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OPINION

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 Seuss-ical 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 countries' babies too often induce 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 odd definition includes "single orphans" who have lost just one parent, and "double orphans" being cared for by extended families. Admirably enough, 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 these children as "orphans."

Another problem is that the abandoned or orphaned children who actually do need homes are rarely the healthy

infants or toddlers that most Westerners feel prepared to adopt. The majority of children who need "forever families," as the adoption industry puts it, are five or

folded, disabled, chronically ill, traumatized, or otherwise in need of extra care. The exception is China, where the one-child policy led to an epidemic of abandoned girls. But China's abandoned babies are historically unique. In Africa, for instance, children may be orphaned because their parents have died of AIDS or malaria or TB. In the former Soviet



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bloc, the parents may have died or lost custody because of alcohol-related illnesses or domestic violence. In Asia, the children themselves may be HIV-positive or suffer from chronic hepatitis B.

But from an adoption agency's standpoint, these needy orphans are not very "marketable." So here's the bad news: to meet Western families' longings to adopt

healthy babies, many adoption agencies pour disproportionately enormous sums into poor, corrupt countries — few questions asked — in search of healthy children ages three and under. Those sums can induce some locals to buy, coerce, defraud or kidnap children from their families. Traumatically, these children are deprived of their families, and families are deprived of their children.

Consider that, after the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989, institutionalized Romanian children desperately needed families. Thousands of generous Westerners went to Romania to adopt — but were swindled into buying babies directly from families who would not otherwise have relinquished. Similarly, for more than a decade in Guatemala, few Westerners were adopting needy abandoned children; far too often, they were effectively — albeit unintentionally — buying healthy babies solicited (in some cases, apparently, conceived and borne) specifically for the adoption trade. Guatemala and Romania have halted international adoption because of widespread corruption. As the respected nonprofit World Vision UK put it, "The urge to adopt across continents is well meaning but misguided."

Don't harden your heart to those sad-eyed "orphans" — but don't feel guilty if you can't (or don't want to) become a Jolie-Pitt world adoption mission. Rather than trying to rescue a single child, which can induce trafficking, invest in and rescue a community, thus preventing children from being orphaned by poverty or disease. Buy supplies for underprivileged schools. Invest in clean water or housing. Go on a medical mission. And remember that most families — like your own — would do almost anything to keep their babies home and to raise them well.

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