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Thousands Of Orphans? An Urban Myth

By NINA BERNSTEIN

The calls came in a torrent, from White Bear Lake, Minn., and Castaic, Calif., from Emporia, Kan., and Boucherville, Quebec. There was even an e-mail letter from a family in Argentina. All were eagerly offering to adopt a World Trade Center orphan.

For weeks after the terrorist attacks, secretaries at the New York State Office of Children and Family Services and press officers at the city's Administration for Children's Services could hardly answer the telephone without hearing from people who had read news of the "many," "hundreds," even "thousands" of orphans left in need of a home by the Sept. 11 disaster.

The problem is, officials say, there are none. Not a single child who needs foster care or adoption by strangers. Not a single documented case of a child who lost both parents. Just a handful of verified cases in which children "lost their only parent" — and all have close relatives who have taken over their care.

No one can overestimate the grief of losing one parent. Whatever the final number of casualties, as Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani has suggested, it will be "more than any of us can bear" — and certainly more than should be borne by their children.

But six weeks after Sept. 11, while there is still no overall count of the bereaved children, the news media and public officials are still repeating numbers like 10,000 and 15,000. Such estimates of the children left behind, always high, now appear to be seriously out of line.

Using either the most recent estimate of the missing calculated by The New York Times, just under 3,000, or the official estimate, 4,700, that would mean that every victim had, on average, more than two or three children under 18. Since those lost include many without children or with grown children, it is increasingly hard to justify estimates like 15,000, cited in an editorial in The Times on Sept. 26, or 10,000, cited last week on National Public Radio by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Yet it is these same estimates that seem to give credence to assertions that "many" or "several hundred children" have been left without any parent — the common understanding of the word "orphan." Such phrases showed up only this week in USA Today and New York magazine.

"It's pure speculation," said Jennifer Falk, a spokeswoman for the Administration for Children's Services, who found herself debunking one set of urban myths and journalists' assumptions only to be hit with a new wave as the next article about children appeared. "I don't know where the word orphan came from."

A spokesman for the Twin Towers Orphan Fund said some dictionary definitions of "orphan" include any person who has lost one parent.

But the emotional tug of the word orphan draws on the age-old image of a waif without either mother or father. And all available evidence shows that a large majority of the children bereaved by the trade center attacks on Sept. 11 were living in two-parent families on Sept. 10.

In current parlance, they are not orphans now, but children living in single-parent homes. Even the children of single mothers lost in the twin towers typically still have a father in their lives.

Somehow, that reality has never caught up with the outpouring of public concern and the news media's appetite for the idea of the World Trade Center orphan.

From the start, there were rumors that shrugged off facts: the one, for example, about the day care teacher sheltering five trade center orphans. Days later, she was still said to be feeding them soup, unwilling to send them to foster care.

A survey of child care agencies and the passage of time dispelled that myth, but another took its place this month: a clutch of orphaned children of illegal immigrants had shown up secretly at the Family Assistance Center. The presumed sighting led back to a massage therapist who had seen some Hispanic children in the center's day care and thought they might be orphans.

The evidence for what Senator Clinton called "probably 10,000 children who have lost one or both parents" can be equally elusive. "A multitude of news reports and organizations have estimated 10,000 to 15,000 children orphaned," Karen Dunn, the senator's press secretary, said when asked how the figure was calculated.

In The Times's editorial, its writer said, the estimate of "perhaps 15,000 children" who lost a mother or a father was an extrapolation from an early estimate that as many as 7,000 adults were missing, and a report that 1,500 children had been left by 700 missing Cantor Fitzgerald employees, predominantly young married men with large families.

William Van Slyke, spokesman for the State Office of Children and Family Services, said it has kept a list of those seeking to adopt trade center orphans. Some, he said, might want to look instead at the 2,558 children in state custody whose parents lost their right to keep them.

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