


Child protection in Greece: Addressing the national framework, discrepancies and good practices

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges child protection efforts face in Greece within the broader context of European child welfare systems in the 21st century. Despite legislative mandates, Greece struggles with the effective implementation of child protection legislation and out-of-home placement of abused and neglected children. Drawing on the experience of the NGO “The Smile of The Child,” this study employs an empirical approach to examine Greece’s national legislative framework, tools and implementation issues in children’s rights and welfare, child protection systems and child and youth care systems. In Greece, the implementation of child protection legislation faces significant hurdles. Despite legislative mandates, the lack of services, trained personnel, gaps in national legal frameworks on trauma-informed practices and protocols during removal, and lack of support for adults who grew up in out-of-home care hinder effective protection measures. Findings reveal systemic barriers implementing child protection legislation, lack of established protocols, preventive practices and adequate education on the methods and legal basis of removal and foster care leading to systemic re-traumatization of children. This study will attempt to create a timeline of child protection in Greece, starting from prevention to out-of-home care, reviews the legislative framework using data driven from the Center of Abuse and Exploitation of the Organization ‘The Smile of the Child’ including services such as helplines, school interventions, homecare

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social services, remedial services as well as annual reports. Prevention, removal, trauma management, deinstitutionalisation, fostering and adoption and a focus on improvements and good practices will be of extensive concern.

KEYWORDS

child protection, Greece, out-of-home placement, trauma of removal, abuse, child protection legislation, prevention, deinstitutionalization

INTRODUCTION

A widely considered truth regarding child protection systems across various countries is that to be able to build a robust, comprehensive and functional not only child-friendly but also child-protective system, requires a holistic approach and coordination among many services: Legal, social, educational, community-based etc. Many countries are facing serious difficulties in implementing and combining effectively all the above and Greece is no exception, even though significant steps forward have been taken.

Regarding one of the most pressing issues that is residential care, the majority of children and adolescents with social problems, chronic diseases and disabilities and those children that have been heavily abused have, up until now, stayed in institutions (mainly from private, public, church and non-profit sector), that operate in anachronistic “asylum” model (Bertotti, Di Rosa, & Asimopoulos, 2023). This, according to the Greek Ombudsman, has resulted in violation of the childrens’ rights. What is more, in most cases specialized scientific training is poor and the ratio between staff/children is low, thus resulting in exhaustion and burnout. As of 2024, Greece has taken many steps to ameliorate the situation but still there is still a long way to go.

In accordance with European promising practices, Greece has enhanced the legislative provisions for child protection in community and residential services (Routsis & Stratidaki, 2023). Article 4 of Law 4837/2021 states that the professional is obliged to report any incident or suspicion of child abuse in all social care settings. This extends even to schools. Certain professionals from child protection services are now designated as child protection officials, carrying all the aforementioned responsibilities in broader settings (eg when a professional from a child protection service visits a school for awareness raising reasons and finds out that a child is abused and or heavily neglected, he is obliged to report it).

There has also been created a National Action Plan and a national registration mechanism for abused children and adolescents under the supervision of National Center of Social Solidarity (EKKA).

Advances in foster care –although not so great - have also been made through the creation of “Anynet” system that simplifies the bureaucratic procedures of adoption. Also, through the Ministerial Acts 23356/2023 regarding semi-autonomous living in apartments for people aged fifteen and over who live in Child Protection and Care Units and 1316/2024, advances have also been made regarding semi-autonomous living for adolescents 15 years of age and older. The aim of the aforementioned acts, is to gradually enable adolescents over 15 years who live in public or



private Children's protection units, transition to certain apartments (which meet the technical and legal criteria and belong to the respected bodies/organisations), thus implementing in practice the de-institutionalisation rationale.

The current legislative framework, taken as a whole, contains a number of provisions that are frequently contradictory to one another or at least overlap among other pieces of law (usually mostly on other matters which include only one or two articles connected to child protection). Because there is no special framework law for child protection, it is frequently difficult to enact existing rules, and resolving conflicts between jurisdictions or provisions is a difficult and drawn-out process. As a result, there is currently robust legislation that forbids all forms of violence against children. The real problems, however, are with how the current legal framework is being implemented and with the ability of services to actually implement such laws (in terms of coordination, human resources, and capacity specification).

In conclusion, it would be important to mention that there are no quantitative, let alone qualitative, characteristics of the child protection system in Greece. Our only relevant sources were two articles that we managed to find and which relate to the thematic (Routsis & Stratidaki, 2023; Vorizanakis, 2019). As a consequence, the method we will follow in this paper in order to develop the theme of the child protection system in Greece is based on empirical data. This follows both from the lack of a uniform recording system and from the rich activity of professionals in the field of child protection nationwide. Specifically, the study follows a timeline starting from the preventive part to the out-of-home care, reviews the legislative framework using data driven from the Center of Abuse and Exploitation of the Organization 'The Smile of the Child' including services such as helplines, school interventions, homecare social services, remedial services as well as annual reports.

STRUCTURE OF THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM IN GREECE

The child protection and care system in Greece aims to safeguard children's rights and well-being, ensuring their safety while preventing abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Various stakeholders, including the government, local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international entities, play a vital role in this system. Despite efforts to build a robust child protection system, gaps and challenges persist. This article will map the structure of the Greek child protection system, highlight its shortcomings, and propose improvements and best practices, while also emphasizing the importance of preventive measures against child abuse and neglect.

Governmental bodies

The child protection framework in Greece is overseen primarily by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, through its Department for Social Solidarity and Welfare. Social welfare centers, established under regional and local authorities, offer essential services to children in need. Public institutions, such as care homes and shelters, provide temporary care and support for children who cannot remain with their families.

As for the role of the judiciary, particularly Juvenile Prosecutors, relates crucially for child protection, as they have the authority to remove children from harmful environments and oversee the application of protective measures.



Referral mechanisms

There are no specific referral mechanisms stated in legislation. Any case or issue related to child protection is referred to the competent prosecutor, who is responsible for further action, such as ordering investigation or assessment (by social services, police, medical or psychiatric services, etc.), or monitoring of the family by a social or mental health service, referral to other specialist services, or removal of the child from the family, as an emergency protection measure (Routsis & Stratidaki, 2023). As of 2021 (Law 4837/2021. Prevention and treatment of incidents of abuse and neglect of minors, Article 4, Obligation to report incidents of abuse of minors), there is provision of “responsible for child protection” employee, tasked with the obligation to report any incident or suspicion of child abuse, not only in all social care but also in educational settings – schools.

In case the prosecutor judges that a child’s physical or mental health is in immediate danger, they may order removal of the child, even without previous investigation, and placement in a hospital (due to lack of emergency accommodation facilities) until investigation is completed and further custodial arrangements can be made. Article 1533 of the Greek Civil Code “Assigning custody of a child to a third party - a foster family” (Civil Code, 1984) states that the removal of parental rights from both parents and assignment of custody to a third party (relative, foster carer or institution) may be ordered by the court *only if other measures have been ineffective to prevent risk to the child’s physical or mental health*. There are no interagency protocols or guidelines, as the action of all actors involved is coordinated by the prosecutor. There is no specific timeframe for investigation, further referral or any other action, unless specified by the prosecutor.

Following that, children’s views and feelings are heard and are admitted as part of the assessment procedure. In case the prosecutor orders psychiatric assessment, the service that investigates possible signs of abuse must not be the same as the service that provides psychological support and/or psychotherapy. The biggest setback is the fact that child psychiatry is underdeveloped and the provided beds are very scarce throughout Greece.

Lastly, the role of educational settings and more specifically schools as referral mechanisms needs to be addressed. Teachers, principals, school psychologists and social workers are obliged by Law 3500/2006 “To deal with domestic violence and other provisions” to report cases of domestic violence and abuse. In addition, as of February 2024, with the Law 5090/2024 “Interventions in the Criminal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure to speed up and improve the quality of the criminal trial, the aforementioned professionals cannot be prosecuted and are protected when they report such incidents. Schools can refer children and adolescents to specific Centres of Interscientific Assessment, Counseling and Support (KEDASY) but cannot refer to child-psychiatric clinics of hospital.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

Several NGOs, including The Smile of the Child, contribute significantly to the child protection system. These organizations provide social services, mental health care, and emergency shelter, filling gaps that the public sector cannot always address and always in line with the current legislation and in cooperation with the governmental bodies and authorities. They also engage in public awareness campaigns, emphasizing child rights and child protection.



Alternative care: foster care and adoption

Greece has made significant legislative improvements to promote family-based care over institutional care. The [Law 4538/2018](#) Measures to promote Foster Care and Adoption Institutions and other provisions, established a new framework for foster care and adoption, with the goal of reducing the time children spend in institutions and placing them in family environments. [Law 4538/2018](#) in Greece represents a significant overhaul in the country's approach to fostering and adoption, aiming to streamline and modernize the processes, reduce bureaucratic hurdles, and prioritize the welfare of children in need. The law addresses critical issues such as the length and complexity of the adoption process, the rights and obligations of foster and adoptive parents, and the mechanisms for ensuring child protection.

Some related key factors of [Law 4538/2018](#) in Greece:

- a) Acceleration of Adoption and Foster Care Processes
 - Streamlined Procedures: One of the primary aims of [Law 4538/2018](#) is to make adoption and fostering quicker and less cumbersome. The law establishes a centralized digital database for children eligible for adoption and prospective parents, reducing the time children spend waiting for placement.
 - Reduced Waiting Periods: Prior to the law, prospective parents often faced lengthy waiting periods due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and fragmented procedures. The law's digital system expedites matching by improving communication and transparency among adoption agencies and prospective parents.
- b) Introduction of a Digital System for Transparency and Efficiency
 - Digital Registry: The law mandates the creation of a digital registry to catalog children eligible for adoption, foster families, and prospective adoptive parents. This centralized system helps manage cases more effectively, reducing the risk of delays and lost information.
 - Enhanced Oversight: By making information more accessible and organized, the law enhances oversight, ensuring that cases are handled in a timely manner. This digital transparency also helps prevent issues such as favoritism or unlawful practices in the matching process.
- c) Promotion of Foster Care as a Preferable Interim Solution
 - Shift from Institutionalization to Family-Based Care: [Law 4538/2018](#) places an emphasis on foster care over institutional care. This aligns with modern child welfare research, which generally supports that children benefit from a stable family environment as opposed to institutionalization.
 - Support for Foster Families: To encourage more families to consider fostering, the law provides financial support, training, and resources for foster parents. This helps families prepare for the unique challenges of fostering and incentivizes fostering as a viable alternative to adoption.
- d) Improvement in Child Welfare Standards
 - Focus on Best Interests of the Child: The law is grounded in the principle that decisions should prioritize the best interests of the child, including emotional, educational, and health needs. This means prospective parents undergo comprehensive screenings to ensure they are prepared and capable of providing a safe and nurturing environment.



- Child's Right to Maintain Family Ties: [Law 4538/2018](#) seeks to respect the child's right to maintain contact with biological relatives, where feasible and appropriate. This can be beneficial for children who may later wish to understand or reconnect with their biological heritage.
- e) Increased Legal Protections for Foster and Adoptive Families
- Clear Rights and Obligations: The law establishes clear guidelines for the rights and responsibilities of both foster and adoptive parents, reducing ambiguity and providing a legal framework for parents to understand their obligations.
 - Post-Adoption and Post-Foster Care Support: Recognizing that adjustment challenges often follow placement, the law offers access to psychological support, counseling, and other resources to help families transition smoothly and address any potential issues in the early stages.
- f) Alignment with EU Standards
- Compliance with International Conventions: The law brings Greece in line with EU standards and international conventions on children's rights, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This not only improves Greece's standing within the EU but also ensures the protection of children's rights at a broader level.
 - Potential for International Adoption: [Law 4538/2018](#) clarifies the requirements for international adoption, making it easier for Greek children to be adopted abroad if a suitable family cannot be found domestically, and vice versa, under careful regulation to ensure child safety.

[Law 4538/2018](#) represents a significant advancement for child welfare in Greece. By accelerating the adoption and fostering processes, integrating a digital system for better oversight, and providing clear guidelines, the law seeks to reduce the institutionalization of children and promote family-based care. Additionally, the law's emphasis on child welfare and alignment with international standards marks an essential step in transforming Greece's foster and adoption system into a more efficient, compassionate, and child-centered model.

In practice, this framework fosters a supportive environment for children in need, while also encouraging broader social acceptance of adoption and fostering in Greece. Of course, there are limitations, which may be revised at some point in the Law.

Despite the abovementioned improvements, challenges remain in implementing the law efficiently, particularly concerning bureaucratic hurdles and delays in matching children with families.

Consequently, adoption and foster care in Greece have evolved significantly in recent years, with changes in legislation and the implementation of new procedures to accelerate and modernize them. According to the latest available data from 2023, approximately 400–450 adoptions are recorded annually in Greece. This number has remained stable in recent years, although there is still demand for more adoptions. The duration of the adoption process can range from 1 to 3 years, depending on the case and the availability of children. The online platform created by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs has helped reduce the waiting time for many prospective parents. The majority of adopted children are under the age of 5. A significant portion of these children come from local social services, and there are also cases of international adoptions, primarily from Eastern European and Asian countries (Source: [Anynet.gr, 2022](#)).

However, precise conclusions cannot be drawn due to the lack of critical statistical data, such as the number of adoptions involving minors from closed care facilities, the number of



adoptions carried out through direct agreement between biological and adoptive parents, whether these are intra-family or kinship adoptions, etc. The collection of existing data has thus far been conducted by the clerks of the First Instance Courts after the adoption is announced, while the data recorded in the National Adoption Registry is limited (Law 4538/2018. Measures to promote Foster Care and Adoption Institutions and other provisions).

Additionally, the research by Vamvakidis, Philippidis, and Chatzifotiou (2021) highlights further weaknesses identified in the implementation of foster care and adoption up to now. Specifically, it points out delays in court proceedings for the legal issues of each child, poor coordination between services and agencies regarding their roles, the absence of an interdisciplinary team for overseeing and advising all involved services, understaffing of social services, inadequate support for biological families, and potential lack of promotion of approved single-parent families due to the priority given to nuclear families. These issues provide a broad overview of the daily difficulties and obstacles faced by social workers during the implementation phase of foster care and adoption for minors.

Furthermore, a significant difficulty in promoting the foster care system is that the State appears to treat this institution as adoption, as it often requires foster parents to cover the expenses of the minors they care for entirely out of their own pockets, with minimal institutional support and limited social and employment rights. At the same time, foster parents are constantly on “standby” to return the foster child to the biological or adoptive family whenever requested by the child protection authorities. This practice discourages many prospective parents from proceeding with foster care, which could potentially evolve into adoption under certain conditions, due to the fear of thwarted expectations and unwarranted emotional investment.

For “The Smile of the Child,” deinstitutionalization is both a goal and a true blessing, which is why it implements specialized actions and proceeds with the reintegration of children with their biological families—where feasible—as well as with foster care and adoption.

Deinstitutionalization requires a complete overhaul of child welfare and protection systems towards prevention and the development of community-based services, as well as comprehensive changes across all other systems (e.g., health, education, and housing) to ensure that all children and adults have access to high-quality conventional services. Thus, simultaneous measures must be implemented across various policy areas to ensure the sustainability of reforms. Deinstitutionalization is not merely an effort to close residential facilities. Such a limited view may lead to seeking makeshift and quick solutions. It is crucial to ensure that a full suspension of admissions to institutions does not begin until adequate services are established to accommodate children needing some form of alternative care. The suspension should start gradually and concurrently with the development of community-based services.

“The Smile of the Child” aims for deinstitutionalization through planning and personalized care for each child entrusted to it, operating Day Care Homes based on judicial and prosecutorial decisions.

In Day Care Homes, “The Smile of the Child” provides care for children whose families are facing severe functional and crisis issues. These difficulties may arise from social, economic problems or serious health issues of the parents, resulting in their inability to meet their children’s basic needs. The organization supports the children and strengthens their families to become functional and capable of ensuring the smooth and healthy development of their children. It helps parents effectively fulfill their parental role. In 28 years, 1,061 children have been hosted in the Organization’s Homes.



To holistically support families in crisis due to living conditions, “The Smile of the Child” operates 15 Child and Family Support Centers nationwide. It provides support to families, meets all their needs, so that parents can fulfill their role and the family can remain together with dignity.

A priority for “The Smile of the Child” is to explore the possibility of reunifying children with their biological families, once the reasons for their removal have been resolved. “The Smile of the Child” supports parents and works closely with the relevant municipal social services to verify their suitability and overall recovery, so they can resume caregiving. Since 1997, 408 children have been reunited with their biological families.

From July 2020 until today according to the records of the organization, 68 children have been placed in foster care or adoption:

42 children have been placed with adoptive families, and 26 children have been placed with foster families. 11 children have returned to the care of the Association following unsuccessful placements, as the approved adoptive/foster parents were unable to meet their care needs.

REMOVAL AND OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT

The term “trauma of removal” is a general definition that is internationally utilised within the child protection system. The issue is complex, encompassing the various ways in which a child may be adversely affected by removal and out-of-home placement as a child protection measure, which is frequently employed in cases of child abuse (Trivedi, 2019). The trauma experienced by children within the system is not solely attributable to the abuse they may have endured prior to removal; it is also exacerbated by the distress associated with being removed from their familial environment and separated from their social environment and any form of support networks, including significant relationships, communities, neighbourhoods and schools. Consequently, the systemic response to child abuse may result in exposure to multiple insolvable traumatic incidents and complex trauma. Whitt-Woosley’s work (Whitt-Woosley, 2016) emphasises the challenges and promises associated with diagnosing and treating post-traumatic stress disorder in children within the child welfare system. Collectively, these insights emphasise the critical need for systemic transformation and the incorporation of trauma-informed approaches to mitigate the compounded harm of child removal in the child protection system.

In the context of the Greek legal system, the removal of children is subject to the authority of the Public Prosecutor, with consideration given to the following:

a) The International Convention on the Rights of the Child and in particular

- **Article 9**

1. States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child. Such determination may be necessary in a particular case such as one involving abuse or neglect of the child by the parents, or one where the parents are living separately and a decision must be made as to the child’s place or residence.
2. In any proceedings pursuant to paragraph 1 of the present article, all interested parties shall be given an opportunity to participate in the proceedings and make their views known.



3. States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests.

• **Article 12**

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given counting on and in accordance with its age and maturity.

• **Article 20**

1. A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests are not allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.

The International Convention on Children's Rights was ratified by the Law 2101 of December 2, 1992 (Government Gazette, Series I, No 192 A) and Article 28 of the Greek Constitution (Rules of International Law and international organizations) and supersedes any other opposite provision of law.

b) **Law 3500/2006** – Government Gazette, Series I, No 232 A/24-10-2006: To deal with domestic violence and other provisions”

c) **Article No. 1532 of the Civil Code** – Consequences of defective exercise.

- If the father or the mother violate the duties imposed on them by their function to take custody of the person of the child or the administration of his or her property or if they exercise such function abusively or are not in a position to cope with this task, the Court may, at the request of the other parent, the closer relatives of the child, the public prosecutor or even its own initiative, order any appropriate measure.
- In particular, the Court may take away the exercise of parental custody, wholly or partially, from one parent and entrust it to the other parent or, if the circumstances described in the previous paragraph apply in regard to the person of the other parent, entrust the actual custody of the child or even its custody, wholly or partially, to a third party or appoint a guardian.
- In exceptional cases of urgency, where the conditions of the first section are met and an immediate risk for the child's physical or psychic health arises, the Public Prosecutor may order any appropriate measure for his protection up to the issuance of the judgment of the Court, to which he or she addresses within thirty days.

In the implementation of the legal framework, there is no protocol in place that sets out the procedure that must be followed during a child's removal from home. In the case of Greece, the Public Prosecutor's Order for the removal of the child is addressed to the social worker of the social service of the municipality in which the child resides, or alternatively, to the relevant police authority. This is following a social investigation, or alternatively, the Public Prosecutor's Order follows the detection of abuse by police, and the child's testimonies. Once the order for removal has been enacted, the child must be relocated to a secure and appropriate alternative living arrangement. The transit place for temporary hospitality is typically the on-call children's hospitals, where children are transferred until a permanent solution is found, such as a foster or adoptive family placement, out-of-home placement, or reunification with their biological family. It is notable that there is a legal gap concerning adolescents and hospital care in Greece, resulting



in adolescents being denied access to children's hospitals and having to stay in police stations for longer periods, which can exacerbate the trauma they have already experienced.

In an attempt to enrich the process with a child friendly perspective, the organisation, "The Smile of the Child" in Greece, offers an immediate intervention service that can be applied in the procedure of removal and is designated as "in situ intervention". The in-situ intervention is conducted by the organisation's specialised social workers and psychologists and is directed towards children who are at immediate risk, as well as children who are victims of any form of violence, including physical, sexual and psychological abuse, neglect, illicit trade and trafficking. The objective of this intervention is the child's is to protect the children, advocate for their rights and offer friendly and less harmful circumstances for the removal procedure. In instances where a child is in imminent danger, the primary objective is the safe transfer accompanied by a Social Worker or a Psychologist to a protected environment, using the Immediate Intervention Vehicles of the Organization always in collaboration with the Public Prosecutor and the relevant Authorities. The subsequent step is to collaborate with relevant organisations and social services to facilitate a prompt resolution.

Concerning the year 2023, according to the "The Smile of the Child" report, In-Situ Intervention service was provided to 228 children and, in particular 42.98% of the interventions involved infants, making it the category with the highest intervention rate (Table 1).

In the context of the project entitled 'Leaving with Care – Living with Care' (<https://project-care.eu/>), four countries (Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Croatia) participated in activities related to child protection and removal procedures. These activities were undertaken by a) establishing national working groups, which included the participation of law enforcement, juvenile public prosecutors, social services of municipalities, helpline operators, social services of paediatric hospitals, medical and nursing staff, residential care providers, and experts. b) developing training material and step-by-step protocols on trauma-informed approaches and c) identifying and training professionals. In the Greek national report, conclusions about the removal procedures are drawn from questionnaires and structured interviews with 20 representatives, as well as case studies and scenarios with representatives. It is noteworthy that, in response to the question of whether established protocols exist for professionals in Greece to follow when removing a child from their home, 29% of respondents indicated that such protocols do exist, while 71% stated that they do not. In the case studies, the primary concerns identified by the representatives were the following: (a) the lack of temporary accommodation for children following their removal from the home; (b) the lack of institutions and alternative care services in Greece; and (c) the lack of adequate training.

Table 1. In-Situ interventions conducted by "The Smile of the Child" in 2023, presented by age and gender

Age group	Boys	Girls	Total
0-6	53	45	98
7-12	44	28	72
13-18	16	29	45
18+	1	12	13
Total	114	114	228

Source: Report on the work of the 10 Specialized Action Centers of "The Smile of the Child" for 2023 – Roundtable Discussion <https://www.hamogelo.gr/en/ta-nea-mas/apologismos-2023-xamogelo/>.



SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE GROWN UP IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE

Regarding young adults who have grown up in child protection homes, there seem to be no research or literature reports on relevant qualitative data. Life conditions, personal development, goal fulfilment, living, educational and social standards, as well as the connection of individuals with significant others do not seem to be reflected in the literature. Sources are almost non-existent, with few exceptions being single papers at the degree level (Vorizanakis, 2019). In addition, where records exist from institutional or non-institutional bodies, they refer to quantitative data, and do not include follow-up data. In other words, it seems as if the persons in question are not relevant in terms of their development and are automatically excluded from this sensitive population group of people who have grown up in child protection homes after they have reached adulthood.

All of the above reflects the need for a different, humanistically oriented approach to the child protection system. This approach will be about the human being, the holistic nature of their existence and their overall trajectory, placing them at the centre of everything concerning their past, present and future. All in all, if those who grew up in child protection homes do not testify to their personal and lived experience, every effort of the system will fall on deaf ears. The personal narratives of individuals and the recording of their experiences should form the basis for meaningful changes in the ways and practices of the child protection system.

GAPS IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

Bureaucratic delays in foster care and adoption

Although the 2018 law has streamlined procedures for adoption and foster care, significant bureaucratic delays persist. The matching process between children and foster families can take years, leaving children in institutions for extended periods. These delays often discourage potential foster or adoptive families from participating in the process.

Inadequate number of social workers and psychologists

The lack of trained professionals, including social workers and psychologists, is a severe limitation within the child protection system. Many services are understaffed, leading to long waiting times for children in need of support. This understaffing also hampers efforts to monitor children's welfare once they have been placed in care or returned to their families.

Institutionalization of children

Despite the shift towards family-based care, institutionalization remains a significant issue. A large number of children still reside in institutions for extended periods, which can have long-term negative effects on their social and emotional development. Moreover, many institutions face challenges in providing individualized care due to overcrowding and limited resources.

Limited access to mental health services

Children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or trauma often require specialized psychological support. However, in Greece, there is limited access to mental health services tailored to the



needs of vulnerable children. Mental health professionals are scarce, especially in rural and remote areas, leading to disparities in care provision.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND BEST PRACTICES

Streamlining bureaucratic procedures for foster care and adoption

A crucial step in improving the system is reducing bureaucratic delays in foster care and adoption processes. This could involve digitizing records, establishing a centralized database, and improving coordination between agencies. By enhancing transparency and efficiency, the system can place children in family-based care more rapidly.

Increasing the number of trained professionals

The government should prioritize recruiting and training more social workers, psychologists, and other professionals involved in child protection. Investing in continuous professional development for these workers is vital, as is ensuring they have manageable caseloads to provide quality care.

Promoting foster care over institutionalization

To combat the continued reliance on institutions, Greece must promote foster care as the primary form of alternative care. This can be achieved through public awareness campaigns that educate families about the importance and benefits of fostering, as well as by offering financial and psychological support to foster families.

Expanding mental health services

Expanding access to mental health services for children is critical, particularly in regions where these services are lacking. Creating specialized trauma recovery programs and ensuring that children in the care system receive regular psychological evaluations will help mitigate the long-term effects of abuse and neglect.

Cross-sector collaboration and data sharing

A coordinated, multi-agency approach is necessary for a holistic child protection system. Empowering partnerships between government agencies, NGOs, and local communities can facilitate better data sharing and communication. This will help ensure that cases of at-risk children are identified earlier, and appropriate interventions are made more quickly.

PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Preventing child abuse and neglect requires a comprehensive, proactive strategy that addresses the root causes and risk factors associated with abuse.

Education and public awareness campaigns

Education is essential for preventing abuse. Implementing school-based programs that teach children about their rights and how to recognize and report abuse can be effective. Public



awareness campaigns targeting parents and caregivers can help them understand healthy parenting practices and the consequences of abuse.

Supporting vulnerable families

Many cases of child neglect stem from social and economic pressures within families. Providing targeted support, such as parenting classes, counseling, and financial assistance, can help families overcome challenges before they lead to abuse or neglect. Early intervention programs can identify families at risk and offer them the support they need.

Empowering community-based services

Community-based services play a pivotal role in preventing child abuse. By establishing local centers where families can access support, education, and health services, communities can create a protective network around children. These services also allow for better monitoring of at-risk families and faster intervention when necessary.

Collaboration with international organizations

Collaboration with international organizations, has proven to be beneficial in enhancing Greece's child protection efforts. These organizations offer technical expertise, resources, and innovative solutions that can help improve preventive measures and child care services.

CONCLUSIONS

While Greece's child protection and care system has made progress, significant gaps remain. Bureaucratic delays, understaffing, and the continued reliance on institutional care are challenges that must be addressed. Efforts to promote foster care, improve mental health services, and streamline processes are necessary steps toward a more efficient and humane system. Prevention of child abuse and neglect is equally important, requiring coordinated action at all levels, from education and public awareness to providing vulnerable families with the support they need.

In addition, through collaborations and contacts of the organization 'The Smile of the Child' with official institutions of child protection, the need not only to improve procedures but also to implement the current legislation is stressed. Shortages of staff, space and support networks often make it slow or impossible to implement the current child protection system in Greece. Of course, in any such effort, the best interests of the child should be taken into account and prioritized.

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