The Global Picture of Children in Institutions

There are millions of children living in institutions worldwide. One estimate puts the total at up to **eight million**[1], though, given gaps in global statistics and indications that there are many unregistered children's homes, the true figure may well be much higher[2].
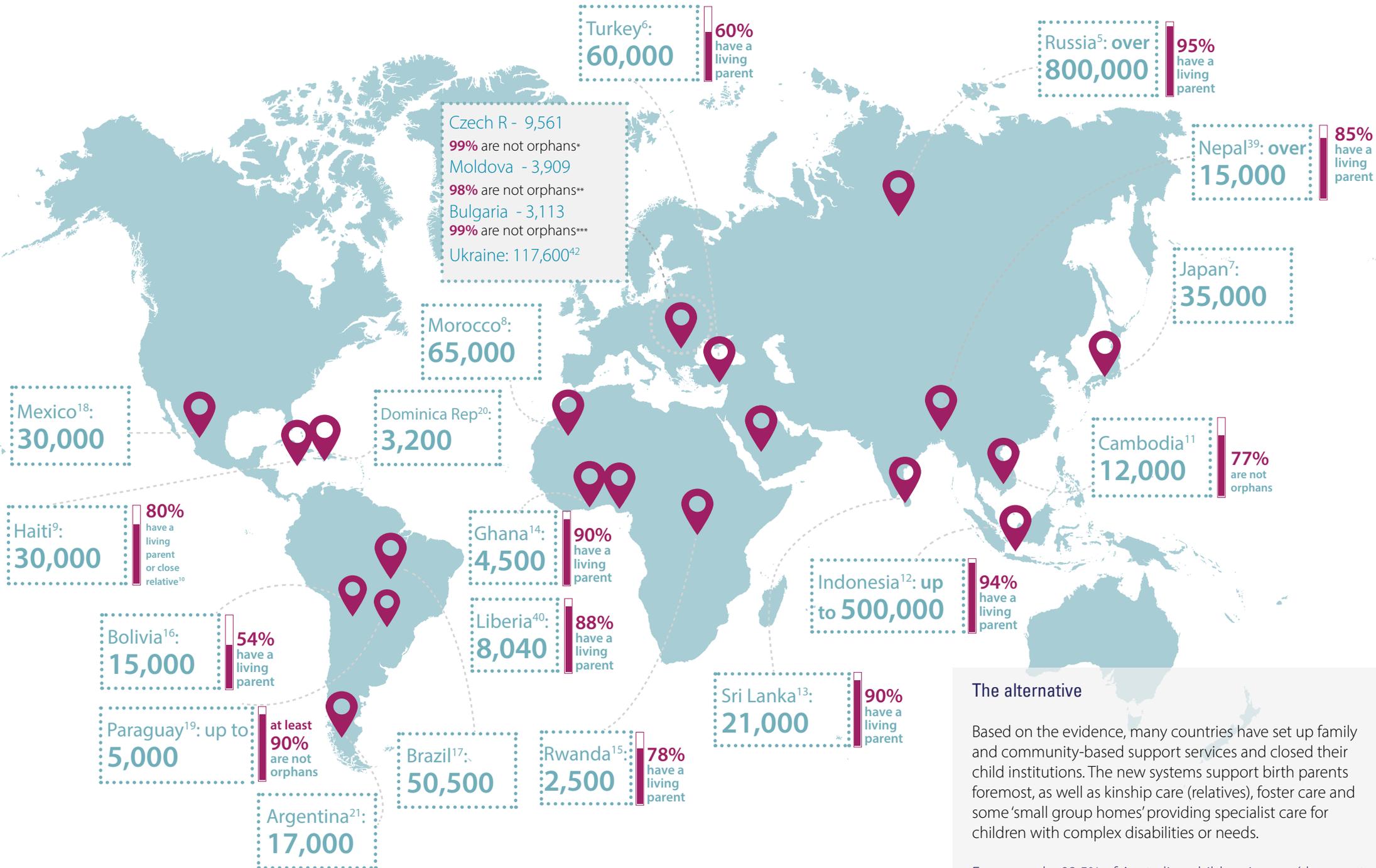
8 MILLION

The orphan myth

We assume these institutions, or 'orphanages', are there to support orphans, **but over 80% of the children have a living parent**[3]. The majority could be reunited with their families given the right support.

Although some institutions run to high standards with dedicated, caring staff, they cannot replace a family. **Sixty years of research has shown the negative impact of institutionalisation on children's health, development and life chances**[4].

Turkey[6]: 60,000 — **60%** have a living parent

Russia[5]: **over** 800,000 — **95%** have a living parent

Czech R - 9,561
99% are not orphans*
Moldova - 3,909
98% are not orphans**
Bulgaria - 3,113
99% are not orphans***
Ukraine: 117,600[42]

Nepal[39]: **over** 15,000 — **85%** have a living parent

Japan[7]: 35,000

Morocco[8]: 65,000

Mexico[18]: 30,000

Dominica Rep[20]: 3,200

Cambodia[11] 12,000 — **77%** are not orphans

Haiti[9]: 30,000 — **80%** have a living parent or close relative[10]

Ghana[14]: 4,500 — **90%** have a living parent

Indonesia[12]: **up to 500,000** — **94%** have a living parent

Bolivia[16]: 15,000 — **54%** have a living parent

Liberia[40]: 8,040 — **88%** have a living parent

Paraguay[19]: **up to** 5,000 — **at least 90% are not orphans**

Sri Lanka[13]: 21,000 — **90%** have a living parent

Brazil[17]: 50,500

Rwanda[15]: 2,500 — **78%** have a living parent

Argentina[21]: 17,000

The alternative

Based on the evidence, many countries have set up family and community-based support services and closed their child institutions. The new systems support birth parents foremost, as well as kinship care (relatives), foster care and some 'small group homes' providing specialist care for children with complex disabilities or needs.

For example, 93.5% of Australian children in care (those not living with birth parents) live with foster families.[22]
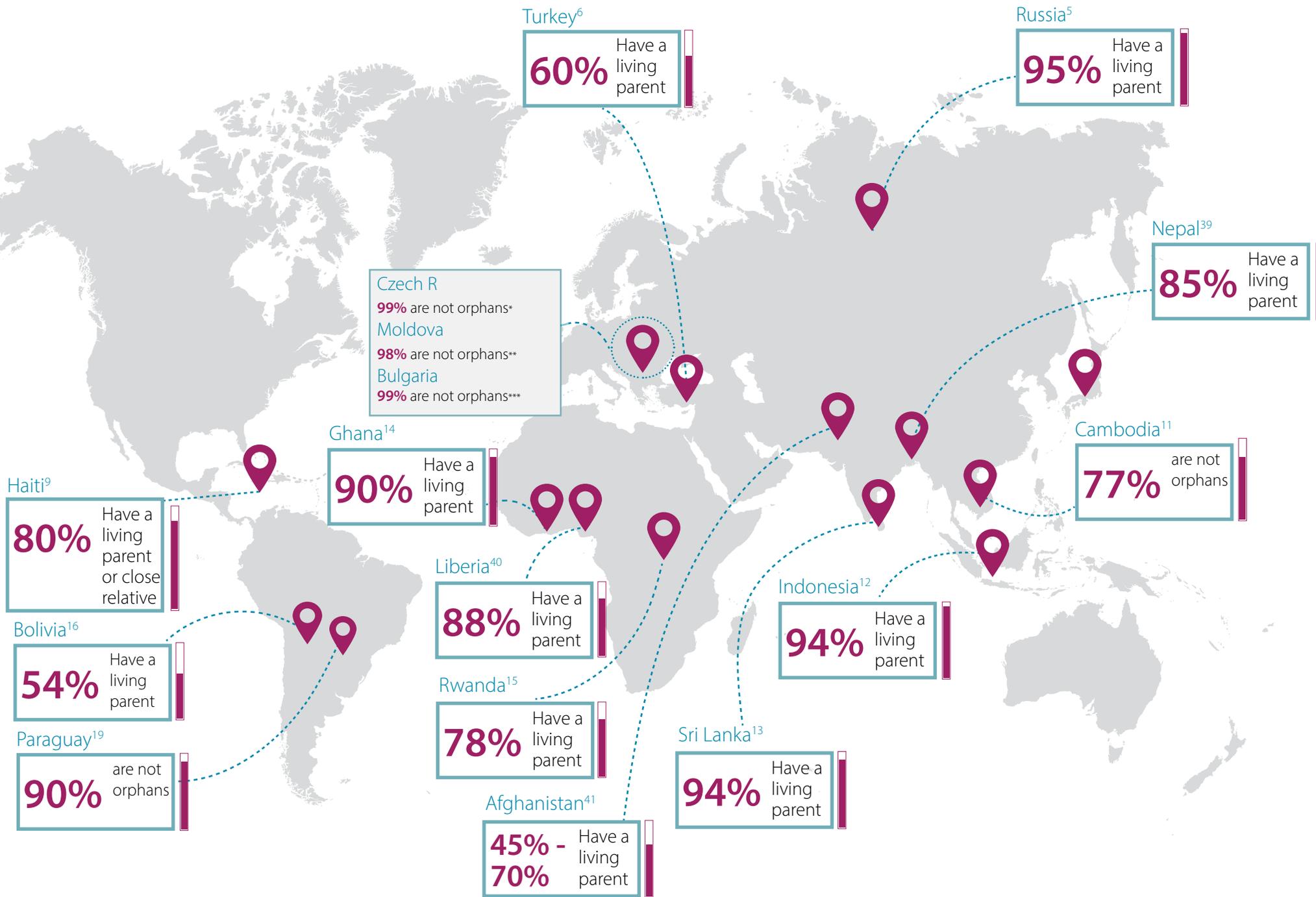
* Figure taken from research conducted in one region in Czech Republic - in line with the national average
** Estimate taken from 10 institutions in Moldova
*** Figure taken from research conducted in two regions in Bulgaria

Children in institutions globally - percentage of children with living parents or close relatives

Turkey[6]
60% Have a living parent

Russia[5]
95% Have a living parent

Nepal[39]
85% Have a living parent

Czech R
99% are not orphans*
Moldova
98% are not orphans**
Bulgaria
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Ghana[14]
90% Have a living parent

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Indonesia[12]
94% Have a living parent

Bolivia[16]
54% Have a living parent

Rwanda[15]
78% Have a living parent

Sri Lanka[13]
94% Have a living parent

Paraguay[19]
90% are not orphans

Afghanistan[41]
45% - 70% Have a living parent

* Figure taken from research conducted in one region in Czech Republic - in line with the national average
** Estimate taken from 10 institutions in Moldova
*** Figure taken from research conducted in two regions in Bulgaria

POVERTY

Parents who can't afford to feed, clothe or send a child to school have little choice. Poverty is recognised as the main driver of child institutionalisation in most countries. 52% of children in institutions in Sierra Leone were there due to poverty.[24]

In a study of maternity hospitals in Europe, staff in 75% of hospitals stated poverty as a possible cause of abandonment.[26]

Over 40% of children in institutions in North East Sri Lanka were placed due to poverty.[27]

DISABILITY, LEARNING DIFFICULTY, ILLNESS

• Hospital staff encourage parents to give up babies.

• Parents can't afford time or specialist carers to look after their child.

• There is no inclusive education so a residential school far from home is the only option.

• Children with disabilities are thought viewed as a problem to be dealt with away from mainstream society. In some African countries they are considered unlucky or cursed. .[28]

• 45% of children in Russian institutions have a disability.[29]

DISCRIMINATION

In Europe, Roma children with no disabilities are often incorrectly placed in remedial 'special schools' for mentally disabled children, according to a European Commission report.[30]

90% of the 11 million 'abandoned or orphaned' children in India are girls.[31]

PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

• **Families need support and community services** to help them care for their children at home. Access to education locally, benefits for those in need and preventative health and support services allow children to grow up with their own caring parents.

• In Zambia, **up to 50% of children in care** could live with their birth families with financial support.[36] With the start of inclusive education in Moldova some children from residential special schools have been able to return to their families. Several studies have monitored deinstitutionalised children and found they adapted well to mainstream school and families were happy to be back together.[37]

• Orphans also have family who want them. After the Japan earthquake in 2011 **over 97% of orphans went to live with relatives**. [38]

When children cannot be cared for by their parents, there should be family-based alternatives: with relatives, or in foster care, or adoption, or in small group homes for those with complex needs.

RECRUITMENT, CHILD TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION

In some countries poor parents are offered money to give up their children. Corrupt institutions and adoption agencies profit from the children through donations to their orphanage or through child trafficking.[33]

In Malawi, over 50% of institutions reported directly 'recruiting' children by encouraging parents to place their children there.[32]

CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT

Some children cannot live with their birth parents due to child abuse or neglect. However, institutional care is likely to perpetuate the problem: children in institutions are at six times greater risk of violence and 3.5 times greater risk of sexual abuse than those in foster or family-based care[34].

Many children are also admitted due to 'neglect', when in fact their parents are just too poor to feed and clothe them[35].

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