The problem with saving the world’s ‘orphans’

By E.J. Graff

It’s the time of year when we are deluged with appeals to save the world’s millions of orphans. On TV, in the newspaper, in our mailboxes, we see sad-eyed children who are starved for food, clothes, and affection. Surely only Ebenezer Scrooge (or his Scrooge incarnation, the Grinch) could turn away with a hard heart.

But when these appeals are combined with glamorous examples like Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt’s world adoption tour, would-be humanitarians can arrive at a dangerous belief: Western families can—and should—help solve this “world orphan crisis” by adopting.

It’s true that, sometimes, international adoption can save a child’s life. But be very careful. By heading to a poor, underdeveloped, or war-torn country to adopt a baby, Westerners can inadvertently achieve the opposite of what they intend. Instead of saving a child, they may create an orphan. The large sums of money that adoption agencies offer for poor country’s ‘orphans’ too often lure unscrupulous operators to buy, coerce, defraud, or kidnap children from families that would have loved, cared for, and raised those children to adulthood.

How does this misunderstanding happen? One problem is the word “orphan.” UNICEF reports 132 million orphans worldwide. UNICEF’s old definition includes “single orphans” who have lost just one parent, and “double orphans” being cared for by extended families. Admittedly, UNICEF is trying to raise money to offer assistance and support to these children’s families, and to build functioning child welfare systems that will benefit entire communities. But few Americans would think of lonely, disabled, chronically ill, traumatized children as orphans.