

## FOSTER CARER'S PROFILE. INSIGHTS FROM ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** *Background. The most important pieces of recent legislation on child protection are the updated Law No. 272 and Law No. 273 of 2004. A normative act relevant to foster care is the Emergency Ordinance 27/2024 that modifies some of the conditions for obtaining the professional maternal assistant certificate, raising real challenges in widening the network of maternal assistants/foster carers. Purpose. Our study aims to outline the profile of maternal assistants within a GDSWCP in the north-west region of Romania. Methodology. In the framework of the quantitative research carried out to outline the profile of the foster carers/maternal assistants we used the study of documents officially registered within the specialized service of the GDSWCP. Results. In July 2022, 90 professional foster carers were employed, of which 5 men and 85 women. Their high average age is noteworthy, namely 54.54 years. We were interested in variables such as education level, marital status, whether they had children of their own, background, whether they had a job at the time of requesting the assessment for attestation, the motivation for choosing this profession, the disciplinary methods used in the foster carer's family as well as the presence of physical punishment in the foster carer's childhood.*

**Keywords:** *child protection, children with special needs, child placement, foster care, foster carer profile*

### Introduction

If we trace the evolution of legislation in the field of children protection rights, we can see that there are several distinct stages, namely: before 1989, then the period immediately afterwards when a rapid repair was attempted, in the form of crisis intervention, in order to lay the foundations for the reconstruction of the system - 1990-1991 -, the transition stage of important but uncoordinated changes - 1992-1996 -, the stage of fundamental changes, of consolidation of an adequate legislative basis, called by Greenwell (2002, p.2) "the real changes" stage in the protection of children's rights - 1997-2003 - and the period from 2004 to the present.

Since 2004, with the enactment of the Children's Law (Law 272/2004), we can speak of a coordinated development, internally and internationally correlated, towards the promotion and guarantee by the State of all children's rights, as set out in the 1989 UN Convention (Baciu, 2023). Roth (1999, p. 27-41) proposed a phasing of the reform covering the period 1990-1991, the period of rapid change, which she, quoting Elena Zamfir, calls the period of reparative regulations (Roth-Szamoskozi, 1999, p. 28 ), 1992-1996, the period of regulations focusing mainly on material support for children, and 1997, the beginning of the third stage, the "judicial reform of child protection" (Roth-Szamoskozi, 1999, p. 36).

The real reform begins in 1997, with the appearance of Emergency Ordinances no. 25 and 26, which brought regulations that were the basis of modern legislation on adoption and the protection of children's rights. Emergency Ordinance No 26/1997, which formed the basis of Law 272/2004, was approved the following year by Parliament as Law 108/1998.

The most important pieces of recent legislation are the updated Law No. 272 and Law No. 273 of 2004 on child protection. The Emergency Ordinance 27/2024 modifies some of the conditions for obtaining the professional foster carer/maternal assistant certificate, raising real challenges in widening the network of maternal assistants.

The World Report on Violence against Children (Pinheiro, 2006) emphasizes that "families are the best providers of physical and emotional care for children" (Pinheiro, 2006, p. 18), which is why maternal care has a central position in the system of special protection of children.

### Methodology

The exploratory study aimed to process data from the files of 90 foster carers in quantitative research on the foster parent profile.

**Sample**

The data of 90 foster carers employed by a General Directorate of Social Work and Child Protection (GDSWCP) was processed. The number of processed files represents the number of all foster carers/maternal assistants employed by GDSWCP in September 2022.

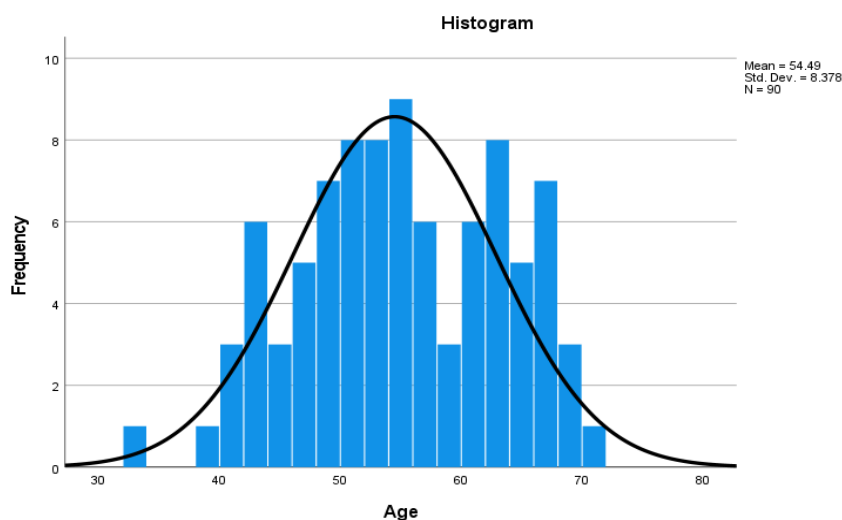
The main objective of the study is to improve information about the profile of foster parents and the reasons for choosing this profession.

**Foster carer`s profile**

*Current age of foster carers*

Their average age is 54.49 with a minimum of 33 years and a maximum of 70 years, a mode value of 54 years and a SD of 8.37 years. If we consider the age of entering the system, we notice that it varies between a minimum of 26 years and a maximum of 56 years old with an average of 41 years (SD of 6.6) and a modal value of 42 years.

**Figure 1. Foster carer`s current age**



Source: Made by the author

*Gender. Length of service*

As expected, most of the foster carers are women (94.4%). The length of service varies from a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 25 years with a mode value of 22 years.

**Table no. 1 Gender**

	N	%
Female	85	94.4%
Male	5	5.6%

Source: Made by the author

*Residence*

Regarding the current residence, we have answers from 89 of the 90 subjects, 31.9% living in urban areas and 67% in rural areas. Most of the foster carers declare that their houses are comprised of 3 rooms, the minimum number being 2 and the maximum 7. This data appears in the case of 84 subjects (6 missing values).

**Table no. 2 Household dimension  
Number of rooms**

	N	%
2	11	12.1%
3	37	40.7%
4	23	25.3%
5	10	11.0%
6	2	2.2%
7	2	2.2%
Missing System	6	6.6%

Source: Made by the author

About the type of housing, 89 subjects answered, 78% living in a house and 20.9% in an apartment, 95.6% being their own or their parents' property and 3.3% living in rentals.

*Foster carer's education*

A percentage of 18.9% of foster carers graduated only 8 classes, sometimes followed by a vocational school, the majority having 10 (36.7%) or 12 classes (40%), totalling 76.7% of the foster carers, only 4.4% completing higher education.

**Table no. 3 Foster carer's education**

	N	%
10	24	26.7%
10+SP	9	10.0%
12	31	34.4%
12+SP	5	5.6%
Higher education	4	4.4%
8	9	10.0%
8+SP	8	8.9%

Source: Made by the author

*Marital status*

Most child carers are married or remarried (84.4%), single parents in 13.4% of the situations and 1.1% in a consensual union situation.

**Table no. 4 Marital status**

	N	%
Married	76	84.4%
Unmarried	1	1.1%
Divorced	7	7.8%
Widow(er)	5	5.6%
Consensual union	1	1.1%

Source: Made by the author

*Previous job*

Regarding the job they had at the time of requesting the certificate, 59 of them had no job, 11 were unemployed (with unemployment benefits) and 20 had a job. Therefore, only a percentage of 22.2% had a job at the time of entering the child protection system as employee, their professions being rather

unqualified ones (e.g., skilled worker, receiver-distributor, waiter, forester, day labourer, commercial worker, milk collector etc.).

*Characteristics of foster children*

None of the 90 foster carers initially requested the placement of children with special needs, 9 of them receiving along the way children who, in their subsequent development, were diagnosed with a disability. In these situations, they were additionally trained, re-evaluated and given a certificate that would allow them to take care of these children.

Of the 90 parents, 82 (91.1%) received a certificate for caring for a maximum number of two children, 5 of them for one child and 3 parents for three children. Over time, the certificate for one of the foster parents was increased to be able to care for two children instead of one, another one was entrusted with three children instead of two and one received an increase from three to four children. All these changes followed in best interest of the children, aimed at placing siblings together. As a rule, these changes to the data of the certificate come as a request from the GDSWCP with the agreement of the foster carer and not as an express request of him/her. Foster carers that can receive one or two children are advised to accept another child in foster care for immediate needs, when a colleague goes on leave. Therefore, in many certificates it is mentioned that they "can receive one/two child(ren) in foster care with the exception of periods of leave of a foster carer when he/she can receive another child by transfer".

*Number of the foster carer's own children at the first evaluation*

We notice that most foster carers have 2, 3, 4 or 5 children of their own (67%), in decreasing order from 2 to 5. Their number varies from 1 to 11 children from the foster carer's own family.

**Table no. 5 Number of the foster carer's own children**

	N	%
1	7	7.8%
2	27	30.0%
3	20	22.2%
4	11	12.2%
5	9	10.0%
6	3	3.3%
7	3	3.3%
8	1	1.1%
9	4	4.4%
10	2	2.2%
11	2	2.2%
Missing System	1	1.1%

Source: Made by the author

*Religious confession*

Depending on the denomination, the foster carers distribution is as follows: Orthodox, Reformed, Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Unitarian, Jehovah's Witness, and Roman Catholic. After Orthodox confession, Pentecostal one is the most represented among foster parents.

**Table no. 5 Religious confession**

	N	%
Orthodox	59	65.6%
Reformed	3	3.3%
Baptist	5	5.6%
Pentecostal	14	15.6%
Adventist	2	2.2%
Unitarian	3	3.3%
Jehovah's Witness	3	3.3%
Roman Catholic	1	1.1%

Source: Made by the author

*Reasons to work as foster carer*

As Tremblay et al. (2009) underlined we can consider motivation as an important vector of professional success. The same authors also stated that we need to make distinction between motives/reasons and motivation. Because we are interested in the success of childcare in placement at foster carers, we need to make sure that we have correctly assessed the reasons why people work as childminders.

From the perspective of motives for choosing the profession, we found the following:

Most foster carers (34 out of 88 people, 38.6%) declare that they have chosen this profession out of love for children.

16 people (18.18%) indicate that the reason was to have a secondary job and out of love for children.

14 people (15.90%) were motivated by the desire to have a job.

7 people (7.95%) declare that they chose the profession because they love children and have free time that they can devote to their care.

4 of them consider that foster care offers a stable job, 3 of them mention the salary/job, the fact that they chose this profession for the benefit of their own child and, thirdly, for the children that they cared for themselves.

2 foster carers state that they chose the profession solely due to free time being a motivating factor.

The remaining 8 foster carers indicated the following motivations:

1 person for the job and for the benefit of one's own child

1 person because of the lack of own children

1 person because of the lack of own children and the need for a job

1 person out of love for children and for the benefit of one's own child

1 person for work, free time available for the benefit of one's own child

1 person for free time and love for children

1 person for free time and lack of own children

1 person for free time, love for children and a job

We note that, as the only motivation or in combination with others, the three most frequently mentioned reasons are *love for children* (77 situations), *the desire to have a job* (41), *the existence of free time* (cited by 13 people).

We have identified 5 basic categories that explain the choice of being a foster carer/maternal assistant as a professional. These can appear alone or in different combinations as reasons for the choice made. These categories are the following:

a. for the love of children; b. job; c. free time; d. for the benefit of one's own child; e. due to lack of own children

*Methods of disciplining the foster carer's own children*

As it appears from the final evaluation report of the foster carer for obtaining the certificate, out of the 90 future foster carers at the time of the evaluation, only 3 people were recorded as having a non-compliant parenting style, respectively the use of physical punishments - 2 people - (hair pulling, hitting with a stick) or verbal abuse and neglect of one's own children - 1 person. All candidates received the certificate. The first two foster carers (who admitted that they sometimes use corporal punishment) were recorded in their employment file that they were informed that corporal punishment is prohibited. The third was recommended training courses aimed directly at the functional relationship between parents and children.

Later, in the third case, (at the 2004 reassessment - it being a foster carer from 1998), the following were recorded in the file: "she is impulsive, decides for the child, does not communicate effectively, does not know how to listen, does not allow the child's initiatives, does not get involved in the child's education, does not show empathy, flexibility, reflexivity. Resolution: she cannot successfully fulfil the duties assigned to her in this profession". The foster carer was warned, received a written reprimand, and was recommended further training courses to support the appropriate training. In autumn 2022 she was to be recertified.

*The presence of physical punishment in the foster carer's childhood*

The available data provides information about foster parents' childhood experiences of physical punishment.

Distribution of responses

53.3% (48 respondents) of foster parents reported having been subjected to physical punishment as a child. This suggests that more than half had experiences involving such disciplinary measures.

41.1% (37 individuals) reported that they had not experienced physical punishment. This group is significant but remains smaller than those who had been exposed to physical punishment.

5.6% (5 cases) are missing data. This may reflect either non completeness of response or reluctance to discuss a sensitive topic.

**Table no. 7. Physical punishment in the childhood of the foster carer**

	N	%
No	37	41.1%
Yes	48	53.3%
Missing System	5	5.6%

Source: Made by the author

Emotional and cultural involvement. The high rate of parents who have experienced physical punishment may reflect the social or cultural norms of their childhood when this type of discipline was more accepted. These experiences may also influence how they perceive and apply discipline in their relationship with children in foster care.

Impact on their current role. Foster parents who have experienced physical punishment may be more likely to either avoid it completely as caregivers or normalize it depending on how they internalized these experiences.

Those who have not experienced physical punishment may have a different approach, more based on other forms of discipline such as communication or positive reinforcement.

Significance of missing data. The 5.6% missing data may reflect difficulties in responding due to subject sensitivity or lack of confidence in data confidentiality. It is important to consider whether these respondents share other common demographic characteristics that explain the missing responses.

These data provide an important starting point for understanding the influence of background on the style of care adopted by foster parents. Further analysis might be useful to relate these responses to current attitudes and practices in childrearing, as well as to factors such as age, education or cultural background.

*Conclusions and recommendations*

Foster carers are usually people over 40 years old who have their own children, - already teenagers or youngsters - with elementary or secondary education, mainly from rural areas. They are motivated by the desire to help and to have a job at home, to complete the seniority necessary for retirement, and/or they have free time.

Additional clarifications are needed regarding the motivation for choosing the profession and how it can vary over time, from the moment of employment till present days.

Although no foster carer requested the care of children with special needs, they ended up doing it because once they received children who proved to have deficient development from a physical, neurological, intellectual etc. point of view, they immediately received also the training and re-certification, the children not being oriented to be cared by another foster carer.

The foster care network is not sufficiently developed, the requests - because of legislative changes - put pressure on GDSWCP to find alternatives to institutionalization. Foster carers over 65 years old are still working in the system and those who have some deviations are usually warned and reprimanded and kept in the system.

Amendments that are made by the Order 27/2024 change the attestation criteria, such as: the minimum age to become a childminder becomes 21; the minimum level of education required is high school graduation; the employment contract is of indefinite duration; the childminder cannot cumulate salary and pension; they can look after 2 children maximum with some exceptions; the attestation is open-ended and is endorsed every two years/the certificate is valid for 2 years; training courses of 80 hours of which 50 theoretical and 30 practical training; at least one adult member of the household must have an income, apart from the childminder.

We are not advocating for the employment of foster carers who are at least high school graduates, nor even for formal continuous training more frequent than once a year, but for necessary support for them and reasonable/realistic expectations of them. This means that, if the foster carer is faced with behaviours of the child that he/she does not know how to deal with, with situations that exceed his/her knowledge and competences, there should be a social worker advisor, psychologist, psychiatrist, etc. immediately available to address the problem before the foster carer - child relationship deteriorates. Most of them are living in rural areas and the social worker assigned to work with them is at the county level organization.

We propose that the retirement age be set at 65 years with the possibility to extend the work contract for a maximum of three additional years. We believe such an extension should be granted only in cases where it benefits teenagers in foster care. Specifically, this would apply when the retirement of a foster carer would otherwise require an adolescent to change foster families for a year or two before aging out of the system.

The issues discussed above pushes the GDSWCP to widen the network of foster carers instead of overburdening the existing staff. Effective recruitment campaigns targeted at the profile of the foster parent/maternal assistant are necessary to ensure that children in need of care and stability are matched with capable families who can provide them with a nurturing environment.

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