

Finding Homes for Poor Children

Orphanages and Child Welfare Policy

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In 1872 Sarah Meyer appealed to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum of New York to accept Philip, her eight-year-old son. Sarah, a 35-year-old immigrant from what is now Latvia, had found work at the Home for the Aged to help support both her children and her elderly mother. Yet her work made it difficult to care for the reportedly rambunctious Philip. “Being obliged to be away from my house all day long,” Sarah wrote, “and having a mother, who is too old to take care of the child, the same is left to itself exposed to every danger and led to mischief.” Her application made no mention of her husband, but most likely he had either died or abandoned the family. Two of Philip’s brothers already lived in the orphanage, but he would leave behind two sisters. Sarah probably planned to reunite all her children at some point in the future. Three days after she applied, Philip moved to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, an imposing structure on the corner of East 77th Street and Third Avenue.

More than 130 years later, in Jacksonville, Florida, Sylvia Kimble’s family faced similar challenges: low wages, high housing costs, unstable family structure, and the need for child care. Sylvia’s six grandchildren—three of whom had psychological problems—ended up in her custody after her daughter and daughter-in-law were jailed on drug charges. Sylvia herself had little parenting experience; during the 20 years she spent homeless, she had left her children with her own mother. But despite her background and poverty, the state of Florida decided in favor of having the grandchildren remain with Sylvia, now 46 years old and clean for 11 years, rather than removing them from the home. The state provided in-home counseling, therapy for the children, and cash assistance. “Family services has been a blessing,” the grandmother declared. Soon her daughter, still undergoing drug rehabilitation, was able to move back into the home. With the support of the state, Sylvia put a down payment on a subsidized house, securing a permanent home for her large, extended family.

The outcomes of these two families’ stories are extremely different, thanks to the public-welfare infrastructure that developed during the century separating them. Where Sarah Meyer and many other 19th-century parents chose or were forced to place their children in institutions, today the state, as in the case of Sylvia Kimble’s family, favors preserving families whenever possible. Public-assistance programs, day care subsidies, and family homeless shelters all are intended to prevent poor families from being broken up. Even child-protection investigators attempt, except in cases involving the most heinous and violent acts, to keep children with their parents and to provide services to prevent abuse or neglect that could affect the children’s well-being. When a child is removed from his or her parents, every effort is made to place the child in foster care, a substitute home environment.

Family-preservation programs are a relatively recent innovation in the history of family poverty. Before the 20th century, the practice of placing one’s child in an institution, voluntarily or otherwise, was grounded in a belief that children would be better served by growing up in congregate institutions, or orphanages, than by living in poverty with their families. As attitudes toward the importance of the family and the role of the state changed over the 20th century, social-welfare agencies gradually shifted resources toward programs that helped families stay together.

Congregate homes for children in the United States date back to the 1700s. As cities grew in the years after the Civil War, the number of institutions and children living in them increased exponentially. The late 19th century became the heyday of large congregate institutions for children: across the country, the number of orphanages tripled between 1865 and 1890. These new asylums expanded their mission beyond that of the orphanages that preceded them; no longer excluding those who

were not orphans or half-orphans (children with one living parent), they began admitting destitute children with both parents living.

The new approach of orphan asylums and other institutions was based in middle-class beliefs about the home and childhood that had emerged over the 19th century. Urban middle-class families had become focused on creating

homes that were distinctly separate from the world of work. In these homes children would live sheltered lives free from the stresses of the adult world. Middle-class married women, also excluded from the male realm of work, were expected to oversee the rearing of children. Based on these standards many less-privileged households in New York and other cities—where mothers and older children were often sent out to work—failed to meet the middle-class definition of a proper home. These poor children were, according to middle-class standards, missing out on a proper childhood.

Orphan-asylum administrators believed that compared with destitute and struggling parents, they could provide a more

The Hebrew Orphan Asylum of New York. This building, opened in 1884 at 136th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, housed up to 1,755 children at a time. Despite its institutional appearance, administrators imagined the Orphan Asylum as a large, efficient home. Collection of the American Jewish Historical Society.



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“homelike” environment and ensure more idyllic childhoods for the boys and girls in their care. The managers of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, for example, imagined their institution as a large, efficient home. “Order and mutual love,” the superintendent wrote in 1868, describing the asylum’s guiding principles, “are the pillars which sustain the happiness and prosperity of every household.” Similarly, the Orphans’ Home and Asylum of the Protestant Episcopal Church in New York explained, “It has been our aim, as managers of the Orphans’ Home, to make it as little as possible like an institution, and to promote by every means in our power, the home-feeling among its inmates.”

In spite of the claims of the managers that orphanages acted as middle-class homes, life in an institution with hundreds of other children had little resemblance to life in a family setting. This was immediately clear to children upon their arrival in these often massive places. Decades later, Sarah Sander recalled the day in 1894, after the death of her father, that she and her sister, Charlotte, arrived at the Jewish Orphan Asylum in Cleveland. The two girls—five and six years of age at the time—were taken to a wardrobe room, where all their clothing was removed, then to the basement for baths in “a large pool of green water,” then back to the wardrobe to be dressed in the Jewish Orphan Asylum uniform. Finally, the girls were taken to the barber, who cut their long hair to the length of “a boy’s haircut.” “Looking at Charlotte and myself in the mirror,” Sarah recalled, “I felt we had lost our identity. We cried.” Soon afterward Charlotte wrote her mother, “I don’t like it here—I was crying and I want to go home—you must take me home—you must take me home ... you must take Sarah and me home.”

Life in these institutions was structured and regimented. Henry Bauer, who came to live in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in New York at age nine, recalled his typical day as, “Get up, say your prayers, get your breakfast, go to school, come back, study your lessons, study Hebrew, get your supper, and go to bed. Very little play, very little play!” At the Catholic Protectory, an institution for vagrant and homeless children just outside New York City, children arose just before six o’clock in the morning, and after that virtually every hour of their day was scheduled for prayer, school, or work, with only a few minutes permitted for recreation. At the Hebrew Orphan Asylum during the 1880s, the bedtime routine was conducted “by the numbers.” Children had to get undressed based on numbered commands such as, “1. Jacket off, 2. Sit down, 3. Right shoe off, 4. Left shoe off.” This continued up to, “10. Get in bed.” Such a rigid system led to frequent infractions, and children often received corporal punishment. For worse offenses they were denied meals or were forced to stay in solitary confinement.



Two brothers, before and after their five-year residence in the Catholic Protectory. Institutions tried to produce adults whose appearance, work habits, and religious views and practices reflected middle-class ideals. The Protectory used these images as proof of its success in its 1892 annual report. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

This structured environment helped administrators keep order among hundreds of children, but it also reflected the institutions’ mission to inculcate values such as discipline. At the heart of all these places was an effort to educate the children and provide them with both greater economic opportunity and an improved sense of morality. At the Catholic Protectory children received instruction in “the various branches of learning, as reading, writing, and arithmetic,” but, as the brother who ran the boys’ section explained, the education program aimed at more. “Our great aim is to mould their hearts to the practice of virtue,” he declared, “and, while we make them worthy citizens of our glorious Republic, to render them fit candidates for the heavenly mansions above.” At some institutions, such as the New York Hebrew Orphan Asylum, children were sent to local public schools for formal instruction. Still, the asylum took responsibility for ethical and religious training as well as preparing children for the workplace.

Extensive vocational training for older children helped these institutions fulfill their mission to improve their charges’ economic opportunities. At the Catholic Protectory boys learned to make shoes and hoopskirts; they were also taught the trades of printing, carpentry, and baking as well as the skills needed for work as blacksmiths, chair caners, tailors, and machinists. This instruction came in addition to the skills acquired while running the farm that provided the institution’s milk and vegetables. Girls were trained mostly in dressmaking and domestic services. The Hebrew Orphan Asylum opened

both shoemaking and printing shops, providing entry into these professions.

In spite of the difficult life most children experienced in these institutions, many families voluntarily placed their children to asylums. Doing so allowed parents to pursue work without worrying about caring for, feeding, and housing children, giving the parents time to get on firmer financial footing before resuming their responsibilities. Interestingly, many parents, such as Sarah Meyer, chose to send only some of their children to the asylum. The decision appears to have been made based on age and gender, with parents keeping at home very young children and older children who could work and add to the family income. Other children were placed in institutions after being found on the street by the police or were removed from their parents' homes by private child-protection organizations such as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

No matter the path by which children arrived at institutions, once they were under an asylum's care, the administrators quickly asserted their power to limit the children's contact with their families. Over much of the 19th century, the managers of these congregate homes feared that parents were a negative influence on their children and attempted to restrict interaction. Often, parents were permitted to visit for a few hours each month, but visiting times

and rules varied greatly by institution. In the 1880s, for instance, the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in New York decided to limit its visiting hours to one day every three months. The asylum also barred parents from giving cash or candy to children as presents. As attitudes toward the role of parents changed in the early 20th century, asylums began to loosen their restrictions on parental visitation. By the 1920s many institutions were actively encouraging parents to spend as much time as possible with their children.

Children's time in institutions was relatively brief. One historian has estimated that children typically stayed in orphan asylums for between one and four years. For some children, especially those with two living parents, stays in an asylum could be quite short, often less than a year. Once a family's financial crisis was resolved, a child who had been sent away usually returned home. Even parents whose children had been removed by child-protection agents could reclaim their children after they had demonstrated to the court that they were now fit parents. Children with no living relatives spent longer periods in institutions. These children were often placed in apprenticeships or boarded with families once they reached their early teenage years.

There was a long tradition of contracting with households to place older children as servants or apprentices. By the mid-19th century these contractual agreements, known as indentures, had declined; instead, institutions placed children in what became known as free homes, with loving families who would voluntarily provide care. The Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum of New York, for instance, was placing children in free homes as early as the 1870s. By the late 19th century, however, a lack of households willing to take on others' sons and daughters made it difficult to place children. To find homes for their charges, institutions placed them in boarding homes, paying substitute parents to care for children. This practice, which became common in the early 20th century, set the foundation for modern foster care.

The 20th century saw a deep reevaluation of child-welfare practice. For most of the 19th century, managers of institutions and agents of organizations including the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children believed that poor children were often better served if they were separated from their parents. By the 1900s, however, there was a growing belief that care of a child in a family was the best course in most cases. When child-welfare experts met at the White House at the invitation of President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909, they recommended that no child be removed from his or her parents due to poverty alone.

Residents in the courtyard of the Home for the Friendless, c. 1864. Established by the American Female Guardian Society, the home provided housing and job training to the "unprotected female whose only crime is poverty and the need of employment." Collection of the New-York Historical Society.





Composition room at the Catholic Protectory. At most institutions for children, residents learned trades that could support them in adult life. In this photo, from 1898, boys compose type for printing. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

Based on this new perspective advocates pushed for, and many states passed, mothers' pensions—public payments to widowed or deserted mothers so that they could care for their children at home. The passage of these laws led to a slow decline in the number of children in asylums. In the ten years following the passage of the mothers' pension law in New York, the number of institutionalized children in the state decreased by around 30 percent. Nationally, by the late 1920s, the number of children supported by mothers' pensions surpassed the number of children in orphan asylums. When mothers' pensions were incorporated into the national Social Security Act of 1935 in the form of Aid to Dependent Children (later Aid to Families with Dependent Children), institutions for children seemed endangered. Still, some continued to care for orphans and other children through the 1940s, and a few lasted through the 1960s.

Institutions that shape the lives of America's poorest families and children changed remarkably during the 20th century. In the 1870s relinquishing children, at least temporarily, was often the best strategy for family survival. Today, the economic conditions that destroyed homes 130 years ago still make it difficult for families to secure adequate housing, jobs, and child care, but the existence of social-welfare programs including TANF, food stamps, and child-care assistance ensure that most poor children can grow up in families. Nineteenth-century institutions strove to release the greatest potential in their young charges—to provide a developmental experience that would ensure their greatest economic opportunity and allow them to become moral, upstanding citizens. These goals, while not always explicitly stated, still inform today's child-welfare policies, but the state's attitude toward poor parents has changed substantially. Today, well-being for poor children is reached through investment in the entire family. ■