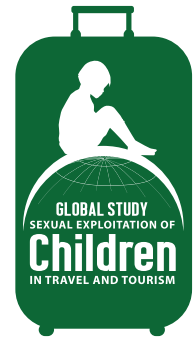


EXPERT PAPER



# INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING AND CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

BETTER VOLUNTEERING BETTER CARE

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## INTRODUCTION

There are over two million children living in residential care centres, or 'orphanages', in the world, although it has been suggested that the real number is likely to be far higher, and possibly as high as eight million.<sup>1</sup> Research has shown that four out of five of these children have at least one living parent and the vast majority could be living with one or both of their parents or with other family members if provided with appropriate support.<sup>2</sup> Despite well-established evidence of the harmful impact of institutionalisation on children's development and wellbeing, international travellers volunteering in such centres, often with very limited, if any, supervision, continues to be promoted as an acceptable form of tourism and volunteering experience.<sup>3</sup> Children in residential care are already at a higher risk of abuse and exploitation<sup>4</sup> and are exposed to further risk of harm by unqualified and unsupervised international volunteers. In addition, residential care operators can come to see international volunteering and children in their 'orphanages' as a key means of income, fuelling the growth of residential care in the country and promoting children's unnecessary separation from their families.



There are different understandings of volunteerism, 'voluntourism' and tourism, as well as perspectives on what is meant by short- and long-term placements. International volunteering in residential care centres can take the form of short visits, sometimes associated with gifts, performances and day-visits, or longer term stays at the residential care centre where a volunteer cares for, or interacts with the children, on a daily basis for a period of time.<sup>5</sup>

A simple internet search of the phrase 'volunteering in orphanages' will bring up a substantial list of volunteering organisations and tour operators that advertise volunteering in 'orphanages' abroad as one of their most popular activities. 'Orphanage volunteering' or 'orphanage tourism' has become a popular activity among tourists, faith-based organisations, education providers and young people on gap years. Corporate and government employees who have specific corporate social responsibility policies encouraging volunteer work and people generally seeking to 'give back' to developing nations, are another group eager to volunteer.<sup>6</sup> However, little attention has been paid to the harm that may be inflicted on children through such tourism or volunteering.<sup>7</sup> These activities pose child protection risks and expose children to various forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation, including child sexual abuse and exploitation.

### **International Volunteering and Child Exploitation in Residential Care Centres**

In many developing nations, there are few effective regulatory systems with oversight over residential care facilities. There are often no consistent regulations requiring residential care centres or tourism operators to have a Child Protection Policy or a Code of Conduct for volunteers in place.<sup>8</sup> Where residential care centres do have Child Protection Policies in place, they are often not implemented properly or enforced.<sup>9</sup> Lack of accountability and regulation in residential care centres means that abuse is often rampant.<sup>10</sup>

Residential care centres are frequently established in locations that are popular with western travellers to increase the appeal of volunteering.<sup>11</sup> Tourism operators may act as inadvertent facilitators of exploitation through arranging volunteer placements in residential care centres for their clients. There is a high risk of sexual, as well as

economic, exploitation by international volunteers because many residential care centres and tourism operators offering volunteer placements do not require police clearance reports, do not conduct background checks before volunteers have contact with children, and do not provide adequate supervision of volunteers once they are spending time with children.<sup>12</sup> Children in residential care centres are then exposed to unqualified and unscreened international volunteers, which heightens the risk of abuse and exploitation.

While many volunteers have good intentions, their very presence normalises the practice of unqualified volunteers accessing children.<sup>13</sup> Voluntourism and 'orphan tourism' also facilitate, and can even promote, the use of vulnerable children as 'commodities'

Children in residential care centres are often used as a commercial entity to attract funds through donations or volunteers<sup>14</sup> and they may be sent out to beg or perform on behalf of centres.<sup>15</sup> There are residential care centres that have been established solely for the purpose of satisfying the western desire to volunteer. In these centres, children are portrayed as 'orphans' to garner international funding.<sup>16</sup> This exposes children to an additional layer of exploitation – the commodification of their false status of orphanhood and maintenance in an institutional environment when they have family that could care for them.<sup>17</sup> This practice has been documented by agencies working in child protection in Nepal, among other places, where there have been reports of residential care operators removing children from their biological families under the guise of education, and then placing children in residential care centres to attract orphanage tourism and funding.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, children are kept in destitute or unhealthy conditions to appeal to donors and volunteers. Further, children who are involved in begging or performing for tourists, often have no access to education.

In addition, there is some evidence that volunteering makes children vulnerable to other forms of harm, impacting their socio-emotional development. Children become attached to multiple short-term visitors and volunteers and are then subject to repeated abandonment when these volunteers leave.<sup>19</sup> In Ghana, international volunteers were also found to keep institutions 'in business' by supporting fundraising. Their presence was used by residential care managers to recruit additional children to their institutions, causing more unnecessary separation and harmful institutionalisation.<sup>20</sup>

A new trend in voluntourism is 'awareness raising' trips which attempt to educate tourists regarding the issues of child exploitation. Some of these trips include visits to brothels, residential care centres and 'child feeding stations' for participants to observe the exploitation in action. While well-meaning, these activities can be just as harmful as orphan tourism as the tourists become inadvertent participants in the exploitation.

International volunteering is also associated with child sex tourism, where people travel to have sexual contact with children.<sup>21</sup> Significant overlap between international volunteering and child sex tourism has been noted in research due to the particular vulnerability of children in residential care centres, and children's perceived accessibility.<sup>22</sup> There is increased potential for individuals utilising (through volunteering or working in) a centre that is intended to benefit the well-being of children to gain access to, groom, and/or sexually exploit children.<sup>23</sup>

'Pseudo-care workers', defined as professionals and volunteers who abuse children they work with, are a known behavioural typology of travelling child sex offenders.<sup>24</sup> Evidence from the United

Kingdom suggests that between 1 in 5 of child sex cases in the UK in the years 2006-2011 were overseas offenders involved in roles that had direct access to children through pseudo-care work.<sup>25</sup> In Cambodia, it was noted that while sexual exploitation within residential care centres or institutions accounted for a smaller number of arrests than other types of exploitation, the number of cases were on the increase.<sup>26</sup> This illustrates an unfortunate correlation between international volunteering and sexual exploitation.

Some residential care centres have an 'open-door' policy which means that volunteers can come and go as they wish, and also take children out of the centre for excursions, further contributing to an environment that can encourage sexual exploitation.<sup>27</sup> Being aware of this environment, people may choose to volunteer with the intention of sexually exploiting children. In Cambodia, some residential care centre operators reported that people asked them directly whether the children residing in the centre were available for sex.<sup>28</sup> While unusual, this blatant approach illustrates the particular vulnerability of children residing in residential care centres.

However, equally alarming is an environment of unsupervised access and contact with vulnerable children that can create opportunities for individuals who did not travel for that purpose, or had not previously engaged in sexual exploitation or abuse of children, to do so. Research shows that opportunistic or situational offenders almost always first access victims in a public place<sup>29</sup> and the majority of sex offences by international tourists fall into this category.<sup>30</sup> This poses a particular challenge for residential care centres as no screening or background checks of international volunteers could address this.

## Prevention and Protection

The growing understanding that residential care is harmful to children has led to wide-ranging reforms globally to prevent children's placement in residential care except in very limited circumstances and for the shortest possible time. The international community has clearly stated through the endorsement of the *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* by the UN General Assembly in 2009,<sup>31</sup> that residential care centres should only be utilised as a last resort and large institutions should be eliminated. Reforms of child care systems in many countries have entailed important deinstitutionalisation of these systems to reduce the number of children in residential care as well as the numbers of such institutions.<sup>32</sup>

Tourism companies have an important role to play in these reforms by ensuring that they do not promote or support the placement of international volunteers in residential care centres. As countries move away from the use of residential care to ensure children are not unnecessarily separated from their families, and that they are provided with appropriate alternative family-based care when they need it, international volunteering should not support, let alone fuel, the growth of residential care. Instead, international volunteering should work to support positive care options for children through organisations that work to strengthen the capacities of families to care for their children and to provide family-based alternative care for children who need it.

Where tourism companies continue to promote volunteer opportunities in residential care centres without carrying out due diligence on whether the residential care centre is undertaking appropriate action to protect children, they are complicit in the problem. Tourism companies promoting volunteer placements in residential care facilities have a responsibility to ensure at a minimum, that an effective screening process

for volunteers is in place before a volunteer travels to the country of destination. Tourism companies should also be responsible for working with the placement provider locally to put in place strict safeguards, policies and mechanisms to limit and supervise the access of international volunteers to children in these facilities.

The use of international volunteers in residential care centres should be restricted to lessen the risk of children being abused and exploited. This is often viewed as problematic from the perspective of residential care centres as they rely both on the caregiver roles that volunteers play to reduce their staffing costs, and also on the fees and donations that volunteers pay or give to the centre. These donations often do not go through official channels and are therefore more susceptible to corruption.<sup>33</sup> Agencies offering international volunteering in residential care facilities and residential care managers often argue that if volunteers are no longer allowed in residential care centres, these centres will be forced to close due to the lack of caregivers and associated funding.<sup>34</sup> Yet, if residential centres require international volunteers to operate what are highly complex children services with the potential to expose vulnerable children to serious risks of abuse and exploitation, the question should be whether these centres should be operating at all.

It is preferable that residential care centres do not utilise international volunteers as caregivers for children at all. However, where centres continue to utilise international volunteers, they need to ensure that Child Protection Policies contain multiple measures to protect children.<sup>35</sup> Volunteers should not reside on the same premises as children, nor should they ever be alone with children. As part of these measures, centres should systematically ensure that they conduct background and criminal checks on all potential volunteers before entering the country for placement or, if they are already in the country, prior to the commencement of that placement.

Volunteers should be appropriately skilled, and focused on capacity building of local staff, without direct contact with children. Further, centres should not allow any unscreened volunteers or visitors on the premises to limit potential unsupervised access to children. Child Protection Policies should also form part of a contract with volunteers, clearly articulating the expectations of the volunteer regarding protecting children from the risk of abuse.

Anti-orphanage tourism campaigns have been developed to educate volunteers about the harm that volunteering causes institutionalised children,<sup>36</sup> as well as how the desire to volunteer is linked to the establishment of residential care centres, and the maintenance of children in that environment. These campaigns aim to educate potential volunteers about the harm, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse,<sup>37</sup> that volunteering in residential care institutions can cause and discourages the practice.<sup>38</sup>

In relation to child sexual exploitation, countries must ensure that they sign and ratify international and regional standards for the protection of children against sexual exploitation and that domestic laws reflect these. The domestic law regarding child sex abuse must be strongly enforced, and not reliant on extraterritorial law enforcement in relation to international offenders.<sup>39</sup>

Domestic laws regarding visas should be enforced to prevent volunteers entering countries on tourist visas. If volunteer or working visas are made mandatory for tourists intending to volunteer, it could trigger a further investigative process into the applicant's background prior to volunteers entering the country. Given that, a large proportion of child sex offenders in residential care centre contexts have previous convictions in their own countries,<sup>40</sup> this extra layer of screening may be helpful.

For international volunteers, the enactment of extraterritorial legislation, which enables countries to prosecute offenders in their home countries for child sex offences committed internationally, has been crucial. However, enforcement of extraterritorial laws has been inconsistent across countries.<sup>41</sup> There has been a movement to encourage countries to deport child sex offenders back to their home country. However, this has also proved to be inconsistently applied.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, education and regulation interventions will only be effective if implemented by all stakeholders who play key roles in protecting vulnerable children in residential care centres, including governments, the providers and managers of these centres and tourism operators. Without the participation of all stakeholders, vulnerable children in residential care centres will remain at risk of abuse and exploitation from international volunteers.

## Case Studies

On 1 March 2015, Canadian national Ernest Fenwick MacIntosh was convicted of sexually abusing a Nepalese child at a residential care centre, St. Xavier's Social Service Centre. MacIntosh had a history of conviction for 17 child sex offences in Canada. However, the conviction had been overturned on a technical appeal based on the length of time it took to have him extradited back to Canada on those charges.<sup>43</sup> Prior to that, he had been convicted of sexual assault in the 1980s.<sup>44</sup>

MacIntosh entered Nepal on a tourist visa in August 2014 and approached the residential care centre with an offer of money and requesting to volunteer. He was sentenced to seven years imprisonment and ordered to pay US\$10,000 in compensation to the victims.<sup>45</sup>

Had St. Xavier's Social Service Centre properly implemented a Child Protection Policy and sought a police check from Canada for MacIntosh, they would have become aware of his past convictions relating to sex offences. MacIntosh was able to exploit not only the failure of the residential care centre to protect the children in its care but also the failure of the Nepali government to enforce their visa requirements. Technically, there is a requirement to enter Nepal on a visa allowing volunteering. However, this is not enforced and the majority of volunteers in residential care centres enter the country on tourist visas.

The conviction of MacIntosh illustrates the alarming risk of unscreened international volunteers in residential care centres and how vulnerable children can be sexually exploited. The conviction has been described as a 'wake-up call for other organisations to better screen volunteers.'<sup>46</sup>

In 2007, Henk Molhuysen, the founder of Hamro Jiven orphanage in Kathmandu, Nepal, was arrested for molesting 48 of the children in his care.<sup>47</sup> As details of the case came to light, it was revealed that Molhuysen had previously been convicted of child rape in Spain and sentenced to eight years incarceration in 1995. He was deported back to the Netherlands to serve his sentence. Subsequently, in 2003, he opened the Hamro Jiven orphanage in Kathmandu. Volunteers were invited to stay at the orphanage providing a source of revenue.<sup>48</sup> Given his history and his subsequent actions, it is clear that this orphanage was established for the purpose of sexual exploitation, as well collecting fees from volunteers for assisting in the home.

The Sunaulo Pravat Bal Griha orphanage subsequently assumed responsibility for the 48 children from Hamro Jiven, and continued to receive funding from a Dutch donor. In an ironic and horrifying twist, the operator of that orphanage, Bala Giri, fled in 2011 with two million rupees of donations intended to maintain the children. Thus, the children experienced two facets of exploitation – that of sexual exploitation and also the commodification of their orphanhood.

From 2012 to 2014, Matthew Lane Durham, a US citizen, volunteered through mission trips at Upendo Children's Home, a residential care centre in Kenya. On his initial mission trips, Durham stayed with sponsor families in Nairobi. However, on his last trip from April to June 2014, he requested to stay at the residential care centre in an 'overflow bunk'.<sup>49</sup> While he was volunteering, the caretaker of the centre noticed Durham acting strangely towards the children. She found him lying in bed with the children late at night and he was seen embracing them in what she characterised as a 'lingering' manner. He was subsequently accused of engaging in sex acts with as many as ten children between four and nine years of age.<sup>50</sup>

Durham left Kenya in an attempt to avoid prosecution. However, he was charged in Oklahoma, US under extraterritorial laws of 17 counts of travelling to engage in illicit sexual conduct; engaging in illicit sexual conduct in foreign places; attempt and conspiracy; and aggravated sexual abuse with children. He was convicted in July 2015 of seven of those charges and sentenced to serve 210 years in prison – a period of 30 years for each of his seven convictions.<sup>51</sup>

Durham was nineteen years old at the time of the offences and had no previous convictions of sexual abuse, thus screening processes would not have precluded him from volunteering. This case epitomises the potential dangers of unsupervised and unscreened international volunteers working in residential care centres.

## Promising practice

The International Child Protection Certificate (ICPC) was developed by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) and the Association of Chief Police Officers Criminal Record Office (ACRO) in the United Kingdom in 2012.<sup>52</sup> It was developed in response to clear evidence that child sex offenders who were known to UK authorities would often seek out opportunities to work or volunteer overseas as teachers, charity workers, orphanage workers or children's home workers.<sup>53</sup>

The ICPC allows international organisations working directly with children to access the criminal history of potential volunteers who are UK nationals or non-UK nationals who have previously worked in the UK, to assess their suitability to work with children.<sup>54</sup> The ICPC contains a person's complete conviction history, including 'spent' and 'unspent' convictions, as well as any foreign criminal history information that has been disclosed to the UK.<sup>55</sup> There is a fee associated with this certificate.

Volunteers are usually requested to provide such certification themselves, which can result in either fraudulent certification being provided, or none at all. To prevent fraud, the ICPC has been designed with anti-tamper technology and has several security features that cannot be duplicated. It also features a photograph of the applicant, a unique reference number and a unique serial number.<sup>56</sup>

The ICPC represents a promising innovation because it provides international organisations with unprecedented access to screen volunteers proactively. The development of the ICPC has been hailed as a 'step in the right direction' with the hope that other countries will develop similar initiatives.<sup>57</sup>

**1. Promising Practice – Local Travel Industry:** ChildSafe (<http://www.thinkchildsafes.org>) is a proactive child-protection network involving communities, local and international businesses to protect children from all forms of abuse and prevent child exploitation. ChildSafe focuses on educating the tourism industry, tourists and volunteers about situations that can expose children to exploitation.<sup>58</sup>

ChildSafe\_a project of Friends International\_ works on the premise that children are put at risk of exploitation because communities either facilitate or ignore situations and circumstances that lead to exploitation. To counteract this, ChildSafe focuses on building a network of stakeholders to prevent exploitation. These stakeholders are people who ordinarily in the course of their business may facilitate access to children, such as taxi drivers, hotel

and guesthouse staff, restaurant staff, travel and tourism operators, tourists and volunteers, government officials and communities. These people are trained to recognise exploitative situations and take appropriate preventive action. The training provided leads to an accreditation of both the stakeholder through a diploma and also the company through being endorsed as a ChildSafe business. A wider global campaign is targeting tourists, volunteers, and tourism operators in their domicile country to promote a 'child-safe attitude' when visiting risk-countries.

The ChildSafe campaign specifically targets residential care centre volunteering through its 'Children are not Tourist Attractions' campaign<sup>59</sup> It exposes the myths associated with orphanage tourism and encourages tourists and volunteers to re-conceptualise how they view residential care centres.<sup>60</sup>

The ChildSafe Project represents best practice for the tourism industry in ensuring that tourism operators, tourists and volunteers alike are educated about the susceptibility of vulnerable children in residential care centres.

## **2. Promising Practice for International Volunteers:**

Many international volunteers gain the majority of their information regarding potential volunteer placements on the internet. Internet sites can be excellent online resources that provide extensive information about the impact of volunteering in residential care centres. Sites such as 'Learning Service' ([www.learningservice.info](http://www.learningservice.info)) focus on responsible travel and voluntourism generally and provide toolkits for finding responsible ways to volunteer.

'Orphanages - Not the Solution' ([www.orphanages.no](http://www.orphanages.no)) specifically deals with alerting potential volunteers regarding the 'orphanage industry'. The site educates potential volunteers about the harm that volunteering can cause to children in residential care centres specifically. It advises that volunteering at any residential care centre perpetuates the institutionalisation of children.

### 3. Promising Practice for International Travel Industry:

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) and Planeterra Foundation have produced the *International Voluntourism Guidelines for Commercial Tour Operators*.<sup>61</sup> This is a practical tool that helps international voluntourism providers operate their programmes in a responsible and sustainable manner. Voluntourism providers may then utilise the Guidelines when they are planning and managing their programmes.

Another promising initiative is the *Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism*<sup>62</sup> or The Code, initiated by ECPAT. The Code is industry-driven and its mission is to provide awareness, tools and support to the tourism industry to prevent the sexual exploitation of children. Responsible tourism companies voluntarily join The Code and agree to uphold the values and implement staff training to recognise and deal with child sexual exploitation. This is a promising practice because it encourages the active participation of the international travel industry in preventing child sexual exploitation.

### 4. Promising Practice for Residential Care Centres:

In response to the persistence of orphanage tourism, the Better Care Network, Netherlands (<http://www.bettercarenetwork.nl>) has developed *Guidelines on the Deployment of Volunteers working with Children Abroad*. The aim of the Guidelines is to help prevent unintentional harm to children. It promotes that only people with appropriate skills who can share their knowledge and experience with local professionals should be volunteers.<sup>63</sup> The Guidelines outline the issues with children growing attached to volunteers and the effect of the repeated abandonment experienced. It encourages organisations working with vulnerable children to implement strong codes of conduct and child-focused policies, to apply selection criteria for volunteer applicants, provide

training to successful volunteers, and to ensure adequate supervision of volunteer placements. It represents a promising practice for residential care centres by advocating for responsible volunteerism.

## CONCLUSION

There is compelling evidence that international volunteering can increase the risk of harm to children living in residential care centres. This harm manifests in a variety of ways – physical, sexual and psychological. There is also growing evidence that the use of international volunteers in residential care facilities for children compounds the problem of children's institutionalisation and unnecessary separation from their families. It can result in a commodification of the children where their continued value to a care centre is enhanced by the ongoing separation from family, and their position as an 'orphan' or vulnerable child. It reinforces a 'business model' for childcare institutions whereby funding, often unregulated, is dependent on making children available in their centres to respond to the international volunteering and fundraising demands. In a context where countries globally are working to reform their child care systems and reduce harmful placements in institutional care, this can create negative incentives that makes it even harder for governments to ensure financial support follows the best interest of the children, not of those running the services.

Since 2013, a global initiative, the *Better Volunteering, Better Care* has been working with travel and volunteering organisations, non-government organisations focussing on child protection, and international advocates, to discourage volunteering with children in residential care centres.<sup>64</sup> International volunteering can be a positive and responsible force for change to support vulnerable children to receive the care they deserve, but that means recognising that caring for children is not the business of even well-meaning volunteers and that children in care are not a tourist attraction.



# ABOUT BETTER VOLUNTEERING, BETTER CARE

*Better Volunteering Better Care* is a global initiative, led by Better Care Network and Save the Children UK, to discourage volunteering in orphanages, or any other form of residential care centers for children, and to promote responsible volunteering alternatives. The initiative is multi-sector, bringing together actors from the fields of education, travel, Christian faith organisations, child protection, and international development. The goal of Better Volunteering Better Care is to promote global understanding of how volunteering in such settings is causing harm to children and families in a number of countries worldwide, and to forge relationships and initiatives to create positive change. Better Volunteering Better Care is offering advice, information, and links to in-country child protection experts for any travel organization working with residential care centers. Please email [volunteering@bettercarenetwork.org](mailto:volunteering@bettercarenetwork.org) to begin a dialogue.

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