

International adoption

Babies without borders

Hundreds of thousands of children languish in orphanages. Adopting them should be made easier



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OF THE 2 billion children in the world, about 15m are parentless. Millions more have been abandoned. Most of these unlucky kids are cared for by other relatives. Others live temporarily with foster parents. But hundreds of thousands languish in state institutions of varying degrees of grimness. The youngest and healthiest will probably find local adoptive parents. For older or disabled children, however, willing adopters from abroad are often the best and only option. Yet the total number of overseas adoptions is [dwindling](#) (see [article](#))

(<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21703364-fewer-families-are-adopting-children-overseas-home-alone>).

There is a reason for this. For decades cross-border adoptions were often a racket. In Romania after the fall of the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989, thousands of orphans were adopted illegally. In post-civil-war Guatemala middlemen paid poor women a pittance to get pregnant repeatedly—or simply stole babies and sold them. When one country tightened the rules, the trade in babies moved somewhere laxer.

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That trend has stopped. As countries have implemented the Hague Adoption Convention, passed in the wake of the Romanian exodus, they have stamped out the worst cases. Last year 12,500 children were adopted by overseas parents, about a third of the total just over a decade ago. The crackdown was necessary: babies are not goods to be trafficked. But many governments have gone too far. It is now too hard for willing, suitable parents to

adopt needy children—and this hurts both the would-be adopters and, more importantly, the children.

Cambodia and Guatemala have stopped foreign adoptions completely; Russia has banned those by Americans. In many other countries the paperwork can take years. This is cruel. The early months and years of life are the most crucial. Depriving a child of parental love—inevitable in even the least dire orphanage—can cause lifelong scarring. The priority for any system should be to perform the necessary checks as quickly as possible and to place every child with foster or adoptive parents.

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The Hague convention is a good starting-point. It says: first try to place an abandoned child with a relative; if that fails, try for a local adoption; and if a local family cannot be found, look overseas. Critics of international adoption point out that children who grow up in a different culture sometimes feel alienated and unhappy. This is true, but for many the alternative—growing up in an institution—is far worse.

When overseas adoption is a last resort, the children who end up with foreign families are the ones whom no one else wants: the older ones, the severely handicapped, members of unpopular ethnic minorities. In Guatemala only 10% of the children awaiting adoption are babies or toddlers without special needs. Few Guatemalans will consider taking the other 90%. Plenty of evangelical Christians in America would be happy to. It makes no sense to stop them.

No one cares for you a smidge

Creating a fast, safe adoption system should not be costly. Indeed, it should be cheaper than keeping children in institutions. All it takes is political will, as can be seen from the success of schemes in Peru and Colombia. Public databases that match children with good, willing parents work well locally in some rich countries. (Pennsylvania's is praised, for example.) There is no reason why such systems should not be made international. Children need parents now, not next year.