

Christian Alliance for Orphans White Paper

On Understanding Orphan Statistics



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If we are to communicate with humility, credibility, and integrity, Christian orphan advocates must both accurately understand and carefully present orphan-related statistics. Failure to do so undermines the strength of our advocacy and can misguide the actions that organizations, churches and individuals take on behalf of orphans. Meanwhile, an accurate grasp and communication of the true nature of the need provides a strong foundation for an effective, well-focused response.

Current Global Estimates

Although reflecting only broad projections, the estimated number of orphans globally currently reported by the UNICEF and the World Health Organization include:

- 17.6 million children worldwide have lost both parents (“double orphan”).
- 150 million children worldwide have lost either one parent (“single orphan”) or both parents.

Missing From the Estimates

There are many inherent limitations to any data that claims to be truly “global” in nature. While such data can help us gain a clearer picture of the size and scope of need, it can also be misleading.

One of the greatest weaknesses in these global orphan estimates is that they include only orphans that are currently living in homes.^{iv} They do not count the estimated 2 to 8+ million children living in institutions.^v Nor do current estimates include the vast number of children who are living on the streets,^{vi} exploited for labor, victims of trafficking, or participating in armed conflict.^{vii}

Thus, global orphan statistics significantly underestimate the number of orphans worldwide and fail to account for many children that are among the most vulnerable and most in need of a family.

Many of these children who live in orphanages or on the streets are known as “social orphans.” Although one or even both of their parents may be alive, social orphans rarely see their parents or experience life in a family. Some never do. Global orphan statistics shed virtually no light on the reality of the vast number of social orphans who have one or more

living parents, yet experience life as if they did not.^{viii}

It is also important to remember that factors impacting orphans vary tremendously by region. In some places, strong extended family networks can readily absorb orphaned children. In others, that historic safety net has been shredded. A host of other factors – from the strength of the local economy, to the prevalence of child exploitation, to the quality of public and private social services—can each dramatically increase or mitigate the vulnerability of children. For this reason, great caution must be taken in applying and comparing statistics across various regions of the world.

Finally, sweeping statistics reveal nothing about the distinct needs of each individual child. Losing one or both parents increases a child’s statistical vulnerability greatly. But to seek the best outcome for each child requires knowing much more than orphan status alone. What we can say definitively, however, is that children who lack consistent parental care are among the most vulnerable beings on earth.^{ix}

Priorities in Response to Orphan Need

The Christian Alliance for Orphans affirms the historic Christian understanding—conveyed in Scripture and affirmed by social science^x—that God intends the family as the essential environment for children. We believe the ideal outcome for every orphan is to know the love and nurture of a permanent family.

Our world’s brokenness at times makes this goal unattainable. Thus, alternative forms of care are sometimes necessary. This reality calls us to affirm two seemingly opposing convictions at the same time.

First, that amidst the deeply painful and complex situations facing orphans around the globe, there are times when care outside of a permanent family may be the best that can be attained. This can be especially true in countries in which war, disease or other factors have done great harm to the fabric of society, and when a child’s needs require a more therapeutic setting than families in that region can typically provide. (See CAFO “Core Principles” at end of document).^{xi}

Second, that the need for alternative measures should not obscure the ideal of family or diminish our pursuit of it. This includes:

1. Preserving Families. We must work to aid widow-and-orphan and widower-and-orphan families, as well as other families at risk of disintegration. This includes offering opportunities and support that enable these families to remain safely intact, and also providing the community and other resources to help them thrive.

2. Reuniting Families. Whenever it can be done safely and responsibly, we must work to reunite families that have been sundered by war, natural disaster, poverty or other crises, including situations where children have been temporarily placed in residential care—also providing the community supports and other resources needed to help these families thrive.^{xii}

3. Expanding Families. When birth parents have died, or are unwilling or unable to provide adequate care even with outside support, we must work quickly to place children in permanent, loving families—and provide the community and other resources to help these families thrive. When adoption is not an option, care for children should be as family-like as possible.

Implications of the Data

In light of the information presented above, it is important to understand that:

- *Millions of orphaned children have a surviving parent and are part of a one-parent family that needs help to remain together and to thrive.*^{xiii} There are certainly times when a surviving parent is unwilling or unable to provide adequate parental care, but to the fullest extent possible, we place priority on efforts to preserve struggling families and to reunify those that have been separated.^{xiv} Research suggests that single orphans—especially those who’ve lost their mother—are much more vulnerable than non-orphans to a wide range of dangers, including HIV, teen pregnancy, depression, suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, institutionalization, malnutrition, and death. The relational, physical and spiritual support of the local church community are vital to helping single orphans and their surviving parent to thrive.^{xv}

- *Millions of orphans and other vulnerable children are in need of help to reunify with their birth families.* While estimates vary, studies consistently reveal that a large percentage of children living in orphanages and on the streets have at least one living parent.^{xvi} In addition, children in foster care nearly always have living parents. Not all of these parents are willing or able to provide adequate parental care. And a number of recent studies

show that reunification done without great caution can expose children to great harm.^{xvii} But in many cases, it is possible to reunify families that have been split apart by extreme poverty, disaster, war or other crises. Further, even when both parents have died, finding a permanent home with a caring relative is often the most desirable outcome for a double orphan, particularly when it can be ensured the child will be treated as a full and equal member of his or her new home. Both family reunification and “kinship care” represent vital aspects of the church’s response to the needs of orphans worldwide.^{xviii}

- *Millions of children are in need of families that are willing and suitable to adopt them.*^{xix} Each year only a tiny fraction of children that need families are adopted within their own countries or internationally. In much of the world, major barriers stand between these children and permanent family. These barriers include cultural biases against adoption, proclivity toward non-adoption care models by some governments and NGOs, apathy towards orphans in the church and broader society, and government policies that make adoption difficult or impossible. In addition, a large percentage of children in need of adoption are considered particularly “hard to place” because they have special needs, are over age 4, and/or are part of sibling groups. An essential aspect of service to orphans is working to remove these barriers and to grow a culture within the church in every country that affirms and embraces adoption. Well-crafted safeguards must always be set to guard against unethical adoption practices, as with all services to children. But the need for such safeguards must never become an excuse for systems that, in effect, relegate children to life without a family. Placing these children in permanent, safe, loving families should be our unequivocal goal whenever possible.

- *Millions of children today live on the streets and in poorly-run institutions with virtually no realistic hope of placement into a family in the foreseeable future.* In these places, we must champion initiatives that will make family a greater possibility for more children in the long run. But we must also help bring about workable solutions that protect and care for these children today. This includes high-quality foster care and nurturing group homes. While new orphanages should not be created except in extreme circumstances, existing orphanages can be helped to improve their quality of care^{xx} and to develop programs that minimize out-of-home care. Any approach to caring for these children should always be as safe, nurturing and close to family as is feasible for the given situation.

Conclusion

In all of this, it should be clear that statistics regarding orphans, and even the definition of the term “orphan,” have inherent weaknesses. This does not mean they are not important.

Good data can help us understand the nature and extent of the need. And the term “orphan” itself helps a society—perhaps especially those that have been influenced by Judeo-Christian values—to connect the needs of vulnerable children with the clear mandate in Scripture to protect and care for the “fatherless” and the “orphan.”

At the same time, we should understand that the biblical concept of the “orphan” and “fatherless” includes more than just the boy or girl who has lost one or both parents. Rather, it describes the child who faces the world without the provision, protection and nurture that parents uniquely provide. No statistical analysis will ever perfectly capture the global number of children fitting this description. Regardless, God calls His people to reflect His heart and character in choosing to “defend the cause of the fatherless,”^{xxi} to “visit the orphan and widow in their distress,”^{xxii} and to “set the lonely in families”^{xxiii}—whatever the details of his or her situation may be.

In living out this high calling, it is our firm desire to see the local church in every region increasingly play the central role in meeting the needs of orphans in distress—from family preservation and adoption; to provision for specific physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs; to advocacy for government policies that combat systemic injustices and help advance the priorities expressed in this paper.

For Western Christians, this includes a distinctive call to foster, mentor and adopt children within their local foster systems. In addition, when there are more orphans in need of adoption than local families currently willing to adopt in any country, children have a right to find loving homes through inter-country adoption. Western churches and nonprofit organizations also can continue to play a vital supportive role globally—humbly aiding local churches and ministries.

Ultimately, our final hope is this: that Christians in every nation will rise as the primary answer to the needs of the orphans in their midst, glorifying God as a reflection of His great love for the orphan and for us.



ⁱ UNICEF, UNAIDS, and WHO. Children and AIDS: Sixth Stocktaking Report. 2013.

ⁱⁱ As explained in the section “Missing from the Estimates,” the estimate of double orphans—17.6 million—does not include the large population of orphans that live on the streets or in orphanages. Thus, while less than 12 percent of the 150 million children accounted for in current orphan estimates are “double orphans,” this percentage would likely be notably higher if all orphans were represented in global estimates.

ⁱⁱⁱ UNICEF, UNAIDS, and WHO. Children and AIDS: Sixth Stocktaking Report. 2013.

^{iv} Current global orphan statistics are projections based upon data drawn from “household surveys.” Thus, they do not include children that are not currently residing in a household.

^v UNICEF. Progress for children: a report card on child protection. 2009. UNICEF estimates that more than 2 million children are in institutional care around the world, but this is an unreliable figure based on a small sample of countries, and UNICEF acknowledges it is an underestimate. Other credible reports put the figure at 8 million or more. See, for example, www.unicef.org/violencestudy/incare.html.

^{vi} UNICEF. The State of the World’s Children 2006: Excluded and Invisible. 2006. UNICEF estimates 100 million street children in the world. Although no hard data is available to make such projections with confidence, we can be certain the number is very large.

^{vii} See, for example: <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/child-labour/lang--en/index.htm#a3>; http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58005.html; and <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/press-release/secretary-generals-annual-report-on-children-and-armed-conflict-documents-continued-child-suffering-in-23-conflict-situations/>

^{viii} Much could be said and debated about the dilemma of seeking to care wisely for “social orphans.” In some such cases, a modest amount of outside support could allow these children to return to their families of origin. In others, home-based foster care presents a positive alternative to residential settings when local or international adoption is not possible. There may be times when legal termination of a parental relationship should be considered, thus enabling children to be adopted rather than grow up with little or no experience of family. When these options are not available or have proven ineffective for individual children, residential care may be the most practicable care option until additional family-based care options are developed.

^{ix} Consider, for example, just a handful of representative studies. Ainsworth (2000), Lindblade (2003), and the Zimbabwe Ministry of Health and Child Welfare (2003) found that both single and double orphans are much more likely than other children to be malnourished and stunted in growth. Case, Paxson, and Ableidinger (2003) and Hyde (2002) found that even when living with a surviving parent or relatives, orphans are less likely to attend school and more likely to fall behind and drop out. Kifle (2002) and many others have found that orphans are especially prone to labor exploitation. Numerous studies have found that orphans are especially vulnerable to sex trafficking and exploitation, including Mushingeh (2002) in Zambia and UNICEF (2005) in Moldova. This vulnerability extends to children who lack consistent parental care even in western nations. For example, a report by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (2007) found that 75 percent of children who were sexually exploited for commercial purposes had spent time in foster care.

^x Studies consistently reveal that dependable parental attention and nurture is vital to the healthy emotional, physical and social development of children. For overviews of studies documenting potential negative impacts of institutional care upon children, especially orphanages that are large-scale and low-nurture, see *The Risk of Harm to Young Children in Institutional Care* (2009) by Browne; or *Families, Not Orphanages* (2010) by Williamson and Greenberg; or *Children, Orphanages, and Families* (2014) by the Faith to Action Initiative.

^{xi} It is important to affirm that our driving objective should always be to find the care setting that best meets the unique needs of each child. For example, there are cases when the needs of a child (such as intense therapeutic intervention or protection from self-harm or harm to others) may extend beyond what could be provided in a family setting. In cases such as these, while family remains the hope, the importance of quality therapeutic residential settings should not be diminished.

^{xii} Enabling children that live in orphanages or on the streets to return to their families of origin is the definitive priority whenever safely possible. However, it is important to affirm that not all parents are willing or able to

provide adequate care, and that abuse, forced labor and other dangers may sometimes await children within their home of birth. Reunification must always be pursued with a primary commitment to the best interest of each child, and must be carried out with great care and planning.

^{xiii} Roughly 132 million of the 150 million orphans accounted for in current estimates are single orphans and have a surviving parent. The situations facing these single orphans vary greatly. In some cases, the surviving widow or widower is unwilling or unable to care for their children, but there are many times when – even amidst great hardships – modest outside support can help the family to remain intact or to reunify if it has been separated.

^{xiv} Extensive financial giving by Christians every year is invested in disaster relief, community and economic development, and a wide range of other initiatives that help preserve and strengthen struggling families. While not technically focused on “orphan care,” these investments should certainly be understood as a vital part of the Christian mandate to care for orphans—both in helping care for current orphans and preventing the creation of new orphans.

^{xv} Christians should take special note of the fact that the Bible regularly pairs orphans and widows. The Bible also consistently uses the term “the fatherless” as a synonym for “orphan.” This is because in biblical times the large majority of orphans had lost their father but not their mother. This is the case today as well. UNICEF’s Fifth Stocktaking Report (2010) estimated that 101 million of the then-153 million children classified as orphans—more than six in ten—had a surviving mother. Another 34.5 million had lost their mother but had a surviving father. Whether they’ve lost father or mother, single orphans and their surviving families are often highly vulnerable. As people who embrace the central role of family in caring for children, Christians should place special priority on preserving and aiding these vulnerable one-parent families to the fullest extent possible.

^{xvi} A wide variety of studies estimate between 30 and 80+ percent of children in orphanages in many parts of the world have one or more parents and/or relatives. This does not necessarily mean these adults are willing and able to care for the child, but it does reveal that a large percentage of children in orphanages have living kin. For example, the Better Care Network’s *Global Facts About Orphanages* (2009) reports that roughly half of children in orphanages in Bangladesh, Bolivia, and Pakistan had a living parent, and that this number is 80 percent or more in Afghanistan, Belarus, Bhutan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Tajikistan. More studies and data on this point can be found in *Children, Orphanages, and Families* (2014) by the Faith to Action Initiative.

^{xvii} It is important to note that the parents/relatives of these children are frequently unwilling or unable to provide a safe home environment, and that some studies suggest that rates of abuse and exploitation in these homes can be very high. See, for example, Morantz, et al (2012) in Kenya or Merz, McCall and Groza (2013) in Russia. Still, studies of successful programs in many parts of the world reveal that at least a portion of these children can be safely reintegrated with parents or extended family. For example, see “Reaching for Home: Global Learning on Family Reintegration in Low and Lower-middle Income Countries” (2013).

^{xviii} Most orphaned children continue to live in families – typically with a surviving parent or sibling, or members of their extended family. Helping these families to thrive and ensuring that children are well cared for is a vital facet of caring for orphans.

^{xix} This group includes double orphans that have no kin willing to adopt them, as well as single orphans and non-orphans whose living parent or parents are unwilling or unable to provide adequate care, even with outside support.

^x Improving caregiver training, nutrition, child protection practices, gatekeeping and other reforms within orphanages can dramatically improve outcomes for children. For example, “Implementing Changes in Institutions to Improve Young Children’s Development,” in which Groark and McCall (2011) found that reforms in Russian orphanages – especially ensuring consistency of caregiver for each child—produced major improvements in child health and development.

^{xxi} Isaiah 1:17, Deuteronomy 10:18

^{xxii} James 1:27

^{xxiii} Psalm 68:8

Christian Alliance for Orphans Core Principles

1. Responsive Love

To act upon God's call to care for orphans is not merely a matter of duty, guilt or idealism. It is first a response to the good news, the Gospel: that God, our loving Father, sought us, adopted us, and invites us to live as His sons and daughters (Jn 1:12, Gal 4:6, Eph 1:15; I Jn 3:1). We love because He first loved us. (1 Jn 4:19)

2. Informed Action

Good intentions alone are insufficient. All care for children should be done with love that is guided by both knowledge and wisdom (Phil 1:9-11; Prov 19:2). Amidst the deep complexity of human need, no solution will be without flaws. Yet our aim must always be to offer the excellent care we would want to give Jesus himself – informed by both Scripture and the best available research, knowledge and proven practice.

3. Commitment to the Whole Child

To meet only spiritual or only physical needs is incomplete (1 Jn 3:17; Jms 2:16; Mk 8:36). Christian love seeks to address both. Even a cup of water given to quench the thirst of a child is of eternal worth (Mt 10:42). Yet of surpassing value is to know Jesus and our identity as children of God (Phil 3:8). Just as in the ministry of Jesus, we hold together the meeting of physical need with the Gospel that reveals God's love.

4. Priority of Family

Both Scripture and social science affirm that the very best environment for children is a safe, loving, permanent family. When this is not possible, the goal for each child should be – as a general rule – to move as far as possible along the “spectrum of care” options toward permanent family. Care for children should always be as safe, nurturing and close to family as is feasible for the given situation.

5. Family Preservation

Children classified as “orphans” that have a surviving parent or other relatives willing to care for them should be helped to remain with family members whenever safely possible. Likewise, when families have been separated, reunification of children with their biological family is of first priority whenever children can be returned to a safe, nurturing home environment. Efforts that enable struggling families to stay together are a vital part of the Bible's call to care for orphans and widows in distress.

6. Residential Care

Even as we champion the ideal of family, we can also honor the devoted care and protection provided by many quality residential facilities. We also recognize that therapeutic group settings can play an essential role in the healing of children with intensive needs. God created the family as the best environment for children, so new orphanages should not be created except in extreme circumstances. Existing orphanages should be helped to improve their quality of care and to develop programs that minimize out-of-home care.

7. Central Role of the Local Church

The local church in every nation possesses both the Christian mandate and many other resources needed to care for the world's orphans in a nurturing, relationship-rich environment. Every initiative to care for orphans should prioritize and honor the role of the local church, carefully pairing what foreign resources may be necessary with local believers willing to open their hearts and homes to orphans in their community.

8. The Power of Unity

Scripture overflows with calls for unity in the Body of Christ (Ps 133; 1 Cor 12:12; Eph 4:3, Col 3:11-15; Phil 4:1-3). Such unity yields special strength (Ecc 4:9), welcomes the presence of Christ (Mt 18:20), and ultimately presents the truth of Jesus to the world (Jn 17:20-23). Disagreements are inevitable and sometimes even necessary. Yet amidst all that strains unity, we commit to honoring each other above ourselves (Rom 12:10) – and labor in unison to see every orphan experience God's unfailing love.





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