

# Problem of Unaccompanied Children in the Earthquake: Insufficient Enrollment

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## Letter to the Editor

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## Abstract

Türkiye experienced 2 of the most catastrophic earthquakes of the last century on February 6, 2023. The first earthquake with a magnitude of 7.7 occurred at 4:17 AM in Kahramanmaraş City. Nine hours later, the second earthquake with a magnitude of 7.6 hit a region, which has 10 cities and over 16 million people. After the earthquakes, the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Hans Kluge, announced that a level 3 emergency was declared. One of the problems that should be solved at the earliest period in earthquakes is the problem of orphans or unaccompanied children. These children, referred to as “earthquake orphans”, can be potential victims of violence, organized crime, organ trafficking, drug addiction, sexual exploitation, or human trafficking. The already low socioeconomic level of the region, the magnitude of the earthquake, and the turmoil in the emergency rescue organization cause concern that the number of fragile children in this population will be higher than expected. The problem of orphaned children experienced in previous major destructive earthquakes provides important experiences for earthquake preparation.

In Türkiye, 55% of all loss of life and property attributed to natural disasters is caused by earthquakes. A large-scale earthquake occurs in the country approximately every 7 y.<sup>1</sup>

Türkiye experienced 2 of the most catastrophic earthquakes of the past century on February 6, 2023. The first earthquake with a magnitude of 7.7 occurred at 4:17 AM in Kahramanmaraş City. Nine hours later, the second earthquake with a magnitude of 7.6 hit a region, which has 10 cities and over 16 million people (Figure 1). After the earthquakes, the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Hans Kluge, announced that a level 3 emergency was declared.<sup>2</sup>

The first earthquake caught the people asleep in their homes, and many never had a chance to escape or seek safety. For this reason, countless people were left under the collapse of thousands of buildings. In the rush to provide emergency rescue and care, injured adults and children were often separated, some taken to the nearest available health facilities, and sometimes transferred to other centers without registration. Some children, on the other hand, survived these earthquakes alone, in which they lost their parents and close relatives. Uninjured children were taken to places they deemed sheltered, sometimes by authorities or their relatives, and sometimes by an earthquake survivor or by helpful volunteers from outside the earthquake zone. In addition to the turmoil experienced from the disaster, obstacles such as the age of the children, the degree of trauma, and the state of consciousness make it even more difficult to identify the children.<sup>3</sup> In the statement made by the Ministry of Family and Social Services on the 5th day after the earthquake, it was announced that there were 448 unaccompanied children followed in hospitals or kept in institutional care; 223 of whom were unidentified.<sup>4</sup>

One of the problems that should be solved at the earliest period after earthquakes is the problem of orphans or unaccompanied children. These children, referred to as “earthquake orphans”, can be potential victims of violence, organized crime, organ trafficking, drug addiction, sexual exploitation, or human trafficking.<sup>5</sup>

According to official data, the average household size varies between 3.4 and 5.1 people in the disaster area. However, 27.6% (Malatya City) and 38.4% (Şanlıurfa City) of the population in these provinces consist of children in the age group of 0-14.<sup>6</sup> The already low socioeconomic level of the region, the magnitude of the earthquake, and the turmoil in the emergency rescue organization cause concern that the number of fragile children in this population will be higher than expected. The problem of orphaned children experienced in previous major destructive earthquakes provides important experiences for earthquake preparation<sup>3,7,8</sup>:

- Unaccompanied children found should not be handed over to any third party other than an official social worker or law enforcement agencies.
- Information regarding the location where the child was found should be recorded by editing the minutes of the recovery.
- If the child can communicate, every piece of information about the child and the child's family should be recorded in detail.
- If the child has a sibling, they should absolutely keep them together, and the records kept confidential for each child.



**Figure 1.** The area hit by the earthquake in Türkiye, 2023.

- All records related to children should be recorded in the digital and physical environment.
- Children should be placed in official social service organizations.
- After the registration of the children who were taken out from under the debris in the earthquake zone and taken to hospitals and whose treatment was completed, they should be provided with care in official institutions as soon as possible.
- Families who cannot find their children, and who have no communication with each other after being pulled out of the wreckage, should only be contacted by official institutions.

In this context, the Ministry of Family and Social Services has established an official registration system for unaccompanied children whose families and relatives cannot be reached in earthquake zones. However, whether we have learned enough lessons as a country will become clear with the missing children tragedy that will emerge in the coming days. Because, according to the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change, 153,506 independent units located in 33,143 buildings have been severely damaged or destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusions and Recommendation

It should be ensured that demographic registration information is collected as soon as possible at the first point encountered with

the victims during a disaster. Critical early opportunities to register, identify, and monitor children and families should not be missed. It should be noted that the lack of registration is the biggest factor impeding efforts to protect unaccompanied or orphaned children.

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