

Rotten Barrels: Why We Should Just Say No to the Orphanage

Although the idea of going "back to the orphanage" gained a great deal of attention when former House Speaker Newt Gingrich brought it up, the notion was quietly pushed by child savers for many years before – and some of them are still at it.

Gingrich, at least, was honest about his agenda: He wanted to take children away from their parents just because they are poor. The child savers claim no such intent, but their proposals amount to the same thing.

Supporters of orphanages base their arguments on three false premises:

First, they say, we must have more orphanages because there are not enough foster parents for the children who need them. But as we have shown in previous issue papers, we do not have too few foster parents, we have too many children needlessly taken from their own homes.

Thousands of children who could be safely in their own homes now languish in foster care. Get these children out of the system and there will be plenty of room in good, safe, stable foster homes for the few children who really do need substitute care -- and there will be no need for orphanages.

Orphanage backers also claim that institutionalizing children gives them "stability." But orphanage staff often work in shifts, and even in places that employ so-called "house parents," they typically quit every year or two.¹ For a child, that makes living in an orphanage every bit as unstable as a succession of foster homes.

The third false premise is the claim that today's orphanages will be better than yesterday's and we should no longer precede the word "orphanage" with the word Dickensian. This myth has been fed by media that flocked to what they thought were the nation's few well-run institutions (some of which turned out not to be models after all).

Even "model" institutions cause another tragedy for children: When children really can't live with their own parents, the best alternative sometimes is adoption, especially adoption by relatives. But of all the foster children adopted each year, 89 percent are adopted by a relative or a foster parent.² When children are institutionalized, they lose their best shot at ever having a permanent home of their own.

No institution, model or otherwise, is a substitute for a family. Though the "model" facilities love to call themselves "home-like," children know the difference between "home-like" and *home*.

To find out what is in store for *most*

children if we go back to the orphanage, we need go back no further than 1987 – or 2020.

1987 was the year New York City set up 17 mini-orphanages for infants and toddlers. The city called them "congregate care facilities" but they soon acquired another name: baby warehouses. In the two years between the time they were set up and the time the state ordered them closed:

Two children died of infectious diarrhea because of unsanitary diapering practices. A third child died because -- like 91 percent of the children -- he was not properly immunized. There may have been more deaths, but the record-keeping was as shoddy as the sanitation. Inspectors found that "all but five of the shelters have had consistent problems with roaches, flies, mice, or rats. Food practices are often unsafe."³

Sixteen years later, another study of group homes and institutions in New York, this time for teenagers, found similar hideous conditions. According to *The New York Times*, "the report paints a daily life full of barbarisms...

"Teenagers recount being raped, having their rooms set on fire, being pressed to join gangs and routinely having their few nice possessions stolen. Insiders and outsiders ... agree that staff members not only fail to protect children but also engage in violence and intimidation themselves."⁴

There have been other tales of terror from America's modern orphanages:

- SOS Children's Village in Florida repeatedly has been cited by orphanage proponents as proof that orphanages can work. But between 1999 and 2001 33 reports were filed with Florida's child abuse hotline alleging abuse of children at the 50-bed facility; 21 were "substantiated" or "indicated." During the same time period 13 "house parents" and 14 "parent assistants" quit or were fired. (So much for orphanages providing "stability.")⁵

- Another facility touted as a national model, the main campus at Maryville, near Chicago, was revealed as a place of terror for many of the children confined there, according to documents obtained by the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The newspaper reported that "the place is often up for grabs, with staff struggling to handle suicide attempts, sex abuse, drug use, fights and vandalism..."⁶ In 2001, police were called to Maryville 909 times.⁷

In 2004, Illinois pulled all 270 state wards out of Maryville. In 2016, the program closed.

- In 1998, the *Los Angeles Times* found that "children under state protection in California

Orphanages (continued)

group and foster homes are being drugged with potent, dangerous psychiatric medications, at times just to keep them obedient and docile for overburdened caretakers...Under the influence of such drugs, children have suffered from drug-induced psychoses, hallucinations, abnormal heart activity, uncontrollable tremors, liver problems, and loss of bowel control..."

The *Times* found that it happens to children as young as 3 "and even a 22-month-old knew the word 'meds.'"⁸

But hey, that was so long ago. Things must be better now, right? Uh, no. In 2014, the *San Jose Mercury News* [found the same problems](#) – all over California.⁹

- In 2010, the state of Nebraska suspended admissions to two programs run by Boys Town amid allegations of misuse and overuse of "restraints" and medication.¹⁰

- In 2019, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* exposed [a litany of horrors](#) at still another institution once thought of as a model: Glenn Mills School. The newspaper found "a decades-long pattern of abuse, in which counselors violently attacked boys for minor misconduct and then coerced the youths into staying quiet. Staff monitored their phone calls and encouraged them to lie about their injuries ... Leaning on the school's prestige, staff also told boys that reporting assaults to the state would get them sent to worse placements — and school leaders turned a blind eye to it all ..."

The school was shut down – but now is trying to reopen under another name.¹¹

- In 2020, the *Inquirer* [found similar horrors](#) in multiple institutions run by a major nonprofit chain, Devereux. To which a Devereux official replied: "This is not an aberration that happens at Devereux because of some kind of lack of control or structure. This is an industry-wide problem."¹²

Actually, she's right.

An Indiana study found that children in "group homes" are 10 times more likely to be physically abused and 28 times more likely to be sexually abused than children in

their own homes.¹³

A study of teenagers who had been through a representative cross-section of orphanages reported that the teenagers found institutions to be a significantly worse option than their own families, care by relatives, adoption, or even foster care.¹⁴

The North American Council on Adoptable Children aptly summed up the study findings: "The teens felt less loved, less looked after, less trusted, less wanted ... Teens described a powerful code of behavior dictated by institutional peer-group subculture, encompassing drugs, sex, and **intimidation.**"¹⁵

That study is typical. A comprehensive review of the scientific literature on orphanages reveals that even the "model" facilities do serious emotional harm to children.¹⁶

When it comes to orphanages, we're not talking about rotten apples, we're talking about rotten barrels.

Of course, most orphanages don't even call themselves that anymore. Like Devereux, they've "rebranded" themselves as "Residential Treatment Centers." But residential treatment also is largely worthless, and there are far better alternatives. For details, see [our briefing paper on residential treatment](#).

To know which is more likely to emerge from any "back to the orphanage" movement -- luxury orphan resorts or baby warehouses -- we need only look at how America has handled the mass institutionalization of other populations who are feared and despised.

The "back-to-the-orphanage" movement is based on the premise that the same governments and private agencies that have given us the prison system and the juvenile justice system and have dotted the landscape with hideous warehouses for the mentally ill somehow will come up with loving, humane institutions for children who are disproportionately nonwhite and overwhelmingly poor. But orphanages are institutions for the poor, and institutions for the poor are almost always poor institutions.

Updated, December 20, 2021

1. North American Council on Adoptable Children, *There is a Better Way: Family-Based Alternatives to Institutional Care* (St. Paul, Minn: 1995) //2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [The AFCARS Report, #28.](#) //3. All information about the "baby warehouses" is from Karen Benker and James Rempel, "Inexcusable Harm: The Effect of Institutionalization on Young Foster Children in New York City" *City Health Report* (New York: Public Interest Health Consortium for New York City), May, 1989. //4. Leslie Kaufman, "Survey Backs Reputation of Danger in Group Homes," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2003. //5. Megan O'Matz, "Model children's home falls short of expectations," *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, April 21, 2002, p.A1. //6. Tim Novak and Chris Fusco, "Reports find Maryville's environment 'dangerous'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, Sept. 6, 2002. //7. Ofelia Casillas and David Heinzmann, "A troubled Maryville attempts to heal self," *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 7, 2002. //8. Tracy Weber, "Caretakers Routinely Drug Foster Children" (p.A1) and "Prescription for Tragedy" (P.A31) *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1998. //9. Karen de Sá, "Drugging Our Kids," *San Jose Mercury News*, Aug. 24, 2014 //10. Ben Penn, "Boys Town Accused of Using Improper Restraints," *Youth Today* website, Sept. 23, 2010, available online at: http://www.youthtoday.org/view_article.cfm?article_id=4317 //11. ["Glen Mills Schools seeks to reopen under a new name two years after child-abuse cover-up scandal closed it,"](#) *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 11, 2021. //12. Lisa Gartner and Barbara Laker, ["Hope, Help Harm: At the nation's leading behavioral health nonprofit for youth, Devereux staff abused children in their care for years — while red flags were dismissed."](#) *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 11, 2020 //13. J. William Spencer and Dean D. Knudsen, "Out of Home Maltreatment: An Analysis of Risk in Various Settings for Children," *Children and Youth Services Review* Vol. 14, pp. 485-492. //14. M. Bush, "Institutions for Dependent and Neglected Children: Therapeutic option of choice or last resort? *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (50)(2), 239-255 //15. NACAC, note 1, supra. //16. The summary, with full citations, is available on request from NCCPR.