

Prioritizing a Continuum of Care for Older Orphan Populations: A Qualitative Study from Two Transitional Centers in Armenia

George S. Yacoubian, Jr., Ph.D., LL.M., S.J.D., M.S.¹

Lena Bardakjian²

¹ The Founder and Chairman of the Society for Orphaned Armenian Relief (SOAR), United States

² An undergraduate student at Boston University, United States

Correspondence: George S. Yacoubian, Jr., Ph.D., LL.M., S.J.D., M.S., 150 N. Radnor Chester Road, Suite F200, Radnor, PA 19087, United States.

Received: March 7, 2023

Accepted: March 27, 2023

Available online: April 3, 2023

doi:10.11114/ijsss.v11i2.6049

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v11i2.6049>

Abstract

Previous research in residential childcare institutions (RCI) has focused on youth under the age of eighteen. While reaching the age of majority typically signals the end of compulsory childhood institutionalization, age qualifications may deny ministrations to young adults whose adolescence was marked by poverty, trauma, violence, or emotional deprivation. To investigate the need for a seamless transition into young adulthood, we interviewed 12 female residents housed in two “transitional centers” (TC) in Armenia. The respondents, while eager for emotional and fiscal autonomy, perceived their previous RCI as integral to their emotional development and thus recognized the need for ancillary care to prepare them for independent living. These findings suggest that Armenia’s TC offer a critical bridge between adolescence and adulthood, providing an environment within which socially vulnerable young adults can prepare for emotional, financial, and intellectual independence. Countries with significant orphan populations should consider integrating a TC component into their continuum of care model to assure that their most vulnerable children populations receive support throughout young adulthood.

Keywords: Armenia, orphan, residential childcare institutions, transitional centers

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 make placement decisions when parental care is compromised. Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989) provides that the BIC standard 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 on those *under the age of eighteen*. Not surprisingly, the major treaties that address international child protection all delineate age prerequisites. Article 1 of the CRC (1989: Article 1) 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 for Children (2010) 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” (2010: Section E), post-institutionalization care is only for those children who have not yet reached the age of majority.

¹ George S. Yacoubian, Jr., has advanced degrees in Criminology and Criminal Justice, a J.D. from the Rutgers University School of Law, an LL.M. in Transnational Law from the Temple University School of Law, an S.J.D. from the Suffolk University School of Law, and a master’s degree in Negotiation and Conflict Resolution from Columbia University. He is the Founder and Chairman of the Society for Orphaned Armenian Relief (SOAR) (www.soar-us.org), and the focus of his research is international child protection. Direct all correspondence to George S. Yacoubian, Jr., 150 N. Radnor Chester Road, Suite F200, Radnor, PA 19087, gyacoubian@soar-us.org.

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 populations are educationally, emotionally, and fiscally equipped to live independently. While the body of research related to the efficacy and effects of RCI is immense (*see, for ex., Dozier et al., 2012*), we are aware of no studies that have explored older orphan populations and the transitional homes within which they reside following discharge from an RCI. These "transitional centers" (TC), or institutions that serve as a bridge between RCI and adulthood, are non-existent in orphan literature. To address this critical gap, we offer a preliminary introduction to the efficacy of the international TC experience.

2. Research Methods and Findings

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 the Society for Orphaned Armenian Relief (SOAR), which opened its first TC in Gyumri, Armenia (hereafter TC-G) in December 2019.² SOAR's second TC, located in Yerevan, Armenia (hereafter TC-Y), opened in August 2022. At both Centers, the residents are required to attend a college or university; cultivate a business;³ are enriched by a variety of academic programs; appreciate volunteerism; learn essential life skills, including home and money management; build self-nurturance and self-confidence; and prepare themselves for emotional, fiscal, and professional independence. Capacity is eight for TC-G; four for TC-Y. In the current study, 12 residents were interviewed in November 2022. Data were collected confidentially after oral consent was obtained from each respondent.

Instrumentation

Phenomenology focuses on understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In a phenomenological study, a combination of methods (e.g., interviews, reading documents, or visiting places) are 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; and 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, respondents were asked to explain their perceptions about institutional life; the advantages and disadvantages of institutional living; access to education; preferences for familial habitation; personal and professional ambitions; perceived obstacles to achievement of goals; and whether their TC can facilitate the achievement of their personal and professional goals.

Descriptive statistics

Of the 12 residents approached for participation, all (100%) participated. While the sample size is small, these strong response rates are consistent with previous research conducted in similar settings in Armenia (Yacoubian, 2022b, a; Yacoubian and Bardakjian, 2022; Yacoubian, 2021) and confirm that "hidden populations" can be accessed successfully when the relationship between researchers and respondents is based on trust. All the residents were female and, on average, 18.75 years old. Again, we emphasize that these older TC residents are not children under the strictest interpretation of international law. That said, we recognize and recommend that child protection, particularly for marginalized populations, must continue beyond the age of majority to better facilitate socialization and independence.

Findings

All respondents expressed frustration with the lack of emphasis on higher education in their previous institutions and the

² 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 (soar-us.org).

³ gymrisoart.com (accessed March 31, 2023).

challenges associated with community living, but relished the educational opportunities at their TC and the chance to engage in “purposeful” activities. In addition to tuition and all related educational expenses being provided by their TC, the residents took advantage of language programs, computer trainings, cultural activities, volunteerism, and a variety of workshops that made them more “marketable.” Eighty-three percent of the respondents had aspirations of graduate school. No respondents were comfortable discussing their biological family, but were residing at the TC because living alone and/or returning to biological family were not feasible or desirable. All the respondents were committed to adapting to, and immersing themselves in, the TC environment.

Perhaps most importantly, all respondents reported emotional attachment to their fellow residents, the TC staff, and the benefactors whose financial contributions make the TC experience possible. Because the TC residents are at least 18 years old, they were able to make an informed decision of to live in a TC or pursue independent living. This decision, to transition to independent living via a TC, was welcomed because it gave the residents a choice, which they often never had during adolescence.

3. Discussion

Human rights organizations, researchers, and policymakers that call for the repudiation of all RCI believe that biological families provide a superior child-rearing environment to institutional living (Rosenthal, 2019, 2017; 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, 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 and Bardakjian, 2022) suggests that RCI offer significant advantages within a *surrogate* familial environment.

While the child protection literature is abundant with studies addressing orphaned populations and the care received within RCI (Dozier et al., 2012), we are aware of no studies that have explored institutionalization within the residential centers that transition children to young adulthood. These TC offer a significant opportunity for child protection stakeholders to provide a continuum of care for society’s most vulnerable populations. That is, the TC experience offers a critical bridge between adolescence and adulthood, providing an environment within which socially vulnerable young adults can prepare for emotional, financial, intellectual, and social independence. Most importantly, our respondents recognize the need for transitional care, making them committed to the educational, cultural, and social activities afforded by the TC experience in Armenia.

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 investigating human rights within residential centers 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 18 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. This suggests that, if the current study is to be replicated outside of Armenia, it should begin with a 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 and 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 and Sankar, 1994).

Third, the TC experience offers opportunities for research that previously was challenging. In Armenia, healthy males who reach the age of majority have two years of compulsory military service, which explains why the TC house only females. That said, 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, and lastly, those benefitted from 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*. The call for their cessation is implausible because there will always be child populations that require removal from the familial home. Moreover, RCI demonstrate to society which child populations are most vulnerable by offering institutions within which critical care can

be provided. This concession among scholars and policymakers that RCI play 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 recognize the advantages they offer and address the challenges that result from removing a child from the family home. Shielding a child population from the misery that exists everywhere families struggle with abuse, neglect, poverty, trauma, and violence is an obligation of a civilized and compassionate society. Requiring families to commit to parenthood when they are ill-equipped or ill-inclined to do so is the antithesis of child *protection*.

References

- Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted 20 Nov. 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, U.N. GAOR, 44th Sess., Supp. No. 49, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989) (entered into force 2 Sept. 1990).
- Dozier, M., C. H. Zeanah, A. R. Wallin, & C. Shauffer. (2012). Institutional care for young children: Review of literature and policy implications. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 6(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-2409.2011.01033.x>
- General Assembly Resolution 64/142, *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (GACC)*, A/RES/64/142 (24 February 2010).
- Gubrium, J. F., & A. Sankar. (1994). *Qualitative Methods in Ageing Research*. Sage Publications.
- Merriam, S. B., & E. J. Tisdell. (2016). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey Bass.
- Mouton, J., & H. C. Marais. (1990). *Basic Concepts in Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Pretoria: HSRC.
- Rosenthal, E. (2017). A mandate to end placement of children in institutions and orphanages: The duty of governments and donors to prevent segregation and torture. *Protecting Children against Torture in Detention*, 303, 312.
- Rosenthal, E. (2019). The right of all children to grow up with a family under international law: Implications for placement in orphanages, residential care, and group homes. *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review*, 6, 65. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3409395>
- Yacoubian, G. (2021). Deinstitutionalization, family reunification, and the “Best Interests of the Child”: An examination of Armenia’s child protection obligations under conventional international law. *Pace International Law Review*, 33(2), 151.
- Yacoubian, G. (2022a). An assessment of Armenia’s residential childcare institutions as a case study in international child protection. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 12(7), 338. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2022.127026>
- Yacoubian, G. (2022b). Toward a theory of permanent environmental reassignment for residential childcare: A comprehensive research agenda for the 21st century. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 10(6), 52. <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v10i6.5716>
- Yacoubian, G., & L. Bardakjian. (2022). Assessing the perceived familial relationships of orphaned children housed in Armenia’s residential childcare institutions: Revisiting the “Best Interests of the Child” standard in international child protection law. *World Affairs*, 26(3), 137.
- Zeanah, C. H., K. L. Humphreys, N. A. Fox, & C. A. Nelson. (2017). Alternatives for abandoned children: Insights from the Bucharest Early Intervention Project. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 15, 182. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.02.024>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution license](#) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.