



PRACTICE NOTES

PREPARING FOR THE POTENTIAL REOPENING OF INTER-COUNTRY ADOPTION FROM ROMANIA

Romania is considering allowing international adoptions again after banning the practice for more than fifteen years due to widespread adoption irregularities. Adoption and child welfare workers in the United States can better support children adopted from Romania if they are aware of the historical and current trends in Romanian child welfare and the latest research on the impacts of institutionalization on child development.

History of Inter-Country Adoption from Romania

Romania has a complicated history related to child welfare and adoption. Communist era policies and practices, including pronatalist policies which banned birth control and abortion, economic policies that separated people from their extended families, and social service policies which focused on institutionalization as the main form of social welfare, led to the mass institutionalization of roughly 200,000 children in the late 1980s. After the Romanian Revolution in 1989, people around the world learned of the horrible conditions of Romanian institutions for children. Nearly 10,000 Romanian children were adopted internationally between 1990 and 1991, many facilitated by unscrupulous facilitators who were charging large fees to adoptive families and paying birth mothers for giving up their children. Because of these adoption scandals, Romania eventually banned inter-country adoption entirely in 2004, and pledged to increase domestic adoptions, close-down the roughly 700 large institutions for children and people with disabilities across the country, and improve its child welfare system.

One of the legacies of the widespread institutionalization of children in Romania was that researchers were able to investigate the long-term effects of institutionalization on child development. Researchers found that Romanian children who spent considerable time living in institutions had structural changes in their brains, lower cognitive abilities, worse executive functioning, more mental health issues and more social and behavioral issues than children living in family-like settings (Nelson, 2014). Children adopted from Romania were found to have similar types of behavior issues as those adopted from the public child welfare system in the United States (Groza & Ryan, 2002). Further, researchers found that many of the impacts of early institutionalization lasted through adulthood, with some new issues arising in early adulthood, such as new mental and emotional disorders (Humphreys *et al.* 2015). However, some of the cognitive delays diminished after being adopted into a supportive family. Although most children adopted from Romanian institutions had lifelong impacts of early institutionalization, about a fifth of these children experienced no deleterious effects and were surprisingly resilient.

Romania has made significant improvements in its child protection system in the past several decades, including banning the institutionalization of children under age two in 2004, and extending the ban to age seven in 2018. In addition, it re-established the field of social work in 1994 and pledged to close-down large institutions for children by 2020. However, many Romanian children are languishing in out of home placement for years, with more than 17,000 still living in institutions.

The adoption process in Romania is complicated, and the entire process to declare a child "adoptable" takes a minimum of two years. Nearly one-third of children (31%) currently in out-of-home placement are relinquished



ROMANIAN CHILDREN IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM SPEND, ON AVERAGE, 7.5 YEARS IN OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT, AND 33% SPENT 90% OF THEIR CHILDHOODS IN THE SYSTEM"

at or shortly after birth, with 42% of children officially in out-of-home placement due to poverty of the family, and another 13% due to child or parent disability (Stănculescu *et al.*, 2016). In these cases, the family may occasionally visit their children living in institutions or other settings, which restarts the time clock after each visit. Romanian children in the child welfare system spend, on average, 7.5 years in out-of-home placement, and 33% spent 90% of their childhoods in the system. While more children are living in family-like settings, they are often transferred to institutions as they get older.

Children in out-of-home placement are declared "hard to adopt", if they are older, part of a sibling group, a member of certain ethnic groups, diagnosed with a disability, or have been on the adoption list for more than 9 months. Nearly one-third of children in out-of-home placement have a diagnosed disability, many not being diagnosed until after they had spent time in out-of-home placement (Stănculescu *et al.*, 2016). In 2017, only 257 of the 1,251 children adopted were designated as "hard to adopt". As in the United States, in Romania, most adoptive parents adopt children under age 7 (85.5%), while over 90% of children living in institutions are over age 7.

Practice Considerations for Workers, Pre-adoption

There is a current proposal to re-open inter-country adoption in Romania, but to limit it to "hard to adopt" children (Chircui, 2019).



Thus, there might be a new wave of Romanian children adopted by families in the United States.

- » Ensure potential adoptive parents receive information on developmental, emotional and social issues related to their specific child(ren)
- » Provide thorough overview on adoption issues, such as trauma, attachment, identity and culture
- » Provide information about Romanian-specific adoption issues, including an overview of Romanian culture, the Romanian child welfare system
- » Provide research on the potential long-term effects of institutionalization, if appropriate
- » Potential adoptive families should be given a chance to withdraw during this stage

Practice Considerations for Workers, Post-adoption

Child welfare workers need to provide ongoing support for Romanian adoptees and their adoptive parents. As Romanian adoptees will be from the "hard to adopt" list, they likely will have spent a significant amount of time living in out-of-home placement and might be older or have a disability. They will likely experience similar issues as older children adopted through the public child welfare system in the U.S., though will speak Romanian, a language not as common in the United States.

- » Provide adoptive parents with training on child development, trauma, conflict resolution, and helping children cope with emotional issues
- » Ensure adoptees receive support sorting through past traumas and coping with grief, trauma, and identity issues
- » Assess and refer for individual and family counseling and support groups, for parents and children
- » Assess and refer for disability services for children if appropriate
- » Provide adoptees and their families full disclosure of their personal histories and access to their adoption and other case records
- » Help connect adoptive families with the Romanian diaspora living in the U.S.

CASE EXAMPLE

Pat and Sam are a married couple in their thirties living in Minneapolis who are interested in adopting an older child from Romania to start a family. They completed all the required paperwork and home visits through an adoption agency that specializes in adoption from Romania now that inter-country adoption has re-opened from Romania and have been tentatively matched with an eleven-year old girl named Irina. Irina's mother left her at the hospital when she was born, as she couldn't afford to raise another child as her husband had recently died. Irina lived with a foster family until she was 2 years old and has been living in a large institution in a rural part of the country ever since. Her mother visited her occasionally until she was 7 years old, which prolonged Irina's

time in out-of-home placement. Irina has been described in the adoption paperwork as a short, quiet girl who enjoys planning games and taking care of the younger children, and especially enjoys the camp that the children have attended each year. She has no known medical problems, though is thought to be several years "behind" in school. Irina has been on the "hard to adopt" list for almost 3 years. Pat and Sam are planning to go to Romania to meet Irina and finalize the adoption but are frustrated that there are continued delays in the process.

Using this case example and the information you have learned in this issue of Practice Notes, consider the questions below. If you are able to, share this issue with colleagues

and discuss the questions for further collaborative learning.

- » How might the context of child welfare in Romania that you read about in this issue of practice notes apply to this case?
- » Based on the research you read in this issue of Practice Note, what are some possible issues that Irina might face based on her experiences in out-of-home placement?
- » What would you suggest that Pat and Sam do to prepare for adopting Irina or any other child from Romania?
- » What types of supports might Pat, Sam and Irina need after Irina arrives in the United States?

Summary

Inter-country adoption from Romania may soon be re-opened, though limited to "hard to adopt" children who are more likely to be older, to have a disability, and to have lived in out-of-home placement for a significant period. Practitioners can use the knowledge found in this

issue of *Practices Notes* to help prepare for this potential re-opening by sharing it with co-workers and integrating it into your own practice with children and families. Below, please find questions for reflection as you take this research knowledge into your daily child welfare practice.

Reflection Questions

1. What can you do to share this information with other professionals?
2. How can you use your knowledge of the Romanian child welfare system in your own work with families that might consider adopting from Romania?
3. Adoption involves a profound loss by the adopted child, and this loss is compounded when a child is adopted internationally from an institutional setting. What can you do to acknowledge loss and trauma in your practice with adopted children?
4. What can you do ensure that adoptive families develop and maintain a strong connection with the Romanian American community?

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Elizabeth Lightfoot is a professor at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work. She developed this issue of *Practice Notes* while on sabbatical as a Fulbright Scholar in Romania where she was studying services to children and people with disabilities.