Beat: Politics

Spain doubles the world average of children living in residential care centers

Despite having decreased that population

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USPA NEWS - Nearly half a million children in Europe and Central Asia live in residential care, including large-scale institutions, a report by the UN children's agency UNICEF reveals. In the case of Spain, despite this population having decreased, by 2022 there were 210 minors per 100,000 in these residences, compared to a global average of 105 per 100,000.

The rate of boys and girls living in residential care centers in Europe and Central Asia doubles the world average with 232 per 100,000 minors, compared to 105 per 100,000 in the rest of the planet, indicated a new UNICEF study. In Spain, this proportion was 261 per 100,000 children in 2018, and decreased to 210 per 100,000 in 2022, according the document. UNICEF put the total number of children living in hospices at 456,000, including large-scale institutions in Europe and Central Asia.

The specialist of the Protection division at UNICEF Spain, Almudena Olaguibel, explained that the report brings to light the still high numbers of children living in protection systems, in addition to exposing Europe's challenges to guarantee the rights of children and adolescents “to live as a family, including those with disabilities, those who are victims of violence and unaccompanied migrants or separated from their families.”

Western Europe has the highest rate of children in residential care, at 294 per 100,000, almost triple the global average. This higher proportion is due in part to the increase in recent years in the number of unaccompanied minors separated from their families seeking asylum in Europe. UNICEF highlights that it is necessary to look for alternative measures that take into account the life experiences and migratory transit, and the specific rights and needs of this group so that they offer stable solutions outside of an institutionalization environment.

The study reveals little progress for children with disabilities, who represent between 4% and 86% of children in hospices in countries that have reported their data. Children living in large-scale institutions often suffer emotional neglect and higher rates of abuse and exploitation, exposing them to mental health problems, psychological distress and trauma. Additionally, they may have difficulty forming positive relationships during childhood and adulthood, making them feel isolated and alone, the publication warns.

It also notes that children placed in institutions may suffer cognitive, linguistic and other developmental delays, and are more likely to come into conflict with the law, perpetuating cycles of institutionalization, especially when they have lived in those centers from a very young age. The report highlights the reduction that Spain achieved in just four years from 261 to 210 children per 100,000 and considers the country a model for other European nations with similar government structures, since it achieved progress despite divergent assistance systems between their autonomous communities.

UNICEF praises the Spanish strategy for the “deinstitutionalization” of children and their integration into community life, which aims to ensure that no one under six years of age lives in protection centers now, and that no one under ten years of age does so by 2030. This plan seeks for 70% of children to live with families and for no center to house more than 30 children.

The UN agency in Spain defends a preventive approach that supports biological families to avoid separation and, on the other hand, promotes a supported model of foster families. Admission to a hospice should always be the last option, for the shortest possible time and ensuring that they are small, family environments, with trained professionals with the skills and resources to offer them care and protection according to their needs, including the care of their mental health and emotional well-being, points out the Spanish strategy.

UNICEF Spain trusts that the report will contribute to achieving the approval and effective implementation of the strategy, which will require concerted action by the regional governments and the national government, under the leadership of the new Ministry of Youth and Children. “The time is now, the children cannot wait. Spain has assumed very specific commitments at the international and European level that have to materialize in real changes in the lives of boys and girls,” the document highlights.

To reduce the number of children living in protection centers regionally, UNICEF called for the systematic closure of large-scale institutions that house and educate children and their replacement with high-quality family and community-based shelters. In addition,

they requested that investment be made in mechanisms for early detection and early intervention in risk situations in order to avoid family separation, train trained personnel and have social and family support services. “The best way to protect children from institutionalization is to prevent the need to separate them from their families,” says UNICEF.

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