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# Orphanage tourism and orphanage volunteering: implications for children

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Orphanage tourism refers to visits or volunteering in orphanages as part of a holiday or tourist experience. Orphanage tourism is a consumer product which represents the intersection of the desire of orphanage operators to gain access to international funding and the desire of tourists and volunteers to give back to less developed countries. Despite its popularity amongst tourists and volunteers, orphanage tourism has come under increasing scrutiny and criticism for its impacts on child rights, development, and the role it plays in driving the unnecessary institutionalization of children, child trafficking and exploitation in residential care settings. This article outlines differing perspectives on orphanage tourism and volunteering from the last decade of research. It examines the contexts in which orphanage tourism occurs and outlines the drivers for this form of tourism. In addition, it discusses the implications of orphanage tourism for children including impacts on child agency, child rights, child development, child protection, and child trafficking and exploitation. We conclude that the limited benefits for children involved in orphanage tourism are outweighed by child protection concerns coupled with negative impacts on child agency, rights, and development.

## KEYWORDS

orphanage tourism, voluntourism, child rights, tourism impact, orphanage trafficking

## 1 Introduction

In the last decade, orphanage tourism has become an increasingly popular altruistic activity where tourists and volunteers provide care and/or funding to children in orphanages. Internationally, an increased focus on how tourists and volunteers interact with children residing in orphanages, and particularly whether their good intentions may harm more than assist vulnerable children, has led to more research being conducted on the impact of orphanage tourism (Canosa et al., 2022). Orphanage tourism is where people visit or volunteer in orphanages as part of a tourism experience (Canosa and van Doore, 2022). The concept of “orphanage tourism” was first documented in academic research in 2010 by Richter and Norman who described the advent of AIDS orphan tourism in South Africa as where “individuals travel to residential care facilities, volunteering for generally short periods of time as caregivers” (Richter and Norman, 2010, p. 1). Since then, orphanage tourism has been documented by the media, civil society organizations, governments, and academia with a growing realization of the harm potentially caused to children through this activity (Better Care Network, 2014; van Doore, 2022). In this article, we use the term orphanage tourism to encompass both short visits and long-term volunteering in orphanages.

In 2014, the Better Care Network commissioned a comprehensive study of how and why orphanage tourism was occurring. This review article expands upon that initial research and draws together differing perspectives on orphanage tourism and volunteering from the last decade of research. By conducting a review of both peer reviewed and gray literature, we examine the contexts in which orphanage tourism occurs and outline the drivers and narratives surrounding this form of tourism. We then discuss the implications of orphanage tourism for children including impacts on child agency, child rights, child development, child protection, and child trafficking and exploitation.

## 2 Defining orphanage tourism

Orphanage tourism refers to visits or volunteering in orphanages as part of a holiday or tourist experience (Canosa and van Doore, 2022). In their seminal research paper, Richter and Norman (2010) coined the term “orphan tourism” as short-term tourism that involved volunteering at orphanages with international tourists caregiving for children (Richter and Norman, 2010). Throughout scholarly literature, visiting and volunteering in orphanages is variously referred to as orphan tourism (Richter and Norman, 2010; Roby et al., 2013; Freidus, 2017; Rotabi et al., 2017), orphanage tourism (Guiney, 2012; Reas, 2013; Guiney and Mostafanezhad, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Qian, 2014; Carpenter, 2015a; Canosa and Graham, 2016; Cheer et al., 2019; van Doore, 2019), orphan volunteerism (Rotabi et al., 2017), orphan volunteer tourism (Proyrungroj, 2017), orphanage voluntourism (Punaks and Feit, 2014), and even hug-an-orphan vacations (Guiney, 2018). Over time, the concept of orphanage tourism has been expanded to include donations of money, goods, short-term volunteering and watching shows performed by the children (Guiney and Mostafanezhad, 2014). The activities undertaken as part of orphanage tourism include classes (both informal and formal), participation in sports, games, music, or art, or providing other professional services (Carpenter, 2014).

Some research distinguishes orphanage tourism from orphanage volunteering. Much of the literature focuses on the amount of time spent in the orphanage as criterial for whether it should be regarded as orphanage tourism or orphanage volunteering (Carpenter, 2015a). Ursin and Skålevik stipulate that skilled or professional volunteers may receive compensation and tend to spend longer periods of time of 1–2 years volunteering, whilst unskilled volunteers, such as gap year volunteers, are generally inexperienced and pay fees to spend a short amount of time in the orphanage, stipulated as being from 1 to 6 months (Ursin and Skålevik, 2018). Rotabi et al. also focus on the amount of time spent as a distinguishing factor between “orphan tourism” and what they term “orphan volunteerism” (Rotabi et al., 2017). They state that “orphan tourism” tends to be short term whereas “orphan volunteerism” involves a longer-term where volunteers attend to the caregiving of the children (Rotabi et al., 2017). Rotabi et al. use the terminology of “orphan” rather than “orphanage” which indicates the focus of the tourism or volunteering is the orphaned child, rather than the facility.

In this article, we define “orphanage tourism” to include any visiting or volunteering in a residential care facility for children, in

the context of domestic or overseas travel. The term “orphanage tourism” can encompass both shorter- and longer-term visits or volunteering stints. It should be noted that our definition concerns visiting and volunteering in orphanages that occurs as part of a travel or tourism experience, be it a gap year, planned itinerary, or opportunity offered post arrival in the destination country or community. We have also chosen to focus the wording on “orphanage” rather than “orphan” as an acknowledgment that most children residing in residential care facilities, or orphanages, are not orphans with an estimated 80% having one or both parents alive that could care for them with support (Csáky, 2009).

This definition of orphanage tourism incorporates a wide range of activities, from short day visits to orphanages for tourists to see children, including attending performances or concerts; to structured activities arranged at the orphanage for volunteers, such as building renovations, sports, homework, excursion, language lessons; to longer term volunteer positions where tourists may contribute through assisting staff to care children and may even stay onsite at the orphanage for a period of months. Orphanages for the purpose of this paper include all forms of residential care facilities for children, which are invariably called childcare centers, institutions, shelters, children’s homes, children’s villages, hostels and in some instances, boarding schools. The term “residential care centers” is preferred by child protection organizations (Better Care Network, 2014), denoting the fact that most children residing in care are not orphans. For ease of reference, we refer to all these facilities as “residential care centers” and “orphanages” interchangeably.

## 3 The context for orphanage tourism

Orphanage tourism typically takes place in low- and middle-income countries that exhibit a weak rule of law (van Doore, 2022), where child protection systems are under-developed, and where residential care services are highly privatized, under-regulated, primarily funded by overseas sources and used prolifically in response to child vulnerability. Throughout this article, we term countries where orphanage tourism happens as “occurring countries”. Scholarly research has evidenced orphanage tourism in occurring countries including South Africa (Richter and Norman, 2010), Nepal (Punaks and Feit, 2014; Benali and Oris, 2019), Cambodia (Guiney, 2012, 2015; Reas, 2013, 2015, 2020; Carpenter, 2014, 2015a,b; Guiney and Mostafanezhad, 2014), Honduras (Sherman, 2018), Thailand (Proyrungroj, 2017), Myanmar (Brock, 2017), Liberia (Chaitkin et al., 2017), Uganda (Among, 2015), Ghana (Frimpong-Manso, 2016), Guatemala (RELAF, 2010), Haiti (Mulheir and Cavanagh, 2016), Indonesia (Martin and Sudrajat, 2007; Daniels, 2019; McLaren and Qonita, 2020; Westeralaken, 2021), Botswana (Phelan, 2015). This is by no means an exhaustive list. A 2014 study conducted by Better Volunteering, Better Care noted that study participants had observed an “increasing trend in volunteering in residential care centers in over twenty countries” and noted that some of the commonalities between those countries included orphanages being located in popular tourist destinations, that access to visas and entry requirements for international visitors was easy, and that there was inadequate government regulation of

both residential care centers and also of volunteers (Better Care Network, 2014).

In occurring countries, child vulnerabilities that may contribute toward institutionalization can include poverty, family conflict, parental migration where the children are left behind, a lack of access to appropriate medical care, a lack of access to social services and, perhaps most prominently, a lack of access to education. These vulnerabilities can stem from conflict, displacement, health crises, low socio-economic conditions or a combination of these, which research has shown leads to an increase in the number of orphanages (van Doore and Nhep, 2021). Where these vulnerabilities are addressed by residential care as a first, instead of last, resort, it results in children being institutionalized rather than families being preserved and strengthened.

Where there has grown to be a reliance on non-governmental international funding which preferences supporting residential care over family strengthening and preservation, domestic child protection systems and their policies and preferences are often effectively bypassed despite having regulatory frameworks that mandatorily require residential care centers to register to operate (Williamson and Greenberg, 2010). Government agencies with jurisdiction over residential care may lack the human and financial resources to respond to such circumvention. This results in many residential care institutions operating in contravention of laws and regulations, including those governing registration and minimum standards. Unregistered residential care facilities may operate entirely outside of the monitoring and inspection system. In addition, mandated authorities may lack the capacity to close these unlawfully operating residential care centers due to lack of funding or trained personnel to safely reintegrate children or facilitate placement in more suitable family-based care (van Doore and Nhep, 2022).

These institutional care systems are propped up by international funding and support, including tourist and volunteer labor and donations (Matthews, 2019). A UNICEF study in Cambodia showed that all privately run residential care facilities received financial support from international donors, despite 2/3rds of them operating without registration or government authorization (Ministry of Social Affairs Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, 2017), with many of them located along tourist routes and in cities or towns most accessible to tourists and foreign visitors (UNICEF, 2011). The study outlined that the use of residential care as a first resort for child vulnerability is heavily influenced by the “orphanage tourism business” (UNICEF, 2011). In Uganda, research correlated an increase in the number of orphanages and children living in residential care with the availability of foreign sponsorship and donations, mission trips and orphanage voluntourism (Cheney, 2014a). In Uganda, it is estimated that over 80 percent of orphanages are funded by foreign predominantly faith based non-government organizations (Chaitkin et al., 2017) with children in orphanages sponsored by individuals and churches (Walakira et al., 2015).

International funding, tourists and volunteers emanate from what we term “contributing countries”. Contributing countries citizens and residents contribute to orphanage tourism through their involvement in funding, visiting, and volunteering in orphanages. Contributing countries form part of the complex

web of orphanage tourism by failing to adequately regulate how not-for-profit sector funds are disbursed internationally, by often publicly encouraging and celebrating founders, funders, visitors, and volunteers to orphanages via awards and extensive media coverage, by failing to regulate the voluntourism sector, and through uncritical promotion of white savior and self-advancement narratives.

In recent years, several contributing countries have considered how their citizens, residents and entities potentially contribute to orphanage tourism and its promotion of the unnecessary institutionalization and exploitation of children in overseas countries. One of the earliest considerations of the potential impact of orphanage tourism by a government was seen in the Swedish Action Plan to Protect Children from Human Trafficking, Exploitation and Sexual Abuse 2016–2018 (Ministry of Health Social Affairs, 2016) which included specific measures focused on the prevention of abuse and crimes against children in the context of orphanage tourism. It called for awareness programs for the public regarding the potential harms of orphanage tourism and the links between orphanage tourism and the increased vulnerability of children.

In 2017, orphanage tourism and potential links with modern slavery were considered by the Australian government as part of its Inquiry into whether Australia should have a Modern Slavery Act. As a result of hearing consistent evidence regarding the potential negative impacts of orphanage tourism and connection to orphanage trafficking, the Australian government launched the Smart Volunteer campaign to prevent Australians from inadvertently contributing to child exploitation through the practice of orphanage tourism, including by participating in misleading volunteer programs, in addition to a range of other legal responses (van Doore and Nhep, 2019). In 2019, the Dutch Parliament held a Parliamentary Roundtable and commissioned research on how the Netherlands is involved in orphanage tourism (Kinsbergen et al., 2021).

From the tourism perspective, orphanage tourism is identified as a form of voluntourism. Voluntourism involves tourists paying to volunteer in projects, usually with a conservation or development focus (Wearing, 2001). Voluntourists are individuals from more developed countries with discretionary time and income that travel to assist others (McGehee and Santos, 2005). The central presumption underpinning voluntourism is that these tourism activities should contribute to positive impacts to host destinations (Sin et al., 2015) however in recent years studies have focused on the lack of assistance provided by voluntourism and in some cases, the detriment caused. Banki and Schonell (2018) state that critiques of voluntourism hinge on implementation challenges and difficulty enacting structural reform in recipient communities underscored by power imbalances, colonial legacies, and structural white privilege.

Tourism providers offer orphanage tourism experiences in a range of ways, most typically by incorporating day visits to orphanages into tour packages, expeditions or shore excursions offered by cruise companies (Stahili, 2017). These may be sold under the banner of “ethical” “responsible” “sustainable” or “impact tourism” products for socially minded tourists who seek to positively contribute to local communities (CREST, 2019), or as

part of cultural tours designed to provide tourists with insights into local culture and social issues, or to meet the needs of tourists seeking “authentic experiences” that offer a deeper emotional connection (Westbrook, 2019). In other cases, orphanage tourism is promoted as a corporate social responsibility activity connected to the tourism company’s philanthropic endeavors (O’Brien, 2019).

As with other sectors, inadequate data exists to quantify the entirety of the travel sector’s involvement in orphanage tourism. Data from mapping initiatives conducted in select contributing countries and amongst the larger tourism providers offer some insights, however, falls short of being conclusive. Sixteen major companies, selected based on receiving the most nominations for the World Travel Awards World Leading Tour Operator between 2014–2018, were profiled in detail as a part of the Orphanage Divestment Action Group Mapping in 2019. Five of these companies were found to offer orphanage tourism products in at least eight different countries, two of which specialized in luxury tourism experiences for high-end travelers (O’Brien, 2019). In Australia, the Rethink Orphanages mapping discovered 22 travel agencies operating in Australia offering orphanage tourism products (van Doore et al., 2016a). In the same study, a further 61 travel agencies headquartered outside Australia were found to be recruiting Australian orphanage tourists. In a United Kingdom study, 44 volunteer travel companies were found to offer orphanage tourism, however it is unclear whether this count included mainline travel companies or only those targeting the volunteer market (Taylor et al., 2020). In Germany, Taylor et al. (2020) noted that orphanage tourism was more likely to be incorporated into travel packages offered by tourism companies marketing themselves as “sustainable” vs. traditional tourism groups.

It is noteworthy that the UNWTO Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics does not specifically reference orphanage tourism. The absence of orphanage tourism was critiqued in the draft Framework by child protection organizations working on the issue of deinstitutionalization.<sup>1</sup> In the finalized Convention, there is a specific reference to children as a “most vulnerable group”, however no further specificity is offered with reference to voluntourism or orphanage tourism.

## 4 Drivers and narratives of orphanage tourism

Orphanage tourism is a consumer product which represents the intersection of the desire of orphanage operators to gain access to international funding (although often contrary to domestic child protection policy) and the desire of tourists and volunteers to “give back” to less developed countries. This is promoted by a range of narratives, including those grounded in religious doctrine (Priest et al., 2006; Howell and Dorr, 2007; Eagle et al., 2019; McLaren and Qonita, 2020), self-advancement (Hartman, 2016), and white saviorism (Chege, 2018).

The central tenet of orphanage tourism is the perception by those in more developed countries that there are

populations of orphans in less developed countries requiring immediate assistance which can be appropriately rendered by foreigners who wish to make a difference (Rogerson and Slater, 2014). This perception is underpinned by a set of complex intersectional drivers and narratives that fuel voluntourism in general, including neoliberalism, white savior narratives, biblical mandates, and self-advancement (Bandyopadhyay, 2019), and have specific implications for orphanage tourism. These narratives influence the beliefs and motivations of tourists and volunteers and form the basis of their justification for involvement in orphanage tourism. As such they play a significant role in driving the demand for orphanage tourism.

### 4.1 Neoliberalism

A substantial critique of voluntourism, relevant to orphanage tourism, is found in the application of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is focused on privileging “individual autonomy and responsibility over that of the collective” (McGloin and Georgeou, 2016, p. 408). McGloin and Georgeou (2016) argue that social change is traditionally affected through civil society where people join causes, but because voluntourism is entrenched within the market it reflects a consumer model. Neoliberalism has led to decentralization from the central state provision of social services to local governments, and a corresponding increase in privatization of welfare through churches, NGOs, and the private sector (Freidus, 2010a, 2013). Such privatization has seen corporations sending high numbers of volunteers to the global south and NGOs developing similar business models with orphanages advertising orphanage volunteering as a way of gaining funding (Guiney, 2017). Wearing et al. (2019) agree that the commoditization of altruism and the utility of emotion in the branding of voluntourism products results in a high pull factor for such tourist experiences whilst Ursin and Skålevik (2018) question whether the payment of a fee means that volunteers become consumers.

Guiney and Mostafanezhad (2014) argue that a reliance on the use of volunteers in orphanages indicates neoliberal tendencies, where children are considered “objects of compassion” for volunteers (Mostafanezhad, 2013, p. 330). This exemplifies voluntourism as expansion of neoliberalism into aid (Dolezal and Miezelyte, 2020). The expansion is the result of neoliberalism removing social welfare structures and protections necessitating that charity fills the void (Guiney, 2018). Thus, Guiney (2018) argues, orphanage NGOs in less developed nations have moved to orphanage tourism as a way of funding and staffing this gap in services. The volunteers desire to ameliorate the circumstances of orphans therefore becomes marketized, and orphanhood becomes a “globally circulated commodity” (Meintjes and Giese, 2006, p. 425) turning orphanages into places of tourism and exploiting both volunteers and orphans through the commodification of intimate emotional interactions (Guiney, 2018). As Reas (2013, p. 121) states, “orphanage tourism locates and commodifies children as objects of rescue fantasies, objectified as adorable innocents, waiting to be loved by

<sup>1</sup> Stahili, “Why is orphanage tourism not in the UNWTO draft convention on tourism ethics?”, Stahili, <https://www.stahili.org/orphanage-tourism-unwto-draft-convention-tourism-ethics/>.

enthusiastic westerners". Such commodification is the very essence of neoliberalism.

## 4.2 White savior narratives

Another significant critique of orphanage tourism is that it emanates from white savior narratives which view local people and systems as not possessing sufficient agency to solve their own problems (Chege, 2018). In the context of orphanage tourism, Richter and Norman (2010) outline how western sentimentality combined with global aid discourse were critical drivers in the desire of westerners to assist AIDS orphans. Freidus (2013) contends that the meta-narratives surrounding orphans uphold the view that the global north is superior to the south. An example of white savior narrative privileging is where volunteers without teaching experience teaching English to orphans which promotes the perception that the English language is valued as a commodity and has the potential to alleviate socio-economic issues (McGloin and Georgeou, 2016), or where volunteers establish their own orphanages (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). In a study conducted in Malawi, the goals of volunteers were to help, make a difference, contribute to the future of others, and improve on things (Freidus, 2017). That volunteers with no appropriate credentials or experience believe that they can make a significant impact is illustrative of the persuasive nature of white savior narratives.

The concept of "child rescue" is central to white savior narratives. This stems from deeply entrenched systemic beliefs promulgated via neo-colonial narratives that white people are innately able to "save" those in less developed countries. For example, in research conducted on charity organizations running private residential care centers on the Kenyan coast, Chege (2018) studied how the organizations "showcase" the children in their care on their websites. Chege found that "do it yourself" white humanitarians who founded orphanages used white savior narratization, authorization, rationalization, and moralization to legitimize what they viewed as their "child rescue" activities despite the majority (all except one) having no appropriate credentials or qualifications to assist vulnerable children. In a similar study focusing on Malawi and children's rights, Freidus (2013) typifies these volunteers as "lay humanitarians" who have little, if any, experience with the populations and culture they are seeking to serve.

The white savior complex is embodied in the desire of white volunteers to rescue orphans making orphanage volunteering more popular than other forms of volunteering (Montgomery, 2020). The white savior complex exemplifies the symbolic violence of racialized inequality and perpetuates racial, ethnic and class binaries (Wearing et al., 2018). In recent years, social media profiles such as "No White Saviors" and the satirical account "Barbie Savior" (Wearing et al., 2018) have sought to highlight the inherent structural and systemic power imbalance and racism embedded in white tourist and volunteer interactions with host communities. These movements have focused at various times on orphanage tourism, highlighting the inappropriateness of volunteers, who lack the necessary cultural and professional skills, working directly with

highly vulnerable children in residential care settings. In addition, they highlighted how orphanage tourism fuels the concerning practice of unqualified tourists and volunteers founding new orphanages, after a short visit or stint volunteering, and the significant risks to children.

## 4.3 The orphan industrial complex

The culmination of neoliberalism commoditizing the desire to give back and white savior narratives perpetuating systemic structural and institutional neo-colonial myths via participation in orphanage tourism is found in what has been termed the "orphan industrial complex" (Hartley, 2013; Cheney and Ucembe, 2019). Cheney and Ucembe (2019) argue that orphan rescue narratives stimulate a commodification of orphans and orphanhood which can lead to the "production of orphans" intersecting with child exploitation and trafficking. The orphan industrial complex is premised upon the myth of the "orphan crisis"; that there are a population of orphans globally requiring significant assistance. The so-called "orphan crisis" has been debunked by Cheney and Rotabi (2015) who have illustrated factors other than orphanhood are responsible for the increase in the numbers of children in orphanages, including the nature of responses to the AIDS/HIV epidemic, the UNICEF definition of orphan that included both single and double orphans, an evangelical calling through western nations to rescue orphans, and the increasing popularity of orphanage tourism.

Cheney's research on this phenomenon centers on Uganda. She found that in the period from 1992 to 2013, whilst the overall percentage of orphans in the child-aged population had fallen by two percent, the rate of children residing in orphanages had increased by 1,624 percent. There were 50,000 children living in 800 orphanages with an estimated 80% having living parents. A prime factor in this increase was the influx of international aid into Uganda which was aimed at alleviating orphanhood. Instead, it drove the establishment of orphanages to meet the demand of funding, rather than to address the needs of orphans (Cheney, 2014b). She found that foreign donors were instructing their partner orphanages to increase the numbers of children living in the orphanages to meet their supporters' expectations (Cheney, 2015). Therefore, whilst the express intent of the orphan industrial complex is to respond to children in need, in reality it has the reverse effect with children being touted as orphans for purposes of profit and status (Cheney, 2015). Cantwell and Gillioz (2018, p. 6) agree that the act of voluntourism "reinforces the orphan myth among foreigners who are unaware that they are basically contributing to a system which tears children away from their families for financial gain".

A large part of what enables the orphan industrial complex, and indeed orphanage tourism itself, is a lack of critique from participants and a belief that institutional care is a legitimate response to need in low- and middle-income countries, despite most high-income countries not having orphanages anymore. This leads donors, tourists, and volunteers to be less critical than they would be of other charitable endeavors (Guiney and Mostafanezhad, 2014). This uncritical support for orphanages and

demand for an orphan experience has created what Cheney (2018) refers to an “orphan addiction” giving rise to a multimillion-dollar industry.

#### 4.4 Self-advancement and self-development

A significant motivation for younger orphanage tourists, particularly those on gap years or university placements, is the possibility self-recognition and self-advancement exemplified by a selfless act of volunteering. As McGloin and Georgeou point out, this perception is driven by a historical reality that civic engagement indicates good character (McGloin and Georgeou, 2016). In this respect, orphanage tourism ticks all the boxes. Volunteers perceive that they will assist others whilst assisting themselves through a CV that is differentiated by the inclusion of volunteering.

Whilst a mere line on a CV may appear to be a rather cynical approach to what drives orphanage tourism, Carpenter (2015a) proffers that a primary motivation for voluntourism is self-development and the desire for the experience to be transformative. Several studies have found that orphanage tourism has had a profound impact on the participants. For example, in their study centered on service learning experiences in orphanages facilitated by OSSO, Schvaneveldt and Spencer (2016, p. 126) found that young adults reported “their experience with international service-learning was a transformational experience that promoted the development of leadership qualities, an increased appreciation for their families, a desire to live a less materialistic life, increased self-efficacy, a more refined identity, and a desire to remain civically engaged in their own communities”. Whilst concentrating on the outcomes for the volunteers, the study did not include findings on the impact of the volunteers on children.

Anderson et al. (2021) note that the notion of self-development and advancement in voluntourism stems from the white savior complex, which allows volunteers to redirect the conversation about volunteering benefits away from impacts on host communities toward the “self”. They argue that after volunteers benefit from, and support, systems of oppression and claim to assist them, they seek recognition. They argue that when the incentives for voluntourism are self-directed, self-applied, and oriented toward self-recognition, programmatic outcomes are no longer the metric for determining effectiveness. With the demand for contributing to actual impacts removed, volunteers are more likely to engage in activities range from “metaphorical band aids to systemic wounds” to those that exacerbate the very issues they claim to resolve (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 539). Anderson et al. point to orphanage tourism as indicative of this very dynamic. They highlight the role of orphanage tourism in fueling child trafficking in orphanages as illustrative of the “unintended consequences of self-recognition” (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 539).

#### 4.5 Faith and theology

The call to assist orphans is found in many religious traditions including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Eagle

et al., 2019). For some religions, such as Christianity and Islam, orphanage tourism has featured heavily as a mechanism for operationalising scriptures which specifically refer to orphans. Intersecting with neoliberalism, Clarke states that faith-based organizations “expanded or proliferated as a result of economic neo-liberalism as the faithful responded to growing poverty, inequality and social exclusion” (Clarke, 2008, p. 837).

As a driver for orphanage tourism, each faith is called to action to assist orphans via scripture and teachings. In Christianity, James 1:27 in the New Testament calls for Christians to “look after orphans and widows in their distress”. Christian churches and organizations all over the world, but particularly in more developed countries, have heeded the call to “defend the fatherless” (Isaiah 1:17) by actively establishing and supporting orphanages, participating in short- and long-term mission trips to orphanages, and through intercountry adoption. A study on volunteering in Zimbabwe with orphans in a social welfare program found that Christianity provided impetus for volunteering by embodying love and compassion with the ultimate reward in the afterlife (Madziva and Chinouya, 2017) with these sorts of mandates directly utilized to encourage involvement in orphan care activities (Freidus, 2010b). Cheney and Ucembe (2019) contend that Christian faith-based organizations “whose members are driven by Biblical commands to minister to ‘the least of these’ (Matthew 25:40)” fuel a large part of the orphan industrial complex.

Similarly, within the Islamic faith, right treatment of orphaned children is important theological motif and is referenced in the Quran in no <20 passages. Scripture implores Muslims to provide care and support to orphaned children, with an oft-cited Hadith promising closeness with the Prophet Muhammad in the afterlife as a spiritual reward (McLaren and Qonita, 2020). The theme of orphan care is afforded special significance in the Muslim psyche due to the Prophet Muhammad’s own experience of being orphaned as a child (Benthall, 2019). As such, the support of orphaned children is a staple of Islamic charity and translates into the support of orphanages, one-on-one child sponsorship programs, and in some cases, domestic and overseas orphanage tourism (Benthall, 2019).

In Buddhism and Hinduism, the call to assist orphans is perhaps not as explicit as the scriptural teachings of Christianity and Islam. Within Buddhist faith communities, the notion of “dana”, selfless giving, has been associated with support of orphans, including through funding institutions and visiting orphanages for almsgiving and volunteering purposes (Chaisinthop, 2014). In Hinduism, the call to assist orphans incorporates the central components of Hindu religious duty through the concepts of “dan” (gifts given to strangers) and “seva” (service) (Bornstein, 2012).

### 5 Discussion: locating the child in orphanage tourism

Having established the context and drivers for orphanage tourism, the Discussion section focuses on the implications of orphanage tourism for child agency, child rights, child protection, and child trafficking and exploitation. Though there is some overlap evident between these issues, they are particularized distinctly as areas of concern in the research.

## 5.1 Child agency and orphanage tourism

The available research on children subject to orphanage tourism highlights the agency of the child. For example, Freidus and Caro explore how the Malawian children in their research may leverage social, political, or economic power via their interactions with volunteers but question to what extent they are able to exert agency regarding orphanage tourism when that power is inherently limited by institutionalization (Freidus and Caro, 2018). Miller and Beazley note the ways in which children exercise their limited agency to turn the requirement to participate in orphanage tourism into opportunity (Miller and Beazley, 2022). This includes reconstructing orphanage tourism as a chance to learn western culture for future employment purposes and directing demonstrations of affection toward certain visitors in the hope of convincing them to return to teach English (Miller and Beazley, 2022). This is a theme shared in research on 14 youths between the ages of 10 and 14 years old in Indonesia which found that three of the youths noted that a positive aspect of living in an orphanage was the opportunity to meet new people, particularly celebrities or foreigners (Wanat et al., 2010). Another study in Mexico found that children exhibited different behaviors including being “silly” or doing something dangerous to monopolize the volunteer’s attention (Tomazos and Butler, 2012). In a hermeneutical study on Ugandan street children, Bunyan (2021) found that the children saw obtaining an education in an orphanage as a way of elevating their status, however once they entered an orphanage, they often felt that they lost agency and social capital.

Bott (2021) illustrates the nuance and complexity in understanding how children experience orphanage tourism through a study on five young Nepali care experienced adults who were exposed to orphanage tourism. She particularly highlights contrasting feelings regarding orphanage tourism, where the young adults valued the positive interactions with volunteers but also were strongly conflicted about having to pose as orphans when they had parents. They articulated the difficulties of missing their families and their difficulties adjusting to life outside of the orphanage after they had grown up struggling with feelings of worthlessness. Perhaps the most telling was quotes from the participants themselves commenting on the intersection of orphanage tourism and their lives, where they articulated that they felt like they were a product for volunteers and were taught how to canvas for donations (Bott, 2021).

The participants in Bott’s research echo a familiar story of care experienced young adults who were exposed to orphanage tourism growing up. Ucembe (2019) outlines that the children in the orphanage he grew up in were kept impoverished to encourage volunteers and visitors to donate more. He also recalls children being ashamed and embarrassed as they were told what to say to volunteers about how they came to be in an orphanage, some being told to say they were rejected by their families, others told to say they were orphaned or from the streets and the stigma of being labeled an orphan (Ucembe, 2019). It is an experience shared by Sinet Chan, who shared her story of growing up in an orphanage with both the Australian Government as part of the Inquiry into whether Australia should have a Modern Slavery Act in 2017 and the Committee on the Rights of the Child as part of the Day

of General Discussion 2021 centered on children and alternative care. Ms Chan stated that she was subject to severe neglect, sexual abuse and was treated like a slave in the orphanage, and her situation did not improve though volunteers and visitors made generous donations. She submitted that States should ‘criminalize unregistered orphanages, ban all orphanage tourism, end impunity for offenders, and provide free legal services to victims’ (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, p. 19).

Scholars agree that there is limited research focused on children’s experience of being subjects of tourism (Yang et al., 2020; Bott, 2021; Canosa and Graham, 2022). As a result of the nuanced research emerging in this area, many scholars call for further research on child experiences as subjects of orphanage tourism (Bott, 2021; Canosa and Graham, 2022; van Doore, 2022).

## 5.2 Child rights and orphanage tourism

As children without parental or family care, children residing in orphanages are considered highly vulnerable to rights infringements. The rights attached to children without parental care, as with all children, are established in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (“Convention”). Article 9 of the Convention states that children have a right not to be separated from their parents unless by a decision of a competent administrative process (United Nations, 1990). Where children are separated from their parents, they have a right to maintain contact with them and/or be reunified [art 9(3) Convention]. Further, in situations where children who have been deprived of parental care, whether temporarily or permanently, they are “entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State” (art 20 Convention). Children also have the right to be protected from certain forms of exploitation including the sale of children, trafficking and economic exploitation (arts 32–36, Convention), which may be infringed upon in certain circumstances related to orphanage tourism. State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child have an obligation to uphold child rights for all children, but particularly those who are without parental care.

In some countries, scholars have argued that orphanages are being established in popular tourist locations to ensure that volunteering opportunities are available to meet the demand for orphanage tourism, rather than being established to look after orphaned children (Punaks and Feit, 2014; Reas, 2015). Where children are separated from their families to live in orphanages to meet a demand for orphanage tourism, their right to a family life, to parental contact and even to be protected from exploitation may be undermined and violated (Reid, 2019). Countries that send volunteers, visitors, and funding to orphanages in less developed countries may be linked to the infringement of child rights via orphanage tourism (van Doore, 2020).

Recent research discusses the issue of orphanage tourism as impacting on child rights in different ways (van Doore, 2020). Cheney and Rotabi (2015) consider orphanage tourism to be the antithesis of child protection, propping up the most detrimental and high-risk segment of the alternative care for children continuum. They argue that where foreigners spend time at orphanages visiting and volunteering with resident children as

part of their travel itinerary, the rights of children without parental care living in orphanages are directly impacted (Cheney and Rotabi, 2015). In other research, Rotabi et al., state that “the unavoidable fact is that orphan volunteerism in its present form, regardless of the most altruistic motivation, contributes to the continuation of residential care, in violation of the child’s right to grow up in a family environment” (Rotabi et al., 2017, p. 656). Rotabi et al. also note that orphanage tourism not only infringes upon the rights of the child but may also jeopardize parental rights to state assistance in raising children.

Miller and Beazley (2022) draw attention to the conflict of rights that may be present in orphanages that facilitate orphanage tourism. They argue that children otherwise deprived may have an opportunity to access to some of their rights through living in the orphanage, such as right to education and development. Albeit the attainment of these rights is contingent upon their participation in orphanage tourism, which transforms them into a commodity (Miller and Beazley, 2022). Whilst some rights may be met through institutionalization, Miller and Beazley acknowledge the consequent infringement of other rights, including the right to family life, and the adverse impact on children’s emotional development.

There has been high level recognition of the infringement of orphanage tourism on child rights. In 2019, the Report of the Secretary-General on the Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child detailed awareness raising campaigns that “sought to highlight the potential harm to children stemming from a wave of short-term, unqualified staff, volunteers and interns in orphanages around the world” as an “emerging area of progress” (Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2019, 9/17). The United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Rights of the Child focused on Children without Parental Care adopted in December 2019 included specific reference to orphanage tourism and called for State Parties to take appropriate measures to protect trafficked children and to enact laws to prevent and combat the trafficking and exploitation of children in care facilities. It also called for State Parties to prevent and address the harms of orphanage volunteering (Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2019, 13/15).

In addition, the 2021 Day of General Discussion on Children’s Rights and Alternative Care Outcomes Report, issued by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, included a specific recommendation for States to:

adopt legislation and regulations to eliminate orphanage tourism and volunteering in orphanages, prevent incentives driving institutionalization and family separation and ensure adequate offenses and penalties to prevent and enable the prosecution of violations of children’s rights in alternative care, including orphanage trafficking (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021).

Apart from State Parties having ratified the Convention holding obligations to ensure child rights, many NGOs that are established to care for orphaned and vulnerable children do not utilize a rights-based approach to programming. For example, in Malawi, Freidus found that none of the orphan care NGOs that she studied had incorporated rights-based approaches in their care for orphans (Freidus, 2013). Stark et al. (2017) found that one

third of all surveyed children living in orphanages were involved in fundraising including activities such as performances, dances or craft making for tourists, although the children surveyed reported that it did not interfere with their schooling or their sleep. However, other research also based in Cambodia has found more concerning issues where orphanages relied upon orphanage tourism for funding, including children being kept in substandard conditions to elicit more sympathy and thereby more funding from visitors (Guiney and Mostafanezhad, 2014).

### 5.3 Child development and orphanage tourism

Of prominence in the research by critics of orphanage tourism is the fact that for orphanage tourism to occur, children must be resident in orphanages. There has been much research on the effect of institutionalization on children in the past six decades. In a review of literature and policy implications related to the institutional care of children, Dozier et al. (2012) found that the effects of institutionalization on children have been shown to be linked to issues with attachment, indiscriminately sociable behaviors, physical development, and cognitive development. These findings on the harms of institutionalization were corroborated by the Lancet Group Commission on the Institutionalization and Deinstitutionalization of Children published in June 2020 which found institutional care is associated with negative outcomes and that children growing up in institutional care were denied the basic conditions required for positive socioemotional and cognitive development (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2020). The Commission highlighted that orphanage volunteering increased the risk to children by unintentionally adding to the fragmented care that institutionalized care is often characterized by Goldman et al. (2020). Thus, whilst direct evidence of orphanage tourism on children’s wellbeing and development is limited, this high-level research supports that assertion that the inherent institutionalization which leads to children being exposed to orphanage tourism may be harmful.

Children growing up in orphanages display characteristics such as indiscriminate friendliness and an excessive need for attention (Richter and Norman, 2010). Such characteristics can be problematic where children are exposed to orphanage tourism, where short term visits or placements may result in a revolving door of caregivers potentially contributing to emotional issues (Frimpong-Manso, 2021) and attachment disorders (Richter and Norman, 2010). Carpenter (2015a) argues that the risk of attachment disorders in the context of orphanage tourism is uncritically applied in anti-orphanage tourism research and that this application represents a misunderstanding of the research on attachment disorders. She argues that the literature on attachment disorders refers to children who have been institutionalized under 3 years old and that attachment disorders are not a risk for children who are institutionalized after 5 years of age. She bases this argument on the early work of Zeanah, who conducted extensive research showing how attachment disorders are of great concern for institutionalized children under the

age of 3 years old (Zeanah et al., 1993). However, in more recent years Zeanah and colleagues have published a comment in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* directly contravening this view indicating that practice is “potentially damaging” and that the research on disrupted attachment should “raise alarms about the effects of short-term volunteer caregiving” (Zeanah et al., 2019, p. 592).

Commenting on the assertion that attachment disorders may only be applicable for younger children in care, the authors articulate that “although consequences may be especially deleterious in the early years (<6 years), disruptions of attachment relationships through middle childhood (6 to <12 years) are also associated with increased risk of serious psychiatric disorders” (Zeanah et al., 2019). Their findings conclude that “based on the available evidence, the repeated experiences of establishing and disrupting attachments resulting from orphanage volunteering poses substantial and unnecessary risks of psychological harm, especially to young children” and that the “practice of volunteer caregiving is incompatible with the well-being of children” (Zeanah et al., 2019, p. 593).

## 5.4 Child protection and orphanage tourism

Children placed in institutional care are significantly more at risk of facing a range of serious child protection issues, including child violence and sexual abuse (Pinheiro, 2006). The segregated nature of institutional care in combination with “low quality care” results in “children at risk of severe physical or sexual abuse, violation of fundamental human rights, trafficking for sex or labor, exploitation through orphan tourism, and risk to health and wellbeing after being subjected to medical experimentation” (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2020, p. 706).

A major concern for child protection is how common it is for orphanage tourists to be given unfettered access to children residing in orphanages. This unfettered access can mean that orphanage tourism exposes children to the risk of sexual exploitation (Guiney, 2017; Lyneham and Facchini, 2019). Guiney notes that corruption and exploitation are prominent in orphanage tourism (Guiney, 2017). Often, orphanages involved in facilitating orphanage tourism do not require background checks and will simply allow visitors or volunteers to play with, provide care to, and in some cases take the children out for the day or night, without any connection or knowledge of the person apart from the potential of a donation (van Doore et al., 2016a). This lack of enforcement of appropriate screening of volunteers can provide opportunities for child sex offenders (Johnson, 2014). Whilst screening and background checks may provide some protection, they are certainly no panacea against child sexual abuse. Research shows that most sex offenses by international tourists are by opportunistic or situational offenders (Vorng, 2014) who almost always first access their victim in a public place (Ladegaard, 2009). This is of serious concern for both orphanages and entities that organize orphanage tourism who may be inadvertently exposing children to an increased risk of child sexual abuse.

## 5.5 Child trafficking, exploitation and orphanage tourism

One of the first academic links between orphanage tourism and trafficking was in a study on Nepal conducted by Punaks and Feit who argued that orphanage voluntourism and foreign donors were fuelling child displacement, trafficking, and institutionalization (Punaks and Feit, 2014). In 2016, van Doore published an article explicitly arguing that the recruitment and transfer of children into orphanages for the purpose of exploitation and profit should be regarded as a form of child trafficking under international law (van Doore, 2016). Since then, much progress has been made regarding the recognition of orphanage trafficking as a form of modern slavery.

Orphanage trafficking is a form of child trafficking which is defined as the recruitment or transfer of children from their families into residential care for the purpose of exploitation and profit (van Doore, 2022). The demand for orphanage tourism can fuel the active recruitment of children into residential care (Better Care Network, 2014) and encourage orphanages to operate like a business, in some cases prioritizing potential funding by maintaining children in poor conditions to encourage more donations (Vernaelde, 2017). Falling under the umbrella of child trafficking, orphanage trafficking occurs at the intersections of the demand for orphanage tourism, the recruitment of children to meet the demand, and the profit to be gained from visitors, volunteers, donations, and sponsorship. Lyneham and Facchini state that orphanage tourism creates opportunities to scam those who volunteer or donate money (Lyneham and Facchini, 2019, p. 2). In countries where orphanages are prevalent, legal arguments have been made regarding the potential for prosecuting orphanage trafficking as a form of child trafficking (van Doore and Nhep, 2022; van Doore, 2023).

In 2016, the Global Slavery Index listed the practice of orphanage tourism in the Cambodian Country Report and referenced specific forms of exploitation that take place in residential care including forcing children to perform dances for tourists, perform farm work or distribute flyers in order to raise money (Walkfree Foundation, 2016). The Government of Sweden articulated the direct links between orphanage tourism and trafficking in its 2016–2018 Action Plan to protect children from human trafficking, exploitation and sexual abuse highlighting that public awareness campaigns should be enacted to articulate the link between exploitation and trafficking with orphanage tourism (Ministry of Health Social Affairs, 2016).

Subsequent global recognition followed with the 2016 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography* to the Human Rights Council highlighting evidence of orphanage operators using intermediaries to lure children into orphanages to meet the demand for orphanage volunteering with children kept in poor conditions to prompt further charity (de Boer-Buquicchio, 2016).

The ECPAT Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism 2016 outlined that orphanages were emerging as a venue for sexual exploitation with the demand for international volunteering leading to orphanages recruiting children into care to “increase donations from abroad and offer more voluntourism

opportunities to tourists” (ECPAT., 2016, p40). The report noted that voluntourists with a sexual interest in children may donate or pay money to the orphanage to spend time alone with children with orphanages unlikely to properly vet references or supervise due to what are perceived as altruistic motives (van Doore et al., 2016b, p. 58).

In 2017, the annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* published by the United States Department of State first included a link between orphanage tourism and child trafficking by outlining in the Nepal narrative that children had to pretend to be orphans to elicit donations from tourists (United States Department of State, 2017). This was followed by the United States Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report 2018 including a special interest topic on “Child Institutionalization and Human Trafficking” specifically linking voluntourism as a driver of child recruitment and trafficking into orphanages (United States Department of State, 2018).

At the very highest level, the 2019 United Nations *Resolution on the Rights of the Child* specifically addressed orphanage tourism as a driver of child trafficking into orphanages and encouraged State Parties to take appropriate measures in addressing “the harms related to volunteering programmes in orphanages, including in the context of tourism, which can lead to trafficking and exploitation” (United Nations, 2019). Links between exploitation and tourism are also acknowledged by article 2.3 of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism which calls for States to energetically combat exploitation in accordance with international law. In 2020, the Lancet Group Commission on Institutionalization and Deinstitutionalization of Children concluded that “some institutions are known to serve as centers for trafficking and child sexual exploitation” (Goldman et al., 2020, p. 611).

Falling under the broad umbrella of modern slavery, orphanage trafficking has clear links to the orphanage industrial complex. However, orphanage trafficking, modern slavery and orphanage tourism are not synonymous with institutionalization (van Doore and Nhep, 2019). As van Doore and Nhep outline, orphanage trafficking as a form of child trafficking is a criminal activity and must be addressed via criminal law mechanisms. Orphanage tourism is not a crime per se but in addition to contributing to poor outcomes for child development and wellbeing, it may drive demand for orphanage trafficking. As such, appropriate child protection mechanisms must be employed to both protect children and to also limit orphanage tourism’s potential links with trafficking and exploitation. Similarly, it must be understood that not all children growing up in orphanages are victims of orphanage trafficking. Children are transferred to orphanages for a variety of reasons and trafficking is only one of them. Ignoring trafficking as a reason children end up in care means that appropriate sanctions for this form of exploitation are not developed.

Ultimately, both orphanage trafficking and orphanage tourism intersect with the prolific and inappropriate utilization of institutional care as a first port of call to address child vulnerability in many low- and middle-income countries (Nhep and van Doore, 2017). Deinstitutionalisation, the reform of care systems for children, and appropriate and carefully planned divestment strategies targeting foreign donors and orphanage tourism will all contribute to alleviating the vulnerabilities that create space for orphanage trafficking to occur (Nhep and van Doore, 2017).

## 6 Conclusion

Orphanage tourism is viewed by some as a saving grace for children residing in orphanages, and by others as a social ill that requires immediate eradication. This paper sought to draw together existing research on the phenomenon of orphanage tourism from a range of different perspectives. It explored the contexts in which orphanage tourism occurs, the drivers for the phenomenon and potential impacts of orphanage tourism on the vulnerable children it purports to support. The often-vested interests in maintaining the facilitation of orphanage tourism unveils complex and nuanced issues involving institutional care systems, which in many cases provide inadequate care for vulnerable children.

Orphanage tourism is often promoted as an altruistic means of assisting orphaned and vulnerable children. Whilst a review of the research illustrates that in some cases children indicate that they have positive experiences being exposed to orphanage tourism, these appear outweighed by the overwhelming evidence of the potential negative impacts on child agency, rights, and development, in combination with serious child protection concerns and links with trafficking and exploitation. It must be remembered that orphanage tourism is a sector-wide issue for child protection in which normalization of the activity can potentially have serious consequences for vulnerable children.

Many well-intentioned volunteers and visitors aim to enhance and improve the lives of children via orphanage tourism; however, on balance, the research shows harm may potentially be caused instead. It may pay heed for tourists and volunteers to consider whether they would be allowed to visit or volunteer in a residential care facility in their own country with no background checks or appropriate professional skillset, or to watch children perform for donations, before choosing to do so in a low- or middle-income country. It is little wonder that child protection organizations, experts, including those with care experience, and researchers have been advocating for an end to orphanage tourism.

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All authors contributed to conception and design of the research manuscript and contributed to the revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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