

Survey on the Situation of Siblings in the Child Care System in Romania

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Research Report

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Executive Summary

Background

In Romania, Law No. 272 of 2004 on the protection and promotion of the rights of the children, republished, as amended, provides, under Article 64(3) that, when undertaking the placement measure, the competent authorities must consider, on the one hand, "the placement of the child, with priority, in the extended or substitute family" and also "maintaining the siblings together". However, it is not always possible to observe these principles, therefore, the practical difficulties of placing a group of siblings together with substitute families or professional foster parents lead to their placement with residential facilities or even to their separation.

This is the first survey conducted in Romania, which discusses the issue of the group of siblings in the special protection system, and has been prepared at the Initiative of Asociația SOS Satele Copiilor România, in partnership with the National Authority for Protection of Child Rights and Adoption (ANPDCA), and its aim is to identify and analyze the institutional practices related to the placement of groups of siblings, the causes leading to their separation, and the number of children included in the system, who belong to groups of siblings.

The aim of this survey is to help prepare a national institutional framework, to support the general directorates for social assistance and child protection and non-governmental organizations in applying the principle of maintaining the siblings together when the decision of placement is made.

Objectives, Methodology and Limitations of the Research

The main objectives of this survey are as follows:

- To identify the current practices regarding the placement of the groups of siblings in relation to whom special protection measures have been adopted
- To determine the causes leading to the separate placement of siblings, in practice.
- To estimate the number of siblings who are currently placed in the special protection system in Romania.

In the light of these objectives, the survey methodology used both quantitative, and qualitative research methods. The qualitative and quantitative data have been collected in the following 8 counties: Bacău, Constanța, Ialomița, Mehedinți, Arad, Cluj, Sibiu and București (4th District).

The qualitative research component included 8 focus-groups with experts from the General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC), 8 semi-structured interviews with DGASPC's representative in the child protection committee from each county, 20 interviews with representatives of certain NGOs providing special protection services for children with placement, 2 focus-groups with children belonging to certain groups of siblings from the protection system and 15 interviews with biological parents who have several children

placed into foster care. Also, an analysis has been made, over 24 special protection files representing cases of children who belong to groups of siblings, placed into various types of child care services.

The quantitative research has used exclusively administrative data, most of which were taken from CMTIS, respectively identification data of the children placed into foster care from the 8 counties and identification data of these children's mothers. The analyzed database included 7074 children placed into foster care, out of a total of 9077 children included in the special protection system, from the 8 counties, at the end of 2014.

Like any other research, this survey has certain limitations, imposed by the research objectives and the methodology used. The main limitations refer to:

- The impossibility to extrapolate the results obtained from the 8 counties, at the level of the entire country;
- The method used for the identification of the groups of siblings, based on the mother's personal information, and the method used for the identification of placement of siblings together/separated, based on the name of the services facility, imply certain limitations as far as the accuracy of the estimates is concerned;
- The available data, which are of transversal type, have enabled the analysis only for siblings with the same mother, and only for those included in the protection system; the rest of them, with the same father but different mothers, those who stayed in their family of origin, or who have already left the system could not be included in the analysis.
- The available data could not be used to analyze the impact of an important factor, as far as the placement of the groups of siblings is concerned, *i.e.* the moment when they entered the system, whether they entered the system simultaneously or at different moments.

Main Results and Conclusions

1. The number, distribution and characteristics of the groups of siblings included in the special protection system

- In the 8 counties included in the survey taken as a whole, 45.4% of the children placed into foster care have at least one sibling included in the protection system. The percentage of children with siblings included in the system varies from 30.4% in the 4th District, to 54.8% in Sibiu.
- Based on the analyzed data, we have estimated that, in the 8 counties, there is a total number of 1589 groups of siblings, with 4091 children. The average size of a group of siblings is 2.58 members.
- On the whole, 23% of all the children placed into foster care have only one sibling included in the system, 11% have two siblings, and 11% have three or more siblings (see figure 1). The maximum number of children belonging to one group of siblings

identified using the administrative data used was 9. There are few groups of siblings made up of more than 5 members, representing approximately 2% of the children included in the protection system.

- The most frequent are the groups of siblings made up of two children, these groups representing almost two thirds of all groups of siblings analyzed from the eight counties, with variations between 56% in Bacău County and 74% in Ialomița County and 4th District.
- Most groups of siblings (58%) placed in the special protection system are mixed groups, made up of both boys, and girls.
- 14% of all groups of siblings analyzed contain at least one child with accentuated or severe disability.

2. Statistics regarding the placement of the groups of siblings:

- Half of the total number of children with siblings included in the protection system, from the eight counties analyzed, are currently placed together with their siblings, while one third of them are separated from their siblings. The remaining 17% are placed together with part of their siblings. There are significant variations among the counties, which are, to a lesser extent, explained by the characteristics of the groups of siblings, and, most likely, by the configuration of the existing services and the different efficiency of the placement practices, depending on how the facilities existing in each county are used.
- Almost 60% of the total number of children placed together with their siblings receive family-based care: 40% in the extended family, the rest of them in substitute families)
- 21% of the children placed together with their siblings are in family-type homes and 7% in apartments.
- In the case of children separated from their siblings, more than 60% of them, from the 8 counties, are placed with family-based care services, most of these children being placed with professional foster parents.
- Most of the children placed together with only part of their siblings (60%) live in residential care facilities, and, of these, 27% live in family-type homes, and 18% in classic placement centers. Most of those who are placed with family-based care services are taken care of by professional foster parents.
- There are significant correlations between the type of care services and maintaining siblings together:
 - The placement with professional foster parents or other families/persons is significantly correlated with the separation of the group of siblings;
 - The placement with the extended family, and in family-based care facilities or apartments is favorable for maintaining the group of siblings together;
 - The placement with residential facilities is particularly associated with the partial separation of the group of siblings.

3. Influencing factors for the separation of the groups of siblings:

The hierarchy of the factors leading to increases chances for a child to be placed separated from their siblings is as follows:

- The child has accentuated or severe disability
- One of the siblings is aged below three
- The larger size of the group of siblings (4 or more)
- Significant age differences among the siblings

4. Current practices related to the placement of children who belong to groups of siblings:

- The practice used by each DGASPC for the placement of the groups of siblings is determined by a combination between the specific development of the special protection services from that county and the characteristics of the group of siblings.
- In most counties (except for Constanța and Ialomița), the situations when the groups of siblings may be placed together with the extended family are rather rare and depend on the number of siblings.
- Most of the interviewed experts are of the opinion that placement with professional foster parents is the best solution in the case of two siblings, however, the insufficient number of professional foster parents limits the access to this solution.
- When placement with family-based care services is not possible – most frequently, for the groups made up of more than 3 siblings -, solutions for placement with residential facilities are looked for, and the maintaining of the siblings together depends on the spots available in these facilities at the time, and the children's characteristics: age/age difference, gender, disability degree etc.)
- Even if it is impossible to maintain the siblings together in foster care, however, in all cases, solutions are looked for, to maintain the relationships among the siblings, *i.e.* they are placed with nearby foster parents or residential facilities (in the same locality, if they live in the rural environment and in small cities, or in the same neighborhood, if they live in big cities)
- Experts agree, almost unanimously, that the best solution for the placement of sibling groups made up of more than three members is represented by the family-type homes.
- The main obstacles faced by the experts when trying to follow the principle of maintaining siblings together may be grouped into three categories: limitations imposed by the law (children under the age of three must be placed with family-based care services), limitations due to the children's characteristics (health problems, significant age differences, etc.) and limitations due to the family-based or residential services' capacity to take over a certain number of siblings. Plus the situation when children belonging to a group of siblings enter the protection system one by one

5. Maintaining relationships among siblings who are placed separately

- Both the DGASPC experts, and the experts working for NGOs have admitted that, at present, it is considered very important to maintain the relationships among siblings,

when placing them together is impossible, and to maintain the relationship with the parents or with other people to whom the children are attached.

- Practically, direct contacts among the siblings placed with different care services consist in participation in socializing activities, camps, birthday parties, trips, weekend meetings, regular visits, sometimes they are allowed to spend longer periods of time with their families of origin, during the holidays. However, most of the older children have access to the telephone and the Internet, hence they can easily communicate, whenever they want to contact their siblings placed with different care services.
- The main obstacles mentioned by the experts, limiting the possibility to maintain the relationships among siblings who are placed separately are primarily those leading to their separate placement: their health condition, significant age differences, lack of attachment among the siblings, the existence of behavioral problems, etc.

6. Opinions on the importance of maintaining siblings together and maintaining the relationships among separated siblings

- From the experts' point of view, placing siblings together facilitates, to a higher extent, children's adaptation to their new family, due to the fact that they are a group, they feel safer, they know each other and support each other, they create a sense of comfort, they manage to cope better with the requirements and challenges, they have the feeling of belonging to a family, they cope better with the separation from their parents.
- According to the experts, maintaining the relationships among siblings is important for various reasons, among which:
 - children are able to make plans for the future together;
 - children are able to learn certain pro-social behaviors, such as helping, supporting each other;
 - they are able to give moral and emotional support to one other, when facing problems
 - possibility to support one another in the process of adaptation to the challenges of independent life, when leaving the system

7. Lessons learned and possible solutions to the problems related to the placement of siblings groups

- The discussions with the experts from DGASPCs and the NGOs about the lessons learned and the solutions identified to the problems faced when placing sibling groups have focused on several aspects: 1. family-type homes, as the best placement solution in the case of sibling groups; 2. training foster parents for taking over groups of 2-3 siblings, including of older age; 3. the need to develop prevention social services, at a local level; last, but not least 4. financing the field of foster care, in order to render it more attractive for the well trained professionals, on the one hand, and to be able to

develop the special protection services network (foster care, family-type homes) for the children temporarily or permanently separated from their parents, on the other hand.

Recommendations

- The placement of large groups of siblings in family-type homes is considered good practice, and there are several examples of groups made up of 7-8 siblings who were successfully placed in such facilities. In this respect, such facilities networks should be developed, including by supporting the NGOs wishing to develop this type of services.
- The current practice, when foster parents receive primarily children aged up to three years old, obviously favors the separation of sibling groups made up of children aged below and over three years old. The solution would be to train professional foster parents, in order for them to be able to take over groups of 2-3 siblings, irrespective of their age;
- Increasing the system employees' expertise in the placement of siblings groups, by: facilitating the experience exchange among the local experts, training experts in sibling groups cases, preparing good practice manuals, creating regional groups of experts, for a systematic and unitary approach to this exclusive field of placing and maintaining siblings together, creating proper working instruments and procedures, specific to these sibling groups.

I. Background and Objectives

Between 2010 and 2014, on an annual average, 1250 children have been abandoned in health care facilities, and over 11000 children have been abused, neglected or exploited and came to the attention of the General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection. Approximately 25% of these children have been placed into foster care, *i.e.* more than 3000 children were placed in the special protection system annually, during the past five years¹. At the end of 2014, there were approximately 58000 children living in Romania, who were temporarily or permanently deprived of parental care, and who have been placed into care, as a special protection measure. Approximately 30% of these children are placed with the extended family or other families, one third of them are placed with professional foster parents, and the remaining are placed with residential care facilities.

At an international level, the *UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* adjudicates that siblings with existing bonds should not be separated, unless there is a clear risk of abuse or other justification in the best interests of the child, and that, in any case, every effort should be made to enable siblings to maintain contact with each other, unless this is against their wish or interests. In Romania, Law No. 272 of 2004 on the protection and promotion of the rights of the children, republished, as amended, provides under Article 64(3) that, when undertaking the placement measure, the competent authorities must consider, on the one hand, "the placement of the child, with priority, in the extended or substitute family" and also "maintaining the siblings together". However, it is not always possible to observe these principles, therefore, the practical difficulties of placing a group of siblings together in substitute families or professional foster parents often determine their placement in residential care facilities or even the separation of the siblings.

The specific objective of the national strategy for the protection and promotion of the rights of children for 2014-2020 in the special protection area is to continue the transition from institutional care of children to community-based care services. For this purpose, the following measures have been proposed for implementation:

- increasing the efficiency and efficacy of the current system of family-based care services, through a foster care network specialized in certain categories of children, such as the young child, who may not be institutionalized, the child with disabilities and the child with behavioral problems;
- increasing the minimum institutionalization age of the child, from 2 to 3 years, a measure which has already been effective since January 1, 2015;
- closing down all classic placement institutions, and establishing family-type homes and social apartments;
- training the personnel involved in raising and taking care of children in family-type homes, in developing independent life skills, and reviewing the legal framework regarding the favorable environmental conditions for gaining independent life skills.

¹ Author's calculations based on the statistical data published by the National Authority for Protection of Child Rights and Adoption, accessible at <http://www.copii.ro/statistici/>.

The issue of maintaining siblings together when the placement measure is ordered is not covered within the current national strategy for the protection and promotion of the rights of the child –either in the chapter analyzing and describing the current situation, or in the chapter discussing the objectives, the measures and the outcomes, as the children belonging to sibling groups who enter the special protection system are not identified as a special category of children.

In fact, until the date of the present survey, no analysis has been conducted in Romania, dedicated to the situation of sibling groups included in the protection system and the institutional practices related to their placement. Hence, there were no data available regarding the number of children belonging to sibling groups, how many of them live together or separated from their siblings. Also, there were no data available regarding the current practices and the factors influencing the ability to maintain siblings together or their separation when a decision is made to place them in foster care. The initiative of SOS Children's Villages Romania is aimed to identify and to analyze institutional practices related to the placement of sibling groups, the causes leading to their separation, and the number of children included in the system, who belong to sibling groups.

Similar initiatives to study the situation of siblings placed in the special protection system have already been implemented in other European countries, by associations members of the SOS Children's Villages network, and there already are several surveys which analyze the importance of maintaining the relationships among the siblings who are included in the system, and which have been a starting point for researching this matter in Romania, too².

The aim of this survey conducted by Asociația Sociometrics and commissioned by SOS Children's Villages Romania, in partnership with the National Agency for Protection of Child Rights and Adoption is to help prepare a national institutional framework, to support the general directorates for social assistance and child protection, and the non-governmental organizations providing special protection services through placement in family-type homes, while applying the principle of maintaining siblings together when the placement decision is made.

The objectives of this survey have been:

- To identify current practices related to the placement of sibling groups, when such special protection measures are taken
- To determine the causes leading to the separation of siblings when being placed.
- To estimate the number of siblings who are presently placed in the special protection system in Romania

² A summary of these surveys was published in "*Because we are sisters and brothers. Sibling relations in alternative care*", 2012, SOS Children's Villages International, available online at <http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/insights/family-strengthening/because-we-are-brothers-and-sisters>

II. Methodology

In line with our study objectives, our exploration has used mixed qualitative and quantitative research methods, for gathering data from all relevant actors in the study field. We have analyzed both existing data, and primary data collected primarily through group discussion and depth interviews, as well as case studies based on the analysis of the documents attached to the special protection files of certain sibling groups. The qualitative and quantitative data have been collected in the following 8 counties: Bacău, Constanța, Ialomița, Mehedinți, Arad, Cluj, Sibiu and Bucharest (4th District). These counties have been selected considering, on the one hand, the geographical criterion (one country from every development region), and, on the other hand, a pragmatic criterion, related to the degree of filling out the administrative data concerning children placed under special protection in the monitoring and tracking information system (CMTIS - Child Welfare Monitoring and Tracking Information System). In other words, the county with the most numerous records made in the CMTIS regarding the active cases of children placed under special protection has been selected from each development region.

II.1. Qualitative Research

The methods used for data collection during the qualitative research have been the focus-group and the semi-structured interview, complemented by case studies based on the analysis of the files of sibling groups included in the protection system. This qualitative component aimed at exploring current practices related to the placement of sibling groups, the difficulties encountered in maintaining the siblings together and the perception of the importance of maintaining relationships among siblings. The qualitative research has included the following:

- 1) 8 focus groups with experts in the field of child protection, working directly with children, respectively social workers, case managers, professional foster parents, educators, and psychologists. One group discussion has been held in each of the 8 counties included in the survey, attended by 8-10 persons, selected such as to ensure a balanced representation of each category of experts.
- 2) 8 semi-structured interviews with the representatives of DGASPC in the child protection commissions (the general manager of DGASPC or, as the case may be, the deputy general manager coordinating the child rights protection activities)
- 3) 20 semi-structured interviews with the representatives of certain NGOs providing care services to children under placement. 3-4 interviews have been conducted in each county, except for Ialomița and Mehedinți, where there are no private providers of residential services for children.
- 4) 2 focus groups with children placed in the special protection system, placed together with or separated from their siblings, one of which was conducted in Sibiu, with children aged between 11 and 14 years old, and one in Constanța, with teenagers aged between 15 and 17 years old. With the help of DGASPC, 8 children have been selected to take part in each focus group, based on several criteria: placement together with or separated from their siblings,

simultaneous inclusion of the siblings in the protection system or inclusion one by one, and the type of service (foster parents, family-type homes and other residential-type services). The children's participation in the group discussions has been subject to their written consent and the written consent of their legal representatives, and has been ratified by a symbolic gift – a literature book suitable for their age.

5) 15 semi-structured interviews with the biological parents or certain sibling groups included in the protection system, 2 interviews in each county, except for Bacău, where only one interview has been conducted. The parents have been selected based on several criteria, such as the number of children placed under special protection, how the siblings were placed (together/separated), type of service (professional foster parents, family-type homes, other residential services), the moment when the children were included in the system (simultaneously/one by one).

6) 24 case studies based on the analysis of the files of certain children belonging to sibling groups included in the special protection system. 3 files have been selected and analyzed from each county, according to the following criteria: age when entering the system; current age; size of the sibling group; child's gender; type of placement of the sibling group – together or separated; placement facility type; placement moment (simultaneously or one by one).

All the group discussions and interviews have been conducted based on certain guidelines prepared in accordance with the research objectives, have been audio recorded and subsequently fully transcribed, without any interference with the respondents' words, for analysis purposes.

II.2. Quantitative Research

This study component was aimed at identifying the number of children placed in the special protection system, belonging to certain sibling groups and their distribution according to several criteria, such as the size of the group, placement together or separated, and type of facility. Also, the aim of the quantitative analysis has also been to explore the factors significantly influencing the maintaining or separation of the siblings when entering the special protection system.

The quantitative research has used exclusively administrative data, most of which were taken from CMTIS, respectively identification data of the children placed under special protection from the 8 counties and identification data of these children's mothers. The functionality of CMTIS, from this study objectives perspective, has proven rather limited, due to the impossibility to extract from the system all the relevant data. The structure of this system does not enable the automatic identification of all sibling groups, therefore the data taken from CMTIS required a rather laborious processing³ to be able to identify the children included in the system, who has siblings. These children have been identified by their mother's personal

³ We would like to take this opportunity and thank, again, Mrs. Simona Oproiu, head of Monitoring Department at ANPDCA, for her efforts made to extract the data from CMTIS.

identification number or, if this was not available, only by the mother's name and date of birth. This method has certain limitations, which are presented in the sub-chapter dedicated to the research limitations.

Nevertheless, there have been sufficient cases where CMTIS did not contain the identification data of the children's mothers; hence, at a second stage, the data taken from the central information system were sent to the DGASPCs from the 8 counties, to fill out the missing data and rectify/update the data available in CMTIS. Most of the data collected from Cluj and Ialomita counties were not updated, therefore the local DGASPCs provided us with different data sets, from their own records.

It should be mentioned that, for Arad, Bacău, Constanța, Mehedinți, Sibiu Counties and Bucharest Municipality – 4th District, the data available for analysis represented, on the average, 74% of all children placed under special protection in these counties, while the degree of data completion in CMTIS varied between 60% in the 4th District and 90% in Mehedinți County⁴.

The data base used for analysis eventually included 7074 children placed under special protection, out of a total number of 9077 children placed in the special protection system from the 8 counties at the end of 2014 (see Table 1). For some of the estimations presented in this report, the data have been weighted based on ANPDCA's official statistical data regarding the distribution of children by service types as at December 31, 2014.

Table 1. Distribution of children included in the quantitative analysis, by counties and service types

County	Professional foster parents	Relatives up to 4 th degree	Other families/persons	Children placed with public or private residential services	Total children included in the analysis	Total children placed in the special protection system as at 31.12.2014
Arad	128	195	117	422	862	1232
Bacău	423	209	75	544	1251	1786
Cluj*	199	247	45	357	848	897
Constanța	369	550	192	511	1622	2236
Ialomita*	94	302	56	200	652	651
Mehedinți	202	164	66	193	625	696
Sibiu	272	90	92	474	928	1098
4 th District	77	57	46	106	286	481
Total	1764	1814	689	2807	7074	9077

*Note: For Cluj and Ialomita counties, the data used in the analysis have been supplied by the DGASPCs and were updated on 30.06.2015.

⁴ Author's calculations, based on the data extracted from CMTIS, by reference to the statistics published by ANPDCA regarding the number of children placed in the special protection systems at December 31, 2014.

II.3. Research Limitations

This survey, like any other research, has certain limitations imposed by the objectives set by its authors and the methodology used for data collection.

Considering that the analyzed data has been collected from only 8 counties, even if they were selected from all 8 development regions of the country, the results may not be directly extrapolated at a national level. Also, taking into consideration that, for 6 of these counties, the set of data subject to analysis included, on the average, only approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of all the children placed in the special protection system, the results should be interpreted in terms of estimations, which means that certain results are likely to contain errors. Unfortunately, the only county-level data concerning the children placed in the special protection system are those concerning their distribution by types of services, therefore it is impossible to quantify the errors which are due to the lack of complete data from the six counties mentioned above. Considering strictly children's distribution by types of services, no systematic errors are noticed, generated by the under or over-representation of the children placed with certain services, the highest difference between the analyzed data and the official data at the end of 2014 being of -3.8% in the case of children placed with relatives up to 4th degree. These differences have been rectified by weighting.

The method used for the identification of siblings by their mother, and the fact that the data were collected from only 8 counties, also generate certain limitations as far as the estimations precision is concerned. Children of different mothers and the same father, as well as children of the same mother, but placed in other counties than those included in the survey, could not be identified as sibling groups. The discussions held with the experts during the focus groups and the interviews conducted have revealed that such cases exist, but are rare. Therefore, one should take into consideration that the definition used for the sibling group in the present survey, *i.e.* **two or more children of the same mother, irrespective whether any connections have existed or not among these children before entering the protection system**, is limitative from the perspective of accurate identification of all sibling groups.

The identification of the placement of siblings together or separated has been made based on the name of the facilities where the children are placed. In some cases, the residential facilities (family-type homes, social service apartments) are organized by the children's gender (boys' facilities and girls' facilities), being recorded as distinct facilities in the administrative records, although, in some cases, they are located next to each other (for example, there may be two social service apartments in a condominium, one of which is inhabited by boys exclusively, and the other one by girls exclusively). It is possible that some of the mixed sibling groups live in such facilities situated next to each other and, because of the different names of these facilities, such cases could have been classified as separate sibling groups, even if, in fact, the children live in the same condominium and may have contact on a daily basis. This source of error has to be mentioned, although these cases are rather rare (less than 3% of the total number of children with siblings included in the system).

There are cases when the placement decision was made for only part of the siblings, some of them staying with their families, and cases when some of the siblings left the system, either by reintegration into their families, or by adoption or simply by exceeding the maximum age for staying in the system. The data available to us refer strictly to children who, at the time of the survey, were under an active disposition of placement under special protection, hence all of the situations mentioned before, of separated groups of siblings – some of them inside the system, others outside of the system – have not made the object of the survey.

Part of the administrative data which would have been relevant to be included in the analysis is inexistent or could not be automatically retrieved from CMTIS. These are mainly data regarding the time when the children entered the system (the date when DGASPC or the court issued the placement decision), and data regarding the reason for the placement decision or the mother's ethnic origin. Many surveys conducted in other countries have revealed that the inclusion of children in the system at different times was an important factor influencing the separate placement of the sibling group; therefore, preferably the impact of this factor on siblings' separation in Romania, from a quantitative perspective, should have been explored. Nevertheless, children's entry in the system, one by one, has been an important topic during the group and individual discussions held with the experts, therefore it is properly documented through the qualitative research.

Despite all the limitations mentioned above, the very high internal consistence of the quantitative data, and their complementariness with the qualitative data, provide sufficient arguments for us to consider that the results of this survey accurately reflect the situation of the sibling groups included in the special protection system, at the level of the eight counties, and may form a solid basis for the development of an institutional framework that would lead to an improved application of the principle of maintaining siblings together when entering the special protection system.

II.4. Ethical Aspects

All the respondents' participation in this survey has been subject to their informed consent. Regarding children's participation in the focus groups, this has been subject to both the children's, and their legal representatives' written consent. The children who took part in the focus groups have been ratified with a symbolic gift, whose value did not exceed RON 20 (approx. EUR 4.5), *i.e.* a literature book suitable to their age.

All the participants in the survey have been assured of the confidentiality of their personal information, responses and image. The role of the recording equipment has always been explained, and their verbal consent has been obtained, regarding the audio recording of the group and individual interviews.

III. Research Results

III.1 Number, Distribution and Characteristics of the Siblings Groups Place in the Special Protection System

The analysis based on the administrative data collected from CMTIS and DGASPCs has revealed that, at the level of the 8 counties, 45.4% of the children under placement have at least one sibling included in the protection system. The weight of children with siblings included in the system varies significantly among the counties, from 30.4% in the 4th District, to 54.8% in Sibiu (see Table 2).

Of the total number of 7074 cases of children included in the survey, we could identify 1247 groups of siblings, and a weighted estimation made at the level of the 8 counties reveals a total number of 1589 sibling groups, with 4091 children. The average size of a sibling group included in the protection system is 2.58 members. 5 cross-county sibling groups have also been identified, *i.e.* children of the same mother, placed in facilities situated in different counties. However, it is likely that some of the children may have siblings placed in other counties than those included in the survey.

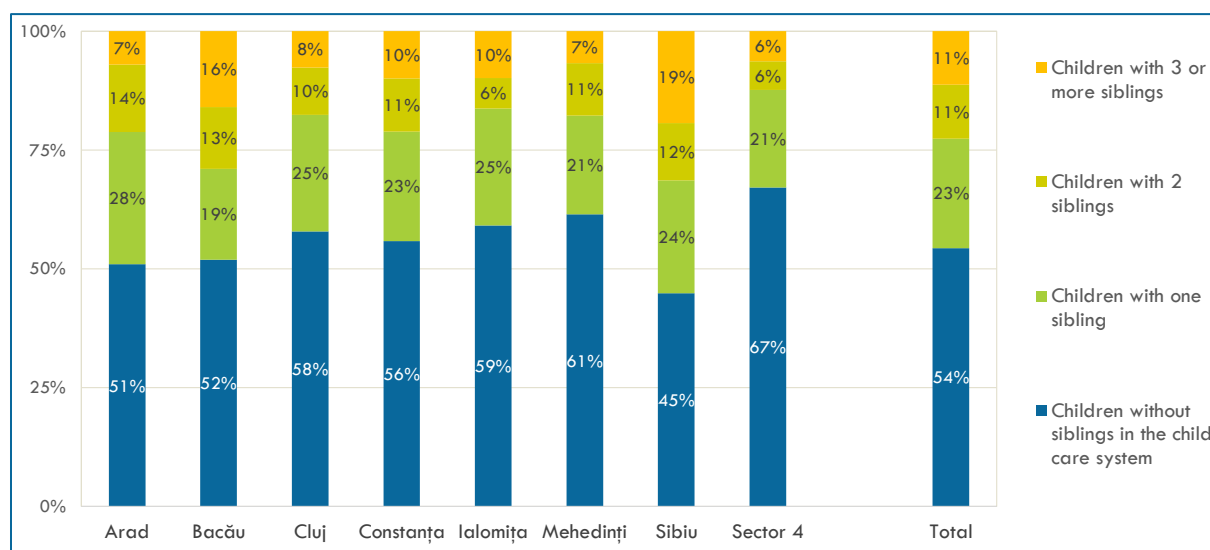
Table 2. Distribution of sibling groups included in the special protection system

County	Total no. of children included in the analysis	No. of children with siblings identified in the system	% children with siblings placed in the special protection system	No. of sibling groups identified	Estimation of the no. of sibling groups	Average no. of siblings per group	Total estimated no. of children with siblings placed in the special protection system
Arad	862	421	48.8%	172	248	2.43	603
Bacău	1251	606	48.4%	214	307	2.79	857
Cluj	848	358	42.2%	147	147	2.43	357
Constanța	1622	722	44.5%	284	390	2.53	986
Ialomița	652	267	41.0%	108	108	2.46	266
Mehedinti	625	241	38.6%	97	97	2.48	241
Sibiu	928	509	54.8%	184	219	2.77	605
4 th District	286	87	30.4%	36	66	2.39	158
Cross-county group	-	-	-	5	7	2.58	18
Total	7074	3211	45.4%	1247	1589	2.58	4091

At the level of the 8 counties, 23% of all children placed under protection have only one sibling included in the system, 11% have two siblings, and 11% have three or more siblings (see Figure 1). The maximum number of children belonging to one sibling group, identified based on the administrative data used, was 9. There are few sibling groups made up of more than 5 members, representing approximately 2% of the children included in the protection system.

The percentage of children with 3 or more siblings varies between 6-7% in Arad, Mehedinți Counties and 4th District, and 19% in Sibiu County. Bacău is another county with a higher percentage of children with 3 or more siblings, respectively 16% of the total number of children under placement.

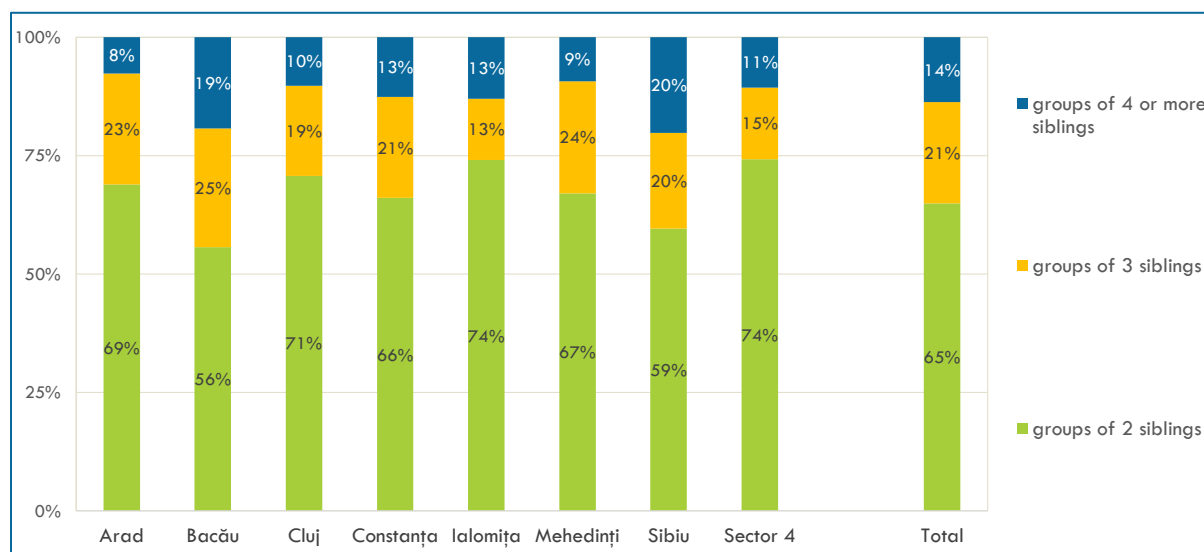
Figure 1. Distribution of children under placement, according to the number of siblings included in the protection system



Sibling groups made up of two children are the most frequent ones, representing approximately two thirds of the total number of sibling groups identified in the eight counties (see Figure 2). The groups made up of 3 siblings represent approximately 21% of the total number of sibling groups, while the percentage of groups made up of 4 or more siblings is 14%.

The percentage of groups made up of 2 siblings varies between 56% in Bacău County and 74% in Ialomița County and 4th District. The groups made up of three siblings are relatively more numerous in Bacău, Mehedinți and Arad Counties (23-25%). Sibiu and Bacău are the counties with the highest percentage of groups made up of four or more siblings (19-20%).

Figure 2. Distribution of sibling groups, by their size



The average age of the children making up a group of siblings included in the protection system is 11.4 years old, varying between 10.3 years old in the case of groups made up of more than 5 children, and 11.7 years old in the case of groups made up of two siblings. The average age difference between the oldest and the youngest sibling strongly depends on the size of the sibling group. In the case of groups made up of 2 siblings, the age difference between them is, on the average, of 2.9 years, and increases to 7.8 years in the case of groups made up of 4 siblings, and almost 10 years, in the case of groups made up of 5 or more siblings (see Table 3). 7.5% of the total number of groups included in the analysis also include twins.

Most of the groups of siblings (58%) placed in the special protection system are mixed groups, made up of both boys, and girls. The groups made up of children of the same gender are more frequent in the case of the groups made up of 2, respectively 3 siblings, while mixed groups represent 90% of the groups made up of more than 4 children.

14% of all the sibling groups investigated contain at least one child with accentuated or severe disability.

Table 3. Demographic indicators of sibling groups included in the special protection system

Indicators	Size of the sibling group				Total [N=1589]
	2 siblings [N=1032]	3 siblings [N=339]	4 siblings [N=121]	>=5 siblings [N=96]	
Average age of the children (years)	11.7	11.3	10.6	10.3	11.4
Average age difference between the oldest sibling and the youngest sibling (years)	2.9	5.4	7.8	9.8	4.2
% groups made up exclusively of boys	29%	19%	4%	5%	23%

% groups made up exclusively of girls	23%	15%	5%	5%	19%
% mixed groups	48%	66%	91%	90%	58%
% groups including at least one child with accentuated or severe disability	12%	18%	20%	16%	14%

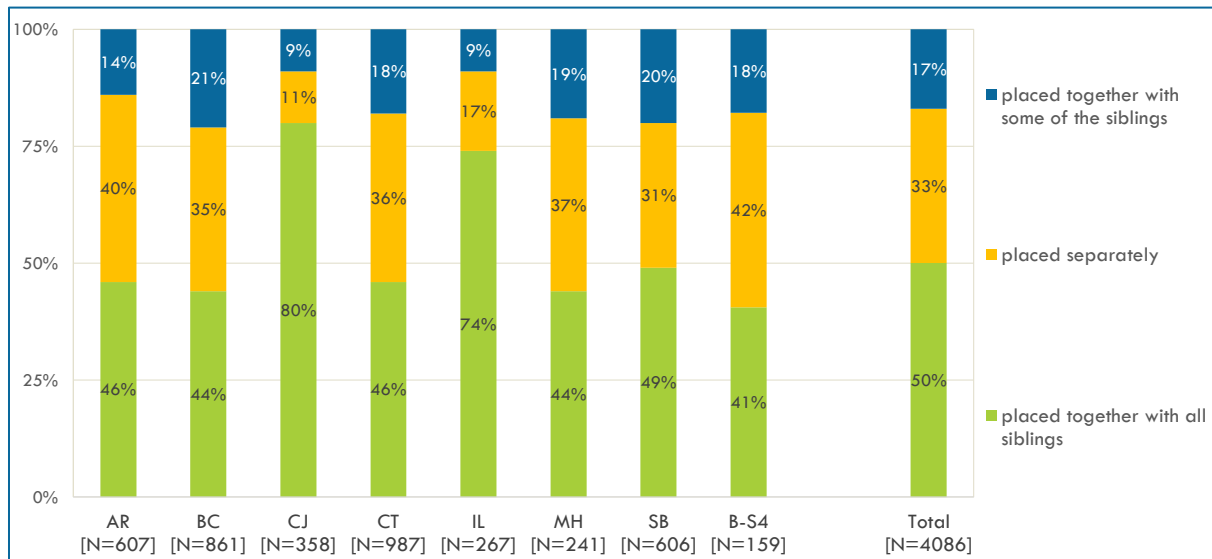
III.2 Statistics Regarding the Placement of Sibling Groups

Out of the total number of children with siblings included in the protection system from the eight counties analyzed, half of them are currently placed together with their siblings, while one third of them are separated from their siblings. The remaining 17% are placed together with only some of their siblings (see Figure 3).

The cross-county variations in terms of the placement of sibling groups are very high. In two of the counties, Cluj and Ialomița, the percentage of children who are placed together with their siblings is 80%, respectively 74%, while in the other counties this percentage varies between 41% (4th District) and 49% (Sibiu). The highest percentage of children placed separately from their siblings is found in the 4th District (42%) and Arad (40%). The percentage of children placed with only some of their siblings varies between 9% in Cluj and Ialomița counties, and 20-21% in Sibiu and Bacău counties.

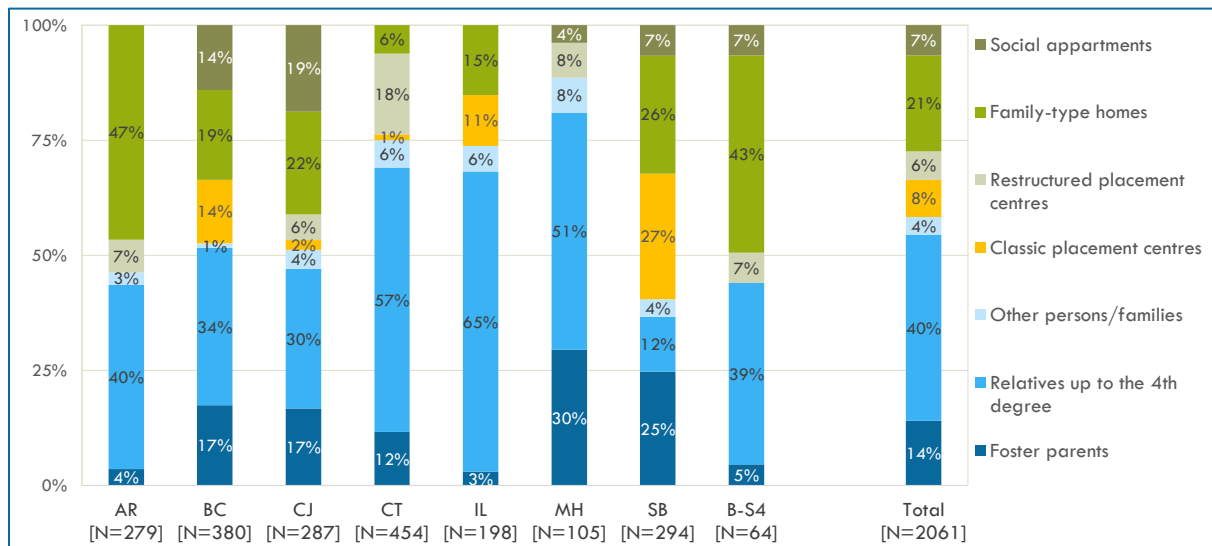
The high differences between Cluj and Ialomița, on the one hand, and the rest of the counties included in the survey, on the other hand, is due, only to a small extent, to the characteristics of the sibling groups (both Cluj, and Ialomița have relatively fewer children with siblings, and the sibling groups tend to be relatively smaller), and most likely to the efficiency of the placement practices, which depends on how the spots available in the care facilities from these counties are used. This efficiency can be noticed especially in Cluj, where the percentage of sibling groups placed with professional foster parents is twice as high as in the other counties (24% of the children placed with professional foster parents belong to sibling groups placed together, compared to only 12% at the level of the other counties). Also, out of the total number of children placed with family-type homes in Cluj, 41% belong to sibling groups placed together, while this percentage is 23% in the rest of the counties. In Ialomița, the fact that siblings are maintained together to a higher extent than in the other counties is based on DGASPC's increased efficiency in placing sibling groups together with the extended family (43% of the children placed with the relatives are sibling groups, compared to 32% in the other counties), and with other families or persons (20% of the children placed with other families are sibling groups, compared to 8% in the other counties).

Figure 3. Distribution of children with siblings placed in the system, depending on their joint or separate placement



The data collected at the level of the 8 counties included in the survey show that 40% of the total number of children placed together with their siblings are placed with their extended family. Almost 60% of the total number of children placed together with their siblings receive family-type care (professional foster parents, relatives, other persons), plus 21% of the children placed together with their siblings in family-type homes and 7% in social service apartments (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Distribution of children placed together with their siblings, by the placement facility type

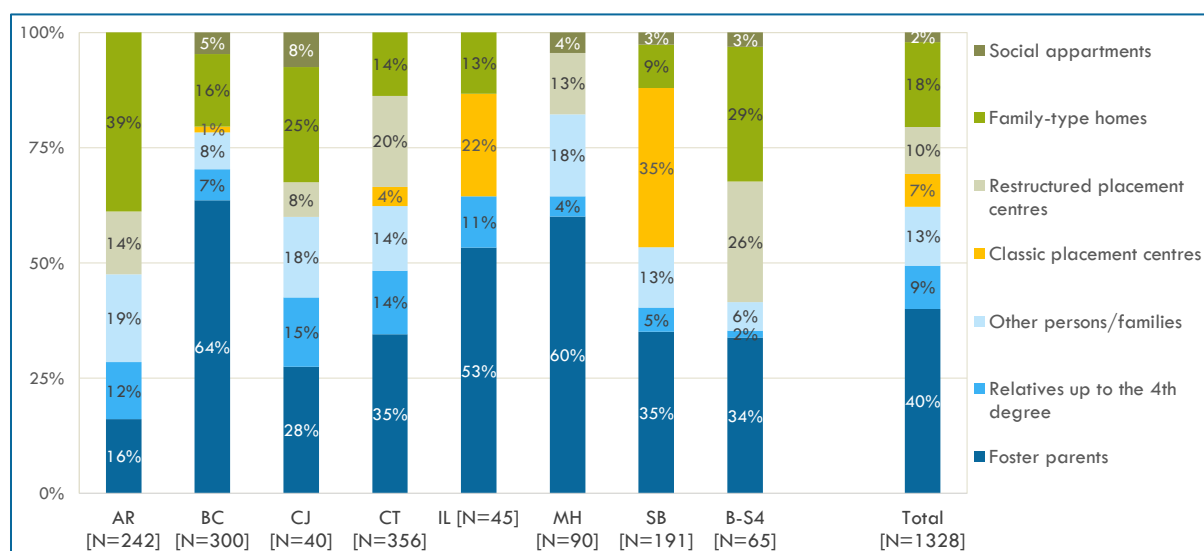


There are significant differences among the counties, regarding the placement of sibling groups together. In Mehedinți, almost 90% of the children placed together with their siblings are under family-type placement, while in Sibiu, Arad and 4th District, only 40-45% of the siblings placed together are placed under such services. The highest percentage of siblings placed together in family-type homes are found in Arad (47%) and 4th District (43%). In Cluj and Bacău, social

service apartments are occupied by siblings placed together to a significantly higher percentage than in the other counties, while Sibiu stands out by the fact that 27% of the siblings placed together live in classic care facilities (see Figure 4).

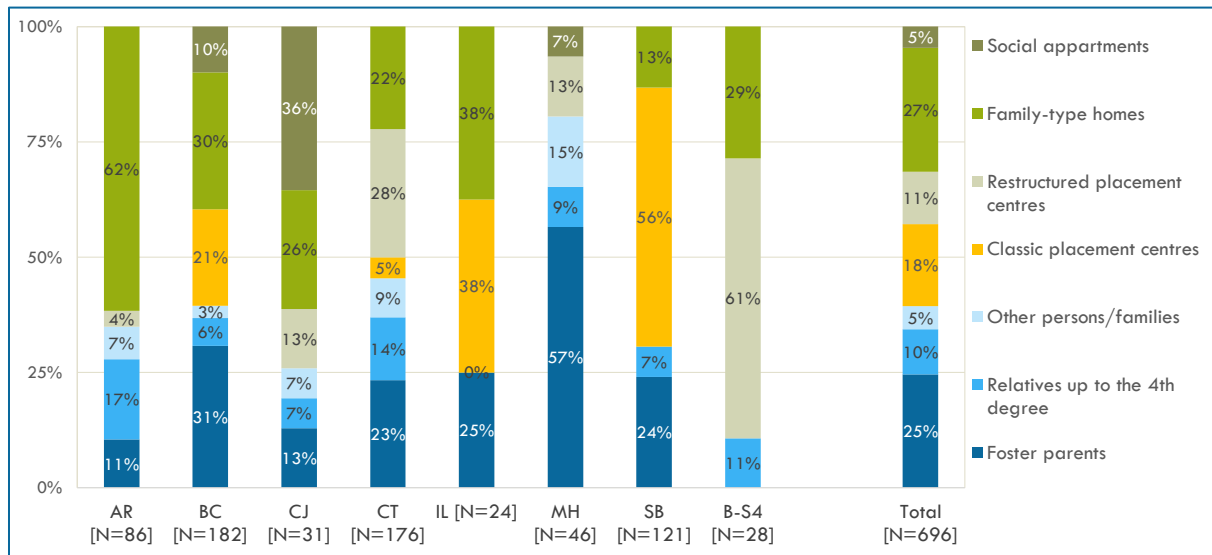
In the case of children separated from their siblings, the percentage of those who are placed in family-based care exceeds 60% at the level of the 8 counties, most of them being placed with professional foster parents (see Figure 5). The percentage of separated siblings placed in family-based care varies from 42-43% in 4th District and Arad, to approximately 80% in Bacău and Mehedinți. Placement with professional foster parents is significantly associated with the separation of sibling groups, due to the fact that most of them lack the necessary capacity to raise and take care of more than one child.

Figure 5. Distribution of children placed separately from their siblings, by the placement facility type



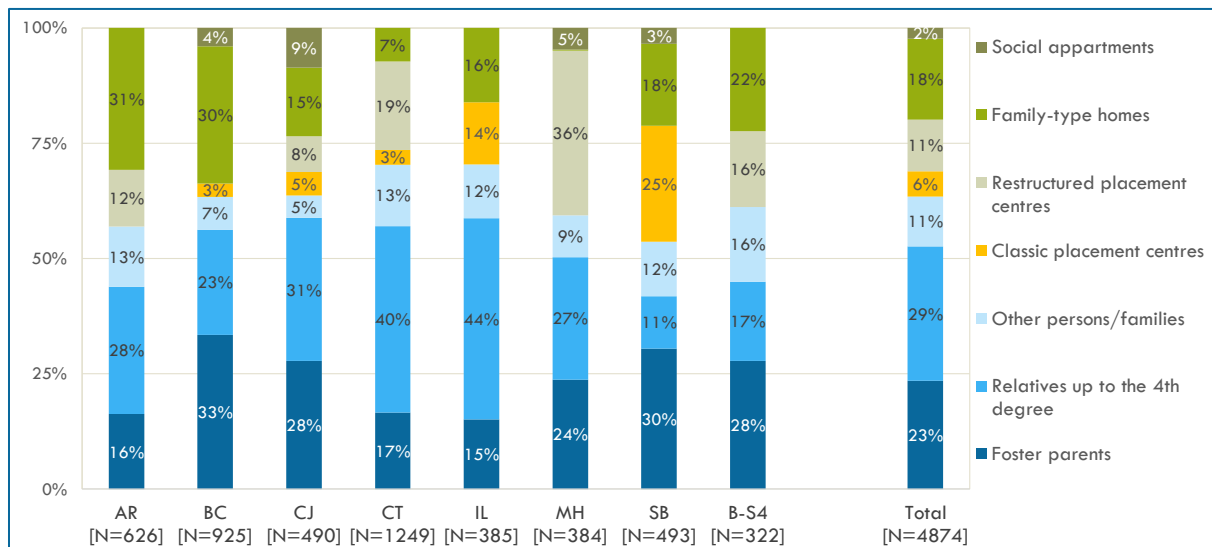
At the level of the 8 counties, most of the children placed together with only some of their siblings (60%) live in residential care facilities, 27% of which are family-type homes, and 18% are classic placement facilities. Most of the children placed in family-based care are with professional foster parents (see Figure 6). The most significant differences among the counties, in terms of the distribution of these children placed in “fractional” sibling groups, are found between Mehedinți and Sibiu. In Mehedinți, 57% of these children are placed with professional foster parents, while in 56% of the children placed together with some of their siblings live in classic placement facilities. The highest percentage of children placed together with some of their siblings in family-type homes is found in Arad (62%).

Figure 6. Distribution of children placed together with only part of their siblings, by the placement facility type



As regards children without any siblings included in the protection system, their distribution by service types at the level of the 8 counties shows that 63% of them are placed in family based care, with cross-county variations comprised between 53% (Sibiu) and 70% (Constanța and Ialomița). Most of the children without any siblings placed in residential care live in family-type homes, the highest percentage being found in Arad and Bacău (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Distribution of children under placement without any siblings included in the system, by the placement facility type



A comparison among the distributions of the four categories of siblings, depending on the type of service chosen for their joint or separated placement, shows that:

- Placement with professional foster parents or other families/persons is significantly associated with the separation of the sibling group;

- Placement with the extended family, and in family-type homes or social service apartments favors the joint placement of the sibling group;
- Placement in residential care facilities is particularly associated with the partial separation of the sibling group.

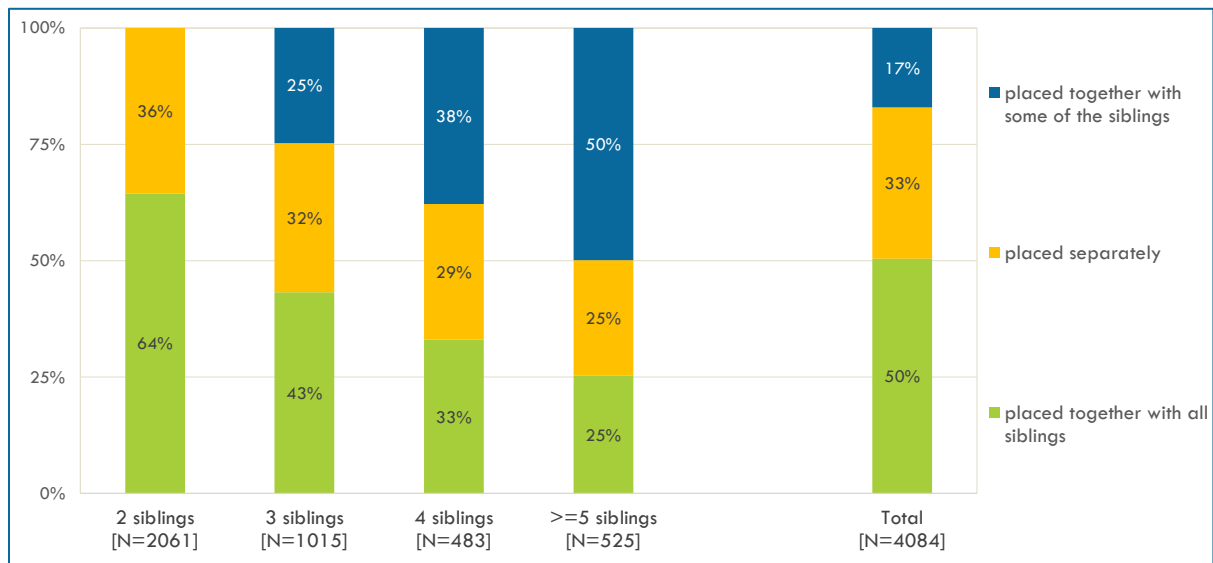
Next we are going to present the results of the analyses regarding the relationship between the sibling group characteristics and their placement into special protection services.

III.3. Factors Influencing the Placement of Sibling Groups

The administrative data available regarding the children under placement have enabled the analysis of the impact of certain socio-demographic characteristics of the sibling groups on the joint or separated placement of siblings when entering the special protection system. These characteristics are: the gender of the children, their age, the age difference between the oldest and the youngest sibling, the number of children making up the sibling group, and the accentuated or severe disability of children. It should be mentioned that the analyses whose results are presented in this sub-chapter refer to those children with siblings placed in the special protection system from the eight counties included in the survey.

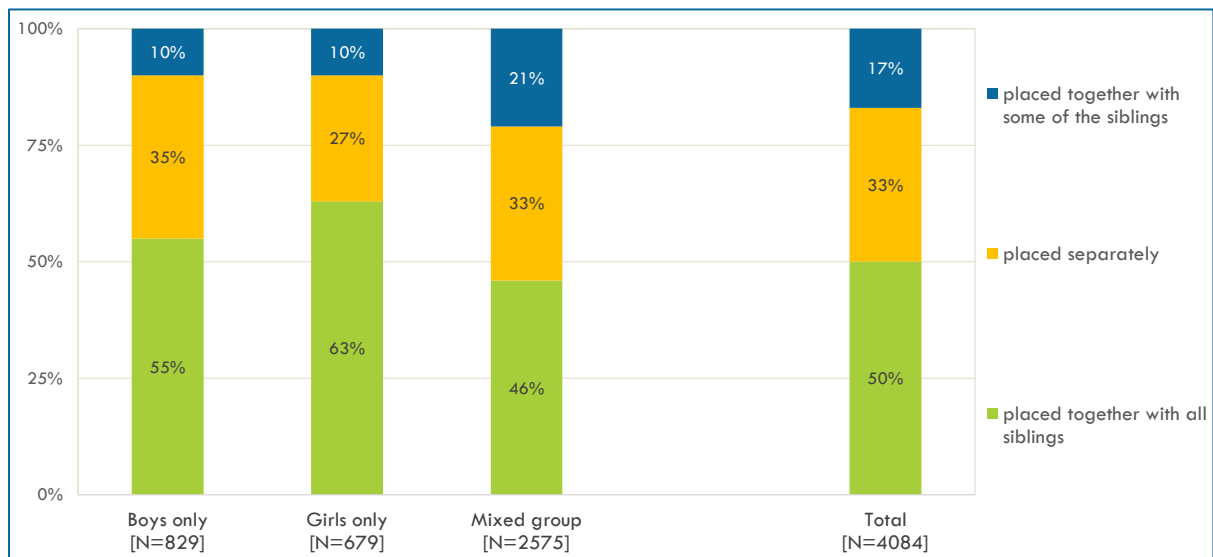
The size of the sibling group has a significant impact on their placement. As shown in Figure 8, there is an almost linear relationship between the number of children making up a sibling group and their joint or separated placement: 64% of the children belonging to groups made up of 2 siblings are placed together, this percentage decreases to 43% in the case of groups made up of 3 siblings, 33% for the groups made up of 4 siblings and 25% in the case of sibling groups made up of 5 or more members. The percentage of children placed separately from the siblings also has a linear decreasing trend, depending on the group size, however it is less accentuated, while the percentage of children who are separated from only some of their siblings increases from 25% in the case of groups made up of 3 siblings, to 50% in the case of groups made up of 5 or more children.

Figure 8. Joint or separate placement of siblings, by the size of the sibling group



The gender of the children making up a sibling group has less impact on the joint placement or separation of the group (see Figure 9). The girls belonging to groups of sisters are placed together to a higher extent than the children belonging to groups made up exclusively of boys, or children from mixed groups. In the case of children from mixed groups, the likelihood of a child to be placed with some of the siblings, but separated from the others, is double compared to the children belonging to same gender sibling groups.

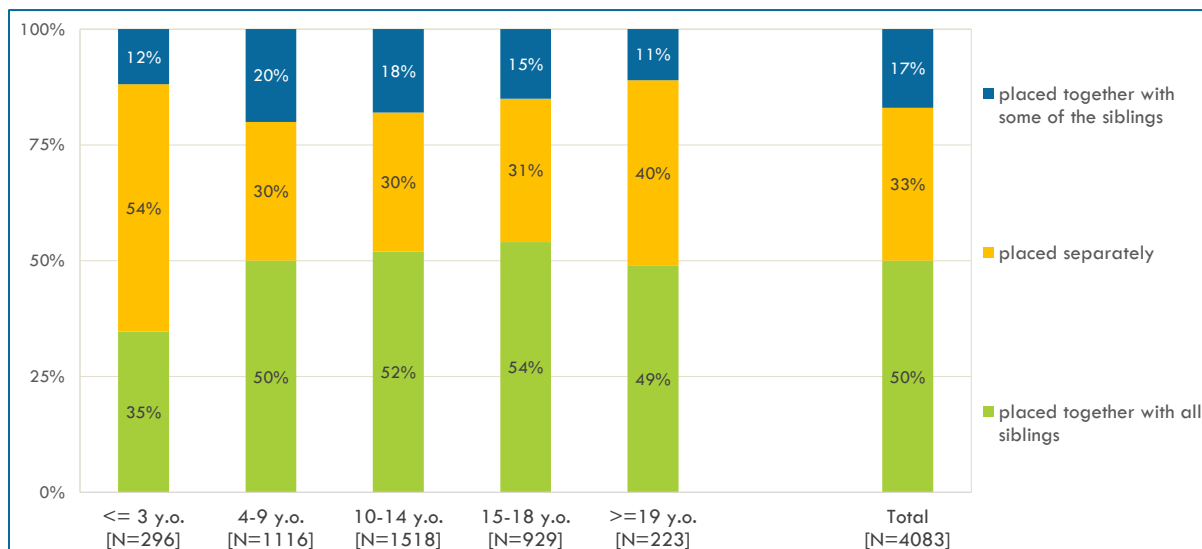
Figure 9. Joint or separate placement of siblings, by the gender of the members of the sibling group



Children's age significantly influences their separate placement, only in the case of children aged below three years old. The law forbids the placement in residential care facilities of children under the age of 3 (until January 1, 2015 the law provided an age limit of 2 years old), which mostly explains the fact that 54% of these children are separated from their children. Nevertheless, there are significant cross-county differences regarding the placement of sibling

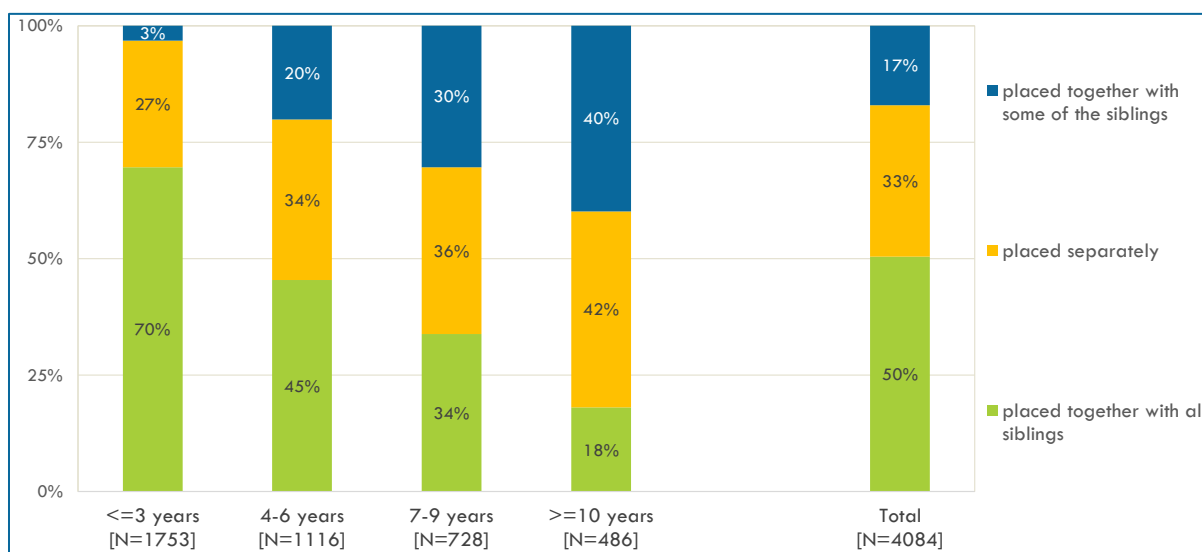
groups including children under the age of 3. The percentage of children under the age of 3 placed together with their siblings varies from 15% in Constanța, to 65% in Cluj. 70% of the children under the age of 3 from Sibiu are placed separately from their siblings, while in Cluj and 4th District only 20%, respectively 35% are separated.

Figure 10. Joint or separate placement of siblings, by the children's age



The age difference among the siblings has a significant influence on the joint placement of sibling groups (measured, for the purpose of our analysis, by the difference between the oldest sibling and the youngest sibling). In the case of siblings of very close ages (differences of maximum three years), 70% of them are placed together. This percentage decreases as the age differences between the siblings increase, to 45% in the case of age differences of 4-6 years, 34% in the case of differences of 7-9 years, and even reaching merely 18% in the case of age differences exceeding 10 years (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Joint or separate placement of siblings, by the age difference between the siblings



The existence of a disabled child in a sibling group is significantly associated with the separate placement of the group. As shown in Figure 12, 63% of the children with accentuated or severe disability, and 43% of those with mild or medium disability are placed separately from their siblings, while the percentage of children without any disability placed separately from their siblings is 30%.

Figure 12. Joint or separate placement of siblings, by the existence of disability

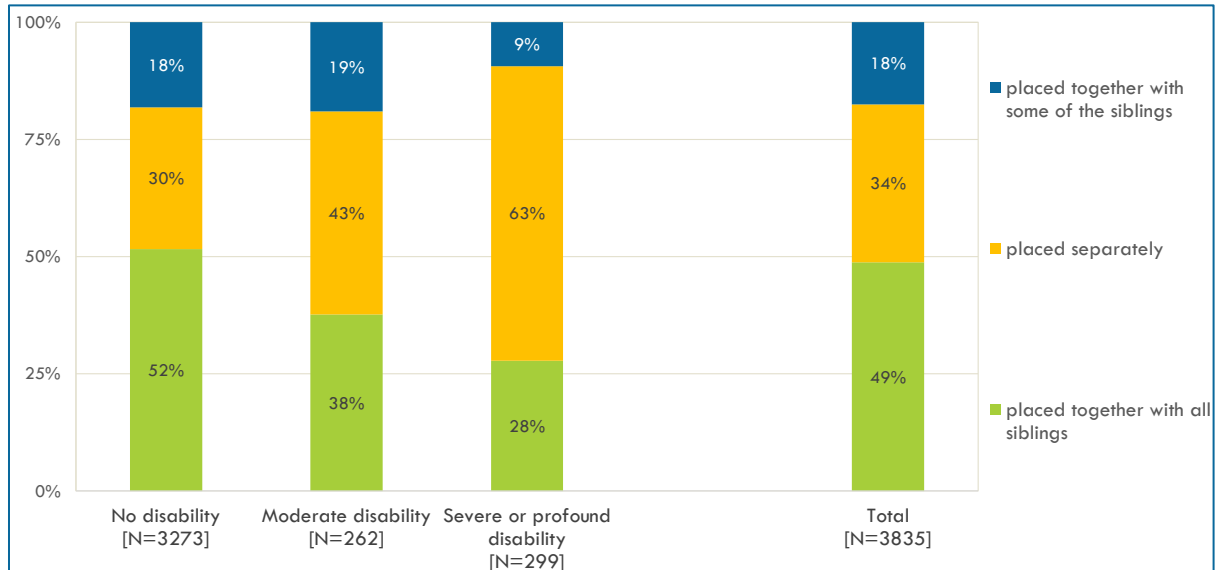
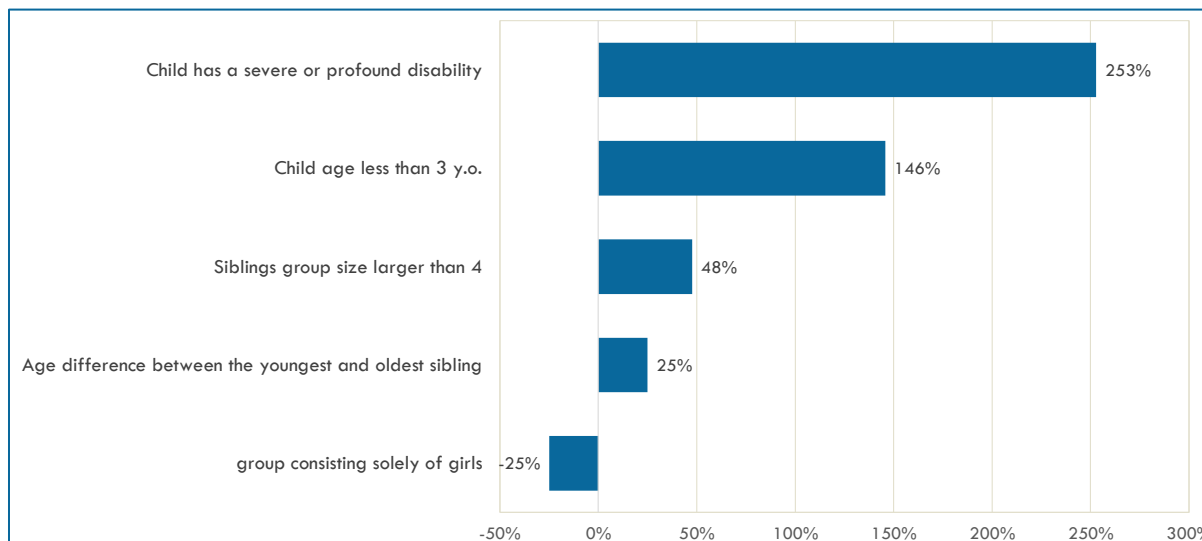


Figure 13 presents the hierarchy of socio-demographic factors, depending on their influence upon the probability of separate placement of the members of a sibling group. The most influencing factor is the accentuated or severe disability of a child, which increases by 253% the probability of separate placement of a child, maintaining under the control the other factors included in the analysis. The second factor, in terms of influence, is the age under 3 years old of the child, which increases by 146% the probability of a child to be placed separately. The sibling group size, the age difference between the siblings, and the siblings' gender also has a significant, but lower influence. If a child has 3 or more siblings, the chances to be placed separately from them increase by 48%, compared to those with fewer siblings. Also, an higher age difference by one year between the siblings leads to a 25% increase of the chance for those siblings to be placed separately, while the fact that a girl belongs to a group of sisters decreases the chances for her being placed separately, by 25%.

Figure 13. Influence of socio-demographic characteristics of the sibling groups on their separate placement⁵

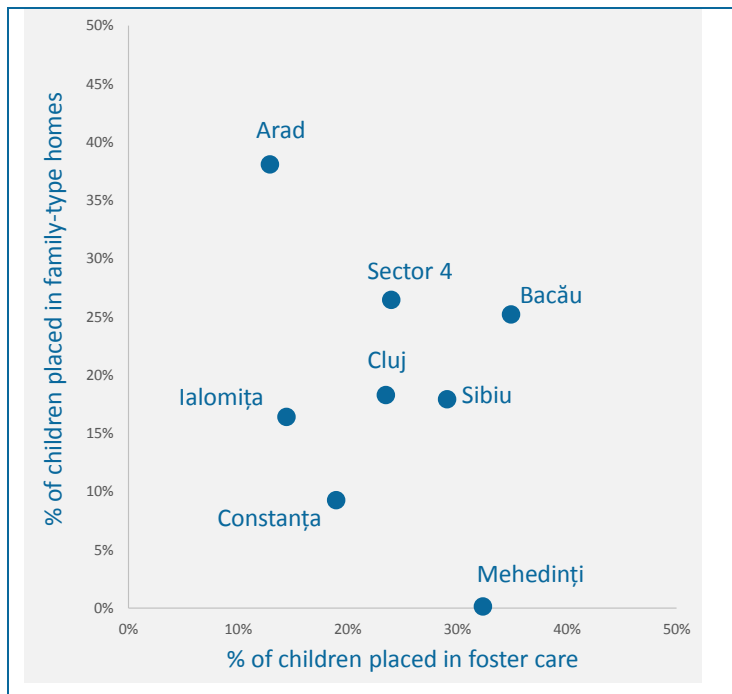


The following chapters of this report present the results of the qualitative research, the opinions and experiences of the experts from DGASPCs, of the private providers of special protection services, and of the biological parents and the children included in the protection system, regarding the placement of sibling groups.

III.4. Current Practices Regarding the Placement of Children Belonging to Sibling Groups

Figure 14. Positions occupied by the 8 counties included in the survey, according to the percentage of children placed with professional foster parents and in family-type homes (data source: ANPDCA)

⁵ The graph shown in Figure 13 presents the results of a logistic regression analysis, whose dependent variable is the separate placement of a child belonging to a sibling group. The values presented in the graph represent the change in a child's chances to be placed separately, due to the increase in the value of the predictor by one unit, expressed as percentage, while the values of the other predictors are kept under control.



Most of the experts interviewed during the group or individual discussions, both from DGASPCs and representatives of non-governmental organizations, claim that high importance is always given to the principle of maintaining siblings together when the placement decision is proposed and made. The joint placement of sibling groups is a priority and, except when this is against the children's interest, all efforts are made to keep siblings together. However, it is admitted that this principle may not always be complied with, especially in the

case of sibling groups made up of a high number of members (3-4 or more). The reasons are related, on the one hand, to the limited number of professional foster parents and their reduced capacity to take several children under placement, and, on the other hand, to the limited number of spots available in residential care facilities, be they placement centers or family-type homes.

DGASPCs made efforts to place siblings together even before 2004, when Law No. 272 was ratified, and no changes have occurred in time, regarding the importance given to the application of this principle. Also, most of the experts have declared that the same special importance is given to maintaining siblings together in all cases, but they have also emphasized that, beyond the limited capacity of the system to accommodate large sibling groups, there are also other limitations or factors which prevent the application of this principle, and which will be further discussed (see sub-chapter III.4.1).

A county's practice of placing sibling groups depends on the development level and the type of special protection services available for children temporarily or permanently separated from their parents. Each of the eight counties has individual service configurations: Arad has a well-developed network of public and private family-type homes, however the foster care network is significantly under-sized; in Bacău, both foster care and family-type homes are well developed. Foster care is well developed in Mehedinți, but the county lacks family-type homes; Constanța and Ialomița are under-developed both in terms of the family-type homes, and in terms of the professional foster parents, however these counties manage to place a very high number of children into the extended family; Sibiu has a relatively well developed network of professional foster parents, but residential services are based mainly on classic placement facilities; Cluj and 4th District have a medium level of development in terms of their professional foster parents networks, compared to the needs and compared to the other counties, the family-type homes network being more developed in 4th District, while Cluj compensates by a well-developed network of social service apartments. The practice of each

DGASPC in terms of the placement of sibling groups is determined by the combination between the specific development of the type of special protection services from that county and the sibling group characteristics.

In most of the counties (except for Constanța and Ialomița), the situations when the sibling groups can be placed together with the extended family are rather rare, and depend on the number of siblings. There are cases when the members of the extended family are willing to take under placement the children who are temporarily or permanently separated from their parents, however the living conditions, their income limitations, the age of the relatives considered for placement (most often, these are the grandparents) etc. make it impossible for DGASPC to decide the placement of the entire sibling group with the extended family. In other cases, a close relative may take over one, two children from a larger sibling group, but not all of them, and the experts are faced with the situation of assessing the best solution: the separation of the sibling group? – placing some of them with their relatives, and other in residential facilities – or maintaining the siblings together? – even if this would mean placing all of them into a placement facility or in family-type homes, thus violating the principle of law regarding the placement with priority in the extended or substitute family. The statistics show that, depending on the age differences between the siblings, sometimes a decision to separate the siblings is made, some of the children staying with the extended family, and others entering the system, but, according to the experts, the children's interest is always taken into consideration.

There are also cases when, despite having the possibility and the capacity to take care of a group of 2-3 siblings, their relatives prefer not to do that, because they are afraid of the children's biological parents. However, there are many cases when the efforts made by DGASPC to find relatives up to the 4th degree who would be willing to take under placement children placed under a special protection measure are unsuccessful, increasing the period of time when these children are under an emergency placement measure. In this sense, the experts consider that the procedures required in these cases should be more flexible. The discussions held with the experts have also revealed that, with the substantial increase of the placement allowance starting with January 1, 2015, many of the DGASPCs are facing an increase in the number of requests for placement with the grandparents or other relatives⁶.

Large sibling groups are facing a difficult situation also when attempts are made to place them with professional foster parents. In most of the counties, the number of professional foster parents is insufficient and, somehow, younger children aged below three years old are given priority. In practice, the groups made up of approximately 2, maximum 3 siblings are relatively easy to place with a professional foster parent, especially when both spouses are professional foster parents. In Mehedinți, for example, the foster parents received special training, to be able to receive and take care of sibling groups (a fact which is also revealed by the statistical analysis – in Mehedinți 30% of the children placed together with their siblings are taken care of by professional foster parents). Most of the interviewed experts are of the opinion that placement with professional foster parents is the best solution in the cases of two siblings, however the

⁶ Order No. 1733/2015 from August 19th 2015 on approving the procedure for establishment and payment of placement subsidy, published in Public Monitor No. 680 from September 8th 2015

insufficient number of professional foster parents limits the access to this solution. The discussions have also revealed that, due to the fact that, in general, those who make adoptions are interested in young children, then each individual case is assessed and if the adoption best serves the child's interest, and the child's older siblings may not be adopted, a decision for separate placement is made – the younger child is placed alone with the professional foster parent, and the rest of the siblings are sent to residential facilities.

In case of unsuccessful placement into family-based care – which is the most frequent situation in the case of groups made up of more than 3 siblings –, the authorities try to find solutions to place them with residential services, while the joint placement of the siblings depends on the vacancies in these facilities at the time, and the children's characteristics: age/age difference, gender, disability, etc.). In practice, although it does not happen frequently, the residential facilities are even over-loaded, to maintain siblings together (e.g. joint placement of 4 siblings in a facility with only 3 spots available). However, even if the joint placement is not possible, solutions are looked for in all cases, to maintain relationships among the siblings, such as placing them with foster parents living close to each other or nearby residential facilities (the same locality, in the rural environment and the small towns, or the same neighborhood, in the case of large cities). The experts almost unanimously agree that family-type facilities are the best solution for the placement of sibling groups made up of more than three members. Family-type homes have the advantage of offering a stable environment, within a small group of children – the number of spots available in these facilities generally varies between 6 and 12 – and, since several family-type facilities are grouped in the same place, even if there are not enough spots available in the same house, they can live in neighboring houses.

III.4.1. The Main Obstacles against the Joint Placement of Siblings

The discussions held with the experts working for the DGASPCs and NGOs providing alternative care services have revealed that the main obstacles faced by them while complying with the principle of maintaining siblings together may be classified into three categories: limitations related to the children's characteristics, limitations related to the capacities of the family-based care or residential services to take over a certain number of siblings, and a limitation imposed by the law, in cases of siblings placed into care simultaneously and one of them being under 3 years old.⁷ There is also another situation, when children belonging to a sibling group enter the protection system one by one. The following paragraphs contain a detailed description of the obstacles identified with the help of the experts from the system.

First, there is the limitation imposed by the law, in the case of children aged below three years old, which may only be placed in family-based care (extended family, other families or professional foster parents). If a group of 3-4 or more siblings includes one child aged below three years old, and the rest of the siblings are above this age, the youngest child will most

⁷ Art. 64, alin. 1), Law no 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of the rights of the children, republished, as amended

probably be placed separately, with a professional foster parent, in case of unsuccessful placement in the extended family.

Second, there are cases when one of the siblings receives a diagnosis of accentuated or severe disability, requiring special care and permanent assistance, in which case the child is placed separated from the siblings, in a special residential facility. Family-type homes, except for those especially dedicated to children with disabilities, do not receive permanent health care services, and, in general, do not have any qualified personnel to take care of children with disabilities; therefore, they are unable to take over these cases. There are also cases when a diagnosis of sensory or development disability, not necessarily accentuated or severe, is received by a child, requiring attendance of a special school, and, depending on its location, it may be necessary to separate the disabled child from the siblings.

Third, there are cases when the residential services (placement facilities, family-type homes or social service apartments) are organized according to the children's gender (boys' facilities and girls' facilities), in which case mixed groups of brothers or sisters end up being placed separately. However, these facilities are usually situated close to each other, therefore the brothers may easily interact with their sisters. There have also been situations when the gender-based organization of the residential service facilities has been eliminated, precisely to be able to maintain sibling groups together.

The limited placement capacity in the extended or substitute family and the number of spots available in residential service facilities limits the possibility of joint placement of the children belonging to a sibling group, especially in the case of large groups. As far as the extended or substitute family is concerned, the limited capacity does not refer only to the existence of proper living conditions and material means to take care of a certain number of children, but also to the physical and emotional capacity of coping with the effort of taking care of these children. Grandparents or other senior relatives are unlikely to be able to properly cope with the raising, education and taking care of a large group of children, even if they are willing to do that. In the case of foster parents, the maximum number of children which they are able to receive into placement is provided in the certificate received by them upon the completion of the training courses. Most of the professional foster parents trained in the counties included in the survey may only receive groups of 2 siblings. Residential services must comply with certain quality standards of equipment and personnel, and, therefore, have a certain capacity supply services to children deprived of parental care. The capacity of a residential service to take over a number of children at a given time depends on the number of spots available. If the number of siblings exceeds the number of available spots, it is obviously impossible to place them in that facility, unless they are separated or the facility is overloaded, which may be a violation of the minimum quality standards.

Significant age differences between the siblings may be an obstacle against their joint placement, for reasons related to the needs specific to their age. If one of the siblings is 16 years old and lives in a residential facility together with another sibling, who is much younger, for example, 6 years old, and most of the children living in that facility belong to this category of younger age, then the older sibling may be transferred to a group from another facility,

corresponding to his/her socializing needs. Significant age differences also imply different education needs, school attendance at different education levels, and such schools may be situated in different localities. For example, a 15-year old child from a group of siblings placed in a residential facility situated in the rural environment should attend high-school, but there is no high-school in that locality. To be able to continue his/her education at a higher level, it is in the child's interest to be transferred to a locality with a high-school.

Another potential obstacle against the joint placement of siblings is the existence of behavioral problems in the case of one of the children, which might endanger the physical safety or mental development of the other members of the group. These cases are carefully assessed by the DGASPC experts and, if their conclusion is that the chances to reduce behavioral issues are low, then the only solution is to separate that sibling from the others. There are also cases when the relationships among the siblings are of rejection, the children clearly manifesting their wish to be placed separately from a certain sibling. These situations occur especially when the siblings have different mothers or fathers, and deny their brotherhood or sisterhood.

Last, but not least, there are specific difficulties when the siblings enter the protection system one by one, either because of changes in their family situation, or because they have different mothers or fathers, or, most frequently, because a new child is born after the placement of the first sibling group. The discussions held with the experts and analysis of the files, as well as certain interviews with the parents have revealed that the cases of siblings entering the system one by one vary a lot, and, in practice, their joint placement is rather unsuccessful. Many of the obstacles already mentioned above must be surpassed in these cases. Usually, children who are placed after their sibling or siblings are children of very young ages, who are placed with professional foster parents. If the first siblings who entered the system were already placed in the extended or substitute family, the chances for the siblings belonging to the second or third group to be placed in the same families are rather low. Also, if the first siblings were placed in residential facilities, the siblings born afterwards, who are of younger age, are placed with professional foster parents and then, when they grow up, and depending on the relationships developed with their older siblings, attempts are made to bring them together in a placement facility or family-type home. Nevertheless, the authorities are frequently confronted with the obstacles represented by the age differences and hence, in practice, it is very difficult for these sibling groups to end up growing up together. Often, there were no relationships prior to the placement between the siblings who entered the system one by one, either because they had different mothers or fathers, they did not live together and, therefore, they had no common life experience to build mutual attachment on, finally ending up by denying the brotherhood or sisterhood. Depending on the time spent by each child in the biological family before placement, each child defines his/her own place within the family in a different way, and tensed up, conflictual or rivalry relationships are likely to appear among them. Each individual situation is analyzed and assessed, and, if it is considered to be in the best interest of the children to be placed together, and there is this possibility, then all efforts are made for the siblings who are subsequently included in the system to live together with their siblings who are already under placement.

III.4.2 Factors Contributing to the Proposal and Decision to Maintain Siblings Together or to Separate Them

Beyond the limitations presented above, which actually condition the possibility, at a given time, to maintain siblings together when the placement decision is made, each case is individually analyzed and assessed. The discussions held with the experts, focused on the identification of the factors contributing to the joint or separate placement decisions in the most recent cases of sibling groups they worked on, support this practice of individual assessment of each child's situation, from the perspective of his/her needs and interests.

According to the experts, the factors taken into consideration and contributing to the joint placement decision are as follows:

- compliance with the child protection laws;
- no health problems or special needs;
- small age difference between the siblings;
- quality and intensity of the emotional relationships among the members of the sibling group, existence of mutual attachment;
- existence of mutual support relationships, emotional support and mutual help, and the need to develop such relationships among the siblings;
- need to develop and/or maintain the feeling of belonging to a family;
- avoiding the situation of double abandonment (by the parents and by the siblings);
- children's need to share experiences or emotions,

In some cases, a decision is made to place some of the siblings together, and the rest of them, separately. Some of the factors contributing to this decision, mentioned by the experts, are as follows:

- the number of siblings, considering the lack of available spots in residential facilities;
- significant age differences among the siblings, and the age below three of one of the children;
- health problems of some of the siblings, need for special assistance and care;
- different educational needs of the siblings (mainly due to the age differences);
- behavioral problems of one of the siblings;
- children's wish to be placed separately, denial of the brotherhood or sisterhood;
- situations when the children were victims of abuse or human trafficking, requiring specialized services for a certain period of time;

The qualitative research has also revealed some rare situations, when siblings under joint placement end up being separated. These situations may be determined by the following factors:

- the completion of an education cycle by one of the siblings;

- a child's health conditions, which requires special living regime;
- behavioral problems which may influence the other siblings, by contagion;
- adoption of one or several siblings;
- attendance of special education units, by some of the siblings;
- impossibility of the foster parent or relatives to take care of the children placed with them, deterioration of their economic situation;
- the professional foster parent's waiver to the contractual obligations to assist children under placement;
- decision of the relatives with whom the child is placed, to leave the country;
- the death of the grandparents or professional foster parents taking care of children;
- siblings over the age of 18 leave the system and manage to integrate themselves from a socio-professional point of view.

There are also rare situations when the sibling group is reunited, after its initial separate placement. If children were placed separately in several residential facilities, and one of the facilities has vacant spots, all efforts are made to move all the siblings together, if this is in the best interest of the children, and corresponds to their wishes. Sometimes, depending on the initial placement services and how the relationships among the siblings are maintained, children end up developing feelings of rejection or even denial of their belonging to the same family. There have also been cases when younger siblings, initially placed with the professional foster parent, left the foster care when they reached a certain age, and were placed together with their siblings, in residential facilities. However, these situations depend a lot on the attachment developed by the child towards the foster parents, and, in most cases, this is a very powerful attachment, therefore the child's interest is not to live together with his/her siblings.

Last, but not least, the discussions held with the experts also mentioned the situations when two or even more sibling groups, with the same mother, but different fathers, entered the special protection system (most frequently, in different counties), without however being aware of the existence of the other siblings. DGASPCs find out about these situations in time, most frequently by chance. This is due to the fact that the current Child Welfare Monitoring and Tracking Information System is not fully functional, or used by all DGASPCs.

III.5. Maintaining Relationships among Separately Placed Siblings

Both the DGASPC experts, and the NGO experts, have admitted that significant importance is currently given to maintaining the relationships among the siblings, when their joint placement fails, and to maintaining the relationship with their parents or other people to whom the children are attached.

Maintaining the relationships with the parents, siblings and other relatives is one of the aspects of the Individual Protection Plan (IPP), for which a Specific Intervention Program is prepared, implemented and monitored. Without exception, all the files of the children who were placed

separately from their siblings, which have been analyzed by case studies, have contained such specific intervention programs and regular assessments of their implementation, with a higher focus on maintaining the relationship with the parents, while the objective of most of the IPPs was family reintegration. Also, such files contained documents (minutes, notes) attesting to meetings among siblings placed with different professional foster parents, for example, or biological parents' visits attended by all or some of the siblings, notes regarding phone calls between the siblings, children and parents, etc.

Both the interviews conducted with the experts, the biological parents and the children, and the file analysis generally confirm the efforts made in this sense by the social workers, who are responsible with maintaining the child's relationships with the family. Maintaining the relationships among siblings who are placed separately mostly depends, on the one hand, by the professionals working on the case and assessing whether this is beneficial, also facilitating such relationships, and, on the other hand, on the sibling's desire to stay in touch with each other. A number of factors have also been identified, which limit the frequency and intensity of the relationships among separated siblings, some of these factors being identical to those leading to the separate placement of the siblings, and briefly presented below:

- The distance between the services in which children are placed separately influences the frequency of direct interactions, of the meetings. It can be and often is compensated by the use of modern means of communication (telephone, Internet), however, in general, efforts are made to place children belonging to sibling groups in services situated in the same locality, if not nearby;
- Denial of the family of origin, due to certain traumas and bad treatment experienced while living in their family of origin. Some children end up associating the presence of siblings with the traumatic event, they remember those situations and practically reject any elements that could remind them of the time spent in the family of origin;
- Siblings with different parents perpetuate the feeling of being different, of being treated differently, in a biased way, by the parents, justifying their suffering by the very existence of the siblings with a different father or mother;
- The health condition, an accentuated or severe disability;
- Significant age differences, corresponding to different socializing needs;
- Lack of attachment or reduced attachment among the siblings;
- Disagreement in the family of adoption, when one of the sibling is adopted;
- Lack of involvement of the adults responsible for facilitating such relationships;
- Existence of deviant or even criminal behaviors

In practice, direct contacts among the siblings placed with different services consist in their participation in socializing activities, camps, birthday parties, trips, meetings at the end of the week, regular visits, sometimes they are allowed to spend longer periods of time with their families of origin, during the holidays. However, most of the older children have access to the telephone and the Internet, hence they can easily communicate, whenever they want to contact their siblings placed with different care services. There is also the practice of scheduling visits

(regular visits scheduled in advance, according to the children's schedule), to maintain the relationships with the family when the children are placed with residential services. When the siblings are placed with different professional foster parents from the same locality, they may visit each other or meet whenever they want, depending on the professional foster parents' schedule.

The NGO representatives presented eloquent examples of maintaining the relationships among the siblings. Even when older siblings left the protection system and left the country or the county, the children placed with the NGOs' residential services can visit them. Regular events are organized at these facilities, where all the siblings and the family are invited and encouraged and supported to take part in the events organized by the siblings who live separately.

During the focus groups, the siblings placed under different services talked about how they are taken by the foster parents to visit their siblings living with other professional foster parents or in placement facilities. They can meet their siblings living in other localities only if they are invited to DGASPC, however they talk to them on the phone or the Internet. In general, the children who attended the group discussions manifested their desire to meet and talk with their siblings more often.

III.6 Opinions Regarding the Importance of Maintaining Siblings Together and Maintaining the Relationships among Separated Siblings

From the experts' perspective, the joint placement of siblings highly facilitates children's adaptation to their new family, because they are a group, they feel safer, they know each other and support each other, creating a feeling of comfort, children cope better with the requirements and challenges of the environment, they have the feeling of belonging to a family, they cope easier with the separation from their parents. Maintaining siblings together has positive effects on their subsequent evolution, the children encouraging each other and supporting each other in solving their problems. The experts agree that they become more responsible and, by staying together, they have the opportunity to build a common background and identity, and to develop a stronger feeling of solidarity.

Siblings who are placed together give moral and emotional support to each other, they become more responsible, they have the chance to build a common background and identity, the experts' intervention is easier, they learn how to live together, they have a stronger feeling of solidarity, they encourage each other and support each other in solving their problems. The experts have frequently referred to the fact that older siblings take the role of the parent for their younger siblings.

However, sometimes joint placement may also have negative effects, due to the incompatibilities of age and needs, the institutional framework, which may weaken the feeling of responsibility towards the other siblings, the existence of hard feelings between the siblings, or jealousy. There are also those situations when one of the siblings has deviant behavior, which

may be a negative example not only for the other siblings, but also for the other children living in the same placement facility.

Nevertheless, the effects of sibling separation, when this is not justified by serving the child's interest, are negative in most of the cases. Some of these negative effects mentioned by the experts are as follows:

- aggravation of the feeling of separation, of alienation (the representative of one NGO even spoke about a feeling of multiple separation: one the one hand, generated by the separation from the family of origin, and on the other hand, generated by the separation of the siblings included in the special protection system);
- isolation, loneliness and, as a consequence, difficult adaptation to the new environment;
- development of deviant behavior;
- lack of self-confidence and accentuated feeling of uncertainty;
- development of defense mechanisms, for rejecting their biological parents and siblings;
- lack of moral and emotional support;
- difficulties in developing a feeling of belonging, an identity;
- the fact that they have no one to count on, when leaving the system.

Both from the perspective of the biological parents, and of the children taking part in the survey, the fact that the siblings were kept together matters a lot, because they have help and support when facing a problem, they have someone close to them, to talk to and get advice from. Children who were placed separately from their siblings talk about how difficult it was for them to be separated from their siblings, when they entered the protection system. For a certain period of time, they did not know where their siblings were, they kept thinking about them, they missed them. Those who were placed together talk about the importance of not being alone in the placement service, about helping each other with their homework, playing and having fun together. Even when they are placed separated or together with only some of their siblings, the fact that they are placed within the same community (*e.g.* with different foster parents, living close to one another) and that they are able to see one another on a regular basis matters a lot both for the children, and for the parents from whom they were separated and with whom they keep in touch. Among the biological parents who were interviewed, there were cases when the children who stayed with their parents (usually, the youngest child, who was born after the placement of the other children) visited their siblings who were into placement, together with their mother or father. Also, the interviews conducted with the children and biological parents revealed cases when the older siblings, over the age of 18 (who had been into placement or not), managed to integrate on the labor market and were an important income source both for their siblings who were into placement, and for their parents, paying regular visits, talking on the phone frequently and sometimes helping them with money or various goods.

The interviews conducted with the biological parents reveal that most of them are aware of the fact that their children have very good living conditions and are well taken care of and educated by the foster parents or in the family-type homes. They are also aware that they are unable to

offer to their children what they receive within the substitute families, and there were also cases when they admitted that the placement was the best solution for their children. All the biological parents who were interviewed want to be able to reintegrate their children in the family, however, in most of the cases, the initial circumstances which led to the protection measures did not improve significantly, and the chances for this to happen are very low.

Although the separation from the family, from the parents is a huge trauma experienced by the children who enter the special protection system, after some time spent in the system, the relationship with the family of origin changes. In most cases, one may notice how children, getting used with the better living conditions from the professional foster parents or the placement facilities, especially the family-type facilities, no longer wish to return to the precarious living conditions from their families of origin. In time, the rare meetings between the children and their biological parents make the latter turn into almost strangers, with whom the children do not seem to have too much in common, with whom they are unable to communicate, of whom they are sometimes ashamed – because of the poverty, alcoholism, physical appearance. Therefore, the relationship with their siblings is very important, and has the potential of remaining the most significant emotional relationship in the life of the child included in the system.

According to the experts, it is important to maintain the relationships among separated siblings, from several perspectives, such as:

- children can make plans for the future together;
- children can learn a number of pro-social behaviors, such as helping, supporting the other;
- they can give each other moral and emotional support, when facing problems
- the possibility to support each other in the process of adaptation to the challenges of independent life, when living the system

III.7. Lessons Learned and Possible Solutions to the Problems Related to the Placement of Sibling Groups

The discussions with the experts from DGASPCs and the NGOs about the lessons learned and the solutions identified to the problems faced when placing sibling groups have focused on several aspects: 1. family-type homes, as the best alternative for the placement of sibling groups; 2. training foster parents for taking over groups of 2-3 siblings, including of older age; 3. the need to develop prevention social services, at a local level; last, but not least 4. financing the field of foster care, in order to render it more attractive for the well trained professionals, on the one hand, and to be able to develop the special protection (foster care, family-type homes) services network for the children temporarily or permanently separated from their parents, on the other hand.

The experts from DGASPCs and the services provided by non-governmental organizations almost unanimously agree that the best solution for large sibling groups, when their joint placement in the extended family fails, is to maintain them together in family-type homes.

Thus, the networks of this type of facilities should be developed, including by supporting non-governmental organizations wishing to develop such services. Another solution proposed was to identify, at a local level, abandoned homes and to transform them into such facilities for the children in need from the local community; these children may be taken care of by members of the extended family or other persons known by the children, thus reducing their feelings of abandonment and uprootal. The placement of large groups of siblings in family-type homes is considered to be good practice, and there are examples of success, when groups made up of 7-8 siblings were placed in such facilities. However, it is also important that the reference persons, the personnel from these family-type homes should be stable, therefore their motivation should be enhanced.

Another solution that would help maintain siblings together would be to train foster parents to take over and take care of groups made up of 2-3 siblings, irrespective of their age. The current practice, of foster parents receiving, with priority, only children under the age of three, obviously favors the separation of the groups of siblings made of children aged below and above three years old. In many counties, the number of foster parents needs to be higher, which implies higher financial allocations for foster care.

The experts from all counties, without exception, spoke about the importance of the services aimed to prevent the separation of the child from the family and the role that the local community should have in this respect. All experts agree that the local public authorities should make more efforts trying to identify the children at risk of separation/abandonment, and supporting their families, both by material means, and by counseling services. The role of the extended family in the prevention of these situations has also been discussed, the experts suggesting the development of counseling services, for its empowerment and strengthening its role in maintaining siblings together.

Most of the experts holding management positions within DGASPCs complained about the poor training of the personnel and the difficulties faced by them in retaining those who are truly competent, and attracting well trained personnel into the system, a situation generated by the very low salaries granted to the social welfare personnel. The lack of motivation, the poor professional training, plus the overloading of the personnel, have a significant impact on the quality and performance of the work carried out by some of the system employees, which eventually impacts the beneficiaries of the social welfare system, *i.e.* children who were temporarily or permanently separated from their families. The experts have also mentioned the improper application of case management (in some counties, children belonging to sibling groups have different case managers, different personnel in charge with certain IPP aspects, and therefore the efficacy and efficiency of the interventions are significantly limited). In addition to increasing the personnel salaries, there have also been proposals to increase the system employees' capacity to work in the cases of sibling groups placed under a special protection measure. Some of these proposals included: facilitating experience exchanges among the experts at a national level, training experts in sibling group cases, preparation of good practice manuals in the field, developing expert teams at a regional level, to systematically and unitary deal with the exclusive field of joint placement of siblings and

maintaining siblings together, development of proper working instruments and procedures, specific to sibling groups.

One last aspect which came out from the discussions held with the system experts is related to the need to comply with the principle of speeding up, at the level of the courts, the settlement of the child placement requests. There have been numerous situations when such cases (of replacing the emergency placement decision with the placement decision) lasted between 12 and 18 months.

IV. Conclusions

The situation of sibling groups for which a placement decision is made is an important topic for discussion, both from the perspective of observing the rights of the child, and from the perspective of assessing the efficiency and efficacy of the special protection system practices and organization. The issue of sibling groups included in the protection system may not be treated as a marginal topic, since, as shown by the present survey, almost half of the children for whom a placement decision is made have at least one brother or sister in the same situation, and one third of these children lie in the special protection system separated from their siblings.

There are plenty of factors conditioning and influencing the capacity to maintain siblings together when the placement proposal and decision is made. Some of these factors are related to the limited capacity of substitute families and existing residential facilities to take over an entire group of siblings, at a certain time; other factors are related to the different characteristics and needs of the children belonging to a sibling group; and others are related to the specific provisions of the laws regulating the protection of the rights of the child. The size of the sibling groups, the children's age and the age differences among the siblings, the existence of disabilities and even the children's gender have a clear influence on the maintaining or separation of a sibling group. However, all of these factors taken together only partly explain the current situation existing at the level of the entire system, as far as the placement of these children is concerned. The children's characteristics belonging to a group of siblings are a fact of life, they can only be altered to a slight extent, however, the structural factors influencing the capacity to maintain siblings together may be changed by policies and public programs.

Despite acknowledging the importance of maintaining siblings together, in order for them to be able to cope easier with the trauma of separation from their parents and with the adaptation to the new living environment, as well as the effects on their future development and capacity to cope with the challenges of independent life when leaving the system, this "we are doing everything possible to keep siblings together", invoked by the experts to justify the current situation, does not seem to be enough, as long as the cases of separated siblings are far from being mere exceptions.

The actions required for the improvement of this situation are relatively clear: development of a network of family-type homes, which, according to the experts, are the best alternative when the placement in the extended or substitute family fails, being capable to accommodate large

groups of siblings; training foster parents, to be able to take over groups of 2-3 siblings, irrespective of their age; creating the necessary expertise in the matter of placement of sibling groups, in parallel with the development, at the community level, of services for the prevention of child separation, and improving the quality of the special protection system employees.

This first survey dedicated to the situation of siblings placed in the special protection system may be used as a solid starting point for the development of certain policies and public programs, to facilitate the application of the principle of maintaining siblings together when a placement decision is made, and, hopefully, the competent authorities, together with the civil society partners, will consider it appropriate to put into practice the results and conclusions presented in this report.