

The Dynamics of Infant Exposure: Motives, Attitudes and (Unintended) Consequences

Today debate rages around abortion and post-coital contraception, but until recently, abandonment was the preferred method of limiting one's family or avoiding the shame of illegitimacy. This paper draws not only on evidence from the Roman imperial period (especially legal sources) but also on studies of abandonment in early modern Europe, when foundling homes were established to deal with an increasing number of abandoned children in large cities. Using data from better-documented societies not only sheds light on the motivations for abandonment in antiquity, but also suggests how the very existence of an outlet for unwanted newborns could promote the use of exposure by those who otherwise would not have resorted to it.

The accessibility of these European foundling homes, particularly those with anonymous admissions, created what scholars have called "unintended consequences." Although the homes were intended for illegitimate babies, married couples began to use them to place their legitimate children temporarily (so they thought) until they could afford to care for them. The availability of a place where infants could be abandoned and (supposedly) receive sustenance, not only led to an increase in abandonment but also provided (usually false) reassurance to parents that their child would survive and be cared for, and could eventually be recovered. Similarly, parents in antiquity who exposed newborn infants did not think they were consigning their children to death (although they usually were); they believed the child would be picked up and would survive, and many times they actually intended to reclaim the child some day. In fact, *expositi* usually died before they were rescued and most of those who were rescued were enslaved and never reclaimed, just as children in European foundling hospitals usually died of starvation and neglect. But Roman legal sources suggest many infants *were* picked up. The survival of these few was enough to lead parents to think that their child, too, might be rescued and someday would re-enter their family. And that belief, unrealistic though it was, in the end led many parents who might otherwise have reared the child to resort to *expositio*. This sad paradox, that a mechanism devised to help abandoned infants and prevent their dying actually increased the social ill it was intended to combat, operated also, *mutatis mutandis*, in the Roman world.