

Christian Alliance for Orphans' White Paper
ON UNDERSTANDING ORPHAN STATISTICS

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 US Government and UNICEF include:

- 17.8 million children worldwide have lost both parents (“double orphan”).^{i, ii}
- 153 million children worldwide have lost *either* one parent (“single orphan”) *or* both parents.ⁱⁱⁱ

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 groups. *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.^{vii}

Finally, these global estimates reveal nothing about the distinct needs of individual children. Losing one or both parents increases a child’s vulnerability greatly. But seeking the best outcome for each child requires knowing much more than orphan status alone.

Priorities in Response to Orphan Need

The Christian Alliance for Orphans affirms the historic Christian understanding—conveyed in Scripture and affirmed by social science^{viii}—that God intended 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 truths 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. In such situations, the Christian Alliance for Orphans affirms the convictions articulated in its “Core Principles” document (see end of document).^{ix}

Second, that the need for triage measures should not obscure the ideal 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 rejoin in a timely manner families that have been sundered by war, natural disaster, poverty or other crises, including situations where children have been temporarily placed in residential/congregate care—and provide the community supports and other resources to help these families thrive.^x*
- 3) **Expanding Families.** *When birth parents have died, or are unwilling or unable to provide adequate care even with outside support, we must work to place orphans in permanent, loving families—and provide the community and other resources to help these families thrive.*

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.*^{xi} 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.^{xii} 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.^{xiii}
- *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.^{xiv} Not all of these parents are willing or able to provide adequate parental care. 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.^{xv} Both family reunification and “kinship care” represent vital aspects of the church’s response to the needs of orphans worldwide.
- *Millions of children are in need of families that are willing and suitable to adopt them.*^{xvi} 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 government 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.

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,”^{xvii} to “visit the orphan and widow in their distress,”^{xviii} and to “set the lonely in families”^{xix}—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 available in any country, children can 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.

CHRISTIAN ALLIANCE FOR ORPHANS CORE PRINCIPLES

God's Heart and Ours. God is vested, deeply and personally, in the plight of the orphan—and in all who are destitute and defenseless (Dt 10:18; Ps 10:14; Ps 68:5-6, Is 58:5-12). He calls His people to join Him in this, sharing His passion for orphans and bringing to each child the love of Jesus Christ in both word and deed (Is 1:17; Jms 1:27; Mt 25:40).

Responsive Love. To act upon God's call to care for orphans is not merely a matter of duty or reaction to need. It is first a response to the Gospel: the loving Father who sought us, adopted us, and invites us to live as His sons and daughters (1 Jn 4:19; Eph 1:15; Gal 4:6).

Commitment to the Whole Child. To meet only spiritual or only physical needs of an orphan 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 momentary thirst of a child is of eternal value (Mt 10:42). Yet of surpassing greatness is to know Jesus as Lord (Phil 3:8). So, just as in the ministry of Jesus, we should always hold together the meeting of physical need with the Gospel and our hope that every child will know God's love deeply and personally.

Priority of Family. God created the family as the ideal environment for every child, and the best outcome for an orphan is to know the love of a permanent family. Given the vast and complex needs facing orphans worldwide, this is not always possible. However, priority should always be placed on family-based solutions, and any long-term care should be as *permanent, nurturing* and *close to family* as is feasible for the particular situation.

Role of Residential Care. Crisis situations sometimes demand residential care for children, including orphanages. To the fullest extent possible, however, residential care should be viewed as short-term and transitional. In general, the goal for each orphaned child should be to seek a solution as far as feasible along a "continuum" toward permanent family: large group homes, small group homes, foster care, kinship care, and, ultimately, full adoption whenever willing families can be found.

Family Preservation. Whenever possible, children classified as "orphans" that have one surviving parent or other relatives should be helped to remain with family members. Efforts that enable families to stay together and prevent children from ending up in orphanages or on the streets are a vital part of response to the global orphan crisis.

Central Role of 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, family-based 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 indigenous believers willing to open their hearts and homes to orphans in their community.

ⁱ UNICEF, UNAIDS, and WHO. *Children and AIDS: Fifth Stocktaking Report*. 2010.

ⁱⁱ Note that, as explained in the section “Missing from the Numbers,” the estimated number of double orphans—17.8 million—does not include any count of the large population of orphans that live on the streets or in orphanages. Thus, while less than 12 percent of the 153 million children accounted for in current orphan estimates are “double orphans,” the percentage of orphans that are double orphan would likely be notably higher if all of the world’s orphans were included in global estimates.

ⁱⁱⁱ UNICEF, UNAIDS, and WHO. *Children and AIDS: Fifth Stocktaking Report*. 2010.

^{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 estimates that more than 2 million children are in institutional care around the world, but this is an outdated figure based on a limited country scan, and UNICEF frequently acknowledges it is an underestimate. *UNICEF. Progress for children: a report card on child protection*. 2009. Two other credible reports put the figure at 8+ million.

^{vi} Many estimates have been made regarding the number of street children in the world, and the figure 100 million is frequently quoted. However, no hard data is available to make such projections with confidence. We can be certain, however, that the number is very large.

^{vii} 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 none of these options are 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.

^{viii} Studies consistently reveal that consistent parental attention and nurture is vital to the healthy emotional, physical and social development of children. For one overview of studies documenting the negative impacts of institutional care upon children, see Better Care Network. John Williamson and Aaron Greenberg. *Families, Not Orphanages*. 2010.

^{ix} 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.

^x While enabling children living in orphanages or on the streets to return to their families of origin should be a definitive priority, 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. Re-integration of families must not be pursued haphazardly, and requires great care and planning.

^{xi} Roughly 135 million of the 153 million orphans accounted for in current estimates are single orphans and have a surviving parent. While in some cases the surviving widow or widower is unwilling or unable to care for their children, often even modest outside support can help the family to remain intact, or to reunify if it has been separated.

^{xii} 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.

^{xiii} 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. An estimated 101 million of the 153 million children classified as orphans—more than six in ten—have a surviving mother. Another 34.5 million have lost their mother but have a surviving father. Whether they’ve lost father or mother, these single orphans and their surviving families are often highly vulnerable. As a 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.

^{xiv} For example, in Bangladesh, Bolivia, and Pakistan, more than half of children living in institutions have a living parent. This number is believed to be 80 percent or more in Afghanistan, Belarus, Bhutan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Tajikistan. *Better Care Network. Global Facts About Orphanages*. UNICEF. 2009.

^{xv} Studies suggest that 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.

^{xvi} 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.

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

^{xviii} James 1:27

^{xix} Psalm 68:6