30 years later in Romania: What happened to the babies deprived of human contact?

In 1990, the outside world discovered [Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceau?escu’s] network of “child gulags,” in which an estimated 170,000 abandoned infants, children, and teens were being raised.

In the decade after the fall of Ceau?escu, the new Romanian government welcomed Western child-development experts to simultaneously help and study the tens of thousands of children still warehoused in state care. Researchers hoped to answer some long-standing questions: Are there sensitive periods in neural development, after which the brain of a deprived child cannot make full use of the mental, emotional, and physical stimulation later offered?

Children taken out of orphanages before their second birthday were benefiting from being with families far more than those who stayed longer… When the children were reassessed in a “strange situation” playroom at age 3.5, the portion who displayed secure attachments climbed from the baseline of 3 percent to nearly 50 percent among the foster-care kids, but to only 18 percent among those who remained institutionalized—and, again, the children moved before their second birthday did best. “Timing is critical,” the researchers wrote.

[Professor Charles] Nelson cautions that the door doesn’t “slam shut” for children left in institutions beyond 24 months of age. “But the longer you wait to get children into a family,” he says, “the harder it is to get them back on an even keel.”

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