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FAMILY VULNERABILITY AND THE SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN IN THE SPECIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

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Family Vulnerability and the Socio-Educational Integration of Children in the Special Protection System

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Abstract

Child abandonment and separation from the family are complex social phenomena associated with the interaction of economic, family, relational and psycho-emotional vulnerabilities. This article analyses the socio-familial characteristics and socio-educational integration of 120 children in the special protection system in Bihor County, with reference to the institutional context of Felix Children's Home. The sample was divided into two equal subsamples: 60 children abandoned at birth and 60 children subsequently separated from their families. Data were collected using a standardised socio-psycho-educational assessment form, based on information from social case files and specialists' assessments. The results indicate an accumulation of vulnerabilities: the main causes of separation were abuse (26 cases), family breakdown (22), poverty (19), parental migration (19), neglect (17) and domestic violence (17). A total of 89 children maintain a relationship with their biological family, 19 have weekly contact, and family reintegration was not possible for 61 children at the time of the research. Emotional and/or behavioural problems were identified in 84 children, learning difficulties in 65, and risk of school dropout in 72. The relationship with staff recorded the highest mean integration score (4.00/5), followed by the relationship with peers (3.88/5). The results support the need for a multidimensional intervention linking social protection with family, psychological and educational support.

Keywords: child abandonment; child protection; family vulnerability; family separation; socio-educational integration; Felix Children's Home; Bihor County.

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Introduction

Child abandonment and separation from the biological family are complex social and relational processes associated with an accumulation of individual, family, community and institutional risk factors. Separation may occur at birth, through abandonment in healthcare facilities, or later, in contexts characterised by neglect, poverty, abuse, parental migration, disability, conflict or family breakdown (Popescu, 2003; Sherr, Mueller, & Fox, 2009). The literature addresses these situations from the perspective of cumulative vulnerability, whereby repeated exposure to poverty, housing insecurity, domestic violence, lack of family support and limited access to social services increases the risk of child-family separation (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

In Romanian sociological literature, the analysis of abandonment is connected to the broader issues of poverty, social exclusion and family vulnerability. Zamfir and Preda, (2000) show that poverty affects a family's material resources and its access to education, healthcare, adequate housing, social protection and community support networks. Similarly, Pop, (2002; 2005) approaches social policies and the evaluation of interventions for vulnerable groups by relating services to the needs of populations at risk. Economic vulnerability thus intersects with access to social resources and the family's capacity to meet the child's needs.

Neglect is another important component of vulnerability. It concerns the provision of food, hygiene, medical care, education, supervision and emotional support necessary for a child's development (UNICEF, 2019; World Health Organization, 2022). Its effects are more pronounced when neglect becomes chronic and occurs during the early years of life, affecting biological, cognitive, emotional and social development (Gilbert *et al.*, 2009). Research conducted in Romania also identifies other circumstances associated with abandonment: single motherhood, low educational attainment, disability of the child or mother, financial insecurity, problematic relationships between partners and insufficient support mechanisms (Milicenco & Bulat, 2010).

The psycho-emotional dimension complements the social explanation of the phenomenon. Attachment theory, formulated by Bowlby (1988), emphasises the role of an early and stable relationship between the child and the primary attachment figure in developing emotional security, trust, autonomy and the capacity to form relationships. Prolonged separation and the disruption of stable emotional relationships may be associated with insecurity, anxiety and difficulties in emotional regulation. For abandoned or institutionalised children, these processes are relevant to socio-emotional development and subsequent adaptation. Early adversity and toxic stress may influence brain development, emotional health and long-term social functioning (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Literature on institutionalisation also shows that long-term residential care, especially during the early years of life, may limit the social, emotional and cognitive stimulation necessary for child

development (Browne, *et al.*, 2005; Nelson *et al.*, 2007; Zeanah, *et al.*, 2017). Findings from the Bucharest Early Intervention Project highlighted the effects of early institutionalisation on cognitive and emotional development and the importance of family-based care for children deprived of adequate parental care.

In Romania, the analysis of abandonment must also be considered in relation to the transformation of the child protection system after 1989. The reform sought to reduce traditional institutionalisation and develop family and community-based services. Cojocaru (2008) describes the transition from institutionalisation to community services as one of the major transformations of the Romanian protection system and highlights the role of day-care centres, mother-and-baby centres, parental counselling and family assistance in preventing child-family separation. From a children's rights perspective, the same author identifies poverty, social exclusion, limited access to social services and parental migration among the important factors associated with the risk of separation (Cojocaru, 2009). Case management occupies an important place in this reorganisation of social intervention. Cojocaru and Cojocaru (2006; 2008) present it as an instrument for coordinating services for vulnerable children, based on assessment of the situation, development of an individualised service plan, collaboration among specialists and monitoring of the case's progress. This approach makes it possible to connect intervention for the child with the family's situation and the resources available in the community.

Deinstitutionalisation gradually shifted the focus of intervention towards preventing separation and supporting the child within a family environment. Community services, family placement, parental support and family-based alternatives became important directions of child protection reform. In Romanian literature, this orientation is reflected in analyses of family- and child-centred social policies and evaluations of interventions for vulnerable groups (Pop, 2005; Zamfir, Voicu, & Stănescu, 2020).

The evolution of the Romanian protection system must also be viewed in a regional context. Anghel, Herczog, and Dima, (2013) analyse child protection reform in Eastern Europe, including Romania, in relation to the difficulties involved in moving from residential institutions towards services and forms of protection closer to a family environment. In this process, prevention of separation, family support and the development of community services became important components of child protection policies. Early intervention encompasses measures such as parental counselling, material support, social monitoring, day-care services, mother-and-baby centres, home visits, parenting education, and facilitated access to healthcare and educational services. These measures seek to reduce risk factors before child-family separation becomes necessary. For children already in the protection system, the same perspective requires continuity of intervention through educational, psychological and social support, the maintenance of family relationships when circumstances permit, and preparation for social integration and autonomy.

Poverty is an important determinant of social risk, but its effects must be interpreted together with access to education, healthcare, housing and social services. A family with limited material resources may become more vulnerable when economic difficulties are combined with relational instability, single parenthood, migration, violence or lack of community support (Zamfir & Preda, 2000; Mărginean, & Precupețu, 2010). Neglect and abuse add a further dimension. Neglect entails the persistent failure to meet a child's fundamental needs, and its effects may be physical, cognitive, emotional and social. Consequently, family separation must be analysed as the outcome of a combination of vulnerabilities, rather than as the automatic expression of a particular marital status, educational level or economic position. Parental migration may produce prolonged forms of separation and discontinuity in parental supervision. Romanian literature has associated this situation with emotional difficulties, social withdrawal and educational vulnerabilities, which justifies including migration among the factors examined in child protection studies.

Studies of children deprived of adequate parental care have shown that the duration and quality of the care environment are relevant to socio-emotional development. Long-term residential care, particularly when separation occurs early, may limit the continuity of emotional relationships and individualised stimulation (Browne *et al.*, 2005; Nelson *et al.*, 2007). At the same time, analysis of children in protection should not be reduced to the effects of institutionalisation. Integration depends on relationships developed with significant adults and the peer group, school participation, access to psychological and social services, and the maintenance of links with the biological family when this is possible and safe. Case management and community services are relevant precisely because they can coordinate these dimensions (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2006; Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2008).

Methodology

Design and sample

The research is applied, descriptive and comparative-typological. Purposive sampling was used, with cases selected according to their relevance to the research objectives. The sample comprises 120 children in the special protection system in Bihor County. Of these, 60 were classified as children abandoned at birth and 60 as children subsequently separated from their families in contexts such as abuse, neglect, poverty or family breakdown.

The sample comprises 61 girls and 59 boys aged between 8 and 18 years. The largest age groups are nine-year-olds (17 children), 12-year-olds (15) and 10-year-olds (14). The research is applied and descriptive, and the sample was divided into two subsamples according to the type of separation.

Instrument and variables

Individual data were collected using a standardised socio-psycho-educational assessment form, completed on the basis of information contained in social case files and assessments conducted by specialists involved in the children's care and monitoring. The instrument covered: history of institutionalisation; family and social context; relationship with the biological family; legal status; health status; emotional and behavioural vulnerabilities; integration within the centre, school and social integration; experiences of abuse and violence; and forms of support and intervention. A five-point Likert scale was used for the integration and relationship indicators, where 1 represents a very low level and 5 a very high level. Absolute frequencies, percentages calculated for N = 120, and mean scores for the integration variables are reported.

Research questions

- Q1. What are the main family and social characteristics associated with the separation of the children included in the study from their biological families?
- Q2. To what extent is the relationship with the biological family maintained, and what are the prospects for family reintegration?
- Q3. What are the main emotional, behavioural and educational vulnerabilities identified?
- Q4. What is the level of institutional, school and social integration of the children analysed?

Ethical considerations and limitations

The data were anonymised and processed exclusively for scientific purposes. Information concerning identity, family history and social circumstances was used in a manner that did not permit direct identification of participants. Purposive sampling limits the statistical generalisability of the findings to the entire population of children in special protection.

Results

History of separation and duration of institutionalisation

Separation from the mother frequently occurred during the early years of life. Most cases were recorded at the age of one year (29 children; 24.2%) and two years (20; 16.7%), in addition to eight children separated at birth and three cases

during the first months of life. The sample also includes separations occurring between the ages of 5 and 13, confirming the existence of distinct pathways into the system. The duration of institutionalisation ranges from 1 to 15 years. The most frequent durations are six years (14 children), eight years (13), ten years (13) and seven years (12). The distribution shows that a substantial proportion of children spent medium or extended periods in the protection system.

Table 1. Key Indicators in the history of separation and institutionalisation

Indicator	Relevant/dominant category	n (%)
Age at separation	1 year	29 (24.2%)
Age at separation	2 years	20 (16.7%)
Duration of institutionalisation	6 years	14 (11.7%)
Duration of institutionalisation	8 years	13 (10.8%)
Duration of institutionalisation	10 years	13 (10.8%)
Duration of institutionalisation	7 years	12 (10.0%)

Source: prepared by the author

Family context and causes of separation

The family context is heterogeneous, but the indicators converge towards the existence of cumulative vulnerabilities. Regarding maternal education, 36 mothers had lower-secondary education (30.0%), 30 had no formal education (25.0%), 28 had primary education (23.3%), and 26 had upper-secondary education (21.7%). The family's economic situation was assessed as average in 43 cases (35.8%), low in 40 (33.3%), and very low in 37 (30.8%). The primary cause of separation was abuse in 26 cases (21.7%), followed by family breakdown in 22 (18.3%). Parental migration and poverty were each identified in 19 cases (15.8%), while neglect and domestic violence were each identified in 17 cases (14.2%). The distribution of causes highlights the multidimensional nature of family separation.

Table 2. Primary cause of child-family separation

Primary cause of separation	n	%
Abuse	26	21.7
Family breakdown	22	18.3
Parental migration	19	15.8
Poverty	19	15.8
Neglect	17	14.2
Domestic violence	17	14.2

Source: prepared by the author

In 61 cases (50.8%), the child had siblings who were also in the protection system. This finding suggests that family vulnerability may affect several children within the same family simultaneously or successively. It supports a whole-family approach to intervention.

Relationship with the biological family and reintegration

Most children, 89 of 120 (74.2%) maintain some form of relationship with their biological family. However, contact is limited in frequency: only 19 children (15.8%) have weekly contact, 40 (33.3%) monthly contact, 30 (25.0%) occasional contact, and 31 (25.8%) have no contact. Family visits are reported for 59 children, while 61 receive no such visits. Maintaining a formal relationship is therefore not equivalent to having a frequent and active family relationship. This distinction becomes even clearer with regard to reintegration: it was considered possible for 20 children (16.7%), under assessment for 39 (32.5%), and not possible for 61 (50.8%) at the time of the research. Family involvement was high in only 21 cases, moderate in 51, and low in 48.

Table 3. Relationship with the biological family and possibility of reintegration

Indicator	Category	n (%)
Relationship with biological family	Maintained	89 (74.2%)
Family contact	Weekly	19 (15.8%)
Family contact	No contact	31 (25.8%)
Family reintegration	Possible	20 (16.7%)
Family reintegration	Under assessment	39 (32.5%)
Family reintegration	Not possible	61 (50.8%)

Source: prepared by the author

Legal status and protection measures

Protection measures are relatively evenly distributed: 43 children were placed with professional foster carers (35.8%), 39 were in placement (32.5%), and 38 were covered by other measures (31.7%). In terms of legal status, 44 were eligible for adoption (36.7%), 40 were subject to a temporary measure (33.3%), and 36 to a permanent measure (30.0%). Adoption procedures had been initiated in 61 cases and had not been initiated in 59. The distribution points to different legal and institutional pathways, which must be interpreted in relation to the possibilities of reintegration, adoption and continuity of protection.

Health and psycho-emotional vulnerabilities

Health problems were identified in 53 children (44.2%), and different forms of disability in 44 (36.7%). Emotional and/or behavioural problems were more frequent, however, being reported for 84 children (70.0%). This profile indicates needs that extend beyond the administrative or material dimension of protection and justify multidisciplinary interventions. In the analysis of traumatic experiences, emotional abuse and neglect were each identified in 25 cases, exploitation in 22, and physical abuse in 21. No direct forms of abuse were identified in the assessments of 27 participants. Exposure to domestic violence was present among 62 children (51.7%), behavioural problems among 56 (46.7%), and tendencies towards social isolation among 63 (52.5%).

Institutional, school and social integration

The mean score for integration within the centre was 3.58 out of 5, and the relationship with other children scored 3.53. The highest score was recorded for the relationship with staff (4.00), followed by the relationship with school peers (3.88). The relationship with teachers had a mean of 3.47, while participation in recreational activities scored 3.46. These values indicate relatively favourable relational integration, particularly in relation to staff, alongside areas in which adaptation remains moderate.

Table 4. Mean scores for institutional and social integration

Integration indicator	Mean score (1-5)
Relationship with staff	4.00
Relationship with peers	3.88
Integration within the centre	3.58
Relationship with other children	3.53
Relationship with teachers	3.47
Participation in recreational activities	3.46

Source: prepared by the author

The educational indicators, however, reveal substantial vulnerabilities. School attendance was regular for 30 children (25.0%), fluctuating for 61 (50.8%), and low for 29 (24.2%). School performance was good for 29 (24.2%), average for 61 (50.8%), and poor for 30 (25.0%). Learning difficulties were identified in 65 children (54.2%), and risk of school dropout in 72 (60.0%).

Table 5. Indicators of school integration

Educational indicator	Category	n (%)
School attendance	Regular	30 (25.0%)
School attendance	Fluctuating	61 (50.8%)
School attendance	Low	29 (24.2%)
Performance	Good	29 (24.2%)
Performance	Average	61 (50.8%)
Performance	Poor	30 (25.0%)
Learning difficulties	Yes	65 (54.2%)
Risk of school dropout	Yes	72 (60.0%)

Source: prepared by the author

Forms of support and intervention

Analysis of the forms of socio-educational support and intervention reveals a diversified system of services for the children included in the research. All 120 children receive educational support, recreational activities and social support, while collaboration with the school and local social services is present in all cases analysed. Regarding specialised interventions, 80 children received psychological counselling (66.7%), 60 received medical services (50.0%), and 62 received community support (51.7%). Collaboration with non-governmental organisations is recorded for 59 children (49.2%), collaboration with healthcare institutions for 60 (50.0%), and collaboration with the church or local community for 61 (50.8%). Participation in prevention and integration programmes is recorded for 54 children, representing 45.0% of the sample. These findings fall within an institutional context in which Felix Children's Home also draws on support from partnerships, donations and international initiatives. The organisation presents monthly child sponsorship, individual donations and funding for special projects as means of support, with donations also managed through its partnership with Assist International. External financial contributions to infrastructure development have been documented: in 2016, Building Humanity raised USD 7,500 for materials required for construction work at Felix Children's Home in Oradea, while in 2023 a USD 5,000 Jacobs Collectively Grant was awarded to continue work on a house under construction.

The support component also includes activities aimed at developing practical skills and preparing children for adult life. Felix Children's Home provides tailoring and carpentry workshops, agricultural activities, including a dairy farm and vehicle-repair activities; these programmes are presented as means of supporting children's development and building practical life skills. Action Felix, a foundation affiliated with Felix Children's Home Romania, operates along the same lines and seeks

to develop a self-sustaining model by managing integrated economic activities and providing opportunities for practical training. The international dimension of support is also illustrated by volunteering and educational collaboration. In 2018, 15 students and three staff members from CU Scarborough (Coventry University) undertook a support visit to Oradea, stayed at Felix Children's Home, and participated in practical, recreational and therapeutic activities. The group also distributed donations of hygiene products, clothing, bedding and medical supplies, and used the funds raised to purchase food and other necessities.

Regarding European funding, the documentary sources consulted record the participation of the executive director of Felix Children's Home in an event organised under the project "Opportunities for the Future through Equal Opportunities", co-financed by the European Social Fund through the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013. The project was implemented by the Filocalia Foundation together with its partners.

Relating the research findings to this institutional information outlines a support framework that brings together educational and social services, psychological and medical interventions, community collaboration, partnerships with non-governmental organisations, private donations and grants, international volunteering, and activities aimed at developing practical skills.

Discussion

The findings support an interpretation of abandonment and family separation as multidimensional processes. The distribution of causes shows that neither poverty, family status nor abuse alone explains entry into the protection system. The data describe contexts in which material hardship, relational breakdown, migration, neglect and violence may overlap. This finding is consistent with a social policy perspective that treats vulnerability as the result of interaction between family resources and access to support mechanisms (Zamfir, & Preda, 2000; Pop, 2005). The fact that 61 children have siblings in the system reinforces the relevance of a family-centred approach. When vulnerability affects several children in the same family, an intervention focused exclusively on the child already separated risks addressing the consequence rather than the configuration of risk. Preventive services, case management and parental support therefore become necessary components of protection. The relationship with the biological family provides a nuanced finding. Although almost three quarters of the children maintain some form of relationship, weekly contact occurs for only a minority, and reintegration was not possible for more than half at the time of assessment. The mere existence of contact therefore cannot serve as a sufficient indicator of the relationship's functionality or the possibility of returning to the family. Reunification requires a reduction in the factors that led to separation, together with continuous assessment and support.

The psycho-emotional and educational profile is one of the study's most important findings. Seven out of ten children have emotional and/or behavioural problems, more than half have learning difficulties, and 60% are at risk of school dropout. The findings indicate a substantial concentration of needs within the sample, consistent with the literature on the effects of early adversity, neglect and relational discontinuity (Bowlby, 1988; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). The relatively favourable relational scores constitute an apparently contrasting finding. The relationship with staff has a mean score of 4.00/5 and the relationship with peers 3.88/5, while educational indicators show fluctuating attendance, learning difficulties and risk of dropout. This difference suggests that socio-educational integration should be examined across distinct dimensions: a functional relationship with significant adults or the peer group may coexist with difficulties in school participation and performance. From a service perspective, universal coverage with educational support, recreational activities and social support is a favourable element, while fewer than half of the participants take part in prevention and integration programmes. This finding supports the need for continuity of intervention beyond day-to-day care, particularly for children experiencing school difficulties, social isolation or limited prospects of family reintegration.

Implications for policy and practice

The first implication concerns prevention. The distribution of the causes of separation indicates the need for early identification of families in which risk factors accumulate. Material support is important but insufficient when poverty coexists with violence, neglect, migration or relational breakdown. Intervention must combine social assistance, educational services, healthcare and psychological support.

The second implication concerns maintaining and assessing family relationships. The data show a clear difference between the existence of a relationship and frequency of contact. Individualised plans must assess the existence, quality, regularity and safety of contact, as well as changes in the conditions that would permit reintegration.

The third implication is educational. The proportion of children with learning difficulties and at risk of school dropout justifies individualised interventions, attendance monitoring, remedial support and sustained collaboration between protection services and schools. The relatively favourable relationship with staff and peers may provide a resource for developing these interventions. For children for whom family reintegration is not possible, continuity of support must be linked to the development of autonomy and preparation for independent living. Effective protection seeks to develop the social, educational and functional skills required for subsequent integration.

Conclusions

The study highlights a complex profile of vulnerability among the 120 children analysed. Family separation occurs in heterogeneous contexts in which abuse, family breakdown, poverty, migration, neglect and domestic violence are present in substantial proportions. The findings support the need for a cumulative and multidimensional perspective. Maintaining links with the biological family remains important, but the data show that the relationship is often discontinuous and that reintegration is not possible for a substantial proportion of the sample. At the same time, the frequency of emotional and behavioural problems, learning difficulties and risk of school dropout highlights the need for interventions that extend beyond the administrative dimension of the protection measure. Scores concerning relationships with staff and peers indicate the existence of important relational resources within the protection environment. These may provide foundations for educational interventions and the development of autonomy. At the same time, uneven coverage of prevention and integration programmes points to a concrete area for service development. The effectiveness of child protection is reflected in the system's capacity to identify vulnerability at an early stage, support the family when keeping the child within the family environment is safe, provide multidisciplinary intervention following separation, and ensure continuity of support until social integration and autonomy are achieved.

Study limitations and directions for future research

The research is applied and is based on a purposively selected sample, according to the relevance of cases to the study objectives. For this reason, the findings describe the circumstances of the children included in the analysis and must be interpreted in relation to the specific sample and institutional context investigated. The data used derive mainly from social documentation and assessments conducted by specialists, providing a detailed picture of participants' circumstances while keeping the analysis predominantly descriptive.

The current structure of the database makes it possible to identify the main characteristics of the 120 children and the general differences between the two types of separation. For further investigation, the individual-level database could be used for additional statistical analyses examining the relationship between the type of separation and variables such as school integration, emotional and behavioural difficulties, risk of school dropout, and the possibility of family reintegration. Such a stage would enable a transition from describing distributions to a more detailed examination of associations among family, institutional and socio-educational factors.

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