

Frequently Asked Questions Haiti's Orphans and Vulnerable Children

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Introduction

Children within the context of a complex humanitarian emergency, such as those affected by the recent earthquake in Haiti, are among the most vulnerable children in the world. Many children in Haiti have suffered disruptions in access to food, education, health care and the comforting routine of community life. A smaller but yet unknown number have lost or become separated from their family, and such children are particularly at risk of exploitation, abuse and malnutrition. The U.S. Government recognizes that protecting and caring for children in these situations requires human sensitivity, technical expertise in child care and protection, and a good understanding of the particular circumstances in Haiti, both before and after the earthquake.

Below is a list of frequently asked questions concerning children affected by the recent earthquake in Haiti and responses to those questions.

Who is considered to be a child?

The generally recognized international understanding is that a child is any person under 18 years of age.

What is the difference between an unaccompanied, separated or orphaned child?

The *Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children*¹ offer the following definitions:

- *Unaccompanied* children are those who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.
- *Separated* children are those who are separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.

Orphan is a term that can cause confusion because some use it to refer to a child both of whose parents are known to have died, while others use the same term to refer to a child who has lost one or both parents. Further complicating the definition within the Haiti context, prior to the earthquake many children in Haiti were living in "orphanages," but were there due to the poverty of their family not because they did not have a parent. In an emergency like the one in Haiti, it is best to refer to children as being "unaccompanied" or "separated," rather than orphaned, unless the deaths of a child's parents had been legally established before the disaster, and to refer to "residential care" rather than "orphanages." Because many children were in school or otherwise away from home when the earthquake struck, the status of their parents may not be clear.

Who are *restavek* children?

Restaveks are children from poor, mostly rural families that are sent to cities to live with "host" families to perform domestic work in exchange for food, shelter and education. While some *restavek* children have been cared for and sent to school, most have been subject to involuntary domestic servitude and are often physically and sexually abused. *Restavek* is a Creole term stemming from the French phrase *rester avec* or, in English, "to stay with."

What do we know about the nature of separations within the Haitian context?

Prior to the earthquake, a large number of children were separated from their families and living in residential care. Since many of these facilities were not registered with the Government of Haiti (GoH), the actual number is not known, but is thought to have been in the range of 50,000 country-wide.²

Prior to the earthquake, the number of children living in *restavek* circumstances throughout the country was thought to be between 90,000 and 300,000.³

Currently, agencies that are assisting unaccompanied children in Haiti, in coordination with UNICEF, are registering them to quickly determine their circumstances and provide immediate protection and care. The U.S. Government and others who are responding to unaccompanied and separated children recognize that the current situation makes children without parental or other family care especially vulnerable. It is an environment conducive to human traffickers, those facilitating illegal adoption or others who wish to exploit the situation and circumvent national and international standards in order to remove Haitian children from Haiti for their own benefit. Though severely affected by the earthquake themselves, mandated Haitian Government authorities are acting to prevent trafficking and investigate allegations of trafficking. The USG is supporting the GoH and partners in this effort.

At this stage, it is impossible to verify how many children have been separated from their families or are unaccompanied.

How many orphans are there in Haiti?

According to UNICEF, approximately 50,000 children were living in residential care prior to the earthquake. The majority of these children still had at least one parent alive.⁴ Many of these children were placed in residential care due to the poverty of their families, not because they had no living parents. The UN has reported that prior to the earthquake, 50,000 children were double orphans (children who have lost both parents) and, according to the UN definition, an additional 330,000 children were categorized as single orphans (children who have lost one parent).⁵

At this stage, it is impossible to confirm the number of children whose parents died in the earthquake. However, estimates from a *simulation* done based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates of the Haitian population and data from the USAID-funded 2005/6 Demographic and Health Survey indicate that there are approximately 15,000 new double orphans, either because both parents were killed or because the only surviving parent was killed; and 17,000 children whose household head died and who lived in a household that did not include a biological parent.

The number of children living in residential care institutions (a.k.a. orphanages) in the earthquake zone is uncertain. The UNICEF-led CPSC is assessing conditions in residential care centers, but has not yet issued an estimate of how many children are residing in such centers. Likewise, no estimate has yet been made of unaccompanied children living in organized or spontaneous settlements.

How is the U.S. Government responding to the needs of children affected by the recent earthquake?

The U.S. Government (USG) responded immediately to the needs of Haitians affected by the earthquake. To date, \$537,616,769 in emergency humanitarian assistance has been provided by USAID and the Department of Defense.⁶

The USG is using several mechanisms to ensure that funding is being put to immediate and good use including UNICEF, the World Food Program (WFP), the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as U.S. and international faith-based and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services and CARE.

The USG's top *child protection* priority is to meet the basic needs of children and families for food, water, sanitation, health and shelter. This basic assistance allows families to remain intact and assists parents in providing and caring for their children.

For those children who are truly on their own, the USG priority is to support protection and care arrangements that keep them safe and meet their immediate needs. The USG is also supporting a family tracing program designed to identify immediate or extended family members, with the aim of family reunification.

What was the U.S. Government doing for Haiti's orphans and vulnerable children prior to the earthquake?

Before the earthquake, the USG had invested more than \$200 million for programs targeting Haiti's orphans and vulnerable children.⁷ UN and international organization partners, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and NGOs were implementing more than 50 projects funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of State and USAID. These existing programs are providing a platform from which to respond to the needs of children affected by the earthquake, but international organization, NGO and Government implementing partners suffered earthquake-related losses and disruptions themselves, so capacity is weakened.

What are the U.S. Government's priorities in assisting Haitian children?

The USG response is based on the following priority actions:

- Meet the basic emergency needs of children and families for food, water, sanitation, health and shelter. Meeting basic needs helps families remain intact and assists parents to provide and care for their children.
- Ensure the rapid identification and registration of all unaccompanied and separated children, as well as implementing a tracing program with the goal of reuniting children with their families. Although interim care points are being used to shelter children, UN's Emergency Shelter Cluster plans are being made to expand the use of closely monitored foster parents in the next few weeks.
- Expand child friendly spaces within informal settlements. In addition to providing respite to parents, these spaces provide opportunities to bundle aid services including health, nutrition, education and psychosocial counseling, in a supportive and protective environment that is safe and comfortable for children. According to UNICEF, as of February 5th, 23 child-friendly spaces had been established, benefitting approximately 150,000 children and care-givers.
- Rapidly assess orphanages in the earthquake affected zone, with the aim of addressing security and subsistence needs. The USG is supporting the GOH and UNICEF to map and build a database of children's residential care centers to facilitate stronger oversight through registration and monitoring in the future. To date, teams from UNICEF and the GOH have completed assessments of approximately 220 residential care centers.⁸

How is the U.S. Government coordinating its assistance with other partners in Haiti?

Coordinating structure: Following the earthquake, the USG established an interagency working group on orphans and vulnerable children in Washington, D.C. The USG Special Advisor for Orphans and Vulnerable Children deployed to Haiti to create a counterpart interagency group at the U.S. Embassy, and to establish a direct link with UNICEF, which is responsible for coordinating all assistance for child protection through the CPSC in Port au Prince. The CPSC collaborates closely with the GoH department responsible for child welfare.

As of February 4th, 57 organizations were partners in the CPSC, including U.S. faith-based and private relief organizations that are long-term USG partners.

Technical Experts - Haiti: USAID deployed two of its top child protection technical experts to Haiti. One is leading the USG interagency child protection working group in Port au Prince and in this capacity supports coordination among USG agencies and between the USG and UNICEF. The second technical expert is working within the UNICEF-led CPSC as the day-to-day bridge between the USG and UNICEF. In addition, the USG is providing a management information specialist to assist UNICEF and the CPSC with development and management of a database on residential care centers, priority needs and assistance. The database will help improve strategic planning and coverage.

Response Management - Washington, DC: At USAID headquarters in Washington, D.C., one of USAID's top child protection experts is serving on the interagency Response Management Team (RMT) and is the information manager on the USG response to orphans and vulnerable children in Haiti. In addition, a Response Unit for Orphans and Vulnerable Children has been established to respond to inquiries and requests for assistance from the public and Congress. The Response Unit verifies and channels information twice daily on the needs of children in residential care centers (121 as of February 7th) into the system established at UNICEF/Port au Prince to track and respond to requests for assistance. The email address for the Response Unit is accessible to the public:

HaitianChildrenUSAID@usaid.gov.

What has been achieved thus far?

USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) is funding international organizations (UNICEF, the World Food Program, and the International Organization for Migration), and NGO and faith-based organizations to meet emergency needs. With funding from OFDA, and other sources, emergency services have been provided to hundreds of thousands of people.

The following estimates of the number of *children* receiving assistance are offered to provide a general order of magnitude. Children *per se* are not counted and reported separately. Estimates are calculated by multiplying the total number of people provided emergency services (as reported in USAID OFDA Fact Sheets), by 45 percent, the estimated proportion of the population affected who are children 0-17. As of February 8th, the following assistance had been provided:

food for 765,000 children, including children in orphanages;
water for 233,550 children, including children in orphanages;

In addition, USG medical and health teams provided:

emergency operative and post-operative care services for 1,777 children.

The USG is currently assisting UNICEF to develop a comprehensive database with information on all organizations and programs assisting highly vulnerable children.

Can we evacuate children to another country?

The priority in responding to children affected by the disaster in Haiti is to assist them and arrange for their care as close as possible to where they have been living. Where this is not possible, then the aim is to arrange care as close by as possible. After securing children's safety and immediate welfare, efforts are being made to trace family members and assess whether, with assistance, they would be able to provide an adequate level of care. Experience in other emergencies has shown that rapidly evacuating children to another country, though done with the best intentions, can separate families and is not the best way to ensure children's safety and longer term well-being. It is the U.S. Government's view that a child's safety and well-being depend primarily on the protection and care their families are able to

provide. In line with this principle, the USG has made strengthening the capacity of families in Haiti to care for their children a high priority.⁹

What is being done to meet the needs of children requiring evacuation for emergency medical care?

All medical evacuations must be approved by the Government of Haiti's Ministry of Health. The Department of Homeland Security is working in close collaboration with the GoH to facilitate the evacuation of Haitian children in need of emergency medical care.

What is being done for children who are alone?

It is frequently unclear whether an unaccompanied child has been accidentally separated from family members, orphaned, or abandoned. Children whose parents have died may have relatives in another part of the country who can provide care. The uncertainty of a child's status coupled with the need for immediate protection, and the goal of a permanent family for all children, necessitates a careful and systematic approach to child placement. The CPSC in Haiti and its member agencies are taking the following priority actions: registration of unaccompanied children, interim care placement, family tracing, and reunification with immediate or extended family members, where this is in a child's best interests. A child should not be placed with relatives if there is concern that she or he may be used as a domestic servant, rather than cared for properly. Any placement with family other than a child's parents requires monitoring.

During an emergency like this one, many children and families spontaneously reunite without the help of intermediaries. Save the Children reports from Haiti that many children and families are finding one another.¹⁰

How does the registration of unaccompanied children happen?

At this early stage, only unaccompanied children are being registered. This means those children who are not in the care of their regular guardian, nor any other member of their family. Within this category, those prioritized for registration are:

- Children under age 5,
- Girls,
- Children with, or at risk of, mental and physical disability (including children known to be in a situation of abuse or exploitation), and
- Restavek* children who have become separated from their regular employers.

USAID-funded partner Save the Children has trained a large team of local workers in family tracing and reunification. Additional training and continued capacity building will be conducted as family tracing efforts expand. Tracing teams are registering unaccompanied and separated children identified at medical facilities, camps, and other locations. Registered children are provided identification bracelets and picture identification cards.¹¹

An Interagency Child Protection Management System is being established using and adapting systems and software used in previous emergencies. In addition to supporting documentation and tracing for family reunification, the same system will be used to monitor the quality of children's care arrangements in family placements.

Where do children who are alone go?

Interim care is provided for children separated from their families until they are reunited, placed with foster parents, or other long-term arrangements for care are made. According to the CPSC, a system to immediately refer especially vulnerable unaccompanied children to temporary interim care arrangements is now in place. Interim care spaces have been identified, and the most vulnerable unaccompanied children are being placed in care.

UNICEF, in cooperation with the GoH, has established interim care sites to accommodate 900 children. Further, child-friendly spaces, which are areas where recreation and services are provided during the day, are being established for 200,000 children. As of February 5th, according to UNICEF, 23 child-friendly spaces had been established, benefiting approximately 150,000 children and care-givers. Over the next few weeks, the CPSC will begin proactively recruiting foster parents locally.

What is the U.S. Government doing to support children living in orphanages?

Children who were living in residential care prior to the earthquake have been receiving particular attention in the emergency response. Rapid assessments of residential care centers in the earthquake affected zone are underway with the aim of addressing security and subsistence needs. As of February 9th, conditions in 220 residential care centers had been assessed by the CPSC in areas seriously affected by the earthquake. The USG is supporting the GOH and UNICEF to map and track conditions and needs at children's residential care centers. In addition to facilitating the coordination of emergency assistance, this tracking system is intended to facilitate stronger oversight by the GoH through registration and monitoring in the future.

On the basis of assessed needs, UNICEF, in partnership with the World Food Program, is providing food and nutrition support for children in residential care centers. UNICEF is also facilitating access to primary health care through mobile clinics operated in partnership with the World Health Organization.¹² The U.S. Government is providing funding to UNICEF, WFP and WHO to support these interventions.

From an early stage of the emergency in Haiti, U.S. Government personnel have been receiving information about specific needs at particular residential care centers and forwarding this information to U.S. Government personnel on the ground as well as to UNICEF. In Haiti, the USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) and USAID child protection advisors are working with relief agencies to ensure that urgent needs are met. USAID is actively supporting relief activities to address urgent care and protection needs and working with partners to encourage better care and protection arrangements in the medium- and long-term.

Is it possible to adopt a child from Haiti?

The State Department continues to make adoptions a priority and is continuing to work on adoption cases.

U.S. citizens with pending adoption cases in Haiti are requested to contact the Department of State at askci@state.gov for information about their adoption case.

To bring an adopted child to the United States from Haiti, you must be found eligible to adopt by the U.S. Government. The U.S. Government agency responsible for making this determination is the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Learn more at: <http://adoption.state.gov/about/who/eligibility.html>

In addition to these U.S. requirements for prospective adoptive parents, Haiti also has eligibility requirements for prospective adoptive parents. Learn more at: <http://www.adoptions.state.gov/country/haiti.html>

What are the U.S. Government's long-term plans to help vulnerable children in Haiti?

Haiti's capacity to protect children was weak before the earthquake. The disaster has further undermined essential support systems. Key government departments, international organizations and NGOs responsible for child welfare and protection were severely affected. Child protection challenges under the circumstances are formidable.

To begin the process of helping Haiti create a stronger national child protection program, the U.S. Government has drafted an operational plan with short-, medium- and longer-term programmatic strategies. The operational plan was drafted on the basis of internationally recognized principles and will be developed further in collaboration with the Government of Haiti, UNICEF and partners.