

## Greece's economic recession hits her youngest citizens: Children abandoned in hospitals

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**Key words:** abandoned children; economic crisis; Greece

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In the end of 2008, Greece entered the country's deepest recession in peacetime history, with the unemployment rate increasing from 7.9% to 26.0% from the fourth trimester of 2008 to the fourth trimester of 2012. By 2012, Greece had the highest at-risk - of - poverty rate (23.1%) among the 28 countries of the European Union<sup>1</sup>.

In this suffocating economic climate, births decreased substantially in Greece especially among the most vulnerable social groups<sup>2</sup>. However, even for people who are impoverished a birth of a child usually turns to a daily struggle even to cover the basic needs.

In an economically battered Greece, as parents run out of the means to care for their offspring, a growing number of children are being abandoned in maternity hospitals by their mothers soon after labor or are left in large children's hospitals. No official data are available, but agencies and charity organizations have reported that approximately 1,200 children were abandoned in Greece during 2011 alone, which is the highest value among the coun-

tries of Southern Europe struggling with austerity<sup>3</sup>.

According to the only official data recently presented by the health minister in the Hellenic Parliament, the number of children who were dispatched under court order to the Athens "P & A Kyriakou" children's hospital increased from 42 in 2010 to 96 in 2011 and 130 in 2012, a 3fold rise between 2010-2012. During the first ten months of 2013 the situation remained distressing, with the number at 102 children<sup>4</sup>.

These children are of Hellenic or foreign citizenship and of different ages who were abandoned by parents unable to financially support them. Some of them are also abused and neglected. Most of the children were born out of wedlock, and some of them to parents afflicted by serious social and psychological problems.

However, the financial recession is only a part of the story. Another aggravating issue is the malfunctioned and antiquated legislation for adoption in Greece since it has not been brought into line with European norms. Meanwhile, the concept of foster care is not yet widely accepted.

The effects of austerity are becoming devastating for Greece's youngest citizens. Newborns and young children grow up in overburdened public hospitals in the same departments with patients suffering from various health issues, exposed to obvious risks to their health and social and psychokinetic development<sup>5</sup>. There is an urgent need to take measures immediately in order to support poverty-stricken families with young children, ensure that children will be removed from hospital wards and also, develop strategies aimed at reintegrating these children into their own families or enabling them to enter a foster home. ■

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