



(left) A child found wandering the street at night is picked up by San José metropolitan police. The Patronato Nacional de la Infancia (PANI), an organization dealing with abandoned children in Costa Rica, will try to find members of the child's family. If none can be found, the child is considered abandoned, and placed in a private or public institution.

Photo: Maria Elene Esquivel/Tico Times.

(Above and opposite page) Children placed by the PANI welfare organization in Pueblito, an adoptive family and community organization. The children will live in Pueblito until they are 18, under the guidance of their adoptive parents. Parents and children work in small farming enterprises to support themselves.

Photos: Pueblito.

LOST AND FOUND

ABANDONED CHILDREN IN COSTA RICA

DENIS MARCHETERRE

The children of the streets are beings as complex and unpredictable as the environment in which they find themselves. Left to their own devices, they will ply any trade: hawker, lookout, singer, beggar or burglar, usually under the indifferent gaze of passersby. The street urchins are usually responsive and grateful to those who help, rude and aggressive to the indifferent. In the street, freedom of any kind often seems better than any alternative that might present itself.

At the beginning of this decade, the United Nations Statistical Office estimated that there were five million children living in the streets in Latin America. In the case of Costa Rica, 1983 figures reveal 8000 children in institutions and 20 000 living in the streets — 28 000 of a population of 2.5 million. More than 40 percent of the country's population is less than fif-

teen years old. A large portion of these young work without the protection of laws or other control measures to protect rights or guarantee healthy living conditions. So it is a precarious life for 20 000 of the children that the Costa Rican state considers as abandoned.

The phenomenon of the abandoned child in Costa Rica is linked to the social and economic characteristics of the society. Studies attribute most social changes in Costa Rica during the past three decades to the country's exceedingly rapid industrialization, a process in which the perception of the role of the child and the family within Costa Rica has changed for the worse.

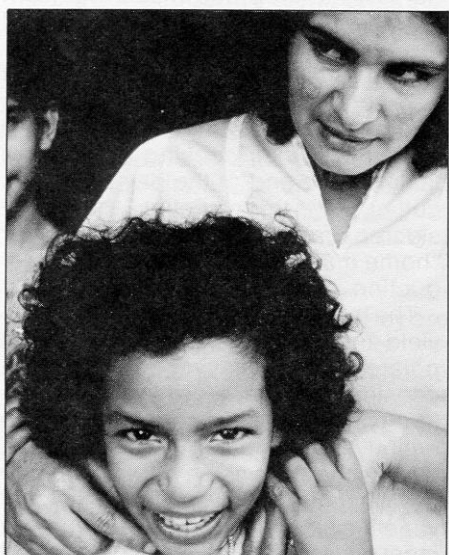
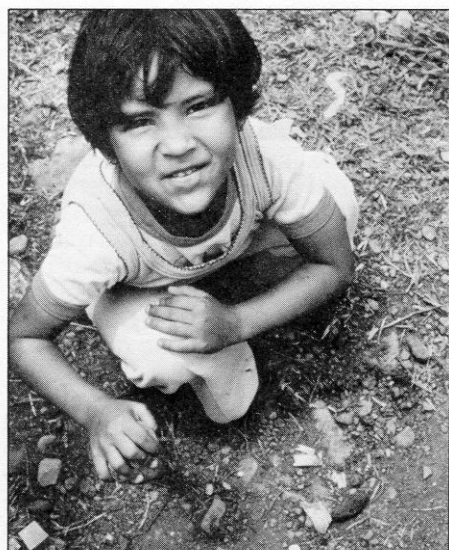
In the migrations of the 1950s and 1960s that saw masses of rural people flow to the capital, San José, the poor were shunted aside — marginalized. A parallel social system was created, composed of those unable to adapt to

the fast-paced urban changes. This marginalized population had to evolve its own value system and "laws": one of the consequences was the growing number of abandoned children.

Even though the proportion of children living in the streets is much larger in cities, the phenomenon is not a strictly urban one. Abandoned children are also found in the most isolated areas of the country. Poverty is not the only cause for abandonment. In the country as in the city, the relaxation of mores, the proliferation of unwed mothers, prostitutes, homeless women and women beggars, parental ignorance of their obligations and role, family conflicts, the incidence of mental deficiencies in some adults, the lack of proper contraceptive methods, and the recent phenomenon of family break-ups are all factors contributing to an increase in abandoned children in Costa Rica.

These children are undernourished, shy despite their apparent aggressiveness, insecure, unstable, and rebellious. The harshness of street life has also led to physical and mental handicaps. In addition, they are often dangerously habituated, as early as from the ages of six to twelve, to alcohol, drugs, and a rootless way of life.

A child is considered abandoned,



according to criteria set down by the government of Costa Rica, not only when there is no family but also when while in the family, the child is physically or mentally mistreated by parents, or if there is not "adequate" guidance. In such cases, the state reserves the right to assume responsibility for the child, including removing the child from the family and placing him or her in the care of an institution.

For the International Year of the Child in 1979, Costa Rica gave priority to policies and programs aimed at improving the well-being of its young people. The principles of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child were updated to mark the occasion, organizations and programs were evaluated and reformulated, and some projects undertaken.

Through the Patronato Nacional de la Infancia, or PANI, an organization specializing in so-called abandoned children, Costa Rica today is endeavouring to provide the food, shelter, affection, and support these children need.

Three government-funded group homes in different areas of the country support the sincere efforts of the government to assist disadvantaged children — although, in accordance

with its philosophy and objectives, PANI attaches the greatest importance to adoption and placement activities. The centres are never intended to replace a real family environment, as PANI representatives quickly point out.

PANI's multidisciplinary mode and its recent moves to decentralize and operate in the regions have increased its importance and influence in the eyes of the government, the legal system, and the people in general. Yet despite its apparent efficiency, PANI's efforts are often impeded and plagued by a heavy internal bureaucracy, and the duplication of work and the lack of planning and coordination between PANI and other public organizations intervening with young people.

In an approach to strengthen family bonds to prevent abandonment the hospital network also participates in the search for solutions. One hospital in the capital set up a mother and newborn live-in program a few years ago, specially designed for unwed mothers, prostitutes and teenagers. A 1983 study showed an encouraging decrease in the percentage of abandoned infants in some of the poorer quarters of San José where live-in programs were offered. An additional benefit has been the drop in the prevalence of disease at birth.

Some 22 private institutions are also working to improve the well-being of the street children. One example is Pueblito, a Canadian non-governmental organization project administered by Costa Ricans. The institution provides 80 children with the support and education they need, using an approach that is unique in Costa Rica: instead of placing young people in the community setting of a group home, it gives them a family life with adoptive parents in a house on the grounds of the institution.

The importance of their role notwithstanding, institutions and group homes are still a temporary solution, as they can only bind the wound, not eliminate the social wounding that produces abandoned children. Meanwhile, the children, with all their contradictions and capriciousness, constitute an unbearable problem to many — because they are a reminder of the failure of government policies, of the schools, and of the family. A lasting solution is probably to be found in the balance between economic and social development that often eludes the planners' control — as it did in Costa Rica, a country caught unawares by the suddenness of its own development. □

Denis Marcheterre is a freelance writer living in Costa Rica.