

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.

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 all 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 children who really do need substitute care -- and there will be no need to build any more 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). Of course there are model orphanages. There also are model jails. But they are called models precisely because they are unusual.

Even model institutions cause another tragedy for children: When children really can't live with their own parents, the best alternative is adoption. 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. That 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."

- Disease was not the only hazard. Inspectors also found "unshielded wall outlets, broken cribs, playpens, and highchairs, play areas with broken glass, toxic chemicals leaking from containers within easy reach of toddlers. Children were cared for in eight-hour shifts by untrained workers who often did not even know their names. At one of the baby warehouses, the children were spoken to only when they did something wrong."³

Sixteen years later, a new 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**... [emphasis added]."

"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 **(over)**

Orphanages (continued)

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 – something it could do because it had done such a good job of reducing needless foster care. As a result, in Illinois, substitute care is no longer a “sellers market.”⁸

- 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.⁹

- A 1997 Los Angeles County Grand Jury report found, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, that “Many of the nearly 5,000 foster children housed in Los Angeles County group homes are physically abused and drugged excessively while being forced to live without proper food, clothing, education, and counseling...” [emphasis added]¹⁰

A year later, the *Times* found that “children under state protection in California group and foster care 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.’”¹¹

- And here’s how the Atlanta Journal-Constitution summed up a three-part series on group homes and institutions for foster children in Georgia in 2010: “Fights. Sexual assaults. Consensual sex between young teens. Abuse by foster parents and group home employees. Escapes. Suicide attempts. All occur with regularity at many of Georgia’s 336 private foster care agencies ...”¹²

These institutions are not aberrations.

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

And 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. 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 the “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 and the mentally retarded, somehow will come up with loving, humane institutions for children who are disproportionately black and overwhelmingly poor. But orphanages are institutions for the poor, and institutions for the poor are almost always poor institutions.

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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 #21*. //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. Ofelia Casillas, “Maryville opens doors again,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 28, 2007. In 2007, 25 state wards were transferred to the campus from another Maryville program. //9. 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 //10. James Rainey, “Grand Jury Cites Abuses in Group Foster Homes,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1997, p.A1. //11. Tracy Weber, “Caretakers Routinely Drug Foster Children” (p.A1) and “Prescription for Tragedy” (P.A31) *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1998. //12. Alan Judd, “Foster care fraught with private abuses, public excuses: AJC investigation: Children needing homes get placed in harm’s way with few repercussions,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 18, 2010. //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.