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## Addressing The Plight Of Haiti's Orphans

By Sam Bojarski



*Orphan living in Leogane Photo Credit: Jared Stanley*

Blaise Emilson, 25, spent his early years with his family, which included his mother and 13 siblings. But in 2003, he explained, a group of people connected to St. Joseph's Home for Boys, an orphanage focused on arts education, saw him dancing at a carnival. They invited Emilson to leave his hometown of Jacmel and live at their Delmas facility.

Emilson spent most of his childhood at St. Joseph's Home for Boys. Although he recalled mostly positive experiences, not all orphan children in Haiti can say the same. Numerous economic, psychological and

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organizational challenges impact the country's orphans. Some of these challenges are more obvious than others.

Current demographic figures show that Haiti is a young country, with more than half of the population under the age of 25. But certain realities in the Caribbean nation have left many Haitian mothers with difficult choices when it comes to the future of their children.

Many mothers live on less than \$2 per day and struggle to find sufficient employment, Erick Pierre-Val, a Haitian citizen, said in an interview with the Haitian Times. In a recent master's thesis he published while studying at the University of Montreal, Pierre-Val looked at the factors that lead Haitian mothers to give their children up for international adoption. Poor access to health care, inadequate housing and paternal absence were also common struggles they faced, he said.

"Because there is no governmental assistance or welfare system in Haiti, oftentimes single mothers are left to fend for themselves, there really isn't a place to go for regular aid," said Kristen Hertzog, an American who adopted her daughter from Haiti in 2009.

Faced with minimal means of support, many mothers choose to give their children to orphanages for the possibility of international adoption. As a result, most children in Haiti's orphanages are not "real orphans" because they have living parents, Pierre-Val pointed out.

### Mixed results from Haiti's orphanages



Orphan living in Leogane Photo Credit: Jared Stanley

Emilson recalled that his mother reluctantly agreed to let him live at the orphanage.

“She didn’t have opportunity to help me. It was so hard, because I had 13 people living with me, in a small house,” Emilson said. “When I (went) there I saw there were a lot of kids like me.”

In 2015, St. Joseph’s Home for Boys was closed by Haitian authorities, who were investigating allegations of sexual abuse against its founder Michael Geilenfeld, according to [The Washington Times](#). Emilson said he never personally witnessed any abuse while living there. He added that he values the education he received at St. Joseph’s Home for Boys, which included instruction in the English language, as well as music and visual arts. He uses this experience at the Jacmel Arts Center, where he currently teaches classes and paints pictures that depict the experiences of street children.

If he saw Emilson’s artwork, 30-year-old Rodney Leveille would probably relate to it. After spending the first part of his life at an orphanage in Thomassin, Leveille said he got kicked out of the facility at age nine.

“I was fighting with the other kids, they usually (looked) down on me,” Leveille said.

The other children, he added, knew how he got there. As a newborn, said Leveille, his mother sent him out with the trash, placing his birth certificate on his chest. A group of Americans who were passing by saw Leveille and took him to the orphanage.

After getting kicked out, Leveille said he lived on the street, where he washed cars and begged for money.

“It was a hassle. Every day you have to go out there and make money to feed yourself,” Leveille said.

Since then, he has turned his fortunes around and now runs a small home for 13 children, called Home for Love. His rough childhood experiences, he said, have prompted him to shun the orphanage label and pursue a different model.

“What they do, most of them, is they take a lot of kids in the orphanage, but they don’t even have a good place for them to sleep. They don’t have a room for them, they don’t have a lot of plans for them,” said Leveille.

At Home for Love, most days have a structure that emphasizes education and spiritual growth. Children wake up around 6 a.m., and Leveille transports them to school. They return to the home early in the afternoon for a generous lunch and some rest time. From 3:30 to 5 p.m., they work on school assignments, and the evenings are set aside for Bible study and learning English, according to Leveille.

Home for Love, a nonprofit, receives much of its funding from outside Haiti. But Leveille said he has chosen not to take in more children until he has the funds to provide for them. Not all organizations in Haiti follow this approach.

Although technically nonprofits, many orphanages that receive outside funding run more like a business and fail to meet the everyday needs of children, Leveille said.

Emilson expressed similar sentiments, noting that some children at Haitian orphanages receive just two small meals each day. Problems like this, he said, aren’t always due to lack of resources.

“The biggest problem is because they just want to make money for themselves but not for the kids, not to help the kids,” Emilson said. “When you’re asking people for money to help others, for me, you should do what you’re asking for.”

### **Hidden problems for children and parents**



*Photo credit: Jared Stanley*

Hertzog, who has been doing mission and nonprofit work in Haiti for nearly three decades, said the quality of the country’s orphanages varies widely.

“I have seen well-run, well-funded orphanages, and I have seen the ghost orphanages which are just someone trying to keep some kids alive,” said Hertzog.

She added that she has never seen an orphanage that prioritizes mental health, despite the attachment issues prevalent among Haitian children.

Tamara White, who founded a nonprofit called ZoeRoots that offers trauma care to Haitians, said developmental trauma among children is spreading like wildfire in Haiti. An overreliance on orphanages has exacerbated this problem, according to White.

CNN reported in 2018 that there are currently 30,000 children living in Haitian orphanages. This number has increased since the 2010 earthquake, which left tens of thousands of people homeless and made it much more difficult for parents to provide appropriate care.

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Currently, about \$70 million per year are flowing to orphanages and related causes in Haiti, according to the government's Institute of Social Welfare and Research (known by its French abbreviation, IBESR). But in many cases, White noted, mothers just need an extra \$30-50 per month to care for a child.

"Orphanages also create a great dependency in communities, because they're not addressing the underlying issues of why kids are going into orphanages," said White.

Certain practices employed by orphanages tend to increase this dependency. According to Pierre-Val, some orphanages have staff members who work in communities. Technically, he said, IBESR has to evaluate the family situation before an orphanage can take possession of a child. But this rule is weakly enforced, and staff members often try to coerce parents into giving up their children. False promises to parents are common, Pierre-Val explained.

"Sometimes they take the child, and they don't give anything to the family," said Pierre-Val.

### **Working toward a better future**



*Photo Credit: Jared Stanley*

All international adoptions from Haiti must go through orphanages recognized by the government. Most of these facilities, according to Pierre-Val, are run by organizations from the U.S. and Canada.

But other, more underground orphanages are not recognized by the government and have weak standards of care. According to Hertzog, well-meaning Haitians have started taking children into their

homes since the earthquake. They have few long-term funding sources and operate without any checks and balances, but they still call themselves orphanages.

“There’s no end result, these kids are going to live in these orphanages, and then sadly, many times, after they turn 18 they’re told ‘you’re done now,’ and they’re out on the street,” Hertzog said.

Haiti’s government has stepped up its efforts to crack down on this behavior. IBESR [completed a study](#) on orphanages earlier this year. Out of 757 facilities surveyed, the agency found that just 35 meet its standards of care for children. After completion of the study, IBESR announced it would not issue authorization to open new child reception centers.

Leveille, who said his Home for Love is recognized by IBESR, spoke favorably of the agency’s recent efforts. He also explained his alternative vision – a vision that offers children a future in their own country.

“We have to create more leaders for Haiti, not create leaders we are just going to lose (to) the world,” Leveille said.

Since starting Home for Love in 2015, Leveille said he has been working toward the long-term goal of starting a hospital and school on the property. These facilities would provide stable, family-supporting jobs and give his former children opportunities to help others, he explained.

By showing a long-term commitment to the community, Leveille offers a different example for Haitians who want to address the problems that affect children.

These problems, according to White, are currently going unaddressed, despite the vast resources going to orphanages.

“There is plenty of money to do it the right way. Lots of money needs to go into creating jobs and directed at malnutrition and maternal health and mental health and domestic violence (prevention) and all these different things that contribute to children being in crisis,” White said.