

THE INFLUENCE OF A CHILD'S ETHNIC ORIGIN ON ITS ACCEPTANCE INTO FOSTER CARE

Pavla Štochlová, Lucie Kozlová

University of South Bohemia, Faculty of Health and Social Studies, Department of Social Work, České Budějovice, Czech Republic

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Abstract

This article describes ethnic affiliation of children suitable for adoption and foster care as one of the components playing an important role in the process of implementing foster care. The theoretical part of the article offers an analysis of the concept of “ethnic group”, the perception of the ethnic affiliation of a child by adoption and foster care applicants, and further informs about the activities and collaboration with families of socio-legal protection institutions following the realization of substitute family care. The empirical part of the article focuses in its content on the ethnical affiliation of children suitable for adoption and foster care with whom the effort to place them into substitute family care was unsuccessful during the research period. To obtain the needed results, a quantitative sociological research strategy was employed. The relevant data concerning the ethnical affiliation of children not placed into substitute family care are processed comprehensively for the whole Czech Republic, with a clear breakdown into individual regions.

Key words: *child; ethnic group; substitute family care*

Abbreviations:

SFC, Substitute family care
SLCPI, Socio-legal child protection
institutions

INTRODUCTION

The authors focus attention in their article on the ethnic affiliation of children suitable for adoption and foster care, with whom the effort to place them in new adoptive or foster care families was not successful during the research period. With this group of children, a wide range of possible causes of the given failure can be assumed. Adoption applicants and foster care applicants of course place certain requirements on the child that they are preparing to take into custody. Their requirements generally focus not only on the age and the state of health of these children, but also on their ethnic

affiliation. In the preparatory phase of the research, the authors long considered whether to focus on ethnic affiliation at all. The topic is very current at the present time and discussed not only in the media but also by the general public, and particularly in the area of children suitable for substitute family care it is a rather taboo topic. In matters of the social-legal protection of children and thus also the issue of substitute family care, the emphasis is always placed on the full focus on the welfare of the child. This relates to the fact that in the placement of children into substitute family care, the staff of the social-legal child protection institution always tries to secure the highest quality care for the child in the new family. In order for a successful placement of a child into a family to occur and to secure the highest quality care for the child, it is important, among other things, that the future adopters or foster

caretakers have sufficient information about the child being taken in, and knowledge about the child's origin undoubtedly belongs to such information. Future parents have the right to know the origin of the child that they take into their family, want to take care of, and give them the love and care they need. The more information they get about the child being taken in, the better can they prepare for taking care of it. Recent studies of this issue continue to indicate that today's applicants for substitute family care are still not too tolerant regarding the ethnic origin of the child. It is therefore very important to continue mapping the situation in the Czech Republic, and given these conditions, to provide applicants who state their requirements for children with enough information and try to dispel the myths and stereotypes that persist in Czech society.

Ethnic group

The author Hirt describes "ethnic group" as a term usually used to refer to a historically formed group of people who have a common historical origin, racial type, language, material and spiritual culture, mentality, tradition and who together inhabit a common territory (Hirt 2011). The author further states that idea of a common genetic origin of the members of one ethnic group is in fact misleading, due to migration and the mixing of various ethnic groups among themselves. Experts therefore understand the term "ethnic group" rather as a group of people who share a common culture (Hirt 2011). The Large Sociological Dictionary (1996) moreover mentions that an ethnic group is characterized by its own ethnicity. Sociology regards an ethnic group as a set of learned cultural practices by which groups define themselves and distinguish themselves from each other, primarily in the areas of language, history, origin, religion and "decoration" (the tradition of dress, body changes, the relationship to the body). In sociology, the concept tends to be supplemented with the concept of race and is mostly referred to in the categories "ethnicity and race", where the concept of race brings a biological context to the category, although particularly authors of studies about cultures stress the cultural and constructivist character of the concept of race as well (Hirt 2011). Jandourek (2001) describes the term "ethnic group" even more

aply. He regards the ethnic group as a group of individuals who distinguish themselves from other groups through their ethnicity or the sum of cultural, racial, territorial and language factors, as well as their history, self-concept, awareness of common origin and also by the fact that they are perceived as being ethnically different by others. Sometimes the term "ethnic group" is also used in the sense of a national minority whose culture differs from the majority culture, but an ethnic group is not necessarily identical with the nation. Unlike race, ethnic group members do not have physical features by which they would significantly differ from members of the majority. More important is rather the difference in values, norms, behaviour and language. Features that members of an ethnic group consider to be characteristic of themselves are sometimes called ethnic consciousness (Jandourek 2001).

Child requirements of applicants for SFC

Requirements of applicants for substitute family care are generally high and do not often correspond with features of children who are suitable for adoption or foster care. During research by Štochlová (2007) it became apparent what kind of children are specified for adoption or foster care, and in connection with this lack of awareness the applicants then place demands on them in questionnaires that are too high, which in turn significantly slows down the realization of substitute family care or makes it entirely impossible (Štochlová 2007). In terms of the child's ethnic group, there is a generally low tolerance to it by applicants. Children whose ethnic group is different from the majority one are more often placed in foster care because applicants for foster care do not have such high requirements as applicants for adoption. International adoption is often mediated in case of younger children who can be adopted from the legal point of view (Popovská 2009). The ethnic origin of the child is not even specified for various – especially discriminatory – reasons in the child's records. The authors, however, are of the opinion that applicants for substitute family care of a particular child have the full right to receive as much information as possible about the origin of the child they decide to take into their care.

This information is important for taking care of the child in a proper way, and success of substitute family care is thus increased.

Cooperation with substitute families after arrangement of substitute family care

The social workers' work of course does not end with the placement of the child into a new family. From the experience of many experts, the identification of the needs of foster families, and long-term research, it is evident that after the formation of a new alliance, additional support and assistance to the family and child is needed, with continuous monitoring of the child's development and constant, sensitive support, based on mutual understanding and trust (Bubleová and Kovařík 2001). It is necessary to continue working with both adoptive and foster care families, for example in the form of visits at the families, consultation, etc. Also undoubtedly important are meetings between individual substitute families, where the parents can share their experiences and mutually support each other in the new life situation. Only then is it possible to ensure a high quality adaptation of the child within the new family. With foster care families, the staff of municipal authorities with extended competence has the legal obligation to regularly visit the child in a substitute family. Under the law, the Regional Office has the obligation to organize meetings of foster care families at least once a year. The Regional Office also secures expert advice to substitute families if they are interested in receiving it.

Immediately after arrangement, a so-called pre-adoption or pre-foster care period begins. To enable the child to be discharged from the institutional facility, the conferral of custody to the future adopters or foster carers must be legally secured. Because the new relationships are a major intervention into the life of the children and substitute families, the law stipulates a necessary period of at least three months of so-called pre-adoption or pre-foster care, designated for the adaptation of the child and the applicants to the new situation. The pre-adoption or pre-foster care period is utilized for verifying the preconditions for the creation of a satisfying and successful relationship between the child and the family. The family is visited during

these three months by a social worker, with whom the future adopters or foster carers have the opportunity to discuss and get advice about the particular situation or any difficulties. After the pre-adoption or pre-foster care period, a period of legal matters handling begins (Arrangement of Substitute Family Care 2005).

One of the principles of the Act on Social-legal Protection of Children is the monitoring of the development of children living outside of their family (Novotná et al. 2002). Within the framework of foster care inspection, employees of a municipality with extended competence are required to visit the foster care family in which the child lives. During the visit, they must show proof of special authorization issued by the Municipal Office with extended competence, in order to assure that this is in fact a person with the prerequisites for such activity. The frequency of visits is stipulated by law to occur at least once every three months in the period of the first six months of care substituting the care of parents, and subsequently in accordance with the interests of the child as needed, but at least once every six months. These visits are primarily of preventive importance. Their purpose is to catch possible problems already in their beginnings, making their effective solution possible.

Foster care families often communicate with each other very closely. Foster care family clubs are formed, where the families engage in various activities together, regular gatherings are held, weekend stays, trips, camps for children, etc. At the gatherings, they have the opportunity to participate in discussions with experts, where they receive psychological, special-pedagogical, legal and other advice.

Research on the ethnic affiliation of children not assigned to substitute family care

The aim of the research was to find out what ethnic group were the children that were not placed in substitute family care. In the realization of the research, the analysis included the entire population of children kept in the records of the Regional Offices of the Czech Republic in the 2006 calendar year (from January 1, 2006 to December 31, 2006) who were not placed in substitute family care during the given research period. This was a

total of 199 children, of which 73 were girls and 126 were boys. The breakdown of the children into groups according to ethnic affiliation collided with the fact that information about ethnic affiliation of children belongs to so-called sensitive data, which the law does allow to be set forth in documentation maintained at the Regional Offices. The ethnic affiliation of the children was therefore determined on the basis of a subjective judgement by the social workers of the socio-legal child protection authorities of the given Region, who had worked with the children for a long

period and had sufficient information about their origin. The authors are aware that this fact reduces the validity of the collected data.

RESULTS

Table 1 contains data about children, comprehensively for the entire Czech Republic with a breakdown into individual Regions, which in the research period formed the group of children not placed into substitute family care.

Table 1. Ethnic affiliation of children not placed in substitute family care (absolute and relative frequency)

Region	Ethnic affiliation of child								Total
	Majority		Half-Romani		Romani		Others		
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	100%
South-Bohemian	10	91%	1	9%	0	0%	0	0%	11
South-Moravian	3	38%	2	25%	3	38%	0	0%	8
Karlovy Vary	5	38%	0	0%	8	62%	0	0%	13
Hradec Králové	7	70%	0	0%	3	30%	0	0%	10
Liberec	2	20%	5	50%	3	30%	0	0%	10
Moravia-Silesia	12	32%	4	11%	21	57%	0	0%	37
Olomouc	6	33%	2	11%	10	56%	0	0%	18
Pardubice	1	17%	0	0%	5	83%	0	0%	6
Plzeň	2	67%	0	0%	1	33%	0	0%	3
Central Bohemia	9	50%	1	6%	8	44%	0	0%	18
Ústí nad Labem	19	36%	6	11%	28	53%	0	0%	53
Highlands	0	0%	0	0%	1	100%	0	0%	1
Zlín	3	75%	0	0%	1	25%	0	0%	4
Capital of Prague	4	57%	0	0%	2	29%	1	14%	7
Total	83	42%	21	11%	94	47%	1	1%	199

Of the total number of 199 children not placed in foster care, there were 83 children (i.e. 42%) of the majority ethnic group (which means that children of ethnic group other than majority make up the remaining 116 children, i.e. 58%), 21 children (i.e. 11%) were half-Romani, 94 children (i.e. 47%) were representatives of the Romani ethnic group and 1 child (i.e. 1%) was categorized by the

author in the others group (in this case it was a child of black origin).

DISCUSSION

The results of the research on the ethnical affiliation of children not placed in substitute family care show that 199 children failed

to be placed in new adoptive or foster care families. A wide range of possible causes for the given failure can be assumed. Adoption applicants and foster care applicants place certain requirements on the child that they are preparing to take into custody. Besides the age of the child, its ethnic affiliation of course plays a very important role. The ethnic group brings along certain specifics of which some applicants for adoption or foster care are afraid for a variety of reasons. Besides the various individual situations of bringing up a child of the Romani ethnic group, it was for example discovered on the basis of studies that the Romani population in general suffers a higher incidence of various illnesses (Report on the State of Romani Communities in the Czech Republic 2010). Some applicants refuse to accept a child of the Romani ethnic group, for example, and the placement of such children into substitute family care can then in some cases become somewhat more difficult. Štochlová (2007) analyzed the requirements for children by applicants of substitute family care. With applicants for adoption as many as 81% (83 applicants) stated that they wish to adopt a majority ethnic group child, and only less than 2% (2 applicants) would accept a Romani ethnic group child. Of applicants for foster care, 76% (35 applicants) stated they would accept into their care only majority ethnic group children, and 7% (3 applicants) would accept a Romani ethnic group child (Štochlová 2007). The authors therefore tried in the course of research to find the answer to the question: What is the ethnic group of children that failed to be placed in substitute family care? The authors anticipated the failure to place of some of the children into substitute family care precisely because of their ethnic origin. As Vančáková (2008) states, considerable fears prevail among applicants for substitute family care regarding the acceptance of an ethnically different child. Many future parents give priority to care for the physically or even mentally handicapped child before a child of a different ethnic group. There is no need to suspect them of racism. Especially for adopters, who primarily yearn for a complete family, it is very important that their child resemble them as much as possible, and Romani features usually do not correspond with this. Some applicants are worried about the reaction of their loved

ones, usually parents, and do not want to place the relationships with each other at risk (Vančáková 2008). This fact is also confirmed by research by Štochlová (2007), in which it was found that as much as three quarters of all applicants for foster care require a majority ethnic group child. The issue of placement of Romani ethnic group children into substitute family care is also a subject discussed by Kovařík (2000), who in the periodical *Substitute Family Care* in the article "Romani Children in Substitute Family Care" states that today everything suggests that the socially orphaned Romani children are among those in our children population who have the least chance of experiencing and knowing what absolute and unconditional acceptance is and what the security of a parental embrace and the atmosphere of a family circle are. It is just these everyday experiences that they lack and their absence makes its mark on the fact that they themselves will not be capable of providing these necessities to their own children. The author further notes that the majority (about 60%) of foster carers and adopters declared that they are satisfied with their decision to take a Romani child into their custody, see their living together positively and would make the same step again (Kovařík 2000). It is possible to declare that applicants for foster care are more tolerant in their requirements for a child than applicants for adoption. This benevolence can also be applied to the area of ethnic affiliation of the child suitable for foster care.

CONCLUSION

The article in its contents offers an answer to the question: What is the ethnic affiliation of children that for various reasons failed to be placed in substitute family care during the research period? The aim of the research was to map out the ethnic affiliation of children not placed in substitute family care in the Czech Republic. The results concerning children not placed in substitute family care show that the failure to place them in a new family can be linked precisely to their characteristics. Although the article is aimed only at the ethnic affiliation of the child, it was shown during the entire realization of the research that besides the affiliation of these

children to an ethnic group different from the majority, the overwhelming majority of them were also found to be older and with impaired health status. It is therefore important to view the issue of the placement of children in substitute family also with regard to their other characteristics, and not only on the part of experts on the given issue, but especially on the part of applicants for substitute family care.

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Contact:

Pavla Štochlová, Högrova 2, 612 00 Brno
E-mail: pavla.stochlova@gmail.com