simply, the residents responded that the institutional directors almost always spoke to them in a warm and friendly voice, helped them as much as necessary, and encouraged higher education while almost never invading their privacy. Given the small sample size, we declined to disaggregate the data by gender or institution.

### 3.3. Relationships among Residents

As shown in **Table 2**, residents responded to 19 constructs measuring their relationship with each other. Based on this scale, mean scores closer to 1 would indicate the strongest bonds with their peers. Here, 5a - 5c and 5e - 5s were “positive” statements, where an “Always” (coded as 1) response would indicate the strongest possible relationship between residents. In contrast, 5d was a “negative” statement, such that if respondents were answering consistently, the mean would be closer to “4”. Interpreted simply, the residents responded that their peers almost always respected who they were, that they listened to what they had to say, that they respected each other’s feelings, and considered their fellow residents to be siblings.

<sup>7</sup>The institutional director at SOAR’s TCG and the Superior of OLA Kanaker, a nun, reside with the residents. The Directors for TCY, TCB and NCSC live outside of the residence.

**Table 1.** Relationship between resident and institutional director.

	<b>Mean</b>
Speaks to you in a warm and friendly voice	1.46
Helps you as much as necessary	1.29
Let you do things you like doing	2.04
Is emotionally connected and warm to you	1.58
Understands your problems and worries	1.46
Is affectionate to you	1.42
Invades your privacy	3.54
Enjoys talking things over with you	1.29
Frequently smiles at you	1.33
Understands what you need	1.75
Let you decide things for yourself	1.92
Makes you feel wanted	1.46
Makes you feel better when you are upset	1.42
Talks with you	1.46
Praises you	1.83
Tells you that you are loved	1.87
You think of the director as a parent	1.88
Encourages higher education	1.13

**Table 2.** Relationship between and among residents.

	<b>Mean</b>
You like to get your friends' point of view on important things.	2.13
Your friends can tell when you are upset about something.	2.13
Your friends care about your point of view.	1.88
You wish you had different friends.	2.92
Your friends understand you.	2.04
Your friends encourage you to talk about your problems.	2.33
Your friends accept you for who you are.	1.38
Your friends listen to what you have to say.	1.38
You feel your friends are good friends.	1.46
Your friends are easy to talk to.	2.04
When you are angry about something, your friends are understanding.	2.29
Your friends help you understand yourself better.	2.67
Your friends care about how you feel.	2.04
You trust your friends.	1.95
Your friends respect your feelings.	1.54
You can tell your friends about your problems.	2.38
If your friends know something is bothering you, they ask you about it.	2.00
You think of the residents at this facility as your siblings.	2.04
You treat the residents at this facility as your siblings.	1.58

## 4. Discussion

Human rights organizations, researchers, and policymakers that call for the repudiation of RCI believe that biological families provide a superior child-rearing environment to institutional living (Rosenthal, 2019; Zeanah et al., 2017). This myopic approach to child protection does not reflect the real-world realities that exist anywhere children, particularly in inconspicuous countries, are abandoned, abused, neglected, or forgotten. The fundamental flaw to the deinstitutionalization argument is the assumption that living with biological family, because of a genetic relationship, affords children an opportunity for more positive short- and long-term outcomes than a surrogate family. The practical reality is that no biological families are immune to economic, environmental and situational factors, like poverty, substance abuse, and domestic violence, that often contribute to the dissolution of the family unit. Moreover, our research (Yacoubian & Bardakjian, 2022) suggests that RCI offer significant advantages within the *surrogate* familial environment.

Our research in Armenia is unique and consequential, both for the institutional access we have mastered, and the empirical results generated. Prior to the instant study, only Yacoubian & Bardakjian (2023) studied TC populations to explore the significant opportunity for child protection stakeholders to provide a continuum of care for society's most vulnerable populations. The instant study confirms that the TC experience offers a critical bridge between adolescence and adulthood, providing an environment within which socially vulnerable young adults can bond with each other and their facility directors in a way that mirrors the traditional familial environment.

There are several major implications for the current study. First, populations that have historically been difficult to access because of international boundaries or the sensitive nature of familial relinquishment can be accessed. Our research continues to demonstrate that exploring human rights constructs in residential centers, despite the sensitive nature of the topics, is possible. Achieving entry may be influenced by the entity seeking admission and the relationship that organizations have with child protection stakeholders (i.e., institutional personnel and national authorities) in that host country. The trust and mutual respect that SOAR has cultivated during the past 19 years unquestionably facilitated access for the current study. Other organizations, with checkered relationships or questionable motives, may face significant hurdles in gaining admission to these facilities. If the current study is to be replicated outside of Armenia, it should begin with a reputable, charitable organization working with the institutions in that host country.

Second, for smaller populations whose histories may be marred by sociological trauma, qualitative data collection methods offer the opportunity to investigate and understand complex phenomena more judiciously without imposing pre-existing expectations upon the setting (Mouton & Marais, 1990). The qualitative approach rests upon the assumption that one can obtain extensive in-depth



data from ordinary conversations to obtain information that facilitates the understanding of the meaning that the individuals have ascribed to their life-world circumstances (Gubrium & Sankar, 1994).

Third, the TC experience offers opportunities for research that previously was challenging. Future research should compare outcomes to various child populations, such as those housed in RCI, and those adopted, in foster care, reunified with biological family or in transitional care. Exploring long-term outcomes across the body of residential opportunity allows for a more rigorous approach to the testing of RCI hypotheses.

Fourth, decades of child protection research have illustrated that RCI are *indispensable*. Any demand for their cessation, or the consideration of same by policymakers, is not grounded in any reasoned child protection reality. RCI demonstrate which child populations are most vulnerable by offering institutions within which critical care can be provided. Conceding that RCI plays a vital role in child protection is the first step toward focusing on *how* institutionalization decisions are made and improving the conditions within those facilities. Rather than continuing to debate the *need* for RCI, stakeholders should instead recognize the advantages they offer and address the challenges that result from separating a child from biological family. Shielding a child population from the misery that exists everywhere families struggle with abuse, neglect, poverty, trauma, and violence is an obligation of a compassionate and enlightened society. Conversely, requiring families to commit to parenthood when they are ill-equipped or ill-inclined to do so is the antithesis of child *protection*.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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