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The Structure of Families who Adopt Children from Foster Care

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Abstract

The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) gave incentives to states to expedite the adoption of children from foster care. Administrative data describe the changes in adoptive families from 1996 to 2003 in terms of the marital status and sex of the household head and in terms of the relationship of the parents to the child prior to adoption. Patterns in the way children with special needs were matched with different kinds of families are described. The data show that agencies have tapped the resources of families headed by single parents to provide permanency for older children and that older children adopted by fathers have spent more time as legal orphans than children adopted by single mothers.

Keywords

adoption; foster care; legal orphans; single parents; special needs

Of the 513,000 children in foster care at the end of fiscal year 2005, one quarter had been in care for three or more years (US DHHS, 2007a). The average age of waiting children was 9.8 years; they had been in care an average of 41.6 months. Child welfare agencies were seeking to place one fifth—almost 101,000—of the children in foster care with an adoptive family. Preliminary estimates for fiscal year 2005 indicate that between 51,000 and 52,000 adoptions of children from foster care were finalized (compare US DHHS, 2007a and 2007b). Although the gap between the number of children who need adoptive families and the number of adoptions finalized was large, the combined efforts of state child welfare authorities and the federal government (Hansen & Hansen, 2006) led to a near doubling of the number of children adopted with state agency involvement from 1995 to 2005, as shown in figure 1 (US DHHS, 2007b).

Although adoptions of all kinds have been increasing over the past few decades, until recently it has not been possible to describe adoptive families in a systematic way at the national level. The Census of 2000 was the first federal census to collect data on adopted children (Kreider, 2003). The census enumerated 2.1 million adopted children, who represented about 8 percent of all sons and daughters of householders in 2000. About 1.8 percent of all households (817,000 households) contained only adopted children. Another 1.8 percent contained both adopted children and birth children.

The census did not ask whether children were adopted with state agency involvement, but the public availability of data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System [AFCARS] makes it possible to describe how child welfare authorities have tapped the resources of families to provide permanency through adoption. AFCARS data are used to

describe the families who adopt children with state agency involvement and to describe patterns in the matching of children with special needs to their adoptive families.

The next section reviews the history of family structure in adoptive placement. The third section describes the AFCARS data and its limitations. The fourth section describes the distribution of adoptive families in terms of the marital status and sex of the parent(s) (married couple, unmarried couple, single female, or single male). This study adds to what is known about the structure of adoptive families (e.g., US DHHS, 2007a; Maza, 2002; Feigleman & Silverman, 1997; Groze & Rosenthal, 1991) by estimating the likelihood that a child with a specific special need is placed in a particular kind of adoptive family. The final section explores the relationship between adoptive family structure and the time spent as a legal orphan, controlling for characteristics of the child.

Forming Adoptive Families

Historically, the aim of adoptive placement was to place children where they would blend in, where they would (to the uninitiated) be indistinguishable from birth children. It was therefore believed that an adopted child must be parented by two married, heterosexual, same-race adults who were comfortable with a division of labor between non-working wives and bread-winning husbands (Melosh, 2002). The 1958 standards for adoption practice issued by the Child Welfare League of America, for example, stated that adoptive families should include both a mother and a father. While most couples expressed interest in adoption because of infertility, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s a small, but increasing number of married couples chose adoption for reasons other than infertility (Feigleman & Silverman, 1983). These *preferential* adopters were more likely than infertile couples to adopt children with special physical, emotional, psychological, or educational needs.

Advocates of special needs adoption, however, saw that unmarried adults could also meet the needs of waiting children. By 1968 the Child Welfare League of America granted that placements with unmarried adults were allowable if the child would not otherwise be adopted. Eventually, public child welfare agencies dropped restrictions on marital status, income, home ownership, sex, religion, age, race, and handicap that kept interested people from becoming adoptive parents (Adoption History Project, 2007; Lakin & Whitfield, 1997; Melosh, 2002).

Agencies also began to utilize more fully the resources of families already known to them. One of the first changes in adoptive family structure was the acceptance of foster families as prospective adoptive families (Adoption History Project, 2007; Lakin & Whitfield, 1997). Agencies began to recognize that the potential problems of adoption by foster parents (fear of sabotaging reunification, fear of a decline in the number of foster parents) were frequently more than offset by the benefits of maintaining the relationship between a waiting child and his foster family. Many states and localities now have so-called *fast-adopt* programs, in which families are recruited to accept foster care placement of a child who is unlikely to be reunified with her birth parents, but for whom parental rights have not yet been terminated. In a recent focus group study of prospective adoptive parents, almost all said that they were asked to consider fostering (Wilson, Katz & Geen, 2005).

The next major change in adoptive family structure was the active recruitment of kin as foster and, later, adoptive families. Formal kinship care continued a tradition of extended family care-giving when parents are unavailable (Pollack, Bleich, Reid & Fadel, 2004). Some social workers and policy makers believed that because kinship care preserves family ties, and family preservation is a fundamental guiding principle of social work, kinship care must be preferred. Since the 1980s, agencies have relied more and more on relatives and on other people who have a close tie to the child in care (Boots & Geen, 1999).

Before the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), relatively few kinship caregivers expressed their commitment through adoption. Many believed this would cause hard feelings in the family, be confusing to the child, and be too expensive (Thornton 1991). While concern still exists about how the legal process of termination of parental rights and adoption changes birth family relationships, ASFA's Adoption Incentive Program encourages states to promote adoption over alternatives. Today, most child welfare agencies express (in law, in theory, and in practice) a preference for kinship care (Geen, 2003).

AFCARS Adoption Data

It would not be possible to consider patterns of adoptive family structure were it not for the outcome-oriented nature of the Adoption and Safe Families Act. ASFA created the Adoption Incentive program, which pays bonuses to states that increase the number of adoptions of children from foster care. In addition to providing an incentive for states to increase adoptions, the Adoption Incentive program provides an incentive for data collection. To qualify for ASFA bonus payments, states must document increases in adoptions. Effectively, ASFA pushed states into compliance with a 1993 federal rule requiring the submission of data on adoptions with state agency involvement (Maza, 2000). States are required to submit data for each adoption in which a public child welfare agency was involved in any way. (States are encouraged, but not required, to submit data for all other adoptions including adoptions through tribal agencies, private agencies, and independent adoptions; only cases with state agency involvement are considered here). The data collection system is known as the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (again, AFCARS). The Children's Bureau publishes tabulations of some AFCARS data on the Web and in an annual outcomes report (e.g., US DHHS, 2006). The data used to produce the outcomes report form the basis for the public use version of the data.

Methodology

Key Variables

AFCARS describes the "nature of the adoptive parent(s) family structure" using a categorical variable. The data for fiscal years 1996 to 1999 have five mutually exclusive categories of family structure. The categories are *married couple*, *unmarried couple*, *single female*, *single male*, and *unable to determine*. For fiscal years 2000–2003 AFCARS allows *not applicable* as a sixth category. The categories *unable to determine* and *not applicable* are treated here as missing data.

Similarly, AFCARS records whether the adoptive parents were unknown to the child before the adoption. Alternatively, adoptive parents could be recorded as previously fostering the child or as being kin to the child. Kin who were also foster parents are not clearly designated.

The AFCARS records show if an adopted child has a state-defined special need that would make the child eligible for adoption assistance under Social Security Act Title IV-E. State-defined special needs may include disabilities, diagnosed medical or psychological conditions, learning disabilities, being part of a sibling group to be adopted together, being an older child, or being of minority race. Only the primary special needs basis is recorded, although an adopted child may have several characteristics that would make him or her eligible for adoption assistance.

In AFCARS, specific disabilities are recorded separately from state-defined special needs. Disabilities include vision or hearing impairment, other physical disability, a diagnosed physical or psychological condition, and "mental retardation." The disability variables are each binary; multiple disabilities may be recorded for each adopted child.

This study also uses AFCARS data on the birth date of the child, the date of finalization of adoption, and the date(s) when the parental rights of birth parents was terminated.

Sample

Neither states nor the Children's Bureau puts little faith in the AFCARS data for 1995 through 1997 (see, especially, NDACAN, p. 9). Many states did not comply with the federal rules on AFCARS before fiscal year 1998. For example, in 1995, 31 states submitted some adoption data to AFCARS. Moreover, the data submitted were incomplete. For example, of the states that submitted any AFCARS data in 1996, four states did not report adoptive family structure. Six additional states submitted a majority of adoption records without family structure information. For fiscal years 1998 and 1999, 83 to 85 percent of records have usable family structure information. For the most recent years just over 90 percent of adoption cases have usable family structure information.

About 84 percent of all records have usable information on the relationship between the adoptive parent(s) and child prior to the adoption, with the majority of missing data for 1996 and 1997. About 30 percent of records for 1996–97, but less than two percent of records for 1998–2003, are missing at least one element necessary to calculate the time the child spent as a legal orphan (i.e., the time between the termination of the rights of the birth parent(s) and the finalization of the adoption). About four percent of all records (mostly for 1996) are missing information about the special needs and disabilities of the adopted child.

Although the first three years of data are suspect, AFCARS still represents the only source of case-level data on adoptions with state agency involvement in all states that is consistent in format across states and over time. Moreover, at least at the state level, the AFCARS count for fiscal year 1996 is highly correlated with information reported in the Child Welfare League of America's National Data Analysis System and the National Council on Adoption's Adoption *Factbook* (Hansen & Hansen, 2006).

Results

Most of the children adopted with state agency involvement are adopted by married couples. As the annual number of adoptions increased in the 1990s, the number of children adopted by married couples increased from 7,540 in 1996 to a high of 31,616 in 2002. (Year-to-year changes in proportions noted in the text are statistically significant (p -value<.05) in all cases.)

States with more than 80 percent married couples among adoptive families were Kentucky, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Puerto Rico, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Less than 60 percent were married in the District of Columbia, Florida, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, and Wisconsin. There was a notable decline in the representation of married couples among adopters in Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, and New Hampshire. There was an increase in the representation of married couples in Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, and Virginia.

The proportion of children adopted by married couples, however, fell from a high of 74.4 percent of valid observations in 1996 to a low of 65.6 percent in 2000. That is, while the number of children adopted by married couples grew, the number adopted by unmarried persons grew faster. The number of children adopted by unmarried women grew from 2,109 (20.8 percent of valid observations) in fiscal year 1996 to a peak of 14,446 (31.5 percent) in fiscal year 2000. The states with 40 percent or more single females among adoptive parents were District of Columbia, Illinois, and New Jersey. Single females completed less than 15 percent of adoptions in Montana, Puerto Rico, South Dakota, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

After 2000, the number of new adoptive families headed by unmarried women fell to 12,936 (18.4 percent) in 2003. Figure 2 shows the time trends in adoptive family structure. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov equality-of-distribution indicates a significant difference (p -value<.01) in the distributions of data for each pair of subsequent years, except for distributions for years 1998–1999 and 1999–2000. There is also a significant difference (p -value<.01) between each year's distribution and the distributions in all other years.

As adoptions by unmarried women dipped, adoptions by unmarried men and unmarried but co-habiting couples rose as a percent of all adoptions with state agency involvement. In fiscal year 1996 only 164 adoptions (1.6 percent) were completed by unmarried men. By fiscal year 2003 the number of adoptions by single men had increased to 1,245 (representing 2.7 percent of all adoptions of children with state agency involvement). The overall increase in proportion of adoptions completed by single men is statistically significant (p -value<.02). Adoptions by single men were most common in Delaware, Iowa, Nebraska, Nevada, and Wyoming. The lowest proportions of adoptions by single male were in Idaho, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Carolina, Utah, and West Virginia.

For most of the period, unmarried couples constituted the smallest group of families finalizing adoptions with state agency involvement. The number of adoptions by this group ranged from 280 in fiscal year 1999 to 794 in fiscal year 2002. There was a roughly U-shaped trend in the proportion of adoptions completed by unmarried couples. In 1996, when the total number of adoptions was relatively small, unmarried couples represented just over three percent of newly formed adoptive families. The percentage fell to 0.7 percent in 2000, but rose from 2000 through 2002, when unmarried couples finalized 1.7 percent of adoptions with state agency involvement. The states with the greatest representation of unmarried couples among adopters were Massachusetts, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Vermont. No adoptions by single men were recorded in Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, South Dakota, and Virginia.

For comparison, the 2000 Census found that 17 percent of all adopted children (including those adopted privately, internationally, and by step-parents or other relatives) lived with an unmarried female parent. About 10 percent of these female-headed households included an unmarried partner of either sex. Five percent of adopted children lived with an unmarried male parent. About one third of these male-headed households included an unmarried partner of either sex (Kreider, 2003).

Characteristics of Children by Family Structure

Across all years, unmarried men had, on average, adopted the oldest children (average almost nine years old) while unmarried couples adopted the youngest (average just over six years old); see table 1. The average age of children adopted by married couples and unmarried women rose between 1996 and 2003. The age differences across family structures and through time that are reported in the table are each statistically significant (p -value<.01). There was no clear trend in the age at adoption of the children of unmarried couples.

Table 2 shows the percentages of children with a recorded, state-defined special need who were adopted by each type of family in each year. The percentage of children with a special need adopted by every type of family increased dramatically from 1996 through 2001. Overall, single women and unmarried couples were most likely to adopt a child with a special need in any given year. After 1998, single men were slightly more likely to adopt a child with a special need, as compared to married couples. Married couples were the least likely to adopt a child with a special need. The differences and changes noted in this paragraph are each statistically significant (p -value<.03).

Table 3 summarizes the recorded disabilities of the children adopted by each type of family. Table 3 shows that, while married couples completed fewer special needs adoptions, they were not less likely to adopt a child with a diagnosed cognitive, physical, or emotional disability. However, because married couples were likely to adopt a younger child, the adopted children of married couples were less likely to fall into the large *older child* category of special needs. Single men were the most likely to adopt a child with an emotional disturbance. The proportion of adopted children who are disabled is statistically significantly higher for couples (p -value<.01), except for the disability of *emotional disturbance*. For *emotional disturbance*, the proportion is statistically greater for single men compared with all other groups (p -value<.01).

The recruitment strategies and placement policies in large states can drive the national average. To see whether the patterns in the means of age, special needs, and disabilities by family type are robust, conditional logit estimation was used. State and year effects were included. Column 1 of table 4 shows the results of the estimation of $\log(p_{ij}/p_{i1})=\beta'_j x_i$, where the base (1) category is being adopted by a married couple, j represents alternatives to being adopted by a married couple (i.e., being adopted by a single mother or single father), and the vector x includes the case characteristics recorded in AFCARS. The probability that a child is adopted by a single female or married couple goes up at about the same rate with age of the child at the time of adoption. That is, the coefficient on child's age for single women is not statistically different from zero. The odds of a child being adopted by a single man, however, go up with age. Similarly, the age of the child at the time of termination of parental rights (TPR) does not predict adoption by a single female (relative to a married couple), but age at TPR is negative and statistically significantly associated with being adopted by a single man. Having a special need does not increase the probability of adoption by a single woman (again relative to a married couple). However, a child whose minority status confers a state-defined special need, a child who is part of a sibling group, or a child with a diagnosed condition is less likely to be adopted by a single man.

After controlling for the effect of the states, a child recorded as *mentally retarded* in AFCARS is more likely to be adopted by a single woman than by a married couple. A mentally retarded child is less likely to be adopted by a single man than by a married couple. A visually or hearing impaired child is less likely to be adopted by a single man. A child with a diagnosed but otherwise unspecified medical condition is less likely to be adopted by a single woman, but equally likely to be adopted by a married couple or a single man. Children with emotional disturbances are more likely to be adopted by single men.

Trends in Pre-Adoptive Relationships

As discussed above, researchers and policy makers debate whether children should be adopted by adults already known to them. Should (and do) kin formally adopt? Should foster parents be allowed to adopt? And, are there enough adults stepping forward to adopt children with whom they have no prior relationship at all?

Figure 3 shows the trends from 1996 through 2003 in pre-adoptive relationships. As shown elsewhere (e.g., Maza, 2002), the proportion of kinship adoptions rose from less than 10 percent in fiscal year 1996 to more than 20 percent in 2001. The proportion of adoptions by foster parents is about three times greater than the proportion of adoptions by kin or families with no prior relationship to the child. Foster parent adoption rose sharply between fiscal year 1997 and 1999, and drifted downward thereafter. The proportion of adoptions finalized by parents with no prior relationship to the child declined from about 23 percent in fiscal year 1996 to just over 13 percent in 2003. The absolute number of adoptions by non-relatives was about the same in 2003 as it was in fiscal year 2000. These trends indicate that recruitment and retention

of prospective adoptive families must become a priority for child welfare agencies (Wilson, Katz, & Geen, 2005).

The changes noted above are statistically significant (p -value $<.05$) when measured at the national level. Some states face a greater challenge in recruitment and retention than the national numbers indicate. There was a *decline* in the proportion of adoptions by parents with no previous ties to their adopted children in the following states: California, Delaware, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Montana, Ohio, and Wisconsin. On the other hand, there were increases in non-relative adoptions in Iowa and Nebraska, and there was a U-shaped pattern of decline and rise in this proportion in Arizona, Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Washington.

Averaging across all years, just over 60 percent of married couples were the foster parents of the adopted child; 16.5 percent of married couples were related at birth to the adopted child; 22 percent of adopting married couples were unrelated to the child prior to adoption. Just under 60 percent of unmarried women were the foster parents of the adopted child; almost 29 percent of unmarried women were related at birth to the adopted child, and just 12.5 percent of unmarried women were previously unrelated to the adopted child. About 53 percent of unmarried men who adopted were previously foster parents, 24.5 percent were related at birth, and 22 percent were unrelated.

Non-relative adoptions fell after 1998 in all types of adoptive families. In 1996, over 35 percent of married couples adopted a child with whom they had no prior relationship. In 2003, less than 20 percent of married couples adopted a child with whom they had no prior relationship. Just over 17 percent of unmarried women who adopted in 1996 had no prior relationship to the adopted child; in 2002 and 2003, only about 10 percent of single mother adoptions were stranger adoptions. This change from 1996 to 2003 is statistically significant (p -value $<.01$) for married couples, unmarried couples, and single females. The change for single males is statistically significant only from peak to 2003 (p -value $<.01$).

Some public agencies now ask prospective adoptive parents to foster a child even before pre-adoptive placement can be made. Foster-adopt seems to be most important in Washington, Montana, and Illinois, where more than 90 percent of adoptions with public agency involvement were completed by foster parents. Additionally, a large, one-time decline in non-relative adoptions that was coincident with an increase in adoptions by foster parents occurred in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Vermont.

Indeed, foster parent adoption was much more common in 2003 than it was in 1993 among all adoptive family types. The sharpest increase was in the prevalence of foster parents among married adoptive parents. Less than 40 percent of married parents finalizing an adoption in 1996 had fostered their child; in each year after 1998 about 60 percent of married parents who adopted had fostered first. The percent of single people who fostered first rose after 1996; however, there was downward drift in this proportion after 1999. The change from 1996 to 2003 is statistically significant for married couples and single females (p -values $<.01$). The change from peak to 2003 is statistically significant for all groups (p -values $<.05$).

In 2003, kinship adoptions were more common among families headed by unmarried couples and single adoptive parents than they were among families headed by married adoptive parents; the differences relative to married couples are statistically significant (p -values $<.05$). This was not always the case. In 1996, the proportions of married adoptive and single adoptive mothers were about equal.

Column 2 of table 4 shows the conditional logit estimation of the odds that a child with given characteristics was adopted by her foster parents or kin, compared to being adopted by a person

with whom she had no prior relationship. The coefficients reported in table 4, again, hold constant the effects of state and year, as well as race and sex.

An older child is more likely to be adopted by kin than by a stranger. There is no difference by age of the child in the odds of adoption by foster parents compared to strangers. The older the child *at the time of TPR*; however, the less likely he is to be adopted by kin. After controlling for state and year, special needs and disabilities made little difference in the odds of being adopted by foster parents or kin relative to a stranger; however, a child recorded as mentally retarded is less likely to be adopted by his or her foster parent.

A nested logit specification, in which placement decisions are viewed as sequential, was also considered. A nested logit might be appropriate if, for example, the decision about whether to place a child for adoption with someone who is already known to the child may be made before any other placement decisions because it is believed that foster parent and kinship adoptions reduce transitions and difficulties for the waiting child. Any decision about the optimal adoptive family structure for a child may be secondary. Overall, the patterns by adoptive structure revealed in the nested logit reinforce the results presented in table 4.

Time as Legal Orphans

The main thrust of the Adoption and Safe Families Act was to shorten stays in foster care by expediting adoptive placement (Lowry, 2004). ASFA requires faster movement towards involuntary termination of parental rights in some cases; for example, ASFA exempts states from pursuing reasonable efforts at reunification when a parent has “subjected the child to aggravated circumstances.” ASFA also reduced the number of months a child can remain in foster care without a permanency hearing and required states to petition for termination of parental rights if a child has been in care for 15 of the most recent 22 months (with exceptions).

Despite the fact that ASFA also established financial incentives to states to increase adoptions, the shorter timelines for termination of parental rights initially led to an increase in the number of children who became legal orphans. The fraction of children in care whose birth parents’ rights had been terminated increased over time (compare Needell et al., 2001 and Guggenheim, 1995). In December 2004, the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* reported that the average annual growth in TPRs from 1998 to 2004 was 1.5 times the average annual growth in adoptions. The number of waiting children peaked at about 130,000 in fiscal year 2000. From 2000 through 2005, the number of waiting children declined slightly, to 115,400. Some of the decline, however, may be attributable to changes in the way *waiting to be adopted* was defined by the Children’s Bureau (US DHHS, 2007c).

Despite an increase in the age of adoption from 6.5 to 6.9 years, the average time between TPR and adoption fell over time. Table 5 shows that the peak of wait time occurred in 1997 at 1.51 years. Since 1999, the average time between termination of parental rights and finalization of adoption hovered around 1.3 years. Nearly half of all adoptions during the period were completed within one year of TPR, and 80 percent were completed within two years of TPR.

Wait times declined even in states where the wait was longest. In 1996 four states (Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas, and Delaware) averaged over two years’ wait. In 2000, only Minnesota and Kentucky took that long, and in 2003, only Maine did.

One of the biggest accomplishments in adoption practice in the past decade has been the sustained increase in the number adoptions of children who have been legal orphans for two years or more. Only about 1,500 adoptions of such long-term legal orphans were recorded in fiscal year 1996 while about 9,000 were recorded in 2002 and 2003. The adoption of long-term

legal orphans represents a small, but increasing and statistically significant (p -value $<.02$), proportion of all adoptions with state agency involvement.

The AFCARS data show that the children adopted by single fathers experienced the longest wait times. Figure 4 summarizes the results of the ordinary least squares regression explaining the time from TPR to finalization as a function of age at TPR, adoptive family structure, and their interaction. The regression also controls for the special needs of the child, the type of pre-adoptive relationship between parents and child, race and sex of the child, and year and state of finalization.

The complete regression table is suppressed in the interest of space. The regression was specified in natural logarithms. The R^2 of the regression was 0.18. The main effect of each characteristic of the child and adoptive family was statistically different from zero (p -values $<.05$). The interaction terms between adoptive family structure and age at TPR were statistically different from zero (p -values $<.05$), except for the case of unmarried couples. The interaction between family structure and prior relationship was not statistically significant for single adoptive fathers. The interaction between family structure and prior relationship was statistically significant and positive (p -values $<.05$) for single mothers who adopted children previously known to them. This effect, however, was driven by very slow foster mom adoptions in eight states and slow kinship adoptions in four states. The effect of race on wait time is discussed at length in Hansen & Pollack (in press).

Wait time is positively associated with age at TPR. The wait times experienced by a child adopted by single fathers, even at young ages, is predicted to be several months longer than the wait time for an otherwise similar child adopted by a married couple. The gap in wait times narrows slightly as age at TPR increases, but the predicted wait times do not converge until age at termination approaches 15.

The wait times experienced by children adopted by single mothers at young ages are also longer than the wait times for those adopted by married parents. However, the wait times increase more slowly for children adopted by single mothers as the age at TPR increased. Among children whose birth parents' rights were terminated after age nine, those who were subsequently adopted by single mothers have the shortest wait times.

Conclusion

The AFCARS data document how the increase in adoptions from foster care in the late 1990s was built upon a strategy of encouraging single parents to adopt children they already knew through kinship ties or fostering. Single adoptive mothers took on most of the same challenges as married couples: children with medical needs, children who were mentally retarded, sibling groups of children. Even single women with no prior relationship to the child were counted upon to adopt mentally retarded children and children with emotional disturbances. Single men stepped up to adopt older children, and especially children with emotional disturbances.

Adoptions from foster care have leveled off in most states since fiscal year 2000. Many of the foster parents and kin already known to children and agencies have already adopted children under the ASFA adoption push. If public agencies want to continue to increase adoptions from foster care, they will have to aggressively tackle the challenge of recruiting additional new families to serve as resources for children (Macomber, et al., 2005).

While the exact number of adults interested in adoption is unknown, there is evidence that the number is substantial. One survey found that about one-third of all American adults have considered adopting a child at least somewhat seriously (Harris Interactive, 2002). Data from the National Survey of Family Growth indicate that in 1995, 232,000 women said they were

seeking to adopt and had taken steps to do so; we can infer that in 1995 more than one million women had taken steps to adopt a child but had not completed the adoption process (Chandra, Abma, Maza & Bachrach, 1999). One of the steps the women might have taken includes calling an adoption exchange. The National Adoption Center alone, a nationally active exchange, gets more than 40,000 calls each year. About 15,000 calls are from people who are interested in adopting a child from foster care (Wilson, Katz & Geen, 2005).

A substantial share of national survey respondents said that they would “accept” a child who looks similar to a waiting child: 56 percent said they would accept a child 6 to 12 years old; 83 percent said they would accept a child with a mild physical or mental disability; 33 percent said they would accept a child with a severe disability; 66 percent said they would accept a sibling group; 79 percent reported they would accept a black child (Chandra, et al., 1999). A separate survey concludes that if a small fraction of all adults interested in adoption were to adopt a child from foster care, all current legal orphans could potentially be placed in adoptive families (Harris Interactive, 2002).

To recruit these interested families, public agencies will likely need to improve both publicity and customer service. Public agencies might consider how they compete with agencies placing children internationally (Hansen & Hansen, 2006). Even preferential adopters may be drawn to international agencies if their processes are highly visible, easy to learn about, friendly, and encouraging. By contrast, customer service at public child welfare agencies can be less-than-welcoming. Dropout during—and even before—foster and adoptive parent training may be partly the result of positive self-selection, with parents who are unwilling to meet the many needs of children with difficult personal histories withdrawing from the process. But prospective parent dropout may also be partly the result of the projection of negative attitudes by agency staff (Wilson, Katz, & Geen, 2005), the media, and the public. Because prospective parents must choose an adoption service provider before they can be matched with a child, the less welcoming and supportive public agencies are, the fewer families will complete adoptions of waiting children. Therefore, continuing success in meeting ASFA goals will depend on the ability of states to recruit, educate, and retain families.

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Figure 1.

Adoptions from foster care, 1995–2005. The number of adoptions from foster care doubled during the late 1990s. From US DHHS, Adoptions of children with public child welfare agency involvement, by state, FY 1995–FY 2005. Retrieved May 7, 2007, from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/adoptchild05.htm.

Figure 2. Trends in adoptive family structure. Share of couples (both married and unmarried) of adoptive parents fell, while share of single adoptive parents (both female and male) rose. Author's calculation from AFCARS Public Use Adoption Data.

Figure 3.

Trends in pre-adoptive relationship. Foster parents account for the largest share of adoptive parents. Adoptions by kin increased relative to adoption by nonrelatives. Author's calculation from AFCARS Public Use Adoption Data.

Figure 4.

Predicted wait time by family structure. For young children, wait time is lowest in placements with married adoptive parents. For older children, wait time is lowest in placements with single adoptive mothers. Children placed with single adoptive fathers wait longest regardless of age. Author's calculation from AFCARS Public Use Data.

Table 1

Age of Children at Finalization, in Years, by Adoptive Family Structure

	Child adopted by:				Average
	Married couple	Unmarried couple	Single female	Single male	
1996	6.1 (4.5)	7.0 (4.6)	6.7 (3.8)	8.9 (5.8)	6.3 (4.4)
1997	5.9 (4.0)	6.4 (3.6)	6.8 (4.1)	8.1 (5.8)	6.2 (4.1)
1998	6.3 (3.8)	6.0 (3.8)	7.2 (3.8)	8.8 (4.1)	6.6 (3.8)
1999	6.3 (3.9)	6.4 (3.8)	7.4 (3.9)	8.5 (4.1)	6.7 (3.9)
2000	6.4 (4.0)	6.5 (4.2)	7.3 (3.9)	9.0 (4.5)	6.8 (4.0)
2001	6.4 (4.1)	6.0 (3.9)	7.4 (4.1)	8.9 (4.3)	6.8 (4.1)
2002	6.5 (4.2)	6.3 (4.1)	7.5 (4.2)	9.2 (4.3)	6.8 (4.2)
2003	6.4 (4.2)	6.1 (4.1)	7.5 (4.3)	9.2 (4.4)	6.8 (4.3)
Average	6.4 (4.1)	6.3 (4.0)	7.4 (4.0)	8.9 (4.4)	6.7 (4.1)

Note. Standard deviations in parentheses. Author's calculation from AFCARS Public Use Adoption Data.

Table 2

Children with a Special Need by Adoptive Family Structure

	Married couples	Unmarried couples	Single female	Single male	Average
1996	46.8	62.3	55.0	46.3	49.0
1997	59.5	76.7	62.5	52.1	60.5
1998	79.8	86.6	85.5	84.4	81.7
1999	81.1	81.8	87.8	83.7	83.3
2000	84.8	83.5	88.3	85.9	85.9
2001	85.9	92.6	89.4	86.6	87.0
2002	84.7	91.6	89.5	88.3	86.3
2003	83.6	87.7	88.8	85.2	85.1
Average	81.0	85.3	86.6	83.4	82.8

Note. Percent of valid observations. Author's calculation from AFCARS Public Use Adoption Data.

Table 3

Children with Disabilities by Adoptive Family Structure

	Married couples	Unmarried couples	Single female	Single male	Average
Mental retardation	3.2	4.5	2.3	2.3	3.0
Visual/hearing impairment	1.6	1.3	1.0	0.9	1.4
Physical disability	3.5	3.1	2.3	2.0	3.1
Emotional disturbance	12.3	12.0	8.8	14.7	11.4
Other diagnosed condition	16.0	13.4	12.0	12.7	14.7

Note. Percent of valid observations. Author's calculation from AFCARS Public Use Adoption Data.

Table 4

Conditional Logit Results

	<u>Odds of adoption by</u> Single female	Single male	<u>Odds of adoption by</u> Foster parents	Kin
Child's age at adoption	0.032 (0.025)	0.089** (0.014)	0.019 (0.048)	0.078* (0.042)
Child's age at TPR	-0.027 (0.025)	-0.078** (0.014)	-0.017 (0.046)	-0.078* (0.042)
No special need	0.028 (0.159)	-0.124 (0.107)	-0.069 (0.082)	-0.39 (0.346)
Special need: Age	-0.033 (0.146)	0.057 (0.088)	-0.014 (0.093)	-0.297 (0.291)
Special need: minority race	-0.073 (0.149)	-0.495** (0.099)	0.132 (0.106)	-0.34 (0.291)
Special need: Sibling group	-0.118 (0.121)	-0.411** (0.092)	-0.054 (0.118)	-0.273 (0.251)
Special need: Diagnosed condition	-0.123 (0.136)	-0.249** (0.093)	-0.061 (0.110)	-0.322 (0.271)
Mental retardation	0.08* (0.041)	-0.152* (0.105)	-0.112* (0.071)	0.051 (0.072)
Visual/hearing impaired	-0.069 (0.056)	-0.25** (0.114)	-0.057 (0.094)	0.049 (0.057)
Physical disability	0.04 (0.037)	0.008 (0.111)	-0.083 (0.063)	-0.064 (0.059)
Emotional disturbance	0.002 (0.034)	0.289** (0.054)	-0.092 (0.069)	0.014 (0.082)
Other diagnosis	-0.068** (0.039)	0.062 (0.082)	-0.101 (0.101)	-0.098 (0.082)
N		248,035		382,218
Pseudo R ²		.07		.20

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Effects of race, sex, state, and year were estimated but not reported. Author's calculation from AFCARS Public Use Adoption Data.

*
p<.10

**
p<.05.

Table 5

Average Time from TPR to Adoption

	Mean (years)	Standard deviation
1996	1.46	5.54
1997	1.51	1.79
1998	1.42	1.51
1999	1.30	1.34
2000	1.28	1.48
2001	1.32	1.32
2002	1.32	1.36
2003	1.32	1.30
Average	1.34	1.72

Note. Calculation of author from AFCARS Public Use Data.