

# Historical abandonment of children in the Azores, Portugal

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## Abstract

Data from the period 1779–1828 were extracted from the books recording the entry and subsequent fate of babies abandoned in the *Roda* in the town of Horta on the island of Faial, Azores. The numbers of babies abandoned increased throughout the period, and their survival rate fluctuated markedly, with a low of under 10% in 1809 to a high of almost 50% in 1813. Overall, just over half the babies abandoned had died within the first year, and over 60% had died within two years. There is no differential abandonment or survival between the sexes. The seasonality of abandonment shows a peak in the first four months of the year, with a decline during the summer months. By contrast, deaths are most frequent in July and August, with another peak in the last quarter of the year. These Azorean data are consistent with the general pattern observed in Southern Europe, but offer some special opportunities to study the variation in nursing performance and the subsequent life-histories of *expostos*.

## Résumé

*Les données concernant la période de 1779–1828 proviennent des registres d'admission d'enfants abandonnés à la Roda (tour) de la ville de Horta dans l'île de Faial, aux Açores. Durant cette période, le nombre de bébés abandonnés augmente régulièrement et le taux de survie fluctue remarquablement, avec un minimum de 10% en 1809 et un maximum de presque 50% en 1813. En général, un peu plus de la moitié des bébés abandonnés sont morts au bout de la première année, et plus de 60% au bout de la deuxième. Il n'y a pas de différence entre les taux d'abandon et de survie des filles et ceux des garçons. Le cycle saisonnier des abandons atteint un pic pendant les quatre premiers mois de l'année, et un minimum pendant les mois d'été. Au contraire, la mortalité augmente pendant juillet et août, ainsi que pendant les trois derniers mois de l'année. Ces données provenant des Açores sont compatibles avec la situation générale observée en Europe du sud. De plus, elles permettent d'étudier les variations des soins donnés et les histoires de vie des expostos.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is a strong historical tradition of institutionalised child abandonment in Western Europe. Evidence has been gathered from classical antiquity and the medieval period (Boswell, 1988), and from the early modern and modern period there are many published accounts of rates of abandonment and mortality of the abandoned. Foundling hospitals were first established in the middle ages, and many European cities soon had a foundling hospital which was the focus of regional or national care for abandoned babies. Some of the notable examples that have been described include those in Florence (Trexler, 1973), Milan (Hünecke, 1985), Madrid (Sherwood, 1981, 1988), Paris (Meyer, 1980), Rennes (Fujita, 1983) England (Cunningham, 1977; Fildes, 1990; McClure, 1981), Dublin (Robins, 1980) and Oporto (Sá, 1992). On a local scale, abandonment became institutionalised, with the widespread provision in convents of a cradle where babies could be left by parents wishing to preserve their anonymity. These

cradles were cylindrical, revolving around a vertical axle. The infant was placed in the cradle on the public side, the cradle rotated and the baby taken into the convent. In Portugal this device was called a *Roda* (wheel). The abandoned children were baptised, cared for, usually by nurses in their own homes, and eventually left the care of the municipality to go into employment. That was the intention: in reality the mortality of abandoned infants was very high, with the vast majority dying in infancy or childhood. The economic costs of the system were very considerable, and throughout the accounts of child abandonment on Faial, for example, the crippling financial burden to the municipality is lamented, and was a strong motivation in the search for ways to reduce child abandonment (Lima, 1943).

Although publications on abandoned children from France, Italy and Spain abound, far less has been written about *expostos* in Portugal (Kertzer and Brettell, 1987). The recent thesis by Isabel dos Guimaraes Sá (Sá, 1992), however, represents a ve-

ry substantial contribution to this field, and cites a number of smaller previous studies. The data presented below were collected during the University of the Azores's scientific expedition to Pico, one of the islands of the central group of the Azorean archipelago. Our intention was to discover what information (both primary data and comment) might be available for the study of child abandonment in the Azores.

#### ABANDONED CHILDREN IN HORTA, FAIAL.

The bulk of the data come from Horta on the island of Faial, and were made available to us by the director of the Arquivo da Horta who allowed us to transcribe entries from the six bound volumes of the *Livros de Entrada dos Expostos*. Owing to constraints on time only a selection of entries could be recorded, as detailed below (table 1).

Livro 1	1778–1805	The first book is fully annotated, as described in text
Livro 2	1806–1825	annotation ceases when a new writer takes over in 1814
Livro 3	1825–1832	annotated in parts, from 1827 onward
Livro 4	1832–1842	annotated at beginning only
Livro 5	1846–1853	annotated with crosses and F's ( <i>faleceu?</i> )
Livro 6	1853–1861	occasional pencil notes, including some F's

Table 1 : Livros de Entrada dos Expostos, Arquivo da Horta, Faial, Açores.

A typical entry gives date of the abandoned child being found, place of abandonment, date of baptism and by whom baptized, baptismal name and name of the nurse (*ama*) to whom the child was entrusted. This basic entry may then carry later annotation in the left hand margin. In the vast majority of cases the annotation is a record of the child's date of death, though sometimes it notes simply that the child has died (*faleceu*) at some unspecified date. Occasionally the child is recorded as «gone away» (*fora*) or having been taken away by its mother (*entregue a sua mae 30 marzo*). A few children were recorded as being found dying on discovery after abandonment (*morreu imediatamente* or *morreu na roda*). One was recorded as completing her time (*completou a tempa*), which at least suggests the existence of a procedure for children to pass on to life beyond the care of the

nurses. It was assumed that the unannotated entries signified others who lived to complete their time, though such an assumption clearly minimises the estimated number of deaths among the *expostos*.

Data were transcribed from the full years 1779, 1798, 1799, 1808, 1813 and 1828. Additionally eight cases were transcribed from April 1778 (the first entries in the first book, which then proceeds immediately to record the events of January 1779), and one each from 1809, 1814 and 1827. These extras are normally included with the data for the years 1779, 1808, 1813 and 1828 respectively, but are excluded when examining the trend in number of abandonments through time. The purpose of transcription was to obtain data across a range of years, to allow the observation of secular trends, whilst also ensuring that the individual entries transcribed contained a maximum of information. To this end, years with full annotation were chosen even though this prevented there being precisely regular time intervals between sample years. In total we have records of 562 abandoned children, of whom all but one were abandoned in the *Roda* at Horta. The exception was the first child in the first book, who is recorded as abandoned in a house (*casa*).

The quality of the data enable us to examine a number of aspects of the demography of these abandoned children; we shall look at the secular trend, seasonality and sex ratio of abandonment, the proportion of survivors and the length of life of those who died in care.

#### NUMBER OF CHILDREN ABANDONED

Table 2 shows the numbers abandoned by year. Clearly, there is an increase through time in the number of children abandoned in the *Roda* at Horta, but in the absence of data about the number of births of children who were not abandoned we cannot say whether the rate of abandonment has increased over the study period. However, in terms of nurse care required and other calls on municipal resources, it appears that *expostos* were an increasing burden. This is amply documented in the discussion of expenditure on foundlings in *Anais do Municipio da Horta* (Lima, 1943). There is no significant excess of males or females among the *expostos*.

Year	Female	Males	Total
1779	26	26	52
1798	30	33	63
1799	47	33	80
1808	46	49	95
1813	51	60	111
1828	83	66	149

are more abandonments in the first six months than in the second. Secondly, and conversely, there are fewer deaths of *expostos* from January to July than from August to December. One possible circumstance explaining the dislocation would be large numbers of *expostos* dying six months after abandonment. However this is not supported by the evidence of lifespan as shown in Figure 3.

**Table 2** : Numbers of infants abandoned at the *Roda* in Horta, 1779–1828.

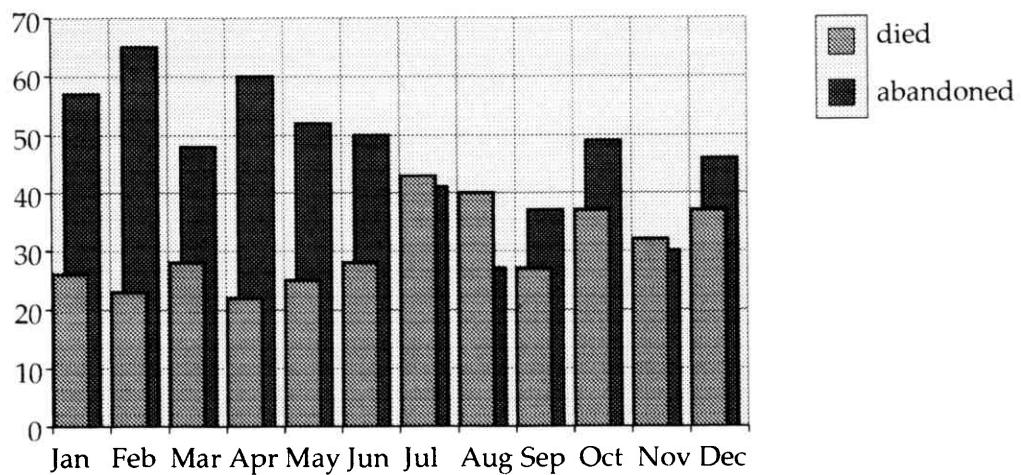
#### SEASONALITY OF ABANDONMENT

For all the abandoned children the date of arrival in the *Roda* and the date of baptism (usually the same day) were recorded. In the case of fully annotated entries the date of death is also known. Table 3 shows the numbers involved on a month by month basis.

Figure 1 plots these data for the sexes combined, with each month's value expressed as a percentage of the total of all twelve months' events. Two seasonal trends are apparent. Firstly, there

Month	abandoned		died	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
January	31	26	14	12
February	24	41	15	8
March	20	28	10	18
April	29	31	12	10
May	32	20	15	10
June	22	28	16	12
July	22	19	18	25
August	16	11	16	24
September	18	19	13	14
October	28	21	24	13
November	24	6	16	16
December	21	25	24	13
Total	287	275	193	175

**Table 3** : Seasonality of abandonment and death of *expostos*



**Figure 1** : Seasonality of abandonment and death.

### SURVIVAL OF EXPOSTOS

We have calculated the number of abandoned children surviving the municipal system of care as those who are taken away, the one who completed her time and, (numerically by far the greatest category) those whose abandonment record contains no further annotation. It is thus a maximum rate of survival. Table 4 shows the numbers abandoned and surviving.

	Females	Males	Total
Survivors	78	80	158
Deaths	209	195	404
Total	287	275	562

Table 4 : Survival of *expostos*

Figure 2 shows the year by year survival of *expostos*. No secular trend in survival is indicated by these figures, but nevertheless survival does vary markedly from period to period. The only change which there is some internal evidence to explain is the rapid transition of survival rates of both sexes from the low of 1809 (8.7%) to the high of 1813 (49%). Inside the front cover of Livro 2 is a note dated February 1812, to the effect that the fifteen *amas* named in the note were never in future to be allowed to take *expostos*, on account of their bad conduct. It may be that the improved survival rate in 1813 was a direct result of this action, as well as the general concern for vigilance in regard to the *expostos*' well-being which it implies.

Figure 3 shows the pattern of mortality month

by month among the *expostos*. On the assumption that the infants were abandoned at birth, we estimate infant mortality rate to be slightly in excess of 50% with over 60% of *expostos* dying by the age of two.

### ABANDONED CHILDREN ON PICO

No records equivalent to the *Livros de Entrada dos Expostos* could be found for Pico, but we did have access to baptismal registers in S. Roque. Transcription of these registers allowed rates of abandonment to be calculated. In the records of the parish of Sta. Luzia there were 6 infants among 186 baptised in the years 1880–1887 who were noted as *expostos*. In the parish of S. Roque there was one *exposta* among 140 children baptised in the years 1880–1883. All these babies were abandoned at the house of someone in the parish, so it is difficult to know whether the rates would be representative of places where there was a *Roda*. It is probable that the existence of a *Roda* encouraged abandonment, or at least provided a focus destination for parents wishing to abandon children.

### DISCUSSION

The data presented here span a period which Lima (1943) records as one when the financial support of foundlings in the central Azores moved from crisis to crisis until, in the mid-nineteenth century, the numbers of children being abandoned each year began to decline. Lima (1943) naturally enough speaks of this pattern of events as though it were a local problem, but recent scholarship

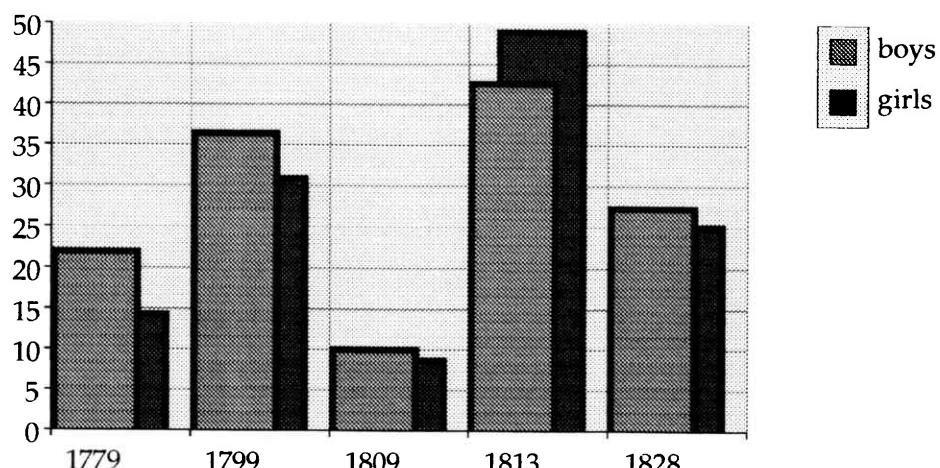


Figure 2 : Percentage of survivors by year.

helps us to appreciate that the situation on Horta reflects general developments throughout Catholic Europe. As noted above, the establishment of foundling hospitals had begun in medieval times, and the widespread provision of abandonment sites in convents and hospitals – throughout Italy, France, Spain and Portugal – was in place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The late eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth saw abandonment reach its maximum, and then sharply decline. The data presented here do not extend that far in time, but the later pattern in Horta does show just this trend (Smith and Lima, in preparation).

Our data show a secular increase in the number of children being abandoned, but we are unable to comment on rates, in the absence of knowledge of the background number of births and baptisms over this period. In general, our figures are consistent with the trend toward increased numbers of foundlings throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a pattern which both Sherwood (1988) and Sá (1992) show to be positively correlated with the price of wheat and other foodstuffs. However, there may be difficulties in the direct interpretation of this correlation, which could be influenced by confounding variables associated with secular trend.

Rates of abandonment are difficult to calculate, because foundling hospitals were situated in towns and cities, and provided a focus for abandonment of babies born in the rural hinterland. Hence, many of the estimates of proportion of foundlings among all baptisms inflate the true rates of abandonment, a point raised by Sá (1992).

Boswell (1988) has collated a number of studies, and cites a number of analyses for France, with the foundling baptisms in Toulouse accounting for 10%–20% of all baptisms in the eighteenth century. In Lyons in the second half of the eighteenth century approximately one third of all baptisms were of foundlings, whilst the figure for Paris over the same period was 20%–30%. In Florence the rate rose from 14% at the beginning of the eighteenth century to 43% during the early nineteenth, in Milan from 16% to 25%. Infants abandoned at the Inclusa in Madrid comprised 14% of recorded baptisms in 1756, rising to 26% after the turn of the century. All these studies are likely to show high rates as a result of the traffic in foundlings towards the larger centres. On the other hand, of course, perceived rates of abandonment in smaller towns and villages might well be underestimates as a result of the same process. Thus our estimate of the rate of abandonment of *expostos* on doorsteps in Pico – 2% – may be influenced

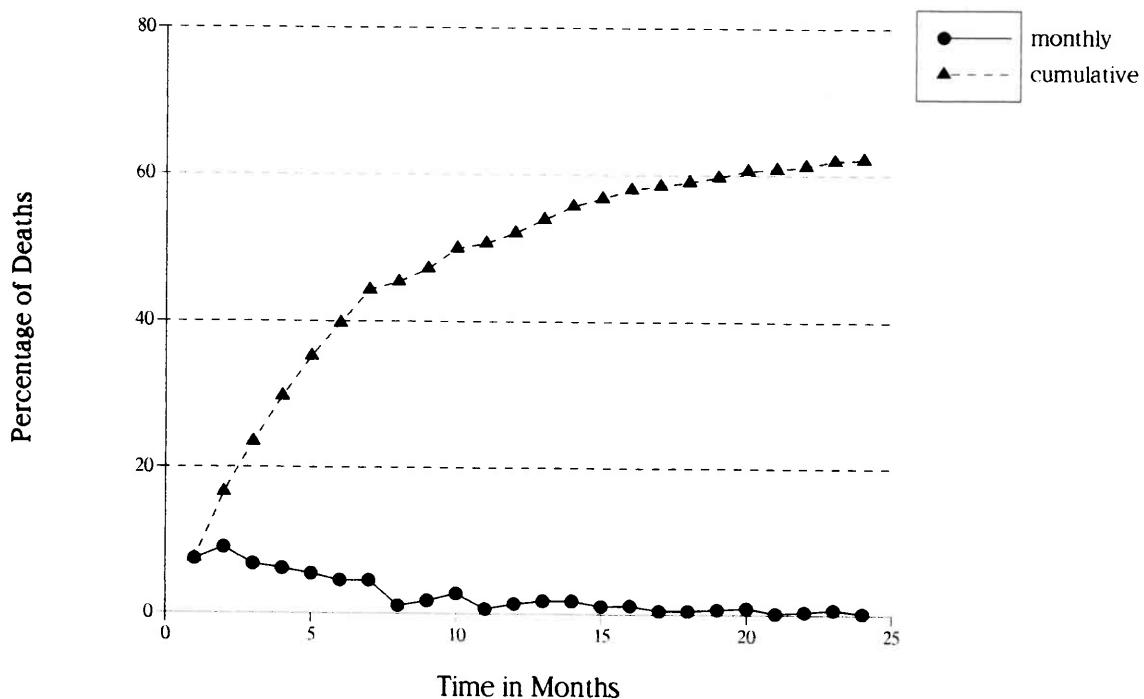


Figure 3 : Percentage dying by month from abandonment.

by two factors: firstly, that other *expostos* could have been taken to a *Roda*, and secondly, that the period is very late (1880–1887) compared to the peak years of abandonment, and the practice by this time had substantially declined (Smith and Lima, in preparation).

Estimation of mortality rates also presents difficulties, as there is little consistency across studies as to whether infant or child mortality is specified, and the estimation of infant mortality by presenting the number of deaths in any year as a proportion of the number of babies abandoned in that year is an unsatisfactory measure. Such a calculation overlooks the surviving foundlings abandoned in previous years as part of the population at risk, and can result in estimates of mortality in excess of 100% when the number of babies abandoned each year is declining sharply. Fildes (1988) tabulated mortality rates, principally during the eighteenth century, for a number of European foundling hospitals, and these ranged from 34% in early 19th century in Lyons to 100% in Dublin in the second half of the 18th century. The modal range of mortality rates was 75%–85%. Sherwood's (1988) annual figures for the Inclusa in Madrid from 1878–1802 also show mortality rates of between 75% and 85%, with the majority in the upper part of the range. Our own data suggest infant mortality slightly in excess of 50%, but with a substantially higher figure (72%, based on table 4) for the minimum rate of mortality throughout the period of care by nurses. An additional notable feature of our data is the fluctuation in the numbers dying from year to year.

How do these rates compare with the mortality of children not abandoned but raised in the family home? Precise controls are not available, but some general figures for England, France and Spain can be drawn from Appendix Table 10 of Flinn (1981). This tabulates data for the periods Pre-1750, 1740–1790, and 1780–1820, and shows values of 19%, 16% and 12% infant mortality for England, 25%, 21% and 20% for France, and 28%, 27% and 22% for Spain over the respective periods. Even bearing in mind the definitional problems mentioned above, it is likely that the comparison indicates a real and substantial difference in survival between the abandoned children and those raised at home. However, the matter really does call for a much stricter analysis. There are two further questions that might be tackled by fur-

ther analysis of Azorean data. Firstly, the question of the behaviour of individual nurses in the survival of foundlings might be answered by tracking the career performance of the *amas*, and secondly, the subsequent life histories of *expostos* might be followed (Smith, Lima and Abade, in preparation) by consulting marriage, burial and baptism registers, since the tag of *exposto* or *exposta* appears to stay with the foundlings even into old age.

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