



Angel's Cradle

Organization for the Support of
Albania's Abandoned Babies

Where Have All The Children Gone

A 20-year follow-up study tracking the whereabouts of
Albania's abandoned babies: 1995-2015

December 2016

Sponsored by



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade





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Introduction

Organization for the Support of Albania's Abandoned Babies (OSAAB) is a U.S. 501(c)(3) organization and an Albanian registered Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) created in 1996 with a mission to provide care to abandoned babies in Albania, as well as provide health education training to medical staff and new and expectant mothers.

The program works cooperatively and in conjunction with the Queen Geraldine University Hospital of Obstetrics and Gynecology in Tirana, Albania to bring about awareness of the Safe Haven existing within the hospital for women with unwanted pregnancies.

From 1996, when the program began, and until December 2016, over 700 babies have been provided care by OSAAB while they remain in the maternity hospital.

Neither OSAAB nor the maternity hospital are involved with the adoption of the babies but merely ensure that while the babies remain in the maternity hospital they receive all the love, care and medical attention required in a newborn infants life.

On average babies remain in the maternity hospital in the Angel's Cradle Nursery for the first 2-3 months of their life prior to being moved to an residential institution/orphanage to await either adoption or re-unification with the birth family. The program provides care to anywhere from 25-45 babies per year.

In 2016 OSAAB celebrates 20 years of providing care to abandoned babies in Albania. In this milestone year OSAAB conducted this follow-up study to statistically track the whereabouts of the babies that have been cared for by OSAAB and the Queen Geraldine University Hospital in the Angel's Cradle Program over the past 20 years.

It is hoped that this Study will be used as a tool to advocate for the rights of children under the Hague Convention. Changes need to be made in processing children through the State system so that they do not spend inordinate amounts of time in a residential institution/orphanage prior to being placed in a permanent adoptive family or reunited with their birth family.

We thank you for your interest in our program and for taking the time to read our Study.

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December 2016

Where Have All The Children Gone: 1995-2015 Study Overview

The Study tracked each child through the system after having left OSAAB.

The project began on 14 March 2016 with the collection of data to conduct a Follow-Up Study tracking the whereabouts of the almost 700 babies that have been through OSAAB in the past 20 years.

Approval to have access to data was authorized in December 2015 by the Albanian Committee of Data Protection and the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth.

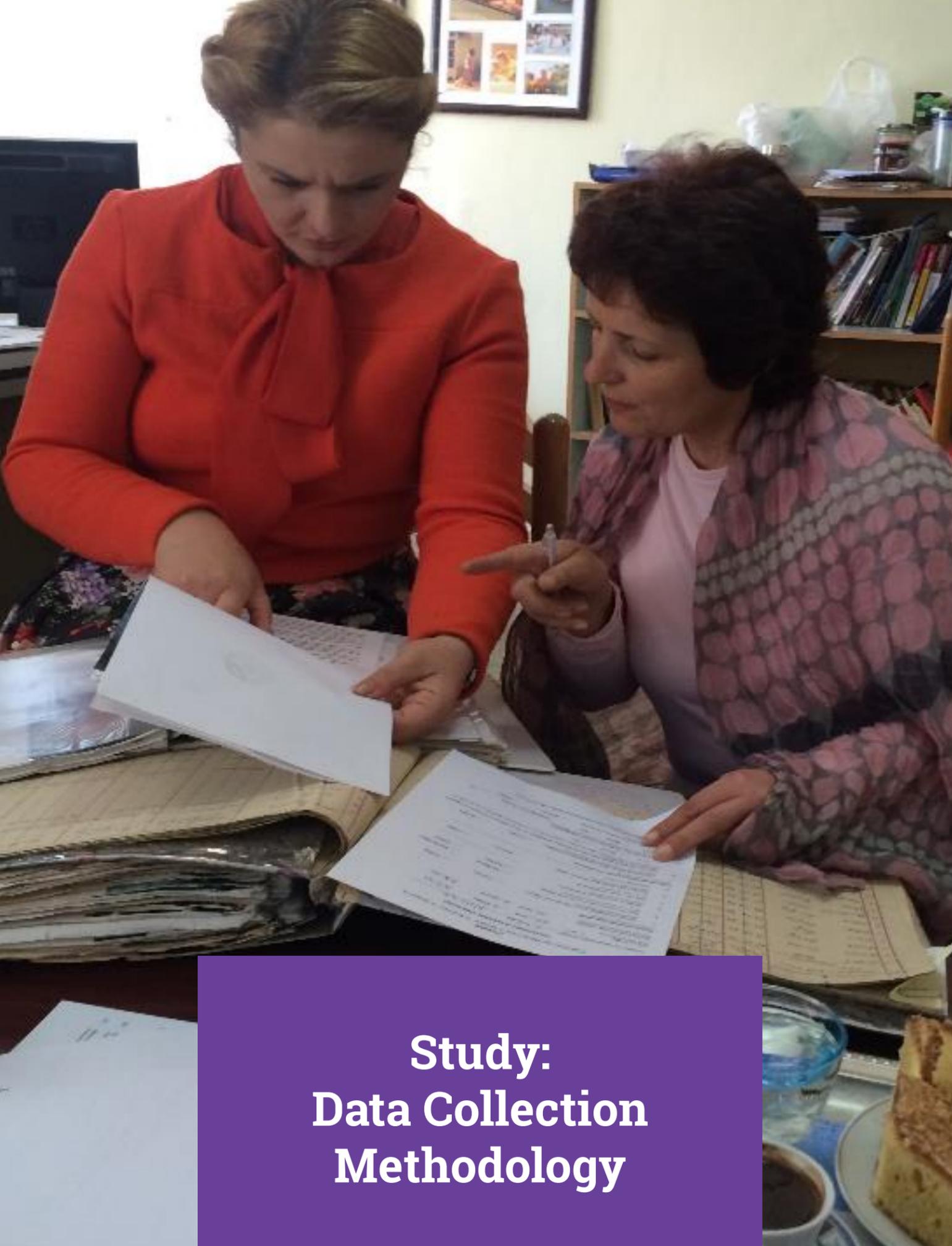
Data collection was conducted from March – May 2016 from 15 residential institutions throughout Albania.

We are grateful for the support of the Albanian Committee for Data Protection and the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, State Social Services, for their support in conducting this Study.

Funding to conduct the Study was provided by the Australian Embassy in Rome, Italy through the Australian Development Aid Program (DAP).

OSAAB nor the maternity hospital are involved with the adoption of the babies, but merely ensures while the babies remain in the Angel's Cradle nursery in the Queen Geraldine University Hospital they receive all the love, care and medical attention required in a newborn infants life.





Study: Data Collection Methodology

Methodology

- Children tracked from birth years: 1995-2015.
- 677 babies abandoned or relinquished in the Queen Geraldine Hospital in this time period.
- 15 residential institutions visited to collect data.
- Field work -Data collection: 15 March–30 May 2016.
- The Hospital Social worker, and OSAAB President, directly worked with each institution director and social worker(s) to review and gather information from archived files.
- Each child's file was individually reviewed to collect the needed data from original documents.

Data collected on each child

- **While in the Hospital**

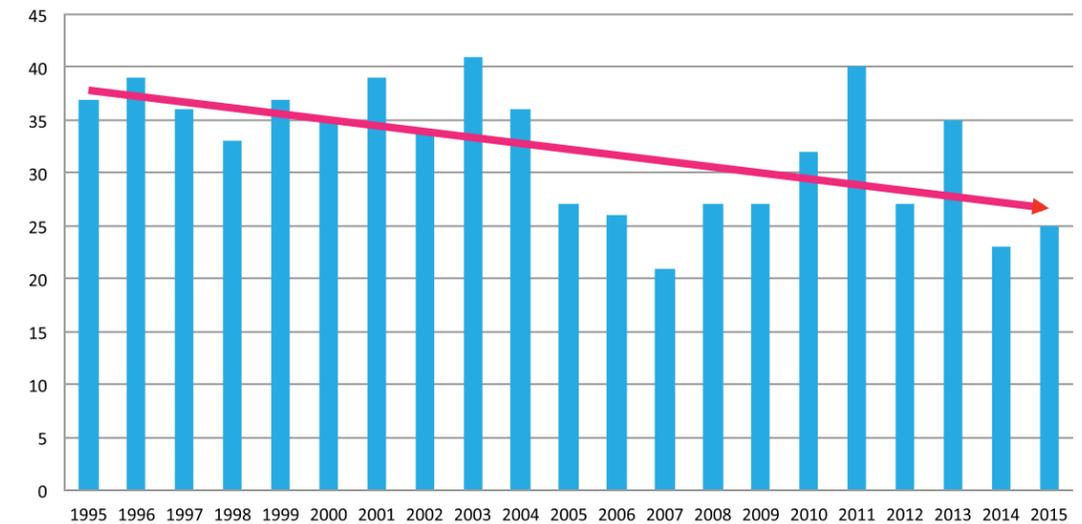
- Birth date
- Gender
- Reason of abandonment/relinquishment by birth mothers
- Birth mothers identity known
- Number of days baby remained in the hospital in the Angels Cradle Nursery prior to transferring to a residential institution, reuniting with birth mother/family or other.
- Name of residential institution baby transferred to
- Birth mother signed a "Consent for Adoption" declaration allowing the baby to be adopted

- **History while in the Residential Institution**

- Birth mother/family making contact with the child while in the institution
- Date child reunited with birth mother/family
- When no contact made by birth mother/family: Date institutions submitted documents to the courts requesting a "Declaration of Abandonment" allowing for the child to be adopted.
- Date court issued the "Declaration of Abandonment" allowing the child to be adopted
- Date the court approved the adoption of the child
- Nationality of the adoptive parents
- Children remaining in institutions - reason
- Date child transferred to another institution
- Date child aged-out of system
- Date child died

Part One: Birth + Hospital Stay

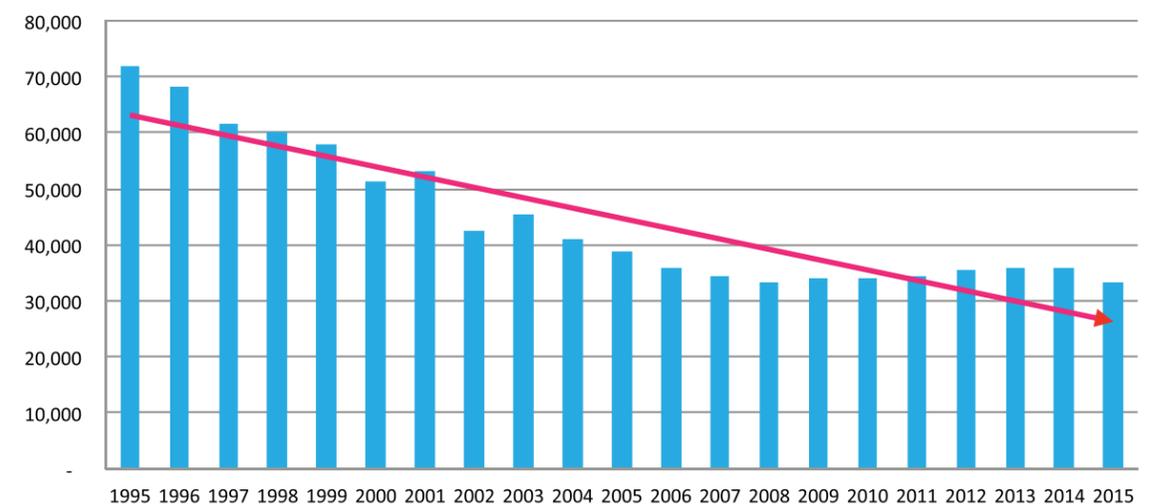
Admissions by Year of Birth:



677 babies cared for between 1/1/1995 – 12/31/2015
21-41 babies per year were provided care by OSAAB while in the hospital.

Data was collected from the time period 1995–2015 and shows a decrease in the number of babies being abandoned/relinquished each year. The highest number of babies abandoned/relinquished in this time period were 41 babies born in 2003, and the lowest number was 21 babies born in 2007.

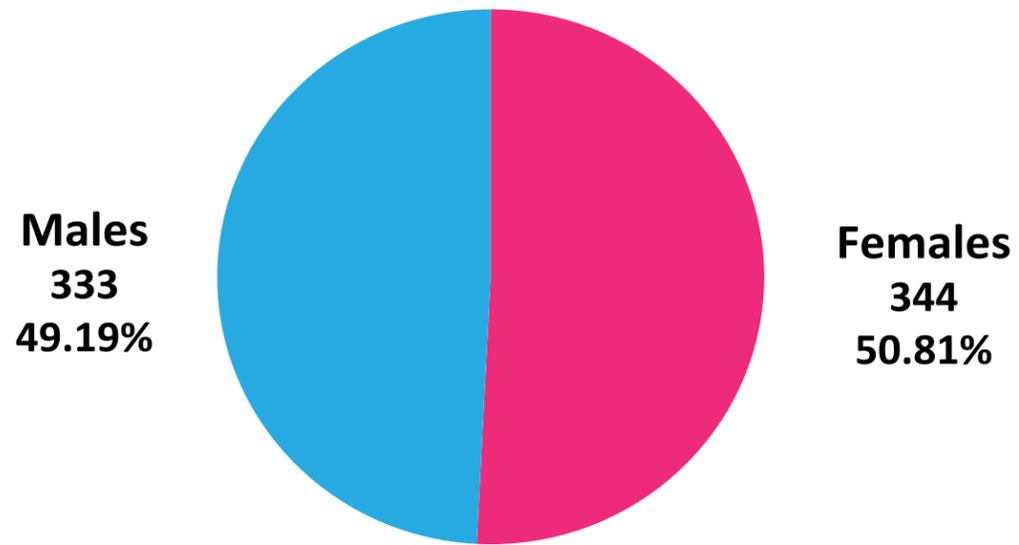
Compared To Live Births in Albania:



In contrast, live births in Albania have decreased by over 50% in the past twenty years. It is uncertain if the decrease in the number of babies being abandoned is in direct correlation to the decrease in live births that may be attributed to heightened awareness and availability of birth control.

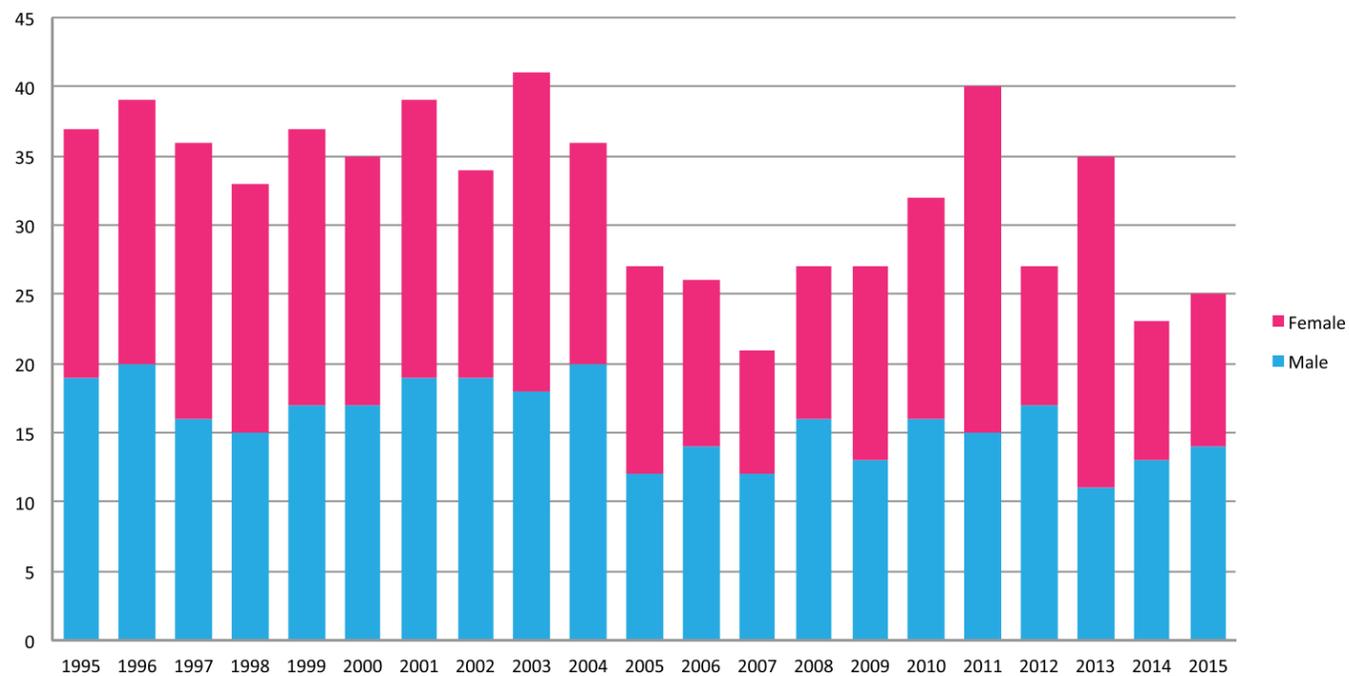
Live birth data from Instat <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/population.aspx?tab=tabs-5>
and http://www.instat.gov.al/media/322941/press_release_population_of_albania_1_january_2016.pdf

Gender: Sex of OSAAB Admissions

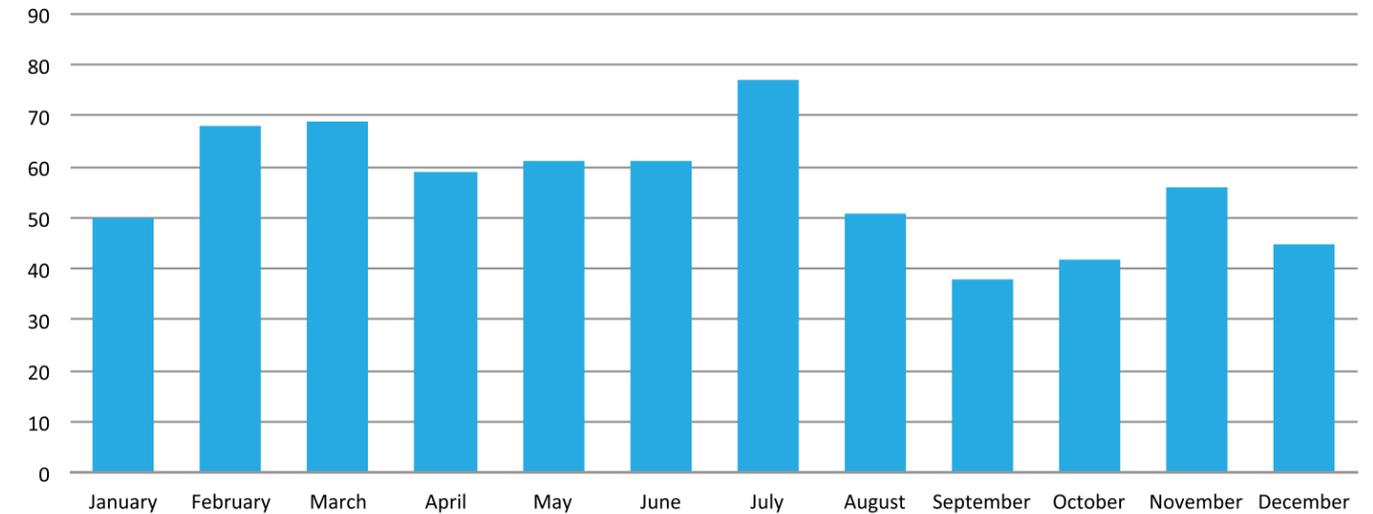


333 Males and 344 females were abandoned/relinquished and highlights that babies are not being abandoned/relinquished by birthmothers/families based on gender.

OSAAB Admissions by Year of Birth and Gender



Admissions to OSAAB by Birth Month

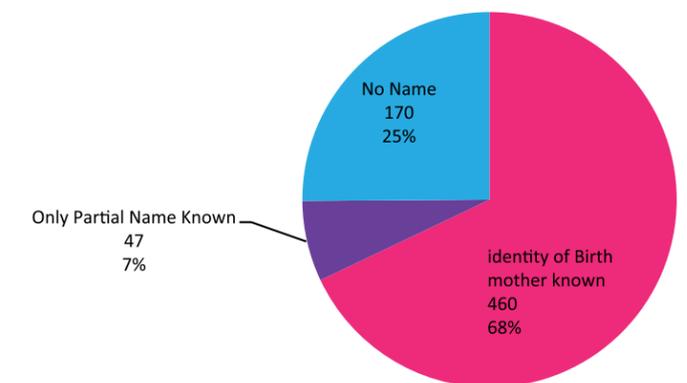


There is very little difference in the times of the year that babies are most likely to be abandoned/relinquished. On average, the highest number of births occur in the month of July, with conception taking place in October/ November. Seventy-seven of the 677 babies (11%) were born in July. As such, education about birth control and awareness of the Safe Haven needs to be conducted year round and not only during certain months of the year.

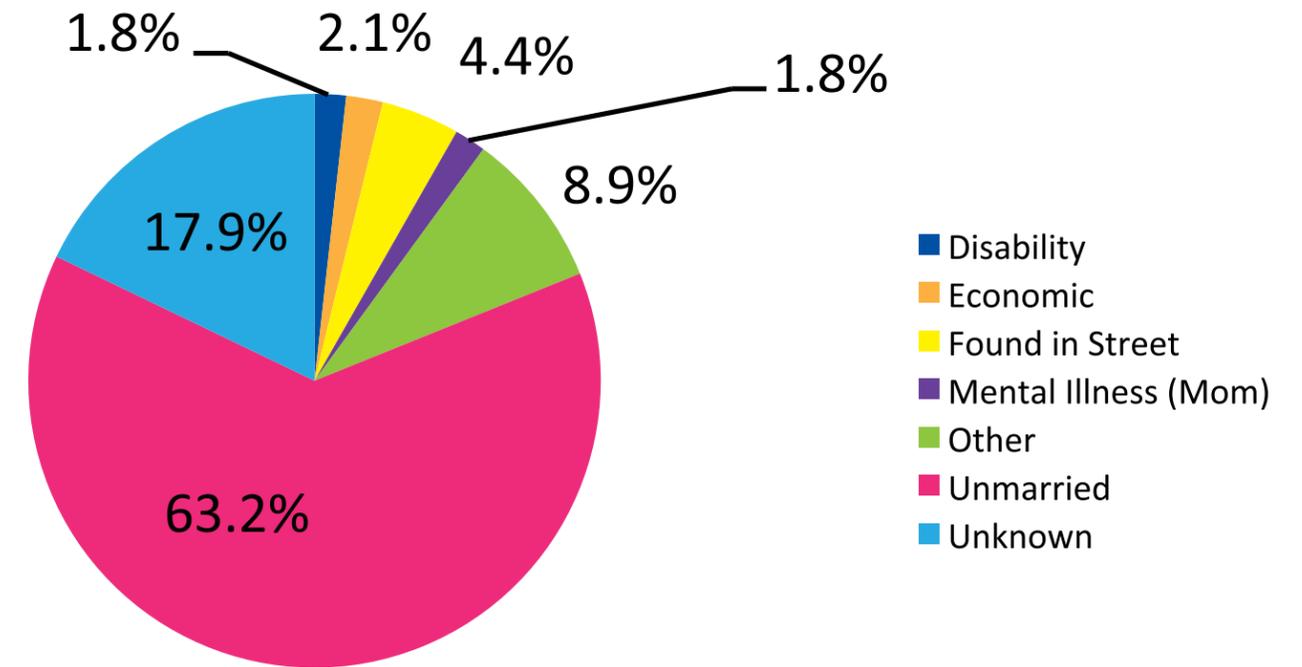
Birth Mother's Identity

The identity of the birth mother is very subjective. In many cases the mother would give her name at birth but had no identification. This was very prevalent when the program began in 1996 when national identification cards were not yet being issued to Albanian citizens. Women would come into the hospital, give a name at check-in, then leave out the back door after the baby was born. It was not known that the name was false until the case went to court to have the child declared abandoned and the birth mother couldn't be found.

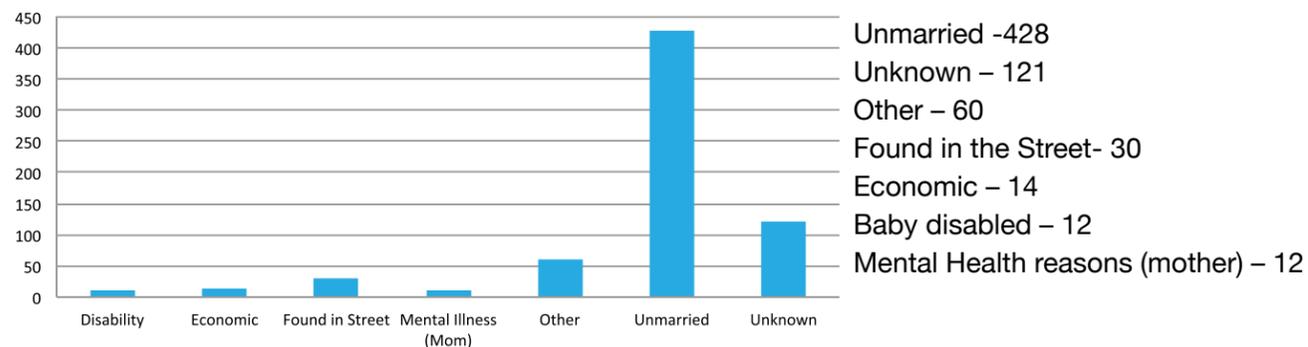
Over the past few years there has been an increase in the number of birth mothers whose identities are known. Nearly 100%. Networks are set up in the maternity hospital to alert the hospital social worker to intervene when a mother is at risk of leaving her baby. The social worker provides the birthmother with all the options available to her and her baby. In the event the birth mother wants to keep her baby, the social worker supports her through linkages to State Social Services and NGO's to assist her with employment, housing and child care.



Of the women whose identities are known, the average age of birth mothers is 23 years old.



Reasons for Abandonment/ Relinquishment



The highest percentages of reasons for abandonment/relinquishment are due to the birth mother not being married (63.2% or 428 babies). In the cases of “unknown” (17.9% or 121 babies), these are cases of the birth mother leaving the hospital without giving any information, or her identity is not known. It is assumed that these are unmarried women and wish to not have their identity revealed.

The number of babies being abandoned/relinquished as reasons of “other” (8.9%) are cases such as a mother born with quintuplets. OSAAB provided support with in-home care by OSAAB nurses for 6 months so that the mother had the help needed to care for the children and not have to place them in a residential institution.

There are other cases of married birth mothers dying during or shortly after the birth of the baby and the family needing time to grieve and find a caregiver.

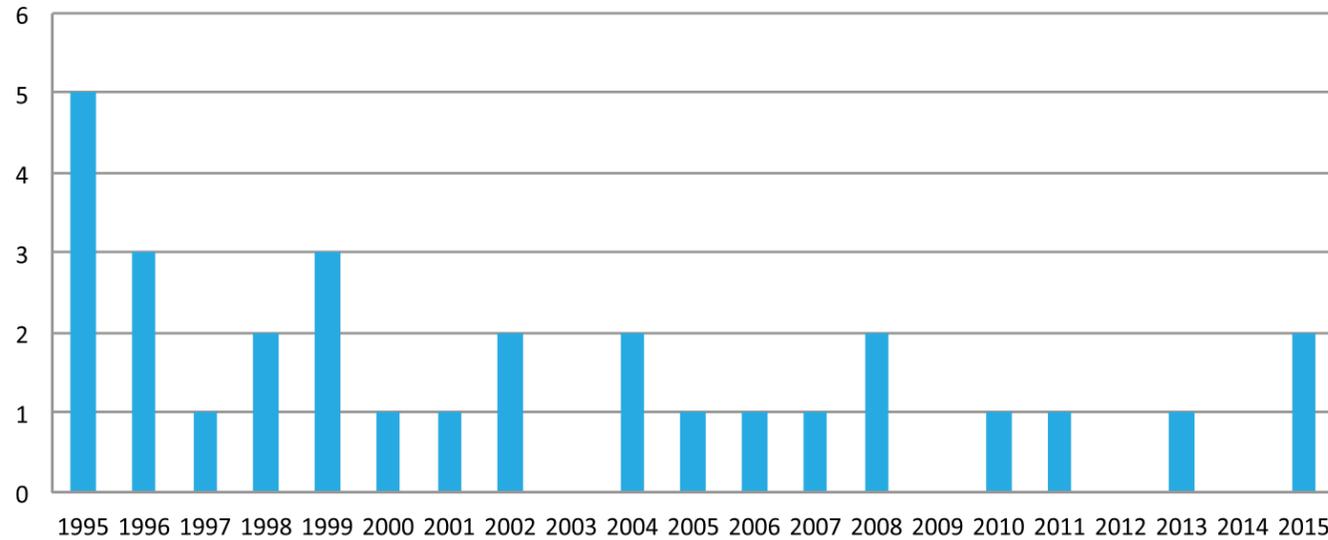
In the past two years, there has been an increase in married women who are pregnant by a man other than their husband. In most cases, the women’s husbands are working abroad and do not know the wife has had a baby. As such, the birth mother’s refuse to register the birth of the baby as the child will be required to be registered under the name of the birth mother’s husband. Since the birth of the baby is not registered, the baby cannot leave the hospital. There have been cases of babies remaining in the hospital for the first 11 months of their life waiting for the birth mother to register the baby. Until that happens, the baby is in limbo and cannot be transferred to a residential institution, nor can the process begin to have the courts declare the child abandoned and eligible to be adopted. They do not exist, in the eyes of the law, until they are registered and have a birth certificate.

This has also been the case of some married couples who have a child born with a disability such as Down Syndrome. The birth parents refuse to register the birth of the child as they have told their friends and family that the child died at birth. Children with Down Syndrome have been known to remain in the Angel’s Cradle Nursery in the hospital for the first two years of their life prior to the birth parents agreeing to register the birth of the child.

Very rarely is a baby abandoned due to economic conditions in the family. Only 2.1% (14 babies) of all babies were relinquished due to economic reasons.

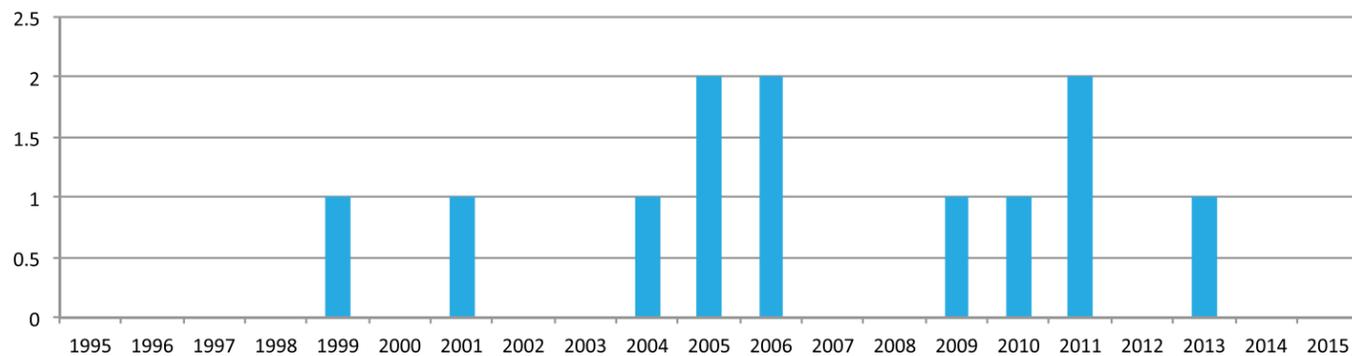
In the rare cases that a mother wishes to keep her child, every effort is made to create linkages to State Social Services, NGOs and other organizations that can help the mother find a job, provide housing and child care. However it is very difficult for women in these situations to financially support themselves and their baby with no family support. In most cases, the women are banished from their families due to bringing shame upon the family name for being pregnant and not married. The solution to infant abandonment in Albania is not economic. It is about changing the mentality and creating acceptance within society of a child born out of wedlock.

Babies Found in the Street By Year



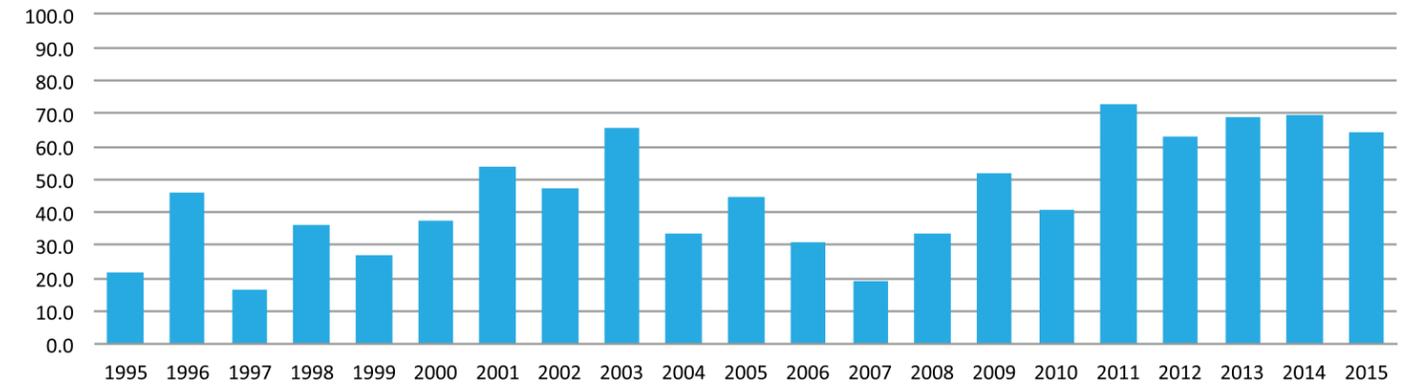
There has been a decrease in recent years of babies being found in the streets. In 1995, 14% of all babies (five babies) were found in the street. In 2015, two babies were found in the street. As such, heightened awareness campaigns are being conducted to bring about awareness of the Angel's Cradle Safe Haven in the hospital so that babies are not being left in dangerous life threatening conditions.

Babies abandoned/relinquished due to a disability



There has been a drastic reduction in the number of babies with Down Syndrome being abandoned by married couples. In 2013, OSAAB formed a partnership with the Jonathan Center in Tirana. The Jonathan Center provides day support to families with children with Down Syndrome. Training was conducted to doctors in the maternity hospital in Tirana to encourage parents NOT to abandon their babies born with Down Syndrome. When a child is now born with Down Syndrome, the hospital social worker calls Jonathan Center to have staff intervene with the parents and educate them about Down Syndrome and the full life the child can have living at home. In 2014, three babies with Down Syndrome were born in the same week in the hospital. Due to the early intervention by the Jonathan Center, all three babies went home with their families and were not abandoned.

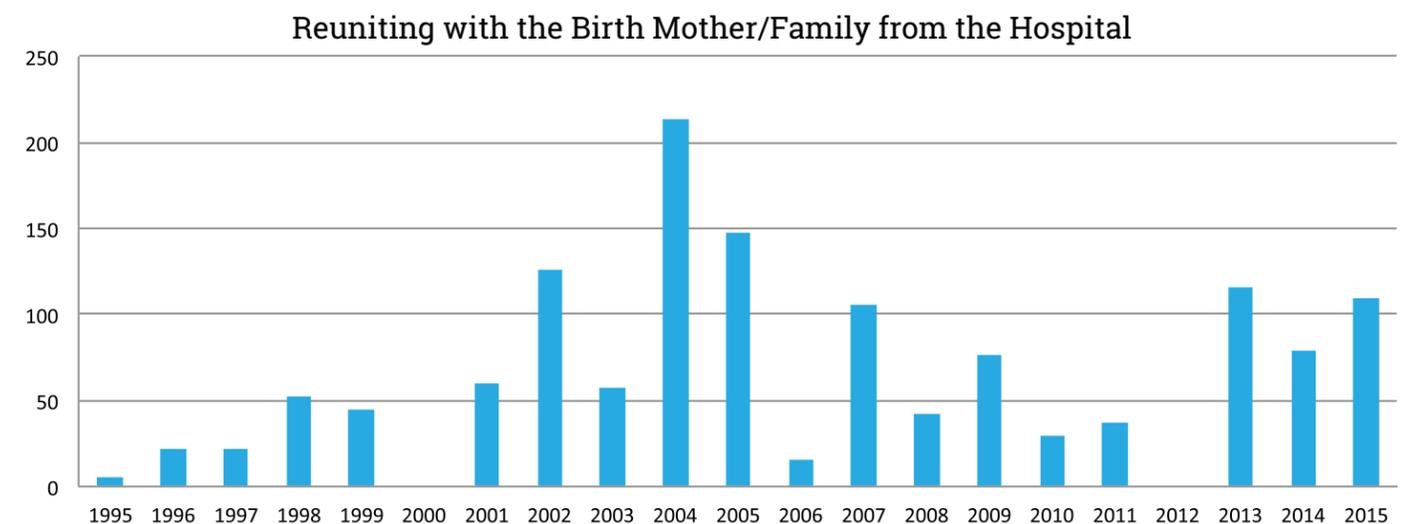
Consent for Adoption Percentages By Year



As of December 2015, the Albanian law states that if a birth mother signs and notarizes the Hague Convention "Consent To Adopt" form, she has three months from the date of birth of the child to return for her child. If she makes no contact or shows no interest in those three months, the process can begin to have the child declared abandoned by the courts and eligible to be adopted. The hospital social worker advises mothers of their rights and will work with mothers who wish to keep their babies. However, very few unmarried mothers want to keep the child due to social stigma.

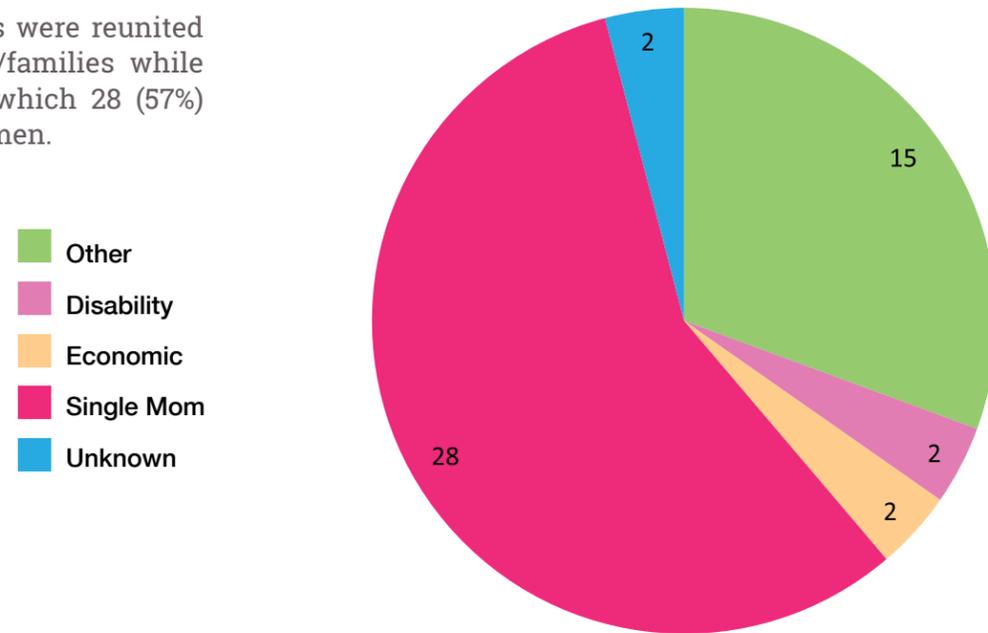
Additionally, birth mothers also have the options to place their child in a residential institution for one-year while they make arrangements to take their child home permanently. Unfortunately, this one-year time frame is often misunderstood and the child remains indefinitely in an institution simply because the birth mother makes contact once a year stating that she "has interest" in her child. There are currently not any requirements for the birth mother to show intent, or make a plan, on how she will eventually take her child home permanently. There are many cases of children remaining in residential institutions their entire childhood due to the birth mother making a telephone call once a year stating that she is interested in her child and will not allow the child to be adopted and placed in a loving family.

Average Days Awaiting Reunion with Family

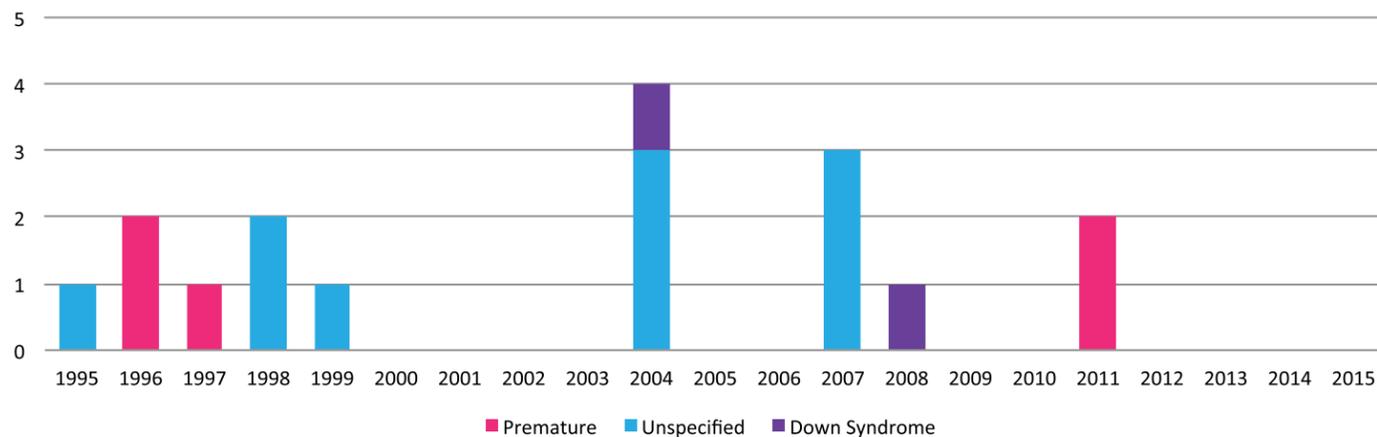


Reasons of Initial abandonment/ relinquishment by birth mother/ family who later reunited with the baby while in the hospital:

49 of the 677 babies were reunited with birth mothers/families while in the hospital, of which 28 (57%) were unmarried women.

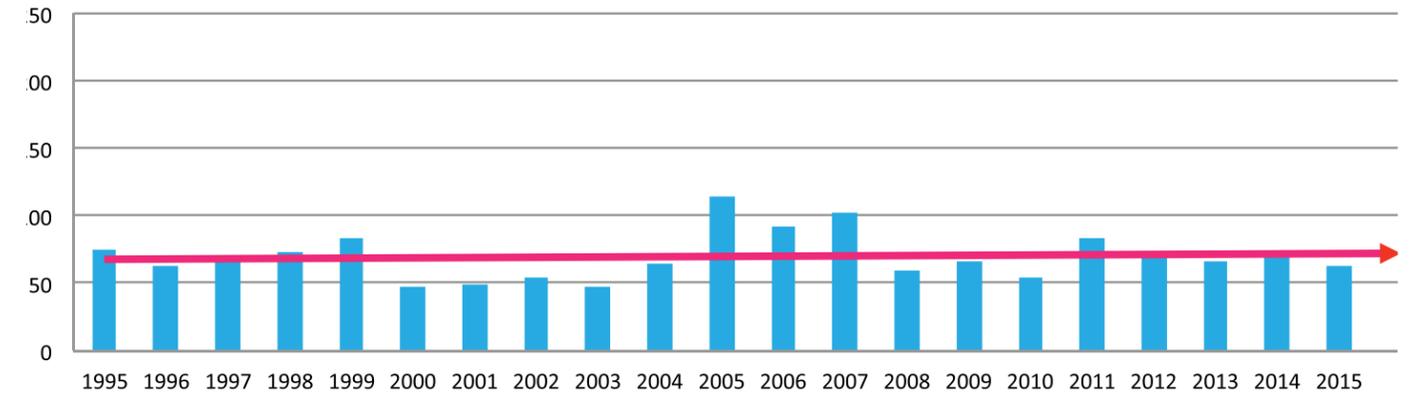


OSAAB Outcome Deaths while Babies were in the hospital



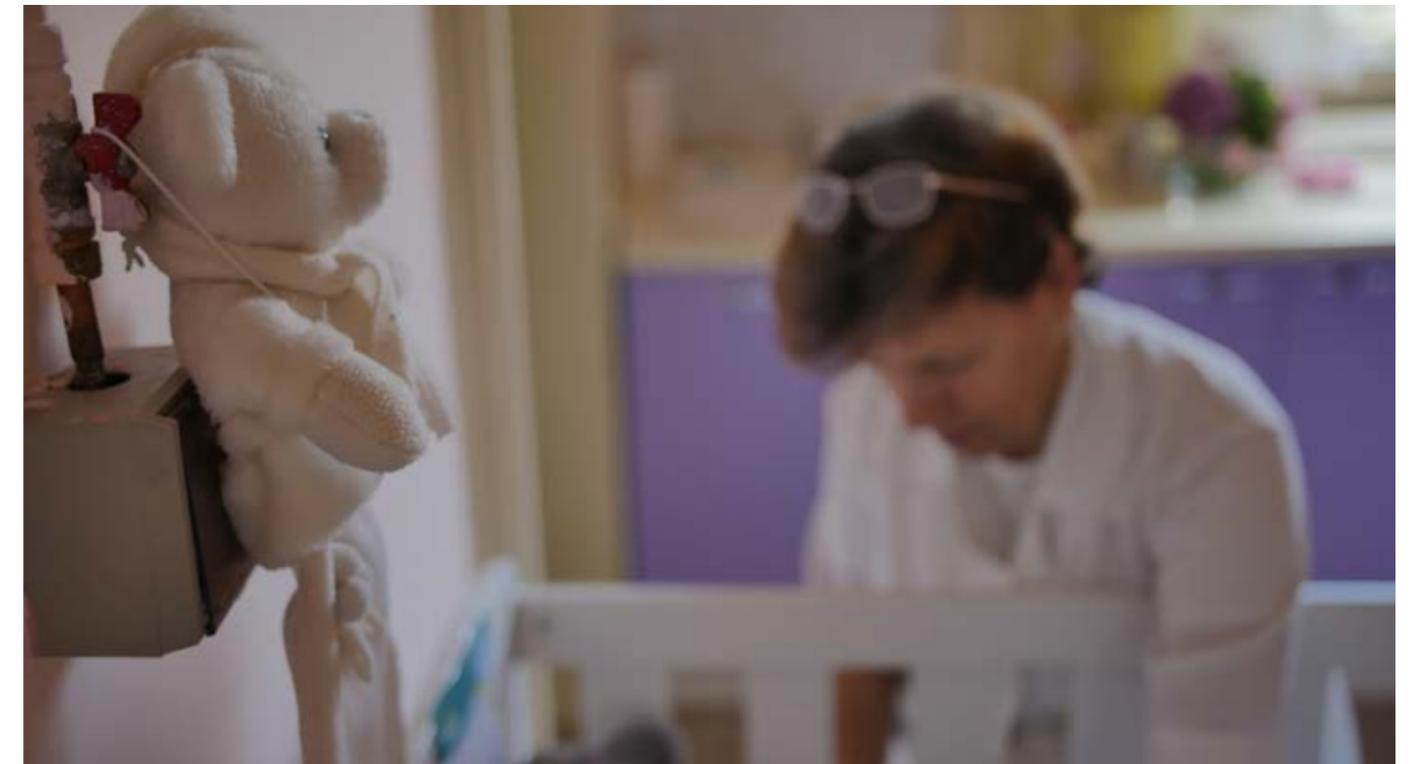
Deaths of babies born prematurely were predominately due to birth mothers not receiving any prenatal care and hiding the pregnancy due to the social stigma associated with a woman having a child out of wedlock. Most women come to the Angel's Cradle Nursery at the time of birth. Outreach and awareness campaigns have been created to heighten the awareness of the Safe Haven in the hospital encouraging women to come forward prior to birth so that they can receive prenatal care for themselves and their baby.

Average number of days babies remained in the Angel's Cradle Nursery prior to being moved to a residential institution.

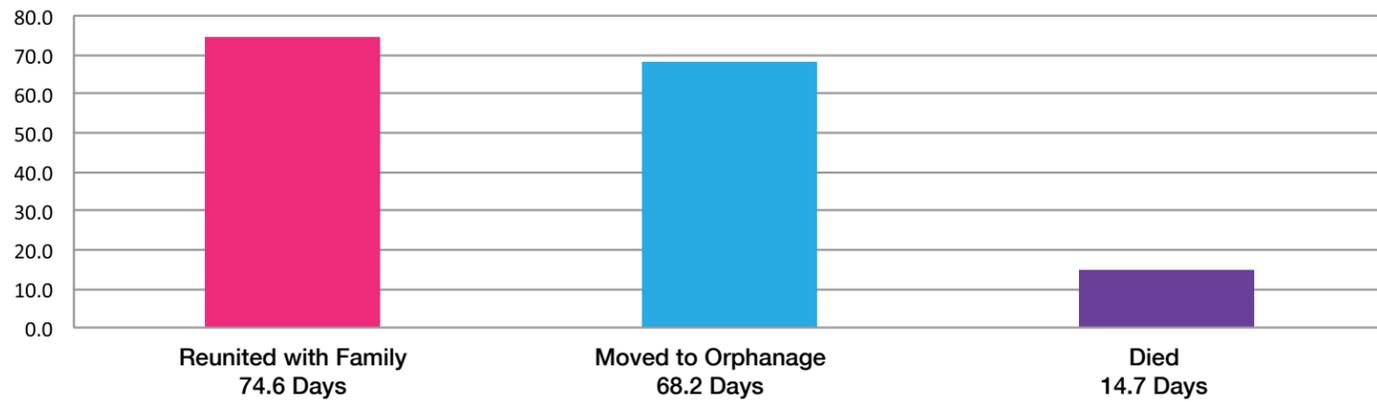


Babies remain in the Angel's Cradle Nursery within the hospital for a minimum of 30 days prior to being moved to a residential institution.

In 2015, on average, babies remained under the care of OSAAB and the hospital for 63 days prior to being moved to a residential institution. In that time period, they receive all the needed medical care and nurturing required in a newborn infants life. Volunteers provide one-on-one touch and care to the babies in the "Angel's Cradle Cuddling Program".



Average amount of days babies stayed at OSAAB

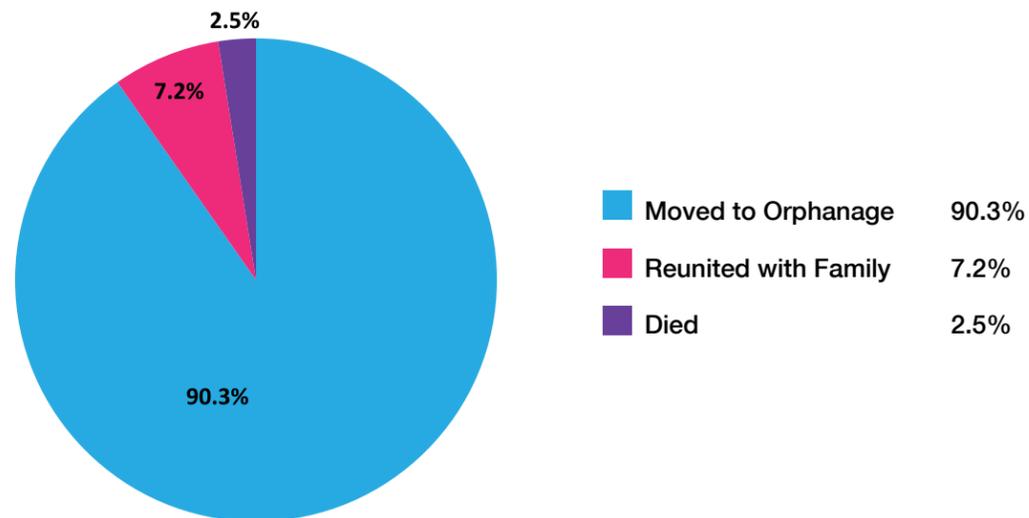


90.3% of the babies (611 babies) were moved to residential institutions after staying with OSAAB for an average of 68.2 days.

7.2% of the babies (49 babies) were reunited with birth families while in the hospital. On average, babies reunited with the birth families while in the hospital in 74.6 days.

2.5% of the babies (17 babies) died while they were in the hospital with an average life span of 14.7 days.

Outcome from OSAAB Care



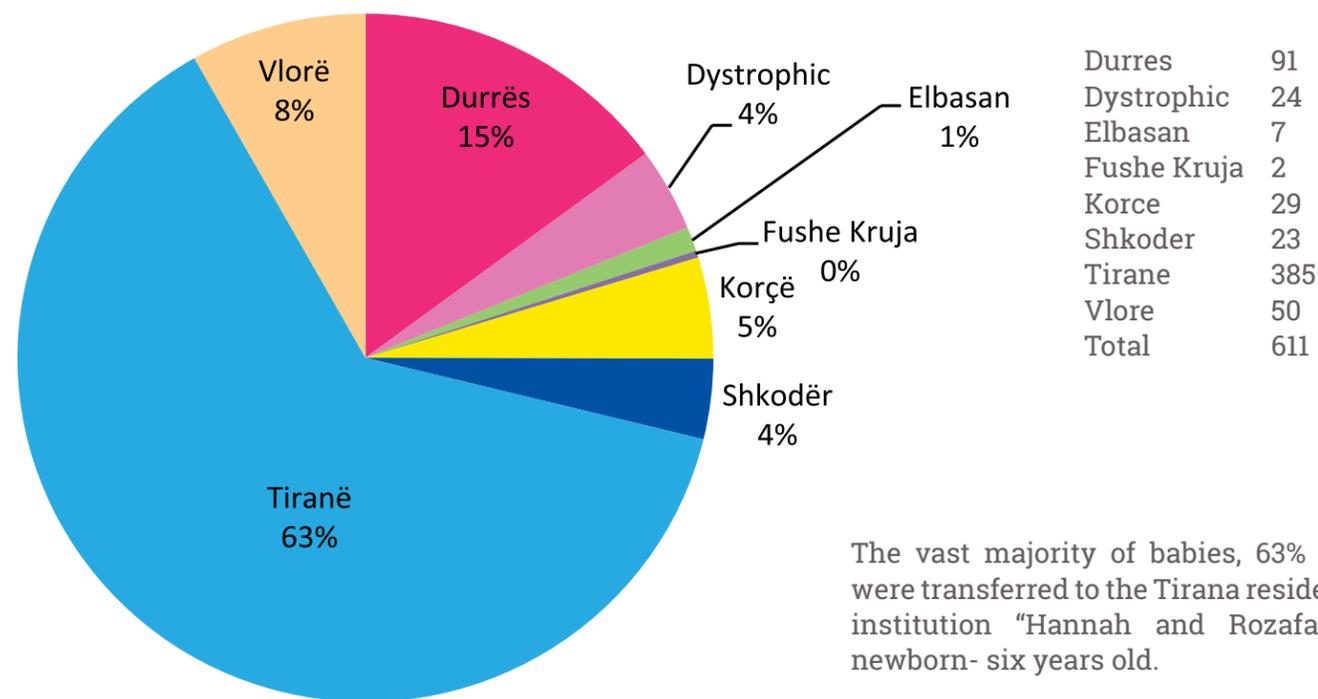
OSAAB's involvement with the care of the babies ends when they are transferred from the hospital to a residential institution, or reunited with their birth families while in the Angel's Cradle Nursery within the maternity hospital.

The Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, State Social Services, determines which residential institutions babies will be transferred to. It is at this point where the involvement and care of the babies by OSAAB and the Queen Geraldine Hospital ends.

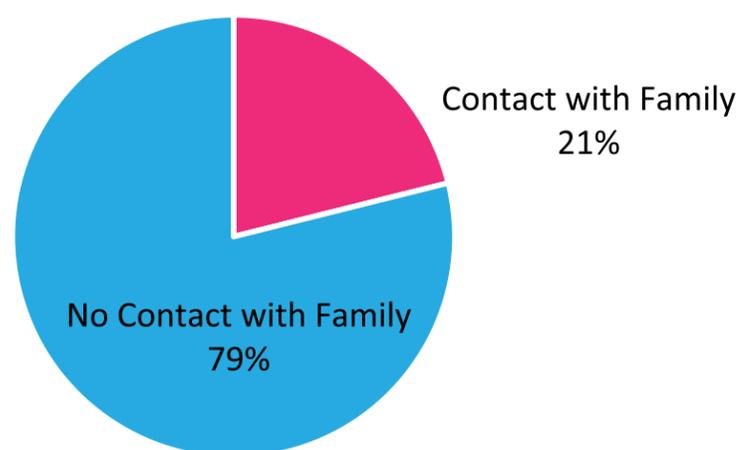


Part Two: Transfer of Babies to Residential Institutions

Residential Institution Distribution by Percentages



Contact With Birth Family While in a Residential Institution:



Contact with family: 129 (21%)
No contact with family 482 (79%)

79%, (482) of the babies transferred had no contact with their birth families while they remained in a residential institution.

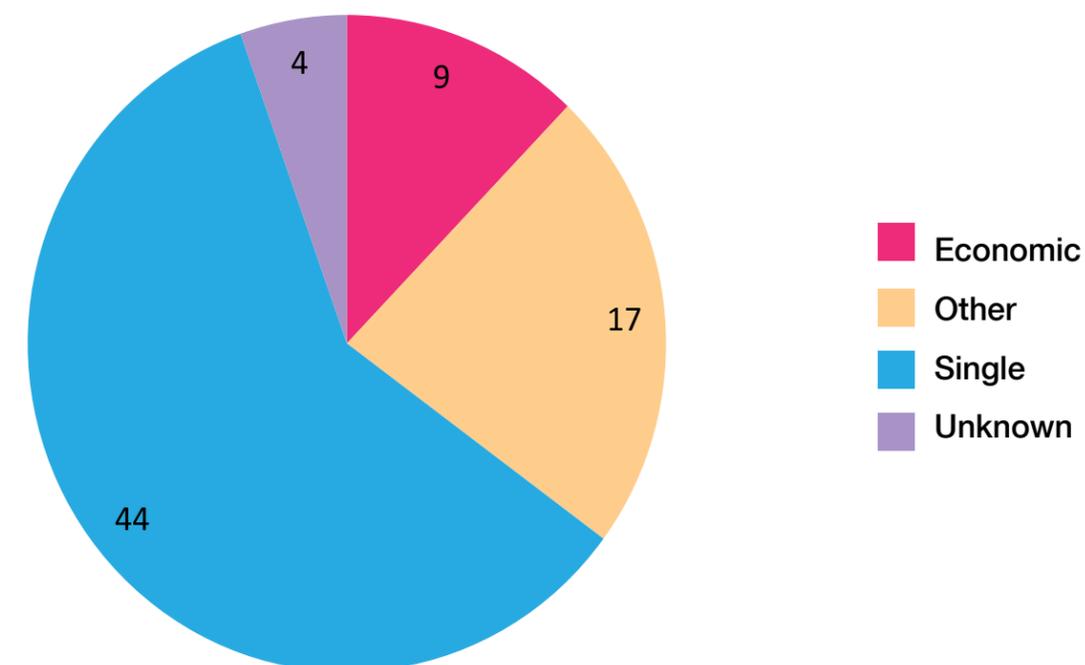
21% (129 babies) had contact with birth families. However, when reviewing files of each child, it was not noted how often there was contact with birth families and if it was consistent and on-going, or if it was only periodic with occasional contact. Files stated that the birth mother "has interest" in the child and didn't specify if the "interest" by the birth mother was through an occasional phone call, or if the birth mother physically visited the residential institution on an on-going basis.

Number of Children Reunited at Institution

	Durres	Dystrophic	Elbasan	Betania /Fushe Kruja	Korce	Shkoder	Tirane	Vlora	Total
Reunited at institution with birth mother	10	3	0	0	4	2	52	3	74
#Babies moved to institution from OSAAB	91	24	7	2	29	23	385	50	611
% Reunited	11.0	12.5	0.0	0.0	13.8	8.7	13.5	6.0	12.1

Of the 21% (129 babies) that had contact with their birth families while they remain in the residential institution, 10.9% (74) later returned to take the child home. The average age of a child when reunited with the birth mother/family from an institution was 2 ½ years old.

Number of Babies reunited with birth family from the institution: Reasons of original abandonment/ relinquishment



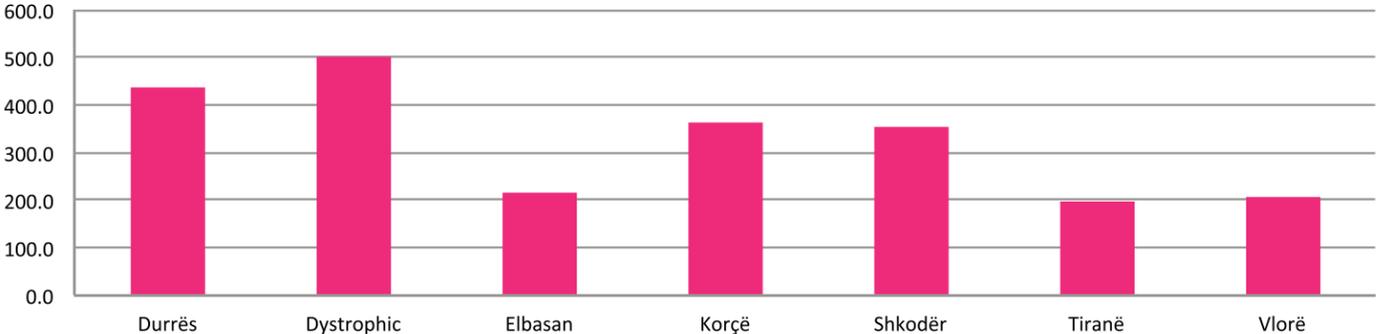
Total number of babies reunited with birth mother in the hospital and/or the residential institution

	Reunited at OSAAB	Reunited at Institution	Total
Number	49	74	123
% of Total in Study (677)	7.2%	10.9%	18.2%

Of the 677 babies surveyed in this Study, 123 babies (18.2%) reunited with the birth mother/family from either the hospital or the residential institution.

Institution Time Line: Declarations of Abandonments.

Days from Arrival to Documents Submitted to Court

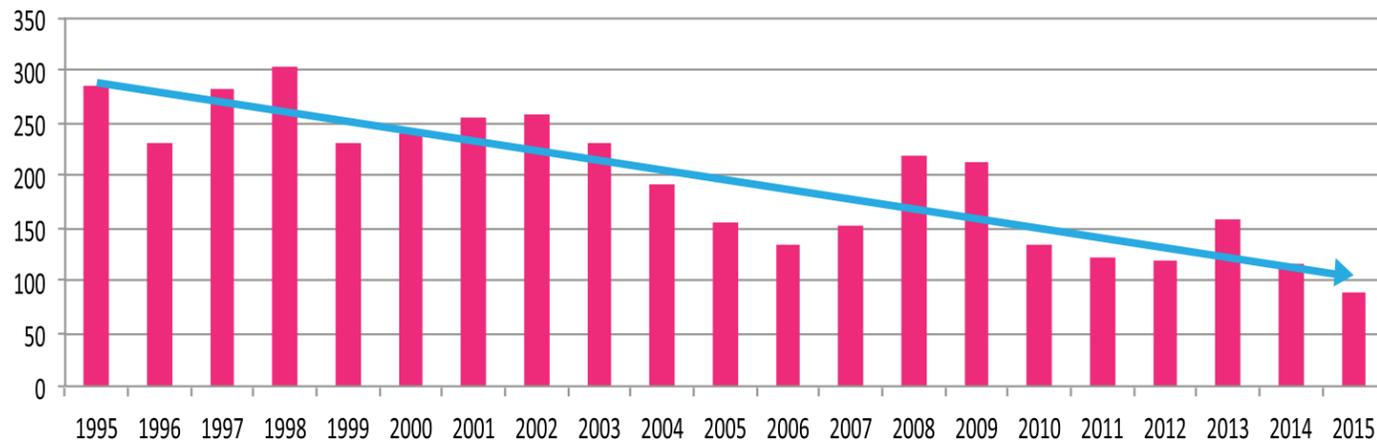


If the birth mother does not return for her baby, or make contact expressing interest in the child within the legal required timeframe, documents are then submitted to the courts to have the child declared abandoned and allowed to be adopted.

Most of the residential institutions surveyed in this Study did not keep accurate records in the files of what dates documents were submitted to the courts to declare the child abandoned, nor what date the final declaration was given allowing the child to be adopted.



Tiranë “Hannah and Rozafa”: Number of Days from arrival at institution - to documents being submitted to courts to issue “Declarations of Abandonments”

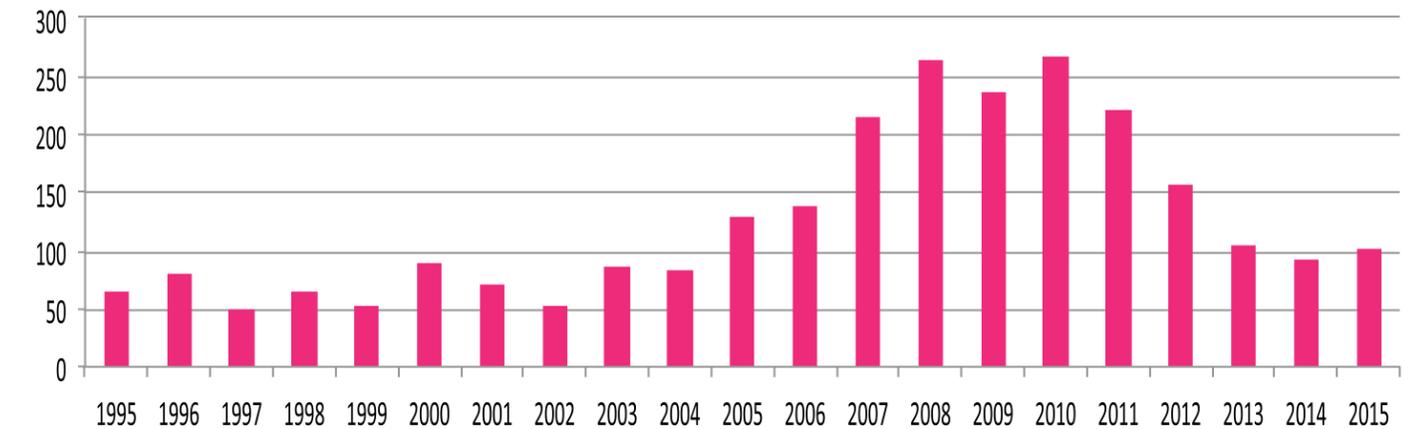


The Tirana Residential Institution “Hannah and Rozafa” had the most accurate record keeping of the dates documents were submitted to the courts to have the child declared abandoned.

In 2015, babies were at the “Hannah and Rozafa” residential institution for an average of 90 days before documents were submitted to the courts for declarations of abandonments. Prior to December 2015, Article 250 of the Albanian Family Code stated that the birth mother has three months (90 days) from the time the child entered a “social service institution” to return for her child. In late December 2015, the law changed. Now, if the birth mother signs a “Consent to Adopt” form at birth, she has three months to return from the date of birth, not from the date the child entered a “social service institution.”

One of the difficulties with institutions submitting requests to the courts for “Declarations of Abandonment” is that staff at some institutions believe that Article 250 requires that the deadline to submit a request to the courts be interrupted whenever the biological mother, or relative, makes even a telephone call to inquire about the child. This interpretation is wrong. Calls by someone that cannot even be identified are not and should not be considered “interest in the child”, as they do not provide, as Article 250 states, “cordial relationships necessary for his/her growth”.

Tiranë “Hannah and Rozafa”: Number of Days from Document Submission to Court Declaration of Abandonment Issued



Over the past few years, the Tirana courts have shown a decrease in time it is taking judges to issue “Declarations of Abandonments”, which then allows the child to be adopted.

The Tirana residential institution “Hannah and Rozafa” reported that in 1995, it was taking the courts 64 days to issue declarations of abandonment which allowed the child to be adopted. This length of time was fairly consistent over the years with the exception of the years 2007-2011 where courts were taking between 221-268 days to issue declarations of abandonments. Since 2013, the length of time has dramatically decreased to between 93 days and 103 days. When conducting this Study it was unclear why there had been a dramatic increase in length of times in the period 2007 -2011.

Once the child has been declared abandoned by the courts, the child is then put on an adoption list. The child’s file is then handed over to the Albanian Adoption Committee, which is overseen by the Ministry of Justice and consists of representatives from various Albanian government ministries.

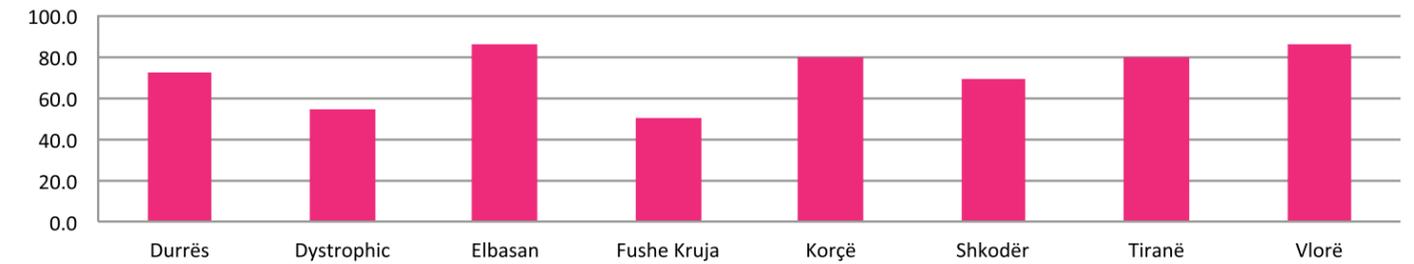
Albanian citizens, or those foreigners having established residency in Albania, have the first right of adoption for a six month period. If the child has not been adopted after being on the adoption list for six months, the child is then put on an international adoption list.

Of the 611 babies transferred from OSAAB and the Angel’s Cradle Nursery in the hospital to a residential institution, 473 (77%) were declared abandoned by the courts due to no contact from the birth mother/family and were put on an adoption list.



Number of children put on an adoption list

% of children put on Adoption List



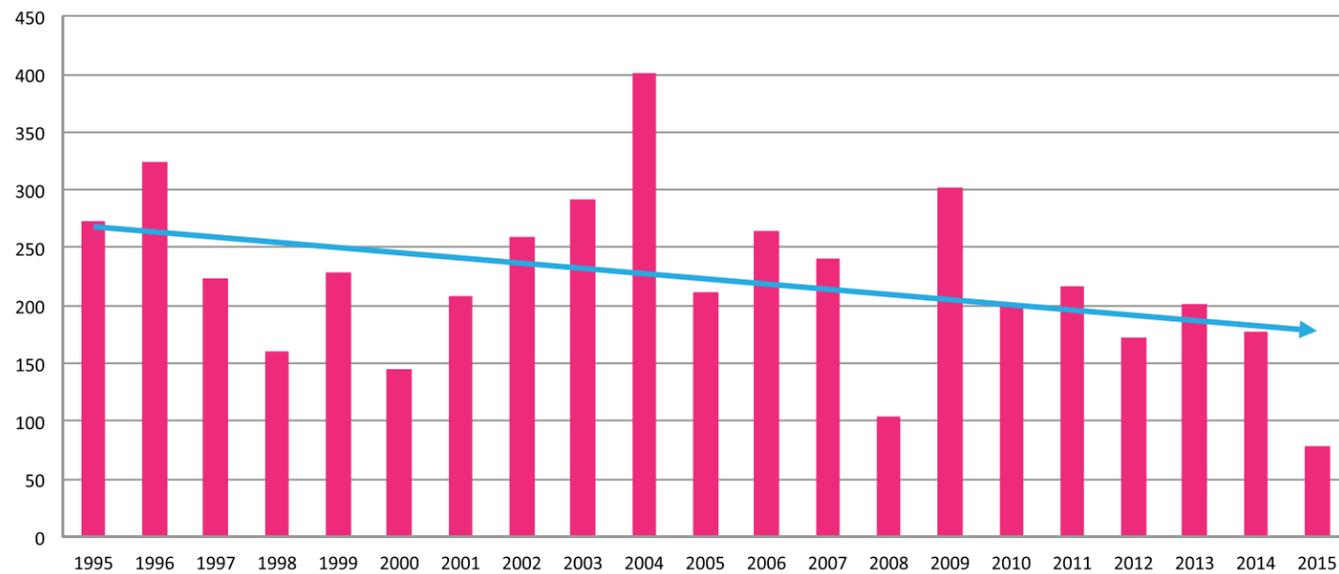
	Durres	Dystrophic	Elbasan	Betania/ Fushe Kruja	Korce	Shkoder	Tirane	Vlora	Total
#Transferred to Institution	91	24	7	2	29	23	385	50	611
# Put on Adoption list	66	13	6	1	23	16	305	43	473
%	72.5	54.2	85.7	50.0	79.3	69.6	79.2	86.0	77.0

Institution Time Line: Average # Days From Court Declarations of Abandonment Issued - to the Approval of the Adoption and the child leaves the institution

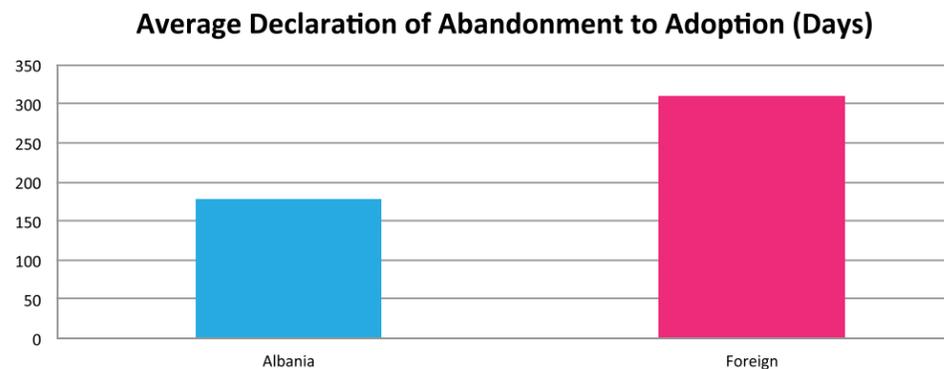
	Durres	Dystrophic	Elbasan	Betania/ Fushe Kruja	Korce	Shkoder	Tirane	Vlora
Average number of days from court declaration to adoption.	226	346	No data	No data	172	244	223	363

Once the child is declared abandoned by the courts, the child is then eligible to be adopted and is matched with a potential family through the Albanian Adoption Committee.

Tirana Courts: Average number of Days from Declaration of Abandonment - to Adoption



Adoptions: Average amount of days from issuance of court Declaration of Abandonment to the date the child leaves the institution with adoptive family.



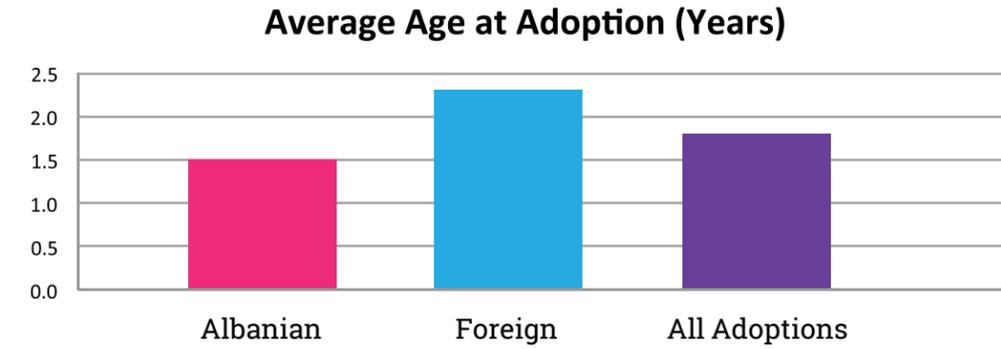
Albanian Adoptions (In-country)

177 days (6 months)

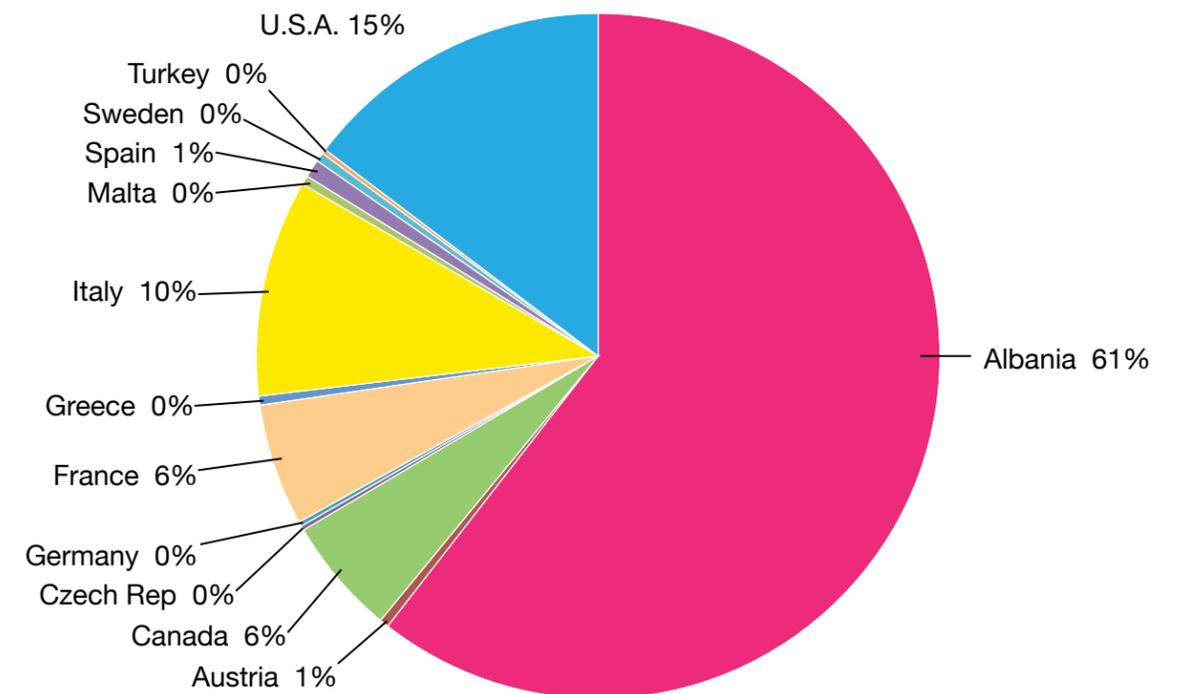
Foreign Adoptions (Inter-Country)

309 days (10 months)

Average Age At Adoption



Nationality of Adoptive Parents

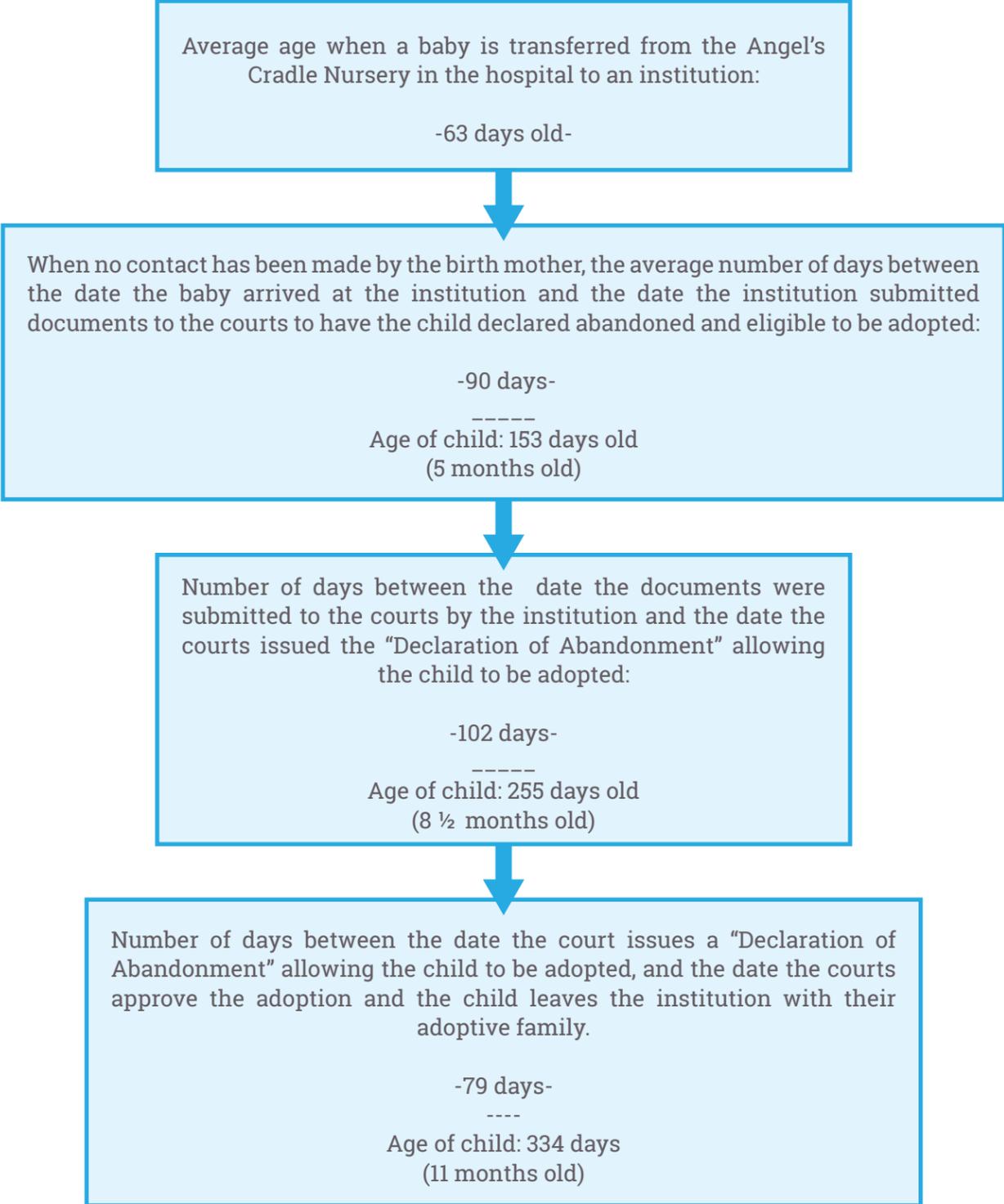


Nationality of Adoptive Family

Albania	USA	Italy	France	Canada	Austria	Turkey	Sweden	Spain	Malta	Greece	Germany	Czech rep.	Total
284	69	48	27	26	2	1	2	4	2	2	1	1	469

Total Adoptions: 469
 Adoptions by Albanians: 284
 Inter-Country Adoption: 185

Time-line of processing OSAAB babies through the Tirana court system: Based off of 2015 statistics from the “Hannah and Rozafa” residential institution in Tirana



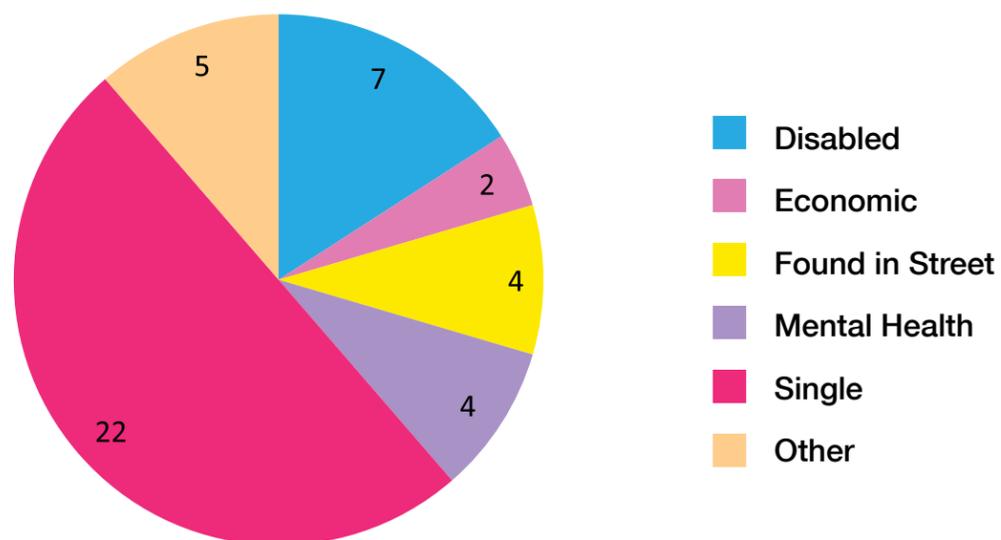
Number of deaths while the child remained in a residential institution.

Durres	Dystrophic	Elbason	Korce	Shkoder	Tirane	Vlora
1	3	1	1	0	4	2

12 children total died while in Institutions

Number of OSAAB “graduates” remaining in residential institutions

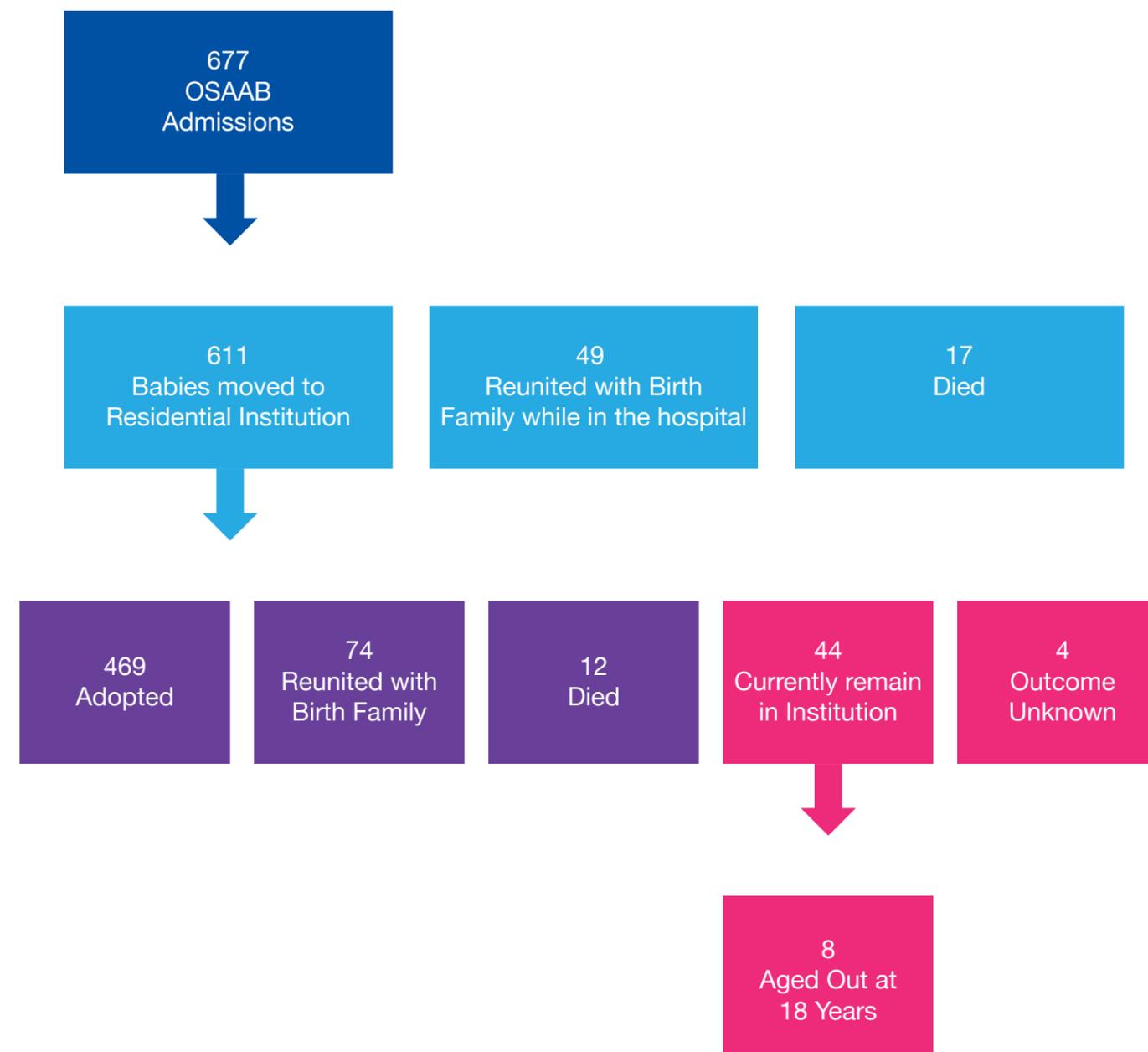
Reason of Original Abandonment / Relinquishment



44 children remaining in institutions

Of the 44 children remaining in residential institutions, seven have disabilities. The remaining 37 children are between the ages of six months, to the oldest (4) children who are almost 18 years old and preparing to age out of the system with no family support.

OSAAB Flow 1995-2015



Albanian Family Code: Article 250

On 14 June 2016, an open meeting was held to present the findings of this Study. In attendance were representatives from the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth (MSWY), State Social Services, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, NGO's, early childhood education specialist, early childhood psychologist, an OSAAB graduate, and the Tirana Municipality Mayors Office.

Findings of the Study were discussed with a main focus of discussion on the children that had to live their entire childhood in an institution due to occasional contact, such as a telephone call, from the birth mother once a year showing "interest".

The law currently states:

"... A parent is considered as not having been involved in an obvious manner with the child when they have not maintained a nurturing relationship necessary for the care of the child and have shown severe negligence in the exercise of their parental responsibility ..."

However, social workers in the institutions, and judges, have frequently misinterpreted this law and believe that Article 250 requires that the process of submitting documents to the courts to have a child declared abandoned and thus eligible to be adopted, be interrupted whenever the biological parent or relative makes even a telephone call to the residential institution to inquire about the child. This interpretation is wrong. Calls by someone that cannot even be identified are not and should not be considered "interest on the child", as they do not provide "a nurturing relationship necessary". This misinterpretation of the law has resulted in children having to live their entire childhood in an institution when they could have been placed in loving homes on a timely basis as infants and/or toddlers.



Recommendations

- Training to judges to be conducted in early childhood development and the need for children to be placed in loving homes on a timely basis.
- Increase awareness of the Safe Haven in the hospital to reduce the number of babies being left in the street, or women seeking illegal late term abortions.
- Receive a commitment from Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth (MSWY) and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to implement a Foster Care program that would enable babies to move directly from OSAAB in the maternity hospital to foster care to ensure bonding starts at an early age.
- Advocate for Albanian families who have been qualified to adopt to be awarded custody of the perspective adopted child as Foster Parents until the courts approve the adoption.
- Increase training and education to social workers and institution directors on counseling techniques to birth mothers on the negative effects on their children of being institutionalized.
- Make training in early childhood development/ parenting mandatory for birth mothers who do not want their child to be adopted but want to keep them in an institution indefinitely.
- Require that birth mothers who want to leave their child in an institution create a plan, and the courts make them accountable, as to how they will work towards reuniting with their child.
- Advocate for Albania "Adoption Without Consent" laws to be in-line with EU countries.
- OSAAB will continue to collect data annually to track the impacts this Study will make in the lives of abandoned babies in Albania.



For further information about our program and how you can get involved, please contact:

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