

WHO WILL ADOPT THE FOSTER CARE CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND?

The number of children in foster care eligible for adoption far outnumbers those who are adopted each year. At the beginning of fiscal year 1999, for instance, 128,000 of the nation's approximately 558,000 foster care children were available for adoption.¹ Over the next 12 months, only 47,000 of them, or 37 percent, were successfully placed.²

Where will states find adoptive parents for the foster children left behind? For clues to help state recruitment efforts, Urban Institute researchers examined the characteristics of parents who have adopted children from the foster care system and those of children who are waiting for permanent homes.

From Foster Care to Adoption

Of the children adopted in FY 1999, foster parents adopted 56 percent, relatives adopted 20 percent, and adults with whom they had no prior relationship provided adoptive homes for 24 percent. The high levels of foster-parent and relative adoptions represent a radical shift in child welfare practice. Many foster parents, originally looked upon as temporary caretakers, were required as late as the 1970s to sign a statement that they would not seek to adopt children placed in their care. Similarly, relatives were typically not considered an option, accounting for less than 3 percent of adoptions in 1982.

Compared with children still in foster care, those who are adopted are younger and more likely to be female, Caucasian, and Hispanic (Table 1). In turn, those awaiting adoption tend to be closest in characteristics—that is, older, male, and black—to the children adopted by relatives. General applicants—those who are not a child's relatives or foster parents—are slightly more likely than foster parents to adopt older and minority children, but are significantly less likely than foster parents or relatives to adopt children with special needs.³

Characteristics of Adoptive Parents

While there are few differences between foster-parent and general-applicant adoptive parents, relatives who adopt have distinctive characteristics (Table 2). All types of adoptive parents tend to be older (a mean age of 43 for mothers and 44 for fathers) than new biological parents, but relatives who adopt are significantly older and less likely to be married than foster parents or general applicants.

Relatives, not surprisingly, are more similar in race and ethnicity to the children they adopt than are foster parents and general applicants. Some experts argue that the rise in foster-parent adoptions is increasing the number of transracial adoptions, since there are insufficient numbers of minority foster parents.

TABLE 1: Who Gets Adopted and by Whom?

Children's Characteristics	Available Children	Adopted Children by Type of Adoptive Parents			
		All Parents	Foster Parents	Relatives	General Applicants
Age					
Mean	8.1 years	6.0 years	5.8 years	6.6 years	6.0 years
Over age 5	64%	48%	46%	55%	49%
Sex (Female)	48%	50%	50%	47%	51%
Race					
Black (non-Hispanic)	43%	34%	34%	36%	35%
Hispanic	13%	16%	14%	21%	18%
White	34%	45%	49%	37%	44%
Special Needs	NA ^a	80%	83%	87%	68%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of FY 1999 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003.

^aData source does not include a special-needs designation for these children.

TABLE 2: Who Are the Adoptive Parents?

Parental Characteristics	Adoptive Parents			
	All	Foster Parents	Relatives	General Applicants
Married	72%	75%	55%	77%
Mean Age				
Mother	43 years	43 years	46 years	41 years
Father	44 years	44 years	47 years	42 years
Race				
Black (non-Hispanic)	26%	25%	29%	27%
Hispanic	6%	4%	14%	4%
White	51%	57%	35%	53%
Transracial Adoption^a	21%	22%	12%	28%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of FY 1999 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003.

^aChild is of a different race or ethnicity than adoptive parents (different than both parents, if adopted by a married couple).

However, adoptions by general applicants are more likely to be transracial than foster-parent adoptions.

Policy and Practice Implications

Foster parents, once barred from adopting children in their care, are now adopting many special-needs children. This may be because foster parents develop relationships with these children and learn that they can meet their unique needs. Because foster parents are generally given first consideration for adopting children in their care, many child welfare professionals wrongly assume that foster parents tend to adopt children who are younger and have fewer special needs.

Emphasizing foster parenting as a precursor to adoption may increase the number of potential parents for special-needs children. For those wanting to adopt but not interested in foster parenting, agencies may want to create opportunities to volunteer with foster children so parents can better assess whether they are able to care for a special-needs child.

Over the past two decades, relatives have become the preferred placement resource for children requiring temporary foster care or a substitute permanent home. In addition to accounting for 20 percent of foster care adoptions, relatives are caring for more than 24,000 children waiting to be adopted. Addressing barriers to relative adoption, such as foster parent licensing, could significantly increase the number of children adopted.⁴

Given the disproportionate number of black children waiting to be adopted, many agencies have redoubled their efforts to recruit black families. Yet, it may be unrealistic to expect enough to come forth, since black parents already adopt foster children at a rate double their proportion in the population. Any changes to adoption recruitment are complicated, however, by the unsettled debate about the appropriateness of transracial adoption.

Tapping into the pool of general applicants holds both great promise and potential pitfalls. While the number of people interested in adoption is unknown, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' 1995 National Survey of Family Growth suggests that more than 470,000 women were planning to adopt a child, but had yet to complete the process.

What stymies a successful parent-child match? Research shows that many people are not interested in foster children with special needs. Bureaucratic hassles also frustrate many would-be parents and efforts to find permanent homes for foster children waiting to be adopted. Child welfare agencies may increase the adoption rate if they reduce administrative hurdles and better equip families to overcome the challenges inherent in adopting a child with special needs or one of a different race or ethnicity.

Further Details

For more Urban Institute research on child welfare, go to www.urban.org/r/children.cfm.

Endnotes

¹ Excludes children 16 or older with a case plan goal of emancipation.

² Includes children who may have entered foster care and been adopted during the year.

³ Each state has its own definition of special needs, referring to children with a specific condition or situation, such as age, membership in a minority or sibling group, or a mental, emotional, or physical handicap, that prevents placement without special assistance.

⁴ One could consider these children as already achieving permanency, since relatives who choose not to adopt are typically willing to care permanently for them and children in kinship care feel they can remain with relatives until they grow up.

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