

COVID-19 Has Orphaned 5.2 Million Kids Worldwide. What Will the Church Do About It?

According to a new paper from *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* journal, there are more than five million children who have been orphaned due to COVID-19. That's right—the report reveals that 5.2 million children around the world have lost a primary or secondary caregiver during the pandemic.

To put this into perspective, a child loses a parent or caregiver every six seconds. Of these children, three out of four have lost their father, and all of them are at an increased risk of exploitation, violence, poverty, separation from their remaining family and mental health challenges.

These numbers are both overwhelming and heart-wrenching. As Christians, we are compelled to come alongside the orphaned and vulnerable, and so if you're like me, you want to find a way to help. But how can we have a truly lasting impact on such a large group of children? Thankfully, there is already a clear path to helping children orphaned because of COVID-19—family strengthening.

The great myth surrounding “orphans” is that they don't have families, and the best thing we can do for them is donate to a local orphanage. We've believed this lie in the past, such as in the relief response to the “AIDS orphans” crisis more than two decades ago.

Individuals and organizations around the world were quick to fund orphanages to care for these children during the HIV/AIDS crisis. A study revealed that the number of orphanages registered in Zimbabwe doubled from 1994 to 2004, and 80% of the funding was coming from Christians. This giving was well-intended, but it was based on the false assumption that these

children didn't have families. Orphanages became heavily overused, and children with living relatives were stripped of their familial connections and left to grow up in a facility that could never provide for their deepest needs.

This "orphan myth" couldn't be further from the truth. These are not family-less children, and they don't need us to build them another orphanage. Nearly every child who has lost a caregiver due to COVID-19 has other family members now caring for them.

So, here's the real crisis—many of these families lack the material resources and support they need to properly care for their children. Not only are they still reeling from the loss of a loved one, but they are also navigating other devastating effects of the pandemic—like an increased risk of extreme poverty and violence.

The church has a unique opportunity here to help move the needle. Christians are already giving an estimated \$2.5 billion to residential care, such as children's homes and orphanages, in the U.S. and around the world each year despite the breadth of research that reveals residential care facilities are ultimately damaging to a child's brain development. The millions of children who lost a caregiver to COVID-19 don't need more resources sent to orphanages; they need support given to their local communities and families.

We've learned a lot since the AIDS orphan crisis—and we know how to help better. We have solutions that work. Instead of rushing to expand residential care options that often keep children away from their living family members, we can strengthen families through social, emotional and economic assistance.

The church where I pastor in Seattle made this shift over a decade ago. We moved away from donating to and volunteering in orphanages. Instead, we began partnering with organizations

like Roblealto and World Relief that help build the capacity of families to care for the most vulnerable children in their kinship networks and communities directly. It's this kind of assistance that ultimately prevents the need for orphanages.

When your church community and leaders hear these updated shocking numbers, many will want to jump in and help. I urge you to reach out to them and ask them to consider responding differently than the "conventional" ways of the past.

The latest report from The Lancet recommends that we follow the "3 Ps" for helping children who have lost a caregiver to thrive in safe and loving families. First, *prevent* COVID-19 related deaths through public health measures. Second, *prepare* family-based support systems to help children avoid institutionalization. Third, *protect* children from poverty, adversity and violence by bolstering parental, economic and educational support efforts. As you and your church community find ways to help, please educate yourselves on the organizations taking this approach to supporting orphaned and vulnerable children—you can get started by learning more about organizations like the Faith to Action Initiative.

Finally, I ask you to consider a fourth "P"—pray. Pray for the protection of the children who have lost caregivers to COVID-19; pray they won't experience any more familial loss or adversity as a result of this terrible tragedy. Pray that well-intending donors will support organizations that are providing life-saving resources for the affected communities and families.

Through this heartbreaking situation, God has given the church an opportunity to help these children, while also turning away from outdated and damaging responses to orphaned and vulnerable children for good. Orphan care desperately needs reform, and this is a chance for the church to play a leading role in positive change. Family strengthening is the way forward, and it's time to get to work. {eoa}

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