

FACT SHEET: THE ORPHANAGE INDUSTRY

Overview

There are an estimated eight million children living in residential care institutions globally. Four out of five of these children have one or more living parent or family member. Many residential care institutions rely on 'orphanage and volunteer tourism' or short term volunteer teams for funding, which allows tourists and volunteers unchecked access to children, and in the worst cases, requires children to actively solicit funds from tourists through performance and begging. Australians are a major contributor to the supply chain of people, money and resources that drive the global orphanage industry, and the practice of visiting and volunteering in residential care institutions in the developing world has become so popular that it is creating a demand for 'orphans' and 'orphanages'.

In many cases, residential care centres are being created as businesses, designed to generate an income from people willing to volunteer their time and donate their money to support 'orphan' children. Children are often deliberately kept in poor conditions in order to elicit sympathy from well-meaning visitors who are then moved to donate. In Nepal, there have been documented cases of residential care centres being linked to child trafficking.

In Cambodia, the number of residential care institutions has risen by 75% in the last decade, whilst the amount of orphans has significantly reduced. The vast majority of children in these institutions are not orphans, in the traditional sense, but children from poor families. An increase in the number of residential care institutions indicates an increase in the separation of children from their families. Visiting, donating to, or volunteering at residential care institutions fuels the 'orphanage' industry and deprives children of one of their fundamental rights, the right to grow up in a family.

How Australia is perpetuating the institutionalisation of children

The ongoing institutionalisation of children can be directly linked to donors and volunteers engaged in supporting residential care institutions. Many Australians are involved in the founding, funding, visiting, and volunteering within residential care institutions overseas. Australians do this through schools, charities, service clubs and religious institutions.

Volunteering in residential care institutions is contributing to the unnecessary institutionalisation of vulnerable children. Australians volunteering at and supporting residential care institutions overseas are often well intentioned, but ill-informed of the harms of this type of care for children. Unfortunately, these good intentions are driving the removal of children from their families and causing lifelong harm to children, families, and communities.

In some cases, well-meaning Australians begin 'orphanages' to provide a solution to poverty, without realising that supporting children to stay in their families is not only more cost effective, but also in the best interests of the child. There is also a misconception that the detrimental impacts associated with residential care only take place in 'bad' orphanages, and well run orphanages are exempt from the debate. The reality is that many of the risks associated with institutionalisation are inherent to residential care and cannot be fully mitigated by high standards of care. Even the best residential care institutions cannot replace the experience or benefits of growing up in a family.

Voluntourism

Volunteering in residential care institutions has become very popular among Australians as a way of 'giving back'. Volunteer placements are accessed through the travel industry, charities, churches, schools, universities, and directly with residential care institutions themselves. Despite a belief that volunteering in these institutions is helping vulnerable children, and with the best of intentions, volunteers are perpetuating an industry that places children at risk. Residential care institutions that accept volunteers:

- **Are using it as a fundraising method:** Volunteer placements are a fundraising tool for residential care institutions. Funds are raised either by charging volunteers a fee, or by emotionally engaging volunteers in the hope it will lead to ongoing financial support. This funding is fuelling the boom in the orphanage industry, turning orphanages and other residential care institutions into viable businesses.
- **Normalise access to vulnerable children:** Residential care institutions are a target for those with harmful intentions toward children. In Australia we do not allow unskilled tourists or volunteers unchecked access to vulnerable children. The same standards should apply overseas. Visitors with good intentions normalise the practice of allowing unskilled, unqualified individuals access to vulnerable children.
- **Harm children:** Children in residential care have already experienced disrupted attachments as a result of being separated from their families, and as a result, are often seeking attachment figures. Short-term volunteers can exacerbate attachment disorders in such children as bonds are quickly formed only to be broken again when the volunteer leaves. Children are left behind to cope with yet another lost attachment figure, and this repeated cycle of attachment and rejection can have a number of long-term impacts on children, including reactive attachment disorders and impaired brain development in small children.
- **Contribute to the commodification of children:** The majority of volunteers in residential care institutions are unskilled and unqualified to work with children, particularly children from another culture, who often have highly complex needs and have experienced some form of trauma. Volunteering in a residential care institution contributes to the commodification of vulnerable children where they are seen as something to be 'experienced', despite the well-documented negative impacts on them. Child protection specialists have also raised



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concerns about the presence of short-term foreign volunteers in residential care institutions and the potential for them to create confusion around identity and culture.

Support families, not orphanages

Australians are generous with their time and money. By redirecting support towards organisations that keep children with their families, and reintegrate children from residential care to family-based care, Australians can help prevent the unnecessary institutionalisation of children in developing countries.

More information

If you have volunteered in a residential care institution, or support a residential care institution and would like support and advice, please contact ReThink Orphanages, a cross sector network that aims to prevent the unnecessary institutionalisation of children by shifting the way Australia engages with overseas aid and development.

- info@rethinkorphanages.org
- www.rethinkorphanages.org

Other resources

Other resources for best practice for international volunteering with organisations working with children:

- bettercarenetwork.org/bcn-in-action/better-volunteering-better-care
- thinkchildsafe.com
- orphanages.no
- learningservice.info
- globalsl.org
- comhlamh.com
- kinnected.org.au
- faithtoaction.org