

A call for coordinated and evidence-based action to protect children outside of family care



A caring and protective family, immediate and extended, is central to effective child protection. Children in the most dire straits, however, live without protective family care. These children may be found living on the streets or in institutions, trafficked, participating in armed groups, or exploited for their labour. Children in such circumstances often experience abuse, neglect, lack of stimulation, and extreme and toxic stress, all of which have a profoundly negative effect on a child's development and adult outcomes.¹

Children living outside of family care have largely fallen off the statistical map. There are only limited data about how many children live in such precarious circumstances, except for scattered estimates from some specific countries. Such children are often not covered in household-based surveys. Some international data collection activities provide useful information about these children, including USAID's Demographic and Health Surveys,² UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys,³ the Statistical Information and Monitoring Program on Child Labor surveys sponsored by the International Labour Organization,⁴ and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Violence Against Children surveys.⁵ Although there is a need for more evidence-based research, rough global estimates indicate that 17 800 000 children have lost both parents;⁶ 2 000 000 children are in institutional care;⁷ 1 800 000 children are victims of sex trafficking or involvement in pornography;⁸ and 1 100 000 children are trafficked for forced labour.⁹

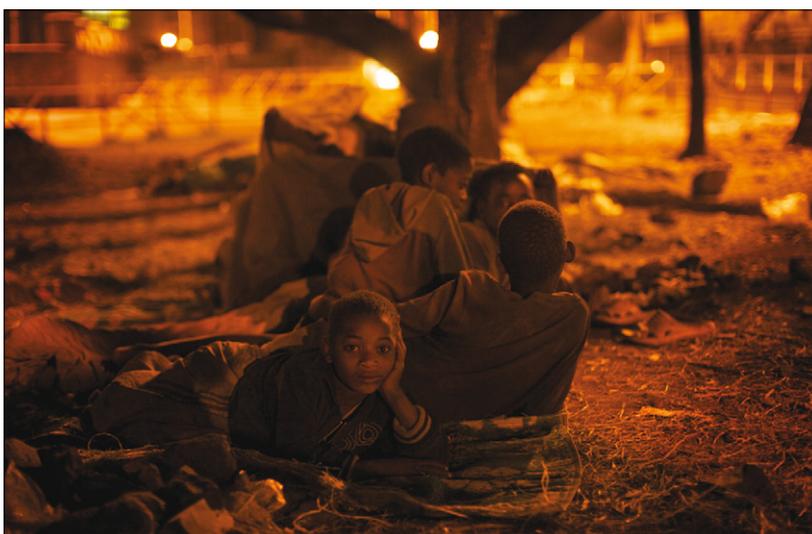
International and national governmental and non-governmental efforts to assist vulnerable children in low-income and middle-income countries have often focused on single vulnerability cohorts and categories—for example, children affected by HIV/AIDS, children in emergencies, or children who have been trafficked. Although current efforts have produced substantial benefits, this diffused approach can result in a fragmented response. Coordinated, multifaceted action can help ensure that disadvantaged and marginalised children outside of family care benefit fully from policies and services.¹⁰ Providing help to these at-risk children is an important barometer of the overall capacity of a

nation's child welfare and protection system. Strong child protection systems, as part of broader child welfare systems, are as important to breaking cycles of vulnerability and assisting highly vulnerable children¹¹ as strong health systems are to the prevention of and response to child morbidity and mortality. In many countries, formal national child protection systems exist, yet application and enforcement of policies, as well as case monitoring and follow-up, are lacking. Child welfare and protection systems are, all too often, neglected, understaffed, and under-resourced. The human resource constraint within the child welfare and protection sector is critical.^{12–14}

Recognising the need for evidence to inform policies, strategies, and programmes to care for vulnerable children has led the US Government to convene an Evidence Summit on Protecting Children Outside of Family Care on Dec 12–13, 2011, in Washington, DC, USA. The Summit will bring together leading researchers and technical experts to assess the evidence to inform policies, strategies, and programmes relevant to protecting children outside of family care in low-income and middle-income countries and so identify evidence gaps to shape the future research agenda. Following the Summit, we have committed to establish guiding principles for US Government assistance to affected children outside the USA and to develop a strategy,

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For more on the **Evidence Summit on Protecting Children Outside of Family Care** see <http://www.hvcassistance.org/summit.cfm>



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by July, 2012, to promote evidence-based responses to protect these vulnerable children. The strategy will promote application of the principles, implementation of evidence-based best practices, and research to address critical knowledge gaps in initiatives for at-risk children outside of family care funded by the US Government. With continued global collaboration and coordination across agencies and partners, we can tackle more effectively the common constraints to improving children's wellbeing and protecting the most vulnerable.

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