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The Illusion of Protection



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In terms of the attitude towards children and the understanding of their needs, little has changed in Ukraine's Child Protection system since Soviet times. There have been some fragmented improvements but governments have failed to lay the foundations necessary to prevent family breakdown and ensure an integrated approach to protecting children's rights.

Institutional care remains the most common response by the authorities to children whose families are struggling to care for them, largely because of poverty and disability. Despite the evidence of countless international studies, which confirm that institutional care causes irreparable damage

to children's development, despite the growing number of gruesome media reports of abuse, violence and worse in residential facilities, despite the stories about the difficulties faced by young people when they leave institutions, no decisive action has been taken to address the situation.



Hope and Homes for Children recently completed the first comprehensive audit of Ukraine's child protection system in order to understand how and why children are sent to institutions, the conditions they experience and the effect that institutionalisation has on their development and their life-chances.

The findings of the audit are stark.

The size of the institutional network is overwhelming – its total area reaches 48.6km². In other words, the institutional care network in Ukraine is the size of a city, a city that lives in isolation from the rest of society, obeying its own rules, its own routines. It is a “territory” inhabited by almost 100,000 children and 68,000 staff.

The daily routine in almost all institutions we surveyed follows a strict schedule. This means that children have almost no free time for themselves. Their days are taken up performing standard tasks that are assigned by staff, with no regard for the children's individual needs and preferences.

“The children are tired. Even though it's the summer holidays right now, they still have to observe their routine. We show compassion to our own children –

we usually let them sleep and rest longer during holidays and on weekends. But children in this place have a schedule: you must be up at 7 am. If you miss your breakfast at 8 am, you will be hungry until lunch. Moreover, children don't have any private time. Their entire lives are scheduled and planned.” (from an interview with a teacher in an institution).

Most of the institutions we surveyed were established during the Soviet era although some date from the 1930s. Most of the facilities were intended for large numbers of inhabitants (100 to 400). Despite the fact that significant resources have been invested by the government and sponsors, living conditions in the institutions are often poor and degrading. For example, a standard bedroom is designed for 6 – 16 children; the only furniture they contain are beds. It's rare to find even a wardrobe or a table for the roommates to share.

Our experts who assessed the institutions pointed out the lack of showers and toilet cubicles. The facilities that are available to children often have no curtains or partition walls.

“The indoor toilet in the bedroom block for children of secondary school age is out of order; children have to use a pit latrine, which is really unsanitary. The smell around this facility is terrible; you cannot lock the door. There is no toilet paper inside. At the same time, a brand new toilet facility was built for the staff, and no one else can use it.”

Less than 15% of UAH 6.4 billion (approximately £180 million) allocated from the State budget to support residential facilities are spent directly on children's needs. The average daily food ration per child costs UAH 18

(approximately 53p); roughly 3,000 UAH (£88) per year is spent on clothes; a few beggarly pounds are allocated to buy medicines. In the meantime, the lion's share of the budget (70%) goes to cover staff salaries. So the question is, who are the main beneficiaries of this system?

Residential facilities in rural areas and small towns often serve as a mainstay of the local economy as the only major employer. More children means more money and more jobs.



Our data busts popular myths and nullifies the arguments used to defend the institutional care of children. One of these myths is that institutions are populated mostly by orphans and children without parental care. In fact, orphans make up only 9% of all the children confined to orphanages and other facilities in Ukraine. The remaining children are placed in institutions at their parents' requests as a result of poverty and other difficulties or because this is the only way they can access education, health and rehabilitation services for their children. Our research also demonstrated that not a single family of a child placed in an institution because of poor living conditions received adequate social support. The reality is, none of these services works towards keeping children in their families. Instead, they work to strengthen and protect the institutions.

We've heard the same excuses from officials for years: "it's not the right time to reform institutions", "we can't ditch institutions, where would be put

the children?”, “some families put children at risk”, “children with disabilities need special schools” and so on. Unfortunately, even after visiting countries that found answers to these questions long ago and have successfully reformed their child protection systems, our ministerial officials still haven’t seen the light or found the motivation for reform.

That is why our research is so important.

Mapping the scale of the problem gives us the credible evidence base that we can use to argue for reform. Aggregated and analysed data points to the urgent need for change and lays the foundation for a real action plan to replace the failing child protection system. We have conducted similar audits in countries like Rwanda and South Africa that have informed and influenced significant political action.

The findings of the audit were officially published in Kiev in December at an event we co-organised with the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman, who was at the event, commented:

“The practice of institutional care belongs in the past. Investing in children and their development, rather than in the walls of institutions, will be a top priority for the Government in relation to child protection.”

The response so far is encouraging, but there is much work to do to ensure children in Ukraine no longer face a future confined to an orphanage.

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