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Cross-border placement of children in care: Setting the research agenda

Размещение детей под опекой за пределами страны: Новое направление для исследований

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ABSTRACT

As international migration leads to significant numbers of children with foreign backgrounds around the world, this article reveals the emerging research agenda around the controversial practice of cross-border placement of children in care. We review existing research, focusing on cross-border kinship care and intensive pedagogy placements. Cross-border out-of-home child care is increasingly promoted and institutionalised. Yet, there are persisting concerns about responsibility sharing, a patchy legal framework, implementation, and little data comparing outcomes of placements in-country and abroad. The article concludes by noting implications for social work and promising directions of empirical investigations.

Аннотация

В связи с тем, что международная миграция приводит к значительному увеличению числа детей иностранного происхождения по всему миру, в данной статье рассматривается новая исследовательская повестка, связанная с неоднозначной практикой трансграничного размещения детей, находящихся под опекой. В центре статьи – трансграничная родственная опека и размещение детей в учреждениях интенсивной педагогической помощи. Трансграничная опека детей все чаще пропагандируется и институционализируется. В то же время сохраняются опасения по поводу распределения ответственности между государствами, неполной правовой базы, разного рода практических трудностей, а также дефицита данных, которые бы позволяли сравнивать результаты размещения детей внутри страны и за рубежом. В заключение отмечаются перспективные направления исследований в этой области.

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дети без попечения родителей; семейные формы устройства детей; трансграничное устройство детей-сирот и детей, оставшихся без попечения родителей; международный поиск опекунов и попечителей; сироты

Introduction

Social work is largely local – social workers tend to operate in domestic settings, with only some working in international agencies like UNICEF, Amnesty International, and similar. At the same time, researchers note a growing transnationalisation of social work, which brings new challenges and

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opportunities to social work policy, practice, and profession (Boccagni et al., 2015; Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2021; Schwarzer et al., 2016). Broadly speaking, existing research looks at two types of transnational social work. The first implies cross-border travel of social workers to provide services abroad (e.g. Bartley & Beddoe, 2018). The second type of cross-border social work results from cross-border movement of recipients of social work services, such as migrant families, refugees, and victims of human trafficking (Boccagni et al., 2015; Kloppenburg & Hendriks, 2021; Withaecx et al., 2017). Social work with transnational populations requires collaboration between social workers in receiving and sending countries. Given the growing migrant populations, researchers discuss the need to develop transnational social work – not only as sporadic information and experience exchange between social work agencies but as a paradigm shift, ‘the institutionalisation of qualified and specific service provision across borders’, with respective new training programmes (Boccagni et al., 2015, pp. 316–317; also Heenan & Birrell, 2005; Withaecx et al., 2017). To do this, one needs to understand different types of cross-border clients, their needs, related risks and opportunities, as well as required infrastructures. Our paper contributes to this broad aim by revealing an increasingly relevant, controversial and challenging area of cross-border social work, namely with children in care.

Around the world, 281 million people live outside their country of origin, and ‘millions of children have family connections that cross international borders’ (ISS USA, 2022, p. 2). Out-of-home child care (also known as alternative child care), i.e. provision for children without parental care, has become increasingly international (Ulybina, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b). Domestic policies and practices are increasingly shaped by international guidelines of intergovernmental and transnational non-governmental organisations – laying out preferred care options and best practices for children without (or at risk of losing) parental care. Another facet of global out-of-home child care – which is the focus of our study – is the cross-border placement of children in care. Children without parental care are moved across national borders into different care settings, e.g. kinship care by extended family, professional foster care, adoption, kafalah, and residential institutional care. European statistics on cross-border placements have started to be collected only recently but even these limited figures show that cross-border placements of children are growing (Carpaneto, 2016, p. 44). Among the biggest users of cross-border child placement are Germany, Belgium, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Spain, and Italy. Some countries tend to place more children abroad (Germany, Ireland), while others tend to receive more children (Spain, Czech Republic, Italy) (Carpaneto, 2016).

Cross-border public care for children even within the European Union is associated with multiple challenges, such as variations in EU Member State national child protection systems, problematic information sharing and cooperation between national courts (Lamont & Fenton-Glynn, 2016), aligning international and national legal systems (Dominelli, 2016; Lorenz & Brendt, 2023), allocation of costs, enforcement of decisions, ensuring high-quality and time-efficient provision across borders (Lorenz & Brendt, 2023), reconciling different social work practices, as well as establishing what constitutes the child’s best interests (Ricciardi & Wöllenstein-Tripathi, 2025; Wright, 2022). Given the rise of cross-border placements, it is important to better understand the problems that arise, ways of addressing them, as well as the implications of these changes for children and families.

Cross-border social work with children is a growing field of research (e.g. Lamont, 2024; Mustasaari, 2022). Concerning alternative child care, there is a big and long-standing corpus of social work, legal, and sociological studies on international/transnational adoptions (e.g. Rotabi & Bunkers, 2011; Willing et al., 2012). Research on other forms of cross-border placement in Europe and beyond is also evolving yet is still limited in scope, evidence base and comparative power (e.g. Ricciardi & Wöllenstein-Tripathi, 2025 on cross-border kafala; Wright, 2022 on international kinship care).

In this paper, we focus on two forms of transnational child care placement – cross-border placement into kinship care and cross-border intensive pedagogy placements – and discuss these in the wider context of transnational social work and cross-border alternative child care. The aim is to reveal cross-border placements of children in care as a complex and globally expanding area of child care policy and social work practice.

We do not aim to advocate for a particular form of child care. Nor is our aim to provide a comprehensive review of the global history and current landscape of cross-border out-of-home child placements. Rather, by reviewing recent research in the field and using examples from the past, we wish to draw attention of social work and child care researchers and practitioners to what looks like an increasingly economically appealing care practice, associated with a heterogenous regulatory field and potentially controversial implications for children.

This article is based on a review of existing scholarship, policy documents and grey literature, concerning cross-border, also known as overseas, placement of children in care. The review seeks to address the following research questions: What is the current situation in policy and practice in this area? What factors may be potentially driving the recourse to cross-border care? What implications may the expansion of cross-border placements have? Sources were identified by a hybrid strategy of reviewing key index literature known to the authors, backward and forward citation searching from this literature, and a search of Google Scholar using the keyword search (foster care, orphanage, orphan, orphanhood, without parental care AND overseas, cross-border, abroad, emigration, foreign, transnational). The sources considered were in English, and no date restrictions were applied. Cross-border intensive pedagogy placements are typical in Germany and Austria, and so the search also included sources in German with keywords Individualpädagogische Auslandsmaßnahmen, intensivpädagogische Auslandplatzierungen, Individualpädagogik.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. Section 1 reviews some historic precedents of cross-border placing of children in care. Section 2 focuses on current practices, regulations, and advocacy concerning international kinship care (2.1), and individual pedagogy measures abroad for difficult children and teenagers (2.2). In section 3, we discuss differences and similarities between cross-border placements historically and today, outline major issues and trends, implications for social work, and promising research directions.

Placing children in care overseas: historic precedents

Moving children without parental care abroad is not a new practice. For 350 years, between the early seventeenth century and the 1970s, the United Kingdom used to send poor, orphaned, abandoned, and street children, as well as juvenile offenders to colonies in America, Australia, New Zealand and Africa (Bean & Melville, 2018; Hadley, 1990; IICSA, 2018). Children would be placed into residential care or foster families, go through vocational training, work on farms, as apprentices and domestic workers (IICSA, 2018; Lynch, 2015). Estimates of the numbers of children historically relocated without parents abroad vary (e.g. Lamont et al., 2024; Lynch, 2015). Available reports and numerous case studies indicate that the scale of this phenomenon was significant. For example, according to a House of Commons estimate, 150,000 British children were sent abroad through child migration schemes (IICSA, 2018, p. 154; Bean & Melville, 2018).

What were the motives for placing children abroad? Some believed that placing children overseas would improve children's social conditions, rescue children from poverty, and unhealthy and morally dangerous environments, and give them better chances in life (HIA, 2017; IICSA, 2018; Lamont et al., 2024; Leavoy, 1995). Another rationale – which is widely recognised to be a central factor in child emigration – was financial. Sending children abroad was deemed to be a cost-effective way to improve the situation in British cities – empty the overcrowded children's homes and workhouses, reduce poverty and unemployment, prevent future crime and social problems (Hadley, 1990; HIA, 2017; IICSA, 2018; Jalongo, 2010; Leavoy, 1995; Norrie, 2020). In the early twentieth century, the cost of emigrating a child to Canada was claimed to be about one-tenth of the cost of maintaining that child in an institution in England (Lamont et al., 2024, p. 120). At the same time, moving children as farm labourers to Canada was expected to provide cheap labour and boost the Canadian agricultural market (Lamont et al., 2024). There were also private beneficiaries, such as emigration agents who received bonus payments on emigrated children from the Canadian government (Lamont et al., 2024). Another driver of cross-border placements was the need to populate new colonies with

'white, British stock' (HIA, 2017; Lynch, 2015). Overseas placements of children were driven not only by British interests but also by interests within the receiving countries, as New Zealand, Australia, and Rhodesia were actively recruiting child migrants (e.g. IICSA, 2018; Lynch, 2015). For example, the Australian Commonwealth Government planned (but failed) to receive 50,000 unaccompanied children after WWII (HIA, 2017; IICSA, 2018). In other words, placing children overseas was meant to ensure better outcomes for vulnerable children but also served as a tool to resolve socio-economic and political problems both in Britain and its colonial territories.

The nature and outcomes of such placements varied greatly. For example, British child migrants to Australia tended to be placed into residential institutions, either children's homes or training farms, while their peers who moved to New Zealand would be placed into foster families (Lynch, 2015). Children were often placed in poor living conditions, received poor education and health care, lost their identity, experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, which had life-long consequences (Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2001; IICSA, 2018). Inspections were limited, and monitoring the performance of placements in a foreign country was challenging. The range of non-state and state actors involved in child emigration was broad, the responsibility for children was poorly defined, and the legal status of children was uncertain. From the late nineteenth century, the state regulation of child emigration was developing slowly (Lamont et al., 2024, p. 6, 65).

Both historically and today, placing children overseas has been deemed controversial. Since at least the nineteenth century, concerns were raised about motives driving the schemes, the unsatisfactory care, and separation of children from their families (HIA, 2017; IICSA, 2018). In the twenty first century, child migration became a matter of several official inquiries (e.g. Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2001; HIA, 2017), followed by official apologies to the former child migrants made by the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown in 2010, the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2009, and Northern Irish ministers in 2022. Governments allocated funding for counselling, family tracing and reunification (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2010-02-24/debates/10022460000003/ChildMigration>; Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2001). Many non-state institutions also apologised for their role in child migration (IICSA, 2018). Today, many consider child emigration to have been a flawed policy and a shameful practice of exporting the problem of child protection overseas, conducted in conditions of deficit regulation and oversight, and driven by political objectives rather than interests of children (IICSA, 2018; Norrie, 2020).

At the same time, children also had positive experiences and developed family-like relationships and successful independent lives on these schemes (Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2001; Moss et al., 2017). Besides, the evaluation of overseas placements may be more positive if it takes into account alternative in-country options available at the time, i.e. conditions that those children were removed from, such as extreme poverty and risks of abuse and exploitation in the urban slums in British cities (Leavoy, 1995; Moss et al., 2017).

After World War II, child emigration to Canada ceased but continued to other destinations. Although several reports were presented to the British government in the 1940s and 1950s, which revealed often detrimental consequences of overseas placement for children, the UK government did not try to stop the relocation of children (IICSA, 2018). By the late 1960s, up to 10,000 child migrants from the United Kingdom were sent to Australia, along with about 300 children to Southern Rhodesia and 550 children to New Zealand (Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2001; IICSA, 2018; Lynch, 2015). The placement of children into care overseas stopped by the late 1970s. This is believed to be not due to specific policy changes but rather due to improvement of the UK economy, improved welfare support for families, and consequently the reduced need for alternative child care (IICSA, 2018). Although significant in absolute numbers, emigration of unaccompanied children was not that great in relative terms. For example, 'between 1947 and 1964, the number of children migrated was between 0.16% and 0.74% of those being cared for by Barnardo's in its UK homes (IICSA, 2018).

Not only Britain practiced long-distance placement of children. A similar, even though not a strictly speaking cross-national border movement of children, occurred, for example, in the USA in

the mid-nineteenth century – widely known as orphan trains. During almost eighty years, an estimated 200,000 poor, orphaned, homeless or abandoned children from New York City were moved to rural foster homes in less densely populated American states (Jalongo, 2010; O'Connor, 2004). This practice was driven by immigration, economic depression, and the Civil War, which all led to growing numbers of children in the streets. Relocating these children to rural areas promised to prevent the rise of crime in the cities and help resolve the problem of deficit labour in the agrarian sector.

Cross-border child placement today

Today, there are signs that we may soon witness a return of significant cross-border movement of children without parental care. It is not uncommon to believe that cross-border, interjurisdictional placement may be a viable response to the growing population of children in care (e.g. Freundlich et al., 2004). Moreover, recent migration trends and socio-economic conditions appear to have made this idea more attractive, as we observe active advocacy and regulatory efforts in this field in different countries. Cross-border placement has started to be viewed as an opportunity to serve the best interests of some children, as it allows public authorities to choose 'the best care solution satisfying the interests of the child at stake among a variety of solutions' (Carpaneto, 2016, p. 20).

Present-day cross-border placement of children in care is diverse and takes place in different directions. Children are moved from countries of the global North to the global South (e.g. international kinship placements; placements of difficult teenagers as part of individual pedagogy measures), as well as from countries of the global South and global North to the global North (e.g. international adoptions, foster care, kinship care). The range of possible placement types has been expanding, e.g. cross-border kafalah is now considered a legitimate type of cross-border child protection measure (Dambach & Wöllenstein-Tripathi, 2020), and a way to incorporate cultural specifics into international child care practices. We do not know the total number of children placed in care abroad, nor do we have aggregate information about outcomes and success rates of such placements (e.g. CFAB, 2024a). To our knowledge, there have been no attempts to collect global data on the destinations where children are sent, draw global maps of cross-border child placements. Below, we discuss some types of such cross-border placements, related issues and debates.

International kinship placements

Regulation and guidance on cross-border placement of children

Some international treaties and cooperation agreements are in place to simplify child placement abroad. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) offers a global normative framework for cross-border placement of children. The Convention establishes several relevant rights and principles that are expected to be considered in all actions concerning children, such as the right to family reunification (Article 10), the right to preserve their identity (Article 8), and the principle of the best interests of the child (Article 3) (Carpaneto, 2019 on the best interests of the child) – and may thus serve as a foundation for globally shared standards on child placement. At the same time, some aspects of UNCRC, e.g. in relation to inter-country adoption, have started to be perceived as outdated (Carpaneto, 2016).

A more specialised international legal framework is provided by the 1996 Hague Convention, which applies to situations where authorities in one state place a child in another state. The Convention relates to different types of international placements, including kinship care (Article 33). It stipulates cooperation arrangements to handle cross-border child welfare cases, exchange relevant information, register and enforce court orders. Cross-border placement of children needs to be agreed by competent authorities of the requesting and the requested countries, and contracting states to the Convention may establish different procedures (CFAB, 2022). Intergovernmental organisations, such as the Hague Conference on Private International Law, have recently offered some guidance on the implementation of the Hague Convention where it concerns provision of out-of-home

child care in another state (HCCH, 2023). High-level regional documents, e.g. the Brussels Ia and Brussels Ib Regulations of the Council of the European Union, as well as the relevant Practice Guide (EU, 2023), also regulate matters concerning cross-border placements in foster or institutional care (<http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2019/1111/oj>). Where a country is not a signatory to such documents, it is expected that child placement will be carried out through contact with the country's relevant authorities, which would be requested to assist with the assessment and provide information about potential carers (Family Rights Group, 2017). Given that existing international legal frameworks, such as Brussels Ia, are broad, there have been initiatives to develop a more practice-oriented European framework for transregional child protection (Lorenz & Brendt, 2023). National governmental regulations and guidelines clarify the implications of international documents and provide practical advice to local authorities (e.g. for the UK see Department for Education, 2012; Department for Education, 2013; for Germany see Bundesamt für Justiz, 2022).

Actions of the European Union go beyond legal regulations and guidance and include commissioning of research on the topic. For example, the EU-commissioned report by Carpaneto (2016) investigated problems related to cross-border placement of children and the application of the Brussels Ia Regulation. Another research project (EUR&QUA 2016–2020), supported by the European Regional Development Fund, aimed at understanding challenges related to cross-border child protection between France, Germany, Belgium, and Luxembourg (Lorenz & Brendt, 2023; Schröder & Zöllner, 2020). As part of this project, efforts were made to develop a European transregional training programme, which would help improve cooperation through joint case work, teaching social workers about different legal concepts and their implementation in partner countries (Schröder & Zöllner, 2020).

National and international charities have also become increasingly involved in this field. The UK child welfare charity Family Rights Group brought together state officials, social workers and non-state stakeholders to design a guide on practical steps that need to be taken for international viability assessments of potential placements abroad (Family Rights Group, 2017). The Guide addresses factors to be considered in such assessments, including: (1) factors that may affect the future welfare of the child, e.g. cultural change; financial, education and health resources available locally; immigration issues; the ability of the potential carer to maintain contact with the child's family in the UK; (2) logistical factors that may complicate the process of child placement, such as the possibility of international money transfers to financially support potential carers (Family Rights Group, 2017). The Children and Families Across Borders work with UK local authorities to provide case management services for family reunification and child placement abroad. They produced various guidelines for local authorities and social workers, e.g. advice on the risks and challenges that UK social workers may encounter when travelling abroad; how to conduct assessments of potential carers overseas (CFAB, 2020; CFAB Factsheet, 2023).

The growing interest in promoting kinship care abroad is accompanied by a rise in guidance, including attempts at private governance. Various state and non-state actors try to put procedures in place that would ensure that children transition safely, retaining links to their relatives and relevant people.

Cross-border kinship placements of children from the UK

Currently, there are about 75,000 looked-after children, i.e. children in the local authority care system in England (sic) (Grandparents Plus, 2020). 'Residential care is by far the most cost-intensive care intervention' (National Children's Bureau, 2023, p. 4). The cost of foster care stands at £800 per child per week, while the cost of residential care is estimated at £3,400 to £4,700 per child per week, or even £10,000 or more in challenging and complex needs cases (Grandparents Plus, 2020, p. 8; Local Government Association, 2023).

In the decade since 2010/2011, the number of children entering residential care in the UK has increased by almost 80%, accompanied by a 63% rise in spending (National Children's Bureau, 2023, p. 4; Sen et al., 2024). In response, the UK government has started to promote kinship care (CFAB, 2024b; Department for Education, 2023). There has also been a push from some British

charities (e.g. Children and Families Across Borders, Grandparents Plus) to expand the use of kinship care by extended families. In this context, there have been calls to apply kinship care support to children with extended families overseas, particularly ‘considering that one in three children born in England and Wales has a foreign-born parent and could have extended family overseas’ (CFAB, 2024b). An estimated 30,000 children in care in the UK have family abroad ‘who may be able to look after them’ (CFAB, 2024c).

Today, local authorities in the UK practice international kinship placements. However, this practice is associated with various deficits and challenges, e.g. children are not guaranteed contingency planning, pre-placement support, and post-placement support with follow-up visits – unlike children on domestic placements (CFAB, 2024b). Charities advocate for ‘equality in support and entitlement for carers’ inside and outside the UK, as well as for clearer statutory guidance for local authorities placing children with families abroad (CFAB, 2024b).

Cross-border kinship placements of children from the USA

About 18 million children, or one in four children, in the United States live with at least one immigrant parent (The Urban Institute, 2024). Between 1990 and 2008, US states saw dramatic increases in their immigrant child population, some as high as over 300% (Northcott & Jeffries, 2012, p. 35). Given these figures, ‘it is reasonable to assume that a subset of the 407,493 children in the U.S. foster care system have family connections overseas.’ (ISS USA, 2022, p. 1) According to available estimates, cross-border kinship placement may lead to significant savings: ‘if each state placed children with families overseas in only 1% of their cases, the total savings to states would be in excess of \$160,000,000’ (Northcott & Jeffries, 2012, p. 38).

Unsurprisingly, cross-border placements of children are increasingly deemed to be a viable solution to the growing presence of such children in the child welfare system. International actors advocate for overseas kinship placements as an important part of ensuring care permanency. For example, the international professional network International Social Service promotes cross-border family reunification and kinship care, by providing case management, technical assistance, and policy advocacy (ISS USA, 2022). They argue that international family finding and cross-border kinship placements need to be routine parts of social work, in order to find permanent homes for children not only with American kinship but also with relatives outside the United States. ISS-USA partners with the Child Welfare League of America – a coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies supporting children in the USA – to understand emerging cross-border issues and advocate for better protection policies.

However, so far, finding relatives for children in care outside the USA has not been standard practice. Many American child welfare organisations do not have international placement protocols and the majority do not engage in international family finding on a regular basis (ISS USA, 2022). International family finding and post-placement monitoring are associated with financial, logistical and practical challenges. There is a need for specially trained staff, effective cross-border communication, tracking and reporting (Northcott & Jeffries, 2012). Concerns are related to longer timeframes of arranging cross-border placements, reliability of post-placement reports, the costs of working with intermediary agencies like ISS-USA, as well as the lack of a uniform international regulatory process (ISS USA, 2022).

Cross-border kinship placements from the global South into the global North

Children without parental care also move from countries of the global South to countries of the global North, often due to conflict, poverty, and displacement. For example, in ten years between 2008–2017, over 3500 children without parental care from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia and other countries came to live with their extended families in Australia, as allowed by the orphan relative visa migration scheme (Rose & Serr, 2019; Tesfaye & Hagos, 2020). Some children move because they are orphaned or their parents are unable to take care of them. Other children move because they are seeking ‘a better life in Australia’ (Tefsaye & Hagos, 2020). Studies reveal

some associated problems, e.g. poor documentation pre- and post-placement, and ‘a lack of clarity on the legal protection’ of children (Tesfaye & Hagos, 2020).

Out-of-home care for difficult children and teenagers – individual pedagogy measures abroad

In Germany and Austria, there is a practice to place ‘especially difficult’ children and teenagers in care abroad – as part of individual pedagogy measures (Individualpädagogische Maßnahmen im Ausland – in German), which were developed since the 1980s (Dohle, 2022; Taube, 2016). These special care arrangements are meant to be a measure of last resort for ‘hopeless’ children and adolescents with particularly traumatic histories of abuse, intensive drug use, criminal history, severe behavioural, personality and relationship disorders (Sanders & Reker, 2021; Taube, 2016). These cases are described as ‘borderline cases between children’s services, psychiatry and youth justice’, where children are in great need of help and at the same time reject the support from regular child support services (Taube, 2016).

Children are placed for a limited period of time with local families or professional carers in other, preferably culturally and physically distant countries, often in hard-to-reach rural areas, with no easy transport links, so that it is harder to run away and return to their original environment and old life-style. Children find themselves in a new environment, not being able to speak the local language, often need to follow a strict daily routine, engage in daily physical work and outdoor activities, e.g. working on animal farms, helping with agricultural work, unable to avoid chores such as cooking, washing, making firewood, and having little free time (Jugendamt der Stadt Nürnberg, 2025; Tacheles Jugendhilfe, 2024; Taube, 2016).

The care plans for such placements are made in Germany, within the German legal framework and through a participatory process between the child, their parents, the providing agency, and the local German youth welfare office. German youth welfare offices retain responsibility for these children and pay the hosting families (Sanders & Reker, 2021; Taube, 2016; Wendelin, 2010).

Overseas placements are implemented by multiple private agencies in Germany, most of which are members of the Federal Working Group for Individual Pedagogy (AIM Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Individualpädagogik e.V.). Agencies cooperate with religious organisations, e.g. the non-profit EAL e.V. partnered with EKJH, the Protestant Child-, Youth- and Family-Care Center of Diakonie in Würzburg, Germany (<https://www.eal-jugendhilfe.de/der-verein>). Programmes offer vary in concepts, length and modes of care, e.g. in a local family or in a professionally run care facility. Public child welfare offices compare projects of different agencies and select what is deemed to be the best fit for a particular child (Taube, 2016). Destination countries typically include lower-income countries, such as the Kyrgyz Republic, Romania, Portugal, Poland, and Spain. There are also examples of child placement from Germany into high-income countries like Finland, e.g. on Finnish farms and with Finnish foster families.

Outcomes of such placements vary. Some researchers argue that individual care with educational assistance abroad ‘achieves significantly higher effects for its specific clientele than other forms of assistance from the spectrum of educational assistance’ (Macsenaere & Klein, 2010; also Klawe, 2007). Some evaluations showed a 50% or more success rate of placements abroad, which is significant given that such placements were used as the last opportunity, after other interventions had failed (Jugendamt der Stadt Nürnberg, 2025; Klawe, 2007). However, there were also scandals concerning child placements abroad (Sanders & Reker, 2021).

In the 1990s, the number of providers offering placements abroad increased, which revealed the need for regulation (Taube, 2016). This led to legal changes to the German Social Code Book VIII (Sozialgesetzbuch VIII) and the adoption of the new Child and Youth Welfare Development Law (KICK) in 2005 – which aimed to increase control over child care provision. The new regulations limited the possibility of applying measures abroad, emphasised the exceptional nature of moving to a foreign country, and regulated issues such as professional training of staff, participation

in the decision-making process, and time limitations of placements. The law required close cooperation between authorities at home and abroad ‘so that cases do not remain “under the radar”’ (Dohle, 2022).

Today, individual measures abroad constitute a relatively small share of all alternative child care measures. Around 600–800 children and adolescents from Germany are being cared for abroad, ‘on behalf of German youth welfare offices’ (Sanders & Reker, 2021). However, there are advocates of such cross-border child placements who argue that alternative care abroad needs to be expanded as it offers important opportunities for child’s transformation and education (e.g. Lorenz & Brendt, 2023).

Discussion: key trends, concerns, and research gaps

The practice of moving children without parental care to other countries is not merely a phenomenon of the past. It continues to be applied in different forms around the world. Cross-border movement of children occurs in different directions – to, from and between countries of Europe and the wider global North. Both historically and today, state and non-state actors, including faith-based organisations, have been involved in cross-border placements. A combination of charitable and economic motivations appears to have been driving this practice.

Active migration of the late twentieth – early twenty-first centuries, and the resulting high numbers of transnational families, as well as children with foreign-country origins, make out-of-home child care overseas a potentially feasible and appealing way to save public expenditure, while also possibly ensure permanent family-based care. Out-of-home child care abroad is becoming institutionalised – through new governmental regulations and non-governmental professional guidelines, including those aiming to ease, speed up and quality-control cross-border placements. Another sign of institutionalisation is the recent discussion about the need to introduce special ombudsman offices to deal with child care abroad (Sanders & Reker, 2021).

Cross-border placement of children without parental care is increasingly debated. Some non-state actors (e.g. CFAB, International Social Service) actively promote it as a viable care option that needs to be more systematically considered by child welfare authorities. It is argued that international kinship care is potentially more cost-effective and in line with children’s interests to live in a family, maintain their ethnic and cultural identity, as well as family links (e.g. ISS USA, 2022). It is argued that grandparents and other relatives may provide good care for vulnerable children; however, the resources of relatives abroad are often overlooked by child welfare workers (Naughton & Fay, 2003). Similarly, there are efforts to normalise other types of overseas placements such as individual pedagogy measures abroad – not as a last resort measure but as a legitimate, more regularly used care option, given the overwhelmed social support services in Germany (Felka & Lorenz, 2018).

Similar developments take place in other fields of cross-border out-of-home child care, such as foster care, when children are placed with foster families abroad, in their original homeland countries. For example, children with Polish citizenship from the UK and Germany are increasingly being placed by British and German authorities into foster care in Poland (Pawliczak, 2022). The rise of such placements encouraged Polish authorities to introduce their first regulations of cross-border foster care in 2018, which specified the simplified and accelerated proceedings of cross-border foster care, compared with the ‘regular’, comprehensive in-country foster care proceedings (Pawliczak, 2022).

Current developments of care abroad bear similarities with historic practices. Placing children overseas is deemed beneficial in terms of child welfare and socio-economic effects for the source country. Cost-effectiveness of care options abroad is a legitimate consideration for public authorities making decisions on child placement, especially when child welfare providers are subject to financial pressures (e.g. Wendelin, 2010). While individual placements abroad have high costs, and relative benefits are likely to vary greatly depending on context, this form of care is nevertheless comparable in cost to regular domestic residential care, or even cheaper than closed therapeutic residential care

or intensive individual care in the home country, which is largely due to lower personnel costs (Jugendamt der Stadt Nürnberg, 2025; Wendelin, 2010). Care abroad for difficult children and teenagers is regarded more efficient, particularly if one considers the long-term positive effects of these placements (Dohle, 2022; Macsenaere & Klein, 2010; Wendelin, 2010). Placements abroad may offer 'also good business' for implementing agencies (Wendelin, 2010, p. 183).

Historically and today, placing children abroad has been associated with similar challenges and concerns about implementation, deficient post-placement control, and potential conflict of child's interests with socio-economic and political interests of other stakeholders. Researchers note that cross-border child placements within Europe are often driven not by the interests of children but rather by the deficit of relevant options in the sending country and the financial interests of hosting countries (Schröder & Zöllner, 2020).

There are also implementation-related concerns. Welfare offices in the sending country continue to have little influence from a distance over the care provided abroad and 'must trust that the providers of measures on site are doing a good job, i.e. there are hardly any control and supervision options' (Jugendamt der Stadt Nürnberg, 2025). It is recognised that cross-border placements need to be processed fast and with stricter and transparent quality control, ensuring that children enjoy the same quality of care monitoring and support both domestically and abroad (e.g. Felka & Lorenz, 2018). This requires open data on the number of children placed overseas, as well as outcomes of these placements; high-quality contingency planning carried out before child placement, including provision in the case of a placement failure (CFAB, 2024a; Felka & Lorenz, 2018). The relevant national and international regulatory fields are heterogeneous, and develop in a responsive manner, i.e. once problems arise. To address these issues and define best practice, advocates of cross-border care produce international care guides, to equip local authorities and care professionals with practical tools (CFAB, 2020; Felka & Lorenz, 2018).

At the same time, modern placements abroad are rather different from historic precedents. For example, the historic movement of British children into colonies was largely migration to 'British' populations in these countries. Also legally, these were very similar countries – which is not necessarily the case today.

Today, there may be a higher level of legal security. Yet, there remains the issue of legal responsibility for the child placed abroad – regarding which there is no international consensus, nor agreement on how this responsibility should materialise. Historically, responsibility was with the receiving country, and this continues to be largely the case with South to North placements now. However, there may also be different responsibility sharing solutions, e.g. the sending country may bear all legal responsibility, or share some responsibility with the receiving country. In some countries of the global North, home authorities strive to retain control of the quality of care. For example, in the case of all individual pedagogy measures abroad, German 'youth welfare offices are obliged to convince themselves on site, i.e. abroad, of the quality of the measure, and they have to do this not only before the start but also before the assistance is then extended' (Sanders & Reker, 2021). At the same time, home authorities try to make sure that responsibility is shared with authorities in the destination country, who are expected to monitor local providers (Jugendamt der Stadt Nürnberg, 2025). Care abroad is deemed 'inappropriate if it is only used to bridge gaps in the support system' in the home country (Jugendamt der Stadt Nürnberg, 2025).

As typical for care and welfare sector in general, modern provision of care has become more formalised, bureaucratised, and professionalised (Sirius Jugendhilfe, 2024). More requirements are applied to care abroad now. For example, children and their guardians are expected to give consent and be involved in making the care plan. The destination country needs to be considered safe. Local care providers need to demonstrate experience in youth welfare and be legally recognised if they run a welfare facility or supervised accommodation (Jugendamt der Stadt Nürnberg, 2025). Further requirements are laid down for specialist staff providing care on-site, for example submission of health certificates, reference letters, proof of pedagogical qualifications and professional suitability for individual educational providers (Jugendamt der Stadt Nürnberg, 2025). The effects of

these changes are not clear. The attempts of the sending country to retain complete or partial control of child placements abroad make care monitoring more complicated, which may inhibit the number of such placements.

Changing care requirements have potential implications not only for children being sent abroad but also for the wider population of children in care. According to the recently introduced rules for German care projects abroad, care providers in destination countries are now expected to effectively meet the same requirements as domestic care providers in Germany, e.g. have an operating licence (Sanders & Reker, 2021). Children abroad must now be accompanied by social work professionals, and more unannounced visits are expected (Sanders & Reker, 2021). This way, Germany is exporting the professionalisation of care to placements abroad, which may facilitate the travel of care practices to receiving countries.

Given the emerged advocacy to normalise and regulate cross-border placement of children in care, we are likely to see further development in these directions. This seems likely particularly given the weakened kinship ties and the broader care crisis in the global North (e.g. Schwiter et al., 2020). It remains to be seen to what extent the practice of cross-border child placement will develop into a new field of international outsourcing and an international market. Similar processes can already be seen in other social policy areas, such as elderly care, which has started to be outsourced to countries with lower wages, for example from Germany to Thailand (Schwiter et al., 2020). More research is needed to better understand the underlying drivers of cross-border child care, particularly the transnational economy of placement schemes, global care chains, and interests of different stakeholders.

The above bears important implications for social work in Europe and beyond. As we are witnessing an increasing demand for cross-border child placements, there is a need to develop more systematic transnational social work. This requires more evidence-based and history-informed thinking about how international social work system could develop to effectively protect children in care, with and without cross-border family connections. There is space for debating the most effective cross-border cooperation models, as well as the future trajectories of the social work profession. More debate is needed to update social work training, so that it equips professionals with sufficient understanding of cultural and institutional conditions in other countries, to enable them to evaluate how placement options abroad will serve their clients' best interests.

Finally, there is a gap in theorising the ongoing developments in cross-border out-of-home child care. The dynamics around transnational care can be usefully analysed through the lenses of global social policy, global and transnational agency and governance (Ulybina, 2023a, 2023b). Social workers increasingly engage in transnational governance of alternative child care, as they move vulnerable children across borders and – in order to ensure quality care for children within their responsibility abroad – export their care norms and procedures to countries hosting children.

Conclusion

Cross-border placement of children in care is a multi-faceted and controversial area of global out-of-home child care, which – although increasingly attracting the attention of child protection advocates and regulators – remains largely unexplored, both empirically and theoretically. There is a need for practice-oriented research on cross-border alternative child care. As more and more families and children move countries, social services and courts are experiencing an increase in family cases involving foreign families and multiple countries. This presents a new challenge for the social work profession, which needs to develop tools for effective cross-border case management, but also to ensure that cross-border placements are in the interests of children and their families – particularly given the controversial implications and the debates around child emigration in the past. Hence, there is a need to better understand what good practice may look like, how one can best arrange collaboration with social services abroad, and guarantee intended-quality care in another jurisdiction, another culture, and socio-economic environment. There are questions around financial and legal

responsibility for children in cross-border placements, including for children with different citizenship and different care settings – kinship, foster, residential, etc. There is a need for comparative analysis of relevant national regulations and practical guidelines, as well as gaps and deficiencies in cross-border cooperation in this policy area. How are relevant procedures in the European Union going to develop? Will non-EU countries want to adopt similar procedures? What are the public perceptions of cross-border child placements? Finally, more research is needed to understand the diverse outcomes and first-hand perceptions of modern-day transnational childhoods of children in care.

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