

ALTERNATIVE CARE IN CHILD PROTECTION - FOSTER CARE

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ABSTRACT

Foster care is a preferred alternative to residential care due to the importance of the family environment for the physical, emotional and intellectual development of the child. This enables the development of a sense of security and belonging.

The paper presents an analysis of the development process of the maternal assistance network at the level of Constanta County, with emphasis on reducing the number of institutionalized children and ensuring the human resource necessary for the placement of children separated from their birth family, having consequence in optimizing and increasing the quality of services addressed to children.

Keywords: to institutionalize, foster care, children, childcare

Introduction

According to constitutional and civil law regulations, the family has a fundamental role in the protection of children's rights in Romania (1). It is to the credit of every state to establish and regulate as effectively and efficiently as possible the basic relationship between child-state-parents, which provides the child with the environment it needs for its full and harmonious development.

Responsibility for the child's harmonious upbringing and development lies primarily with the parents (2). They have an obligation to respect the rights of the child, taking into account

the best interests of the child (3).

Although the State's intervention is additional, as it is responsible for "respecting the rights of the child and protecting him/her through the work of the competent public institutions and authorities, the local administration authorities are obliged to support the parents/legal representative of the child by providing basic, multipurpose and quality services appropriate to his/her needs" (4).

"The professional maternal assistant is a person certified under the terms of the Government Decision no.679/2003, regarding the conditions, procedures and status of the professional maternal assistant" (5) and according to the "Government

Decision no. 502/2017, on the organization and functioning of the Commission for Child Protection (5). The professional maternal assistant ensures the education and well-being, necessary for the harmonious development of the foster child (6).

The field of child protection is nowadays in society's interest and is undergoing constant transformation. Both international documents and national laws which have regulated the rights of the child in detail have developed a set of general principles of law which must be respected on all occasions when the child is in need of protection.

Although Romania adopted the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, it remained faithful to the child protection system since 1970, until 1997, when the Romanian Government adopted Emergency Ordinance No 26/1997 on the Protection of Children in Need.

"Law No 272/2004 regulates the right to special protection of children, defining special protection as the set of measures, benefits and services intended for the care and return of children temporarily or permanently deprived of the care of their parents or those who, in order to protect their interests, cannot be left in their care. The measures, benefits and services referred to above benefit from a legislative framework setting mandatory minimum standards for the adequate protection of children temporarily or permanently deprived of parental care" (7).

Between 1990-1996, normative acts are conceived, therefore, maternal care is promoted only by non-governmental organizations, and after 1997, maternal care becomes an alternative of child protection and gains more and more importance in Romania in the last decades.

"Professional maternity assistant means the natural person who, under the terms of Government Decision no.679/2003 on the conditions, procedures and status of professional maternity assistant" (5) and according to "Government Decision No 502/2017, on the organisation and functioning of the Commission for Child Protection, has been certified and who ensures through the activity he/she carries out at home the upbringing, care and education necessary for the harmonious development of the

children he/she takes into care" (6).

Placement with a professional foster carer has a number of advantages: financial, material costs are much lower than the costs of care in residential institutions and psychosocial: healthier, more harmonious emotional development and a better sociological prognosis.

Material and method

"In order to produce this article, we used the documentation and analysis of the annual reports of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection of Constanta County between 2017-2022" (8).

We conducted a longitudinal study on "children who benefited from the special protection measure, on those who were placed in foster care as an alternative measure to institutionalization, but also on professional foster carers who were employed and who left the system of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection of Constanta County".

The article focuses on demonstrating that foster care is a viable alternative to the institutionalisation of children in special care.

Results

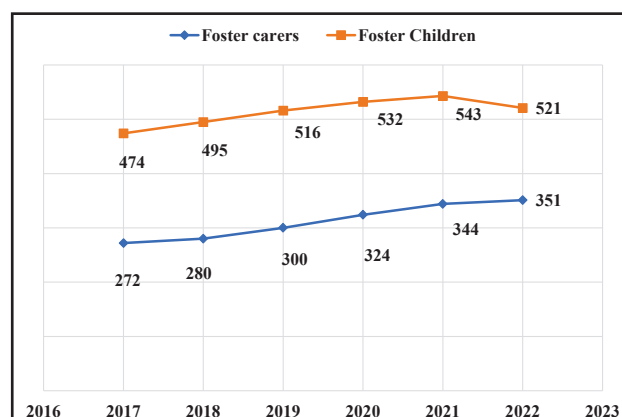


Figure 1 Comparative situation of foster children and foster carers between 2017-2022

Table 1 Intake-out dynamics of children in foster care between 2017-2022

Children placed in Foster care on	No. of children in Foster care	No. of children leaving the Foster care	Children placed in Foster care on
01.01.2017	81	65	31.12.2017
458			474
01.01.2018	100	79	31.12.2018
474			495
01.01.2019	116	95	31.12.2019
495			516
01.01.2020	130	114	31.12.2020
516			532
01.01.2021	108	97	31.12.2021
532			543
01.01.2022	85	107	31.12.2022
543			521

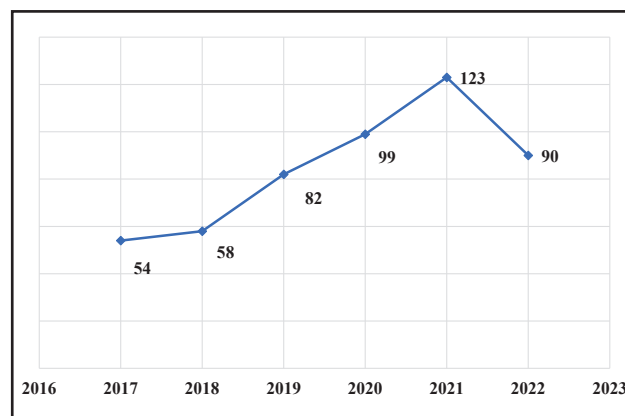


Figure 3 Graphical representation of the total number of children in Foster care classified as disabled

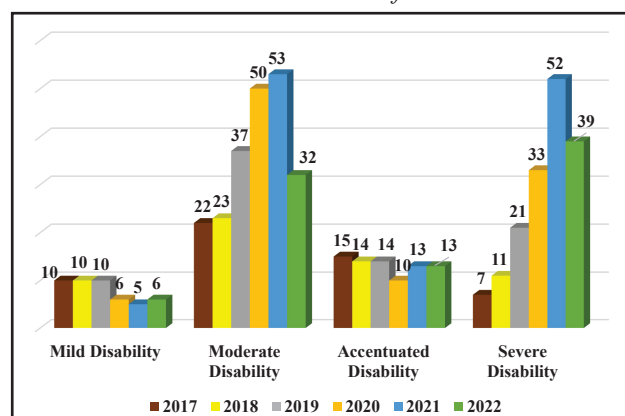


Figure 4 Comparative situation by year of children with disabilities placed with Foster carers

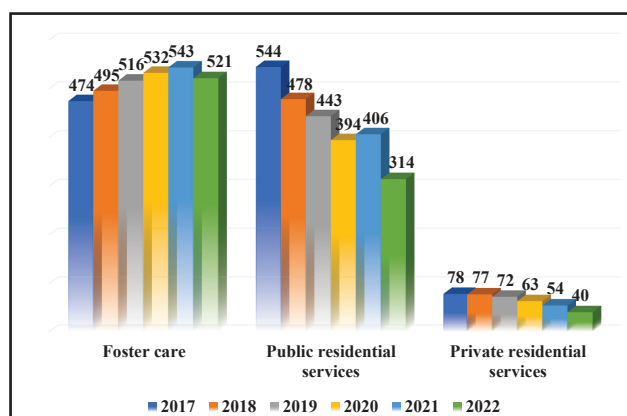


Figure 2 Comparative situation of children in the special protection system between 2017 and 2022

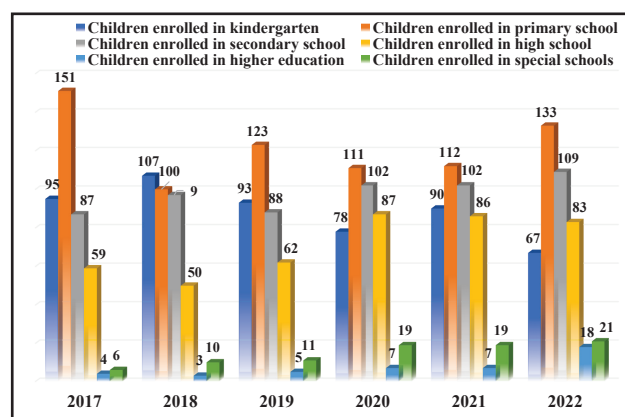


Figure 5 Comparative situation of school-aged children placed with professional childminders between 2017-2022

Table 2 Age status of children in Foster care by year

Age of children placed with Foster carers	No. of children/young people placed at Foster carers 2017	No. of children/young people placed at Foster carers 2018	No. of children/young people placed at Foster carers 2019	No. Children/young people placed at Foster carers 2020	No. Children/young people placed at Foster carers 2021	No. Children/young people placed at Foster carers 2022
0-2 years	163	109	118	117	121	66
3-6 years	106	129	120	132	132	102
7-9 years	65	80	84	87	88	95
10-13 years	80	87	87	87	93	126
14-17 years	56	80	85	92	76	78
Over 18 years	4	10	22	17	33	41

Discussions

“The statistical analysis for the period 2017-2022 is possible by analyzing the annual activity reports of the Directorate of General Assistance and Child Protection of Constanta County” (8, 9).

This analysis includes: Comparative situation of children in foster care and foster carers from 2017 to 2022, Intake-out dynamics of children in foster care from 2017 to 2022, Comparative situation of children in the special protection system from 2017 to 2022, Situation of ages of children in foster care by year, Graphical representation of the total number of children in foster care classified as disabled, Comparative situation of disabled children placed with foster carers by year, Comparative situation of school-age children placed with professional foster carers in the period 2017-2022.

The above statistical analyses are relevant to the study in terms of the alternative to institutionalisation when raising children in birth families is not a viable option.

Following the analysis of the collected data, the number of children in foster care has increased, this is possible thanks to the development of the network of professional foster carers .

We can also observe the upward dynamics that started with 2017, continuing annually until 2021, and then in 2022, the number of children out of foster care increases, as can be seen in the data shown in Figure 1 and Table 1.

Figure 2 shows the comparative situation in 2017-2022 of children in special protection.

While in 2017, the number of children placed with professional foster carers was 474, 544 children were placed in public residential services and 78 children in private residential services, in 2018 there was an increase in the number of children placed with foster carers - 495 - and a decrease in the number of children in public and private residential services - 478 and 77 respectively.

This downward trend of institutionalized children is continued throughout the period analyzed, both in public and private residential services, so that at the end of 2022, according to

official data, there were 314 children in public residential centers and 40 in private ones, while the number of children in foster care increased to 521.

Another classification that I consider quite important in terms of the conditions that MPAs must meet in their upbringing and education to ensure that the “best interests of the child” are served(7) is that by degree of disability,

plotted in Figure 3 and comparative by year in Figure 4.

It is found that in 2017 there were a total of 54 children classified as disabled, of which 12.96% were classified as Severe, 27.78% were classified as severely severe, 40.74% were classified as Medium and 18.52% were classified as Mild.

In 2018 there were a total of 58 children classified as disabled, of which 18.97% were classified as severe, 24.14% were classified as severely severe, 39.66% were classified as medium and 17.24% were classified as mild.

In 2019, there were a total of 82 children classified as disabled, of which 25.61% were classified as severe, 17.07% were classified as severely severe, 45.12% were classified as medium and 12.20% were classified as mild.

In 2020 there were a total of 99 children classified as disabled, of which 33.33% were classified as severe, 10.10% were classified as severely severe, 50.51% were classified as medium and 6.06% were classified as mild.

In 2021 there were a total of 123 children classified as disabled, of which 42.28% were classified as severe, 10.57% as severely severe, 43.09% as medium and 4.07% as mild.

In 2022 there were a total of 90 children classified as disabled, of which 43.33% were classified as severely disabled, 14.44% were classified as severely severe, 35.56% were classified as moderately disabled and 6.67% were classified as mildly disabled.

With the increase in the number of children placed in foster care, an increase in the level of schooling can also be observed, thus it becomes mandatory to analyse the children in foster care according to the form of education in which they are placed and to monitor the situation in order to identify the possibilities of improving qualitative and quantitative indicators.

A structural analysis of Figure 5 shows that the number of young people enrolled in higher education has increased from 4 in 2017 to 18 in 2022. The number of children enrolled in high school has varied recording a notable increase in 2020- to 87 (from 59 in 2019) and a decrease ,to 83 in 2022. The number of children enrolled in special schools has also seen a notable increase throughout 2017-2022, from 6 in 2017 to 21 in 2022.

In the light of the above we rightly consider that the education of the younger generation is a national priority, and with the necessary support from childminders, we can see differences in the future of children.(8)

The conclusions regarding the achievement of the research objective were formulated on the basis of the consideration that it was necessary and sufficient to give a numerical presentation of the maternal care network with its evolutions and mutations

Structural analysis of the situation of the children placed with professional foster carers in Constanta County in order to achieve it: in conclusion, the foster care network has expanded during the period analysed and the number of children placed in foster care has also increased.

At the same time, the number of institutionalized children can be reduced and the necessary human resources for the placement of children separated from their natural family can be ensured, thus optimizing and increasing the quality of the services addressed to children, and we highlight the fact that, as a result of the study undertaken, it was found that in the period 2017-2022 the maternal assistance network, as a viable alternative to deinstitutionalization, has increased and has responded to the needs of children and young beneficiaries of the special protection system.

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