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**ALARMING PHENOMEN OF INFANT ABANDONMENT**

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*Abstract*

The child abandonment phenomenon was influenced by the cultural and historical period. In Romania, historical and political contexts are interlocked, the communist regime having still the major impact over the idea of child abandonment. The last decades were marked by the interest for deinstitutionalization and promoting alternative measures for each child who is deprived of his parents' protection. However, child abandonment in Romanian hospitals continues to be high. The group age most vulnerable to hospitalization is the newborn children. Between 2008 – 2015, every year were abandoned in hospitals between 624 and 942 new-borns. Methodology: Secondary analyses of national data referring to hospitalized children, available on the Romanian Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection site. Conclusion: During the communist regime, child abandonment phenomenon was raised, and legislative changes in 2000s have contributed to the reduction of the number of institutionalized children, but did not lead to the decrease of the number of abandoned children in maternities. The child abandonment and especially the newborn's, continue to be a social problem affecting these children, but also the Romanian Society. During 2008 – 2015, 2 new-borns were abandoned in all Romanian maternities everyday. The time spent in hospital without the emotional connection of a caregiver, can cause psychological problems and also attachment disorders and is necessary to adjust legislation and promote alternatives at the newborn abandonment. It is also necessary to educate young people and inform them previous and during pregnancy so that no pregnant woman at-risk abandonment to leave her child in maternity.

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**Keywords:** Newborn abandonment, Institutionalization, Romania.



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## **1. Introduction**

The child abandonment phenomenon it was in international researchers attention, being met in Roma, at the beginning of the century (Gill, 2014), in industrialized France of XIX, (Segalen, 2011), in USA (Lough, & Panos, 2003), in Ireland (Gilligan, & Munro, 2013), in Poland (Knuiman, et. al., 2015), and continue to be a social problem in communist country like China (Feng, 2005). In Romania case, the communist regime, that ended 1989, had a major impact over the life of many children, when the Ceausescu policy resulted in a demographic explosion (Kligman, 2000), that encouraged the poor parents or the ones of a health issued child to left or abandon the child in the care of an institution where there supposed to have every material condition and medical special treatment. During the communist regime many people at-risk of child abandonment said the phrase "the State made him (the child), the State should take care of him" (Muntean, & Munteanu, 2011, p. 143), and even today those words are used, continuing to have a major impact over the idea of child abandonment and institutionalization.

Considered to be "probably the most extensive trauma of the Romanian society" (Muntean & Munteanu, 2011, p. 143), the child abandonment, in terms of early experience illustrates one of the most painful experiences, and even today two newborn babies are abandoned daily in Romanian Maternities, conform the data that will be presented in the following pages.

The present study is highlighting the situation of the newborn abandoned in maternities and shows the fact that this phenomenon is still present and affects many children over the years. The Romanian orphans were in the attention of the researchers soon after de Romanian Revolution from 1989, and the international NGOs, like UNICEF ([www.unicef.com](http://www.unicef.com)) fight for deinstitutionalization of children.

### **1.1. The factors and the effects of child institutionalization**

Effects of institutionalization during the communist regime period were described by several researchers (McLaughlin, et al., 2012; Polvere, 2011), and longitudinal studies carried out in Bucharest in The Bucharest Early Intervention Project, which began in 1999, 10 years after the Romanian revolution, revealed medical problems, physical and social development of the children like physical and mental delays, anxiety disorders, attention deficit, repetitive behaviors, attachment problems and low intelligence.

In United States of America, but also in France preventive policies were directed specifically towards reducing poverty (Segalen, 2011). At the same time, specialists have tackled a new vision of young children, turning their attention to the medical and psychological needs (Bowlby, 1988, 2011).

A recent study in Romania (Moraru, 2014) identified possible factors for child abandonment. Today's parents at-risk of abandonment are the least informed about alternatives to abandonment and its consequences on the child. Misinformation, poor education, low levels of parental education, lack of social support, social services, as well as young age at maternity, were among the factors promoting child abandonment.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Experts and researchers in social sciences consider that the abandonment and institutionalization of children have very serious effects, in terms of emotional and cognitive development (Bowlby, 1988, 2011; McLaughlin, et al., 2012; Muntean, & Munteanu, 2011; Polvere, 2011). For the child abandonment the parent is initial responsible, but the child institutionalizing is decided by the other persons, specialists in child protection rights. However, the initial abandonment, followed by many months of hospitalization and then by years in different institutions accentuates the trauma felt by the abandoned children.

In particular the toddler abandonment has serious, complex and long term consequences. Small child has emotional experiences of extreme intensity. For many years it was thought that the inability of the child to understand what is happening protects him, but recent studies (Muntean, & Munteanu, 2011) reveals that the child inability to give sense of abandonment, the inability to communicate about the events and feelings induces a chronic panic that increase the vulnerability and panic toward the changes that will occur later in his life, and also, the trauma of abandonment decrease the possibilities of healing, rehabilitation, socio-familial reintegration (Muntean, & Munteanu, 2011).

## **3. Research Questions**

The study presents the situation of newborn abandonment, and the research question is:

The change of the communist regime and the child protection legislation reduce the phenomenon of child abandonment in Romanian hospitals?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The study analyze the official date regarding the newborns abandoned in Romanian maternities compare with the total number of newborn and total number of abandoned children in hospital units, trying to make an alarm signal over this phenomenon.

### **4.1. Theoretical frame**

The research was based on the structural functionalism proposed by Talcott Parsons, 1951 (Giddens, 2000; Vlăsceanu, 2011; subedi.orgfree.com), who argues that society consists of a system of institutions invested with specific functions. The family is a subsystem which has links with other systems and the social system as a whole.

Another representatives of functionalism are Robert King Merton 1910-2003 (Elwell, 2013; Vlăsceanu, 2011) and Henry H. Stahl (Voinea, 2002).

This theoretical perspective is important for building the research design, as I watched the family with the functions (manifest, latent) and the dysfunction, as an institution which responds to functional requirements of the social system and I considered that the changes at the social level determines the changes in the structure and functions of the family, having the argument of the fact that communist regime has influenced the perception of the society over the institutionalization of children, which was considered a viable alternative by some poor Romanian parents (Kligman, 2000; Muntean & Munteanu,

2011). Also, the study explores how the post-communist legislative changes, which discourages the institutionalization of children, contribute to the reducing of the total newborn abandoned in maternities.

## 5. Research Methods

It was used secondary analyses of national data referring to the hospitalized children, available on the Romanian Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection site - National Authority of Child Protection Department (Autoritatea Națională pentru Protecția Drepturilor Copilului și Adopție, 2015) and also, I used the data from National Institute of Statistics (<http://statistici.INSSE.ro/shop/>)

## 6. Findings

Studying the phenomenon of children institutionalization I discover that some of them came from hospital units. The data reveals the fact that more than 50% from the hospitalized abandoned children are in fact newborns.

In table 01 it is presented a comparative situation of the newborn from Romania, children abandoned in hospital units and newborn abandoned every year during 2008 – 2015. The public data available on the site of Romanian Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection site - National Authority of Child Protection Department (Autoritatea Națională pentru Protecția Drepturilor Copilului și Adopție, 2015) with the year 2008. There are no available data before 2008.

**Table 01.** Comparative situation: the total number of new born, children leave in the hospital units and the number of children abandoned in maternity during the period 2008-2015

Years	Total newborn	Total children abandoned in hospital units	Total children abandoned in maternities	% new born abandoned from all abandoned children in hospital	% new born abandoned from all new born
2008	221900	1317	744	56,49%	0,34%
2009	222388	1400	800	57,14%	0,35%
2010	212199	1315	762	57,97%	0,35%
2011	196242	1432	942	65,78%	0,48%
2012	201104	1474	918	62,28%	0,44%
2013	207611	1449	915	63,14%	0,44%
2014	195612	1213	738	60,84%	0,48%
2015	187372	977	624	63,86%	0,33%

Source: generated by the author, based on the National Authority Child Protection Department ([www.copii.ro/statistici](http://www.copii.ro/statistici)) and National Institute of Statistic (<http://statistici.INSSE.ro/shop/>).

Note: The total number of newborn refers to the alive newborn.

In the year 2015 were born daily an average of 513 children. The formula for calculating the total number of new-born divided by the days of the year ( $187372 \text{ new-borns} / 365 \text{ days in year} = 513 \text{ new-born/day}$ ) and every 2 days were abandoned three children. In 2009 were born 222388, meaning 609 new-born/day, and 4 from those children were abandoned in maternities at every 2 days.

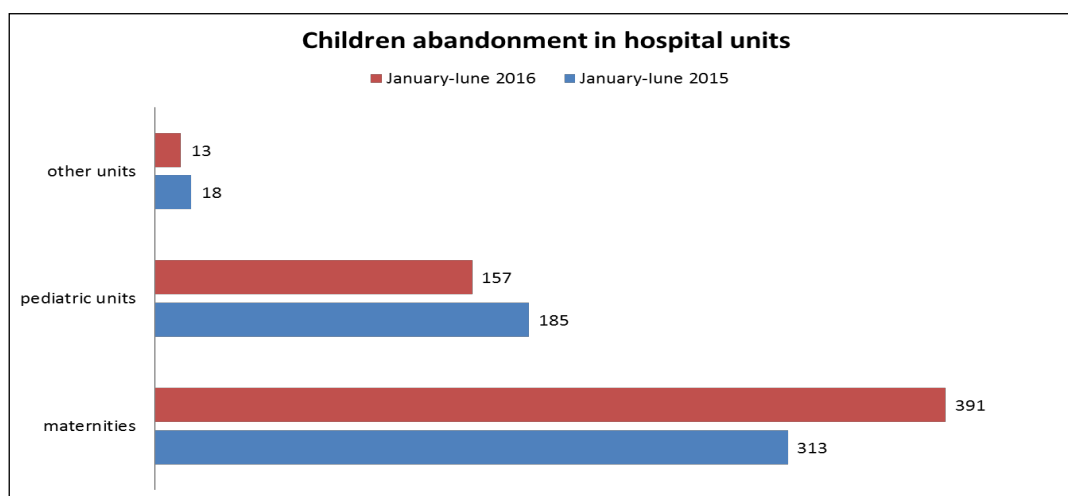
Maintaining a high percentage of newborn abandoned in maternities, compared to the total number of children leave the hospital units during 2008-2015 (Table 01), highlights the fact that the risk of child abandonment is major at this group age. Thus, during the period 2008-2015 from all children leave in the hospital units, a percentage between 56 % and 65,78 % is represented by the newborn abandoned in maternities.

Considering the fact that during the 2008 – 2015 were abandoned in maternities between 624 and 942 children, it means that daily there was at least 2 newborn abandoned in hospitals.

At the same time the percentage of newborn abandoned in maternities represents between 0,33 % and 0,48 % of total newborn in Romania, during 2008-2015. The largest number of children abandoned in maternities has been recorded in 2011, respectively 942, represented 65 % of all children leave in the hospital units and 0,48 % of all Romanian newborn (table 01).

The best situation during 2008-2015, was the one from 2015, respectively 977 children left in hospital units, from which 624 newborn (table 01), but the percentage of newborn compare with the total number of children abandoned in hospital units are still high, respectively 63,86 %. Also, a good sign is the fact that in the same year, 2015, from all newborns, the percentage of the ones abandoned in maternities is the smallest, respectively 0,33 %.

To see if the descendent trend is in the 2016, I compare the data from the I-st semester of year 2015 with the data from the I-st semester of year 2016 (figure 01).



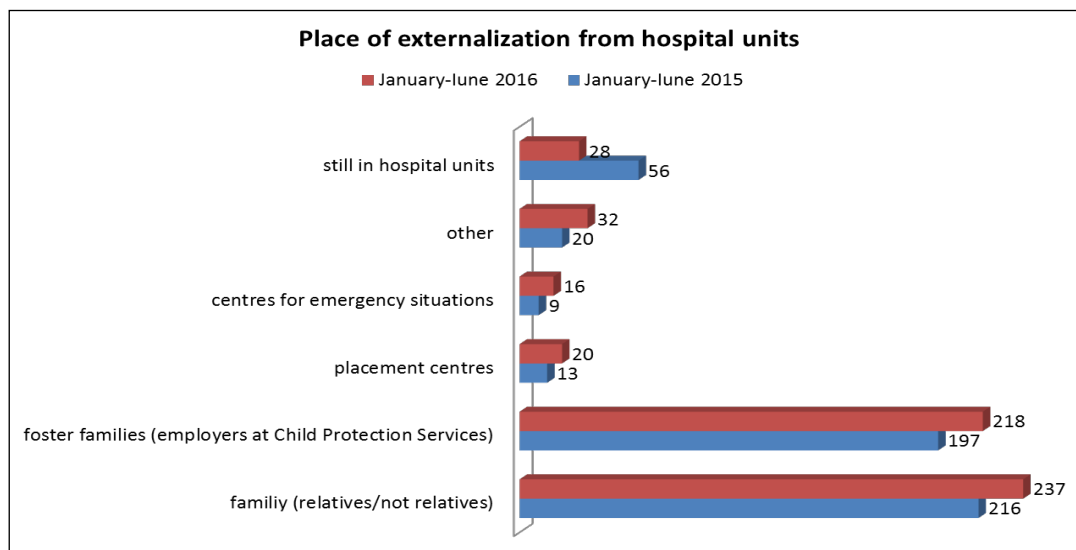
**Figure 01.** Comparative situation: the total number of children leave in the hospital units, I-st semester 2015 and I-st semester 2016

Source: generated by the author, based on the National Authority of Child Protection Department ANPDC ([www.copii.ro/statistici](http://www.copii.ro/statistici))

Note: in 2015: Without the data from Ilfov County – according with ANPDC data.

Figure 01 reveals that during the I-st semester of 2016, in all Romanian maternities were abandoned 391 children, compare with 313 from I semester of 2015. Considering that the data from 2015 do not include the children abandoned in Ilfov County Hospitals, it cannot be evaluate if the newborn abandoned in maternity are less in 2016 than in 2015. In any case the data reveals the reality that the newborn abandonment is high in both intervals.

The public data do not show information referring at the parents of the children, but present the information regarding the place where the children were externalized, respectively the measurement taken by the child protection services. In figure 02 it is presented a comparative situation regarding those measurements taken for the children left in hospital units by their parents.



**Figure 02.** Comparative situation: the place where the children left from the hospital units, I-st semester 2015 and I-st semester 2016

Source: generated by the author, based on the National Authority of Child Protection Department ANPDC ([www.copii.ro/statistici](http://www.copii.ro/statistici))

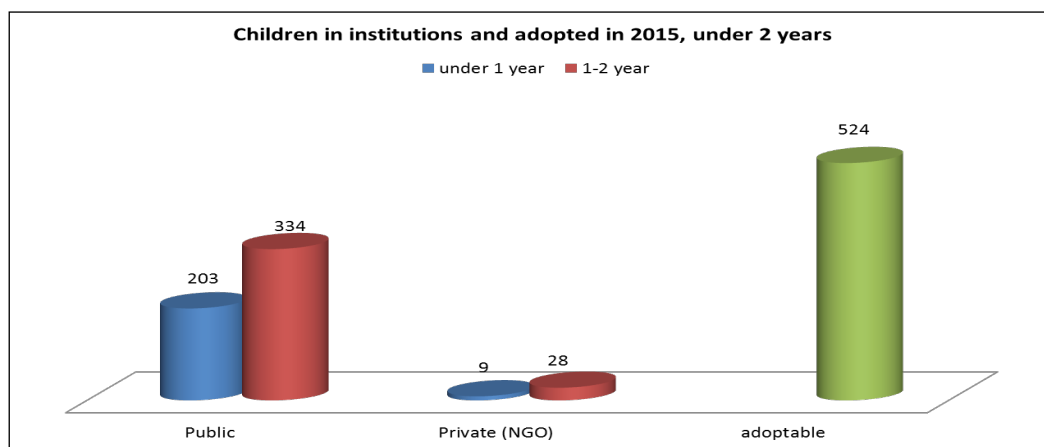
Note: in 2015: Without the data from Ilfov County

According with the Law 272/2004 the children without the care of their parents should be protected by the Child Protection Services, and the first measure that should be taken is to assure a familial environment for the child to be raised in. From the figure 02 it has been pointed out the fact that the first measurement that are taken with priority is to give the children in the care of a family. Obviously, the family reintegration is the measurements that prevail, being relatives reintegration or acquaintance families placement (237 children in 2016), and foster families (218 children in 2016). In first semester of 2016, 237 children return to their family or started a new life with extended family, and another 218 children were placed in foster families.

The national data do not specified the group age for the children that are externalized from the hospitals, so it cannot be made evaluation regarding the place where the newborn are going after the hospitalization. It is easy to suppose that some of them are transferring from maternities units to other hospital units before to go out. By the end of the first semester of 2016, 28 children were still in hospitals, 16 were in centers for emergency situations and for 20 children were decided the Placement in Centers (figure 02). The data from I semester of 2015 are incomplete, without the Ilfov County, but the situation of reintegration seems to be similar with the one from 2016.

The measurements that are taking immediately after child abandonment in hospital are temporarily, being reviewed periodically at least at every 6 months. For some of the children the Child Protection Services decide to start the adoption procedure.

Figure 03 presents the comparative situation of children under 2 years of age from public and private institutions and adoptable children, in 2015.



**Figure 03.** Comparative situation: children under 2 years from public and private institutions, and adoptable children and adoptable children under 2 years, in 2015

Source: Source: generated by the author, based on the National Authority of Child Protection Department ANPDC ([www.copii.ro/statistici](http://www.copii.ro/statistici)).

Note: Total children adopted (0-18 years) until the end of 2015: 850, from a total of 3436, according with ANPDC. The data do not refer to the age of the children adopted, and show the age only for the adoptable children.

In 2015 were abandoned in hospital units total 977, from which 624 were newborn (figure 01), also, in Public Centers were 203 children under 1 year and 334 children between 1-2 years (figure 03). The data do not presents if all institutionalized children under 2 years are adoptable, but from the practical experience I can definitively say that some of the adoptable children are in foster care, not only in institutions. In any case from all adoptable children (3436 conform to the note from figure 03) 524 are under 2 years (figure 03).

From all the figures it is easy to identify the fact that some of the children abandoned in maternities are there because their parents have no intention to take them home, and some of them are becoming adoptable. If the parents will receive some more information regarding the alternative and also regarding the adoption procedure, than the newborn abandonment in maternities could be prevented.

## 7. Conclusion

The historical and political context has influenced the perception of abandonment of children. Some poor parents (Muntean & Munteanu, 2011) still think that for the children will be better if they will remain in the care of hospitals and institutions. During the communist regime this phenomenon was raised and legislative changes in the 2000s have contributed to the reduction in the total number of institutionalized children, but did not led to the decrease of the number of abandoned children in maternities.

The child abandonment and especially the newborn abandonment continue to be a social problem, that affects these children, but also, the Romanian Society. During 2008 – 2015, was born daily between 513 and 609, and 2 from those children were abandoned by their parents, but especially by theirs mothers.

The child abandonment phenomenon is not limited just at newborn group age (Popescu, 2014). Some of the children are abandoned in the next years. But in the newborn case, the effects are major and in some cases irreversible. Many children develop health problems, or are left in hospitals because they already have a physical disability. The time spends in hospital without the emotion connection of a caregiver, can cause psychological problems and also attachments disorders.

The importance that the law gave to the family when established the main measure that should be taken for an abandoned child, point out the fact that the only environment where the child is safe is the family one.

This is why the preventive measurements should involve the counseling of the future parents regarding the parental responsibility, but also refers to the alternative at the child abandonment, based on the case management evaluation for every child (Payne, 2011).

The alternatives at the child abandonment and institutionalization are: placement at the extended family of the child, Maternal Centers, foster families placement and adoption. All of this alternative offers a secure environment and insure the emotional bond and social connection with a family. It seems that those measurements are not sufficient, because some of the children go out from the hospital and end up in an institution, according with the data from table 01 and figure 03. In 2015, there were 203 children under 1 year in Public Placement Center and 9 in Private Centers.

In maternal center the couple mother-child can be protected for 3-12 months. This time will facilitate the attachment between mother and child, which are accepted to the maternal center residency together. Also, the attachment form during the residency in maternal center contributes to the maintenance of the mother-child dyad after the residency period. In Romania, in 2015, there were 54 centers, according to the National Authority of Child Protection Department (Autoritatea Națională pentru Protecția Drepturilor Copilului și Adopție, 2015). Adoption is one of the measures that ensure a family to the child, but also will cut the natural family ties. Despite of the good intention of the law, the adoption is still long process and usually newborn abandoned cannot be adopted, because the Law 273/2004 established many months for every adoption step process, and the child will be adopted after many years since the initial abandonment. In 2015 from 3436 adoptable children only 524 were under 2 years of age and just 850 from total adoptable children were adopted by the end of the year. This process is long partially because for the adoption process to start is needed the accord of the parents and child relatives (grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins). Or in case of newborn abandonment some mothers come at the hospital in labor without the Identity Documents, and after the birth they disappear. In this case is necessary a court decision, fact that are making the adoption procedure longer, and increase the time that child spends in hospital, institution or in foster homes. To offer a family for every newborn abandoned it is necessary to adjust legislation and promote of alternatives at the newborn abandonment. It is also necessary to educate young people and inform them previous and during pregnancy so that no pregnant woman at-risk of child abandonment decides to leave her child in maternity.

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