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Foster Care Adoption in the United States:

An Analysis of Interest in Adoption and a Review of State Recruitment Strategies

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The **National Adoption Day Coalition** is comprised of eight partners – The Alliance for Children's Rights, Casey Family Services, Children's Action Network, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Freddie Mac Foundation, and Target – that work to draw special attention to foster children waiting for permanent families and to celebrate all loving families that adopt. **Web site:** www.nationaladoptionday.org

The **Urban Institute** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research and educational organization established in Washington, D.C., in 1968. Its staff investigates the social, economic, and governance problems confronting the nation and evaluates the public and private means to alleviate them. The Institute disseminates its research findings through publications, its web site, the media, seminars, and forums. This study was conducted by: Jennifer Macomber, Erica Hecht Zielewski, Kate Chambers, and Rob Geen. **Web site:** www.urban.org

Executive Summary

On any given day in the United States, more than 100,000 foster children are waiting to be adopted by someone who can provide a permanent, loving home. While they wait, these children often live with foster parents, with relatives, or in group homes or institutions. Extensive recruitment efforts have been undertaken at the state and federal levels to identify homes for these children. Yet many children still wait a very long time for a new family.

The National Adoption Day Coalition works to draw attention to these children and celebrate loving parents that choose to adopt. The Coalition, comprised of eight partners—The Alliance for Children's Rights, Casey Family Services, Children's Action Network, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption®, Freddie Mac Foundation, and Target Corporation—commissioned the Urban Institute to conduct a study to look more closely at how states find adoptive families for children in foster care.

Last year, the research report commissioned by the National Adoption Day Coalition identified primary barriers and promising approaches to move foster children into adoptive homes. Leading the list of barriers was the difficulty in finding enough interested and able families to adopt waiting children. This year's report looks more closely at this problem. It provides a first-time national look at the state of adoption recruitment by describing: levels of interest in adoption, who takes steps toward adopting, and how interest might be channeled toward foster care adoption. In doing so, it provides needed direction to states and federal policymakers in crafting future recruitment strategies.

Key Findings

- **Women's Interest in Adopting Increased by 38 Percent between 1995 and 2002**
  Based on estimates from the National Survey of Family Growth, 18 million women reported being interested in adopting in 2002. This represents a 38 percent increase since 1995 when 13 million women reported interest. The 18 million women interested in 2002 represents a third (33 percent) of the population of women ages 18 to 44, up from about a quarter (24 percent) of women (13 million) in 1995.

- **Women's Interest in Adopting Increased across Demographic Groups**
  More women reported an interest in adopting in 2002 than in 1995 in nearly all age, race and ethnic, income, education, and religious groups. Some groups of interest to recruiters seeking homes for foster children saw notable percent increases: black women (35 percent), Hispanic women (29 percent), lower-income women (50 percent) (women with family incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty level), Protestant women (41 percent), and 18- to 24-year-olds (73 percent).

- **Many Women Interested in Adopting Special Needs Children**
  Of the women currently seeking to adopt in 2002, many reported a willingness to adopt children with characteristics similar to those waiting to be adopted. For example, the vast majority (97 percent) of women currently seeking to adopt would be willing to accept a minority child. Nearly a third of women (31 percent) said they would be willing to adopt a child that is 13 years old or older. Ninety percent of women reported a willingness to adopt a child with a mild disability, and 31 percent said they would accept a child with a severe disability. Seventy-five percent of women said they would be willing to accept a sibling group.

- **Women Interested In Adoption Were Less Likely to Take Steps to Adopt in 2002 than in 1995**
  In 2002, 10 percent (1.9 million) of the women who reported an interest in adopting took steps toward this end. This portion represents a decline since 1995, when 16 percent (2.1 million) of the women who reported interest took steps. Declines in the portion of interested women taking steps occurred for many demographic groups. For some groups of interested women, the percentage that took steps remained fairly steady: 30- to 34-year-olds, black women, Hispanic women, unmarried women, and lower-income women.

- **States Use Multiple Types of Recruitment Strategies**
  All states and the District of Columbia use child-specific recruitment as part of their recruitment strategy, and most states also incorporate general and targeted recruitment as part of their strategies. The majority of states (40) use all three types of recruitment in their strategies to recruit adoptive homes. In fact, only two states reported using just one recruitment type as part of their overall recruiting strategy.

- **States Employ Innovative Recruitment Strategies to Translate Interest Into Action**
  States conduct general, child-specific, and targeted recruitment through a variety of activities. A majority of states (42) use the media to feature children. All states offer photo listings depicting their children in foster care. Over half of states (32) use faith-based recruitment. And some states use fost-adopt strategies (10), language-based initiatives (10), or word-of-mouth efforts (11). The examples of each of these strategies provided in the report reflect a greater need not to just make families aware of the need for adoptive families, but to personally engage and retain families in the recruitment process.

Recommendations

The National Adoption Day Coalition is encouraged by the dramatic increase in interest in adoption and the extensive recruitment activity occurring across the nation. However, given that interest often does not translate into action, there still is much work to be done to ensure that all children find the permanent, loving families they need and deserve. Based on this research report, the National Adoption Day Coalition recommends the following:

- **Shift in Messaging from Awareness to Taking Action**
  These findings suggest significant progress has been made in generating interest and awareness around adoption. While this is an important first step, the findings also reveal that future campaigns are needed to encourage those interested and able to adopt a foster child to actually take steps toward that end. Future campaigns might shift from telling prospective parents that anyone can adopt to telling interested adopters *how* they can adopt.

- **Channel Interest toward Foster Care Adoption**
  The findings in this report also suggest an opportunity to encourage the option of foster adoption in comparison to other types of adoption. Foster care adoption may be less costly than other types of adoption and often offers financial supports and post-adoption services to families that other types of adoption may not provide. Moreover, it is a means by which to help children in one's own community who need homes.

- **Use Targeted Recruitment to Focus on High-Propensity Groups**
  The report identifies key groups of women for whom interest is up and levels of taking action have not declined: 30- to 34-year-olds, black and Hispanic women, unmarried women, and lower-income women. States might consider more expansive targeted efforts toward these women.

- **Encourage Individuals Not Taking Steps to Participate in Other Ways**
  There are many ways to support the foster care adoption process other than by adopting. With so many individuals interested in adopting but not taking steps, the field might consider strategies to encourage these individuals to support foster care adoption in other ways.

- **Develop a Consumer-Friendly Foster Care Adoption Process**
  In order to sell the foster care adoption process as a viable option to potential adopters, the process itself must be efficient and consumer-friendly. For interested families, the first call they make or the first web site they see may leave lasting impressions. Three stages of the process should be considered as part of efforts to make the process more consumer-friendly: the circumstances of the first contact interested adopters have with agencies, the navigation strategies for guiding families through the process, and the supports and services available to the adoptive family and child.

- **Use Available Resources to Develop New Recruitment Strategies**
  The Federal Adoption Opportunities Program (AOP) grants might be targeted to enhance recruitment activities. Grants could be used for improving adoption web sites and responses to inquiries, developing adoption support services for families seeking to adopt, or funding positions for parent advocates.

- **Test the Effectiveness of Recruitment Strategies with Rigorous Research**
  All states are conducting recruitment activities, yet there is little research indicating what works. Rigorous evaluations and better data are needed to understand the strategies that result in successful adoptions.

INTRODUCTION

The most recent data available suggest that 119,000 children in foster care were waiting to be adopted in 2003 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The children in this circumstance have been abused or neglected and the state has determined that the best prospects for finding them a permanent home are through adoption. While they wait for this home to be found, these children often live with foster parents, relatives, or in group homes or institutions. Many wait a long time. On average, these children have been in foster care for more than 3.5 years. Once their parents' parental rights have been terminated and they are free to be adopted, they wait on average nearly another year and a half before joining an adoptive family. Nearly a fifth of them wait longer than two years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

Policymakers and researchers grapple with why it takes so long to find adoptive homes for these children. Last year, the National Adoption Day Coalition research report identified the primary barriers and promising approaches states report in moving foster children into adoptive homes. One of the leading barriers was difficulty finding interested and able families to adopt these children. Nearly every state (47) reported that this was a significant problem. The two most commonly mentioned concerns were finding homes for children with special needs (i.e., older or minority children, sibling groups, and children with behavioral problems and disabilities) and finding homes to reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the children in foster care.

This year, the National Adoption Day Coalition commissioned the Urban Institute to conduct a study to look more closely at how states find adoptive families for children in foster care. This process is typically called adoption recruitment. Adoption recruitment includes the practices, methods, and procedures by which an adoptive family is located. These efforts involve not just finding families willing to adopt a child unfamiliar to them, but also exploring the network of family members and friends a child already knows to find potential adoptive families. Adoption recruitment can also involve recruiting foster parents who might eventually adopt a child they foster. This report provides a first-time national look at the state of adoption recruitment. It describes levels of interest in adoption, who takes steps toward adopting, and how interest might be channeled toward foster care adoption.

This report comes at a critical time. The passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997 placed a greater urgency on finding permanent homes for children in foster care in a timely manner. And while there was a sharp increase in adoptions after ASFA, numbers of adoptions have remained steady at around 50,000 per year since 2000. Finding enough homes and the right homes is not easy. States employ a variety of strategies toward this end, yet direction is needed to guide future approaches. Using data from the 1995 and 2002 National Survey of Family Growth and the state Child and Family Services Reviews, the following pages of this report depict a growing pool of interested adopters and suggest strategies for channeling this interest toward identifying permanent and loving homes for children in foster care.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Gauging Interest in Adoption

Using data from the 1995 and 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), researchers analyzed women's interest in adoption and those who took steps to adopt. The NSFG, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), involves interviews with a nationally representative sample of women and men between 15- and 44-years-old on issues related to marriage, contraception, infertility, and women's health in general. The NSFG asks female respondents a series of questions regarding the respondents' interest in adoption (e.g., "Have you ever considered adopting a child?") and also whether they are actively seeking to adopt (e.g., "At this time, are you seeking to adopt a child?") or have taken steps to adopt. Those seeking to adopt and those who have taken steps are asked their preferences around the types of children they would like to adopt.

Researchers used the NCHS Statistical Export and Tabulation System (SETS) to extract the data for a sample of women ages 18 to 44. Data was then analyzed, applying weights, stratum, and cluster variables, to produce estimates that take account of the complex design of the sample. Statistical tests were conducted to test for differences between particular estimates. All results were subjected to a thorough review process to ensure their accuracy.

Determining the Recruitment Landscape

Data for this analysis were also extracted from states' Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR). The CFSR is a tool used by the federal government to ensure that state child welfare agencies conform to federal child welfare requirements. Congress mandated CFSRs through amendments to the Social Security Act of 1994, and ASFA of 1997 further specified the review process, requiring a more hands-on assessment of states' conformity with a set of indicators. The process is designed to help states improve child welfare services and the outcomes for families and children who receive services by identifying promising approaches and needs within state programs, as well as areas where technical assistance can lead to program improvements. CFSRs are administered by the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The review process is a collaborative effort between the federal and state governments. A review team made up of both state and federal staff members conducts the reviews and evaluates state performance. The team relies on information from a variety of sources in making decisions about a state's performance, including a statewide assessment completed by the state's members of the review team, onsite reviews of a sample of children and families served by the state, statewide aggregate data, and interviews with state and community representatives. The CFSR results in three documents: the statewide assessment, a final review, and a subsequent program improvement plan (PIP). The PIP provides a plan for addressing outcomes that are not determined to be in substantial conformity. The CFSR review process began in 2000 and will conclude in 2004. States will be reviewed again in five years.

Using the three CFSR documents, researchers created an "extraction document" for each state by copying and pasting information relevant to adoption recruitment. Researchers then reviewed each extraction and compiled all recruitment techniques into a matrix of recruitment strategies. The review process was completed twice to ensure accuracy and reliability of results. Final assessments were obtained for 50 states and the District of Columbia. Statewide assessments were available for 45 states and the District of Columbia. Program improvement plans were available for 42 states.

Highlighting Innovative Strategies

Using the data from the CFSRs, researchers selected a set of strategies to highlight that are innovative, noteworthy, and most importantly, replicable for other states and localities. Research staff conducted phone interviews with key stakeholders knowledgeable of each recruitment strategy to attain more detailed and current information about the particular strategy. Interviewees reviewed all highlighted examples for accuracy. It is important to note that other states may be employing similar or possibly more innovative strategies; however, these examples illustrate some of the most innovative strategies presented in the CFSRs.

HOW ARE ADOPTIVE HOMES FOUND?

What Is Adoption Recruitment?

Adoption recruitment includes the practices, methods, and procedures by which an adoptive family is located. Adoption recruitment can take many forms, from individualized local efforts to national campaigns. Recruitment includes not just finding families willing to adopt a child they do not know, but also exploring the network of family members and friends the child already knows or recruiting foster parents who might eventually adopt a child. In fact, foster parents and relatives adopted 85 percent of the children in foster care waiting to be adopted in 2003. Thus while recruitment may be perceived as seeking adopters generally unknown to the children in care, clearly important recruiting efforts also occur within a child's already existing network of friends, family, and foster parents.

Recruitment and Adoption Processes Work in Tandem

Finding permanent homes for children can be thought of as a three step process: raising general awareness of the issue, engaging families to start the adoption process, and retaining families throughout the adoption process (i.e., home study, training, paperwork). Recruitment can fulfill two of these three steps. Recruitment strategies can raise awareness about the need for adoptive homes and can draw families into the process by convincing them that adoption is something they can do. The adoption process, however, must be consumer friendly and engaging to ultimately convert an interested family into an adoptive home. Extremely effective recruitment or a very efficient adoption process in isolation will not result in more adoptions. Recruitment efforts must work in tandem with the adoption process.

Policy Context around Adoption Recruitment

Throughout the 1990s, the call for permanency for children in foster care was further heightened through two distinct pieces of legislation, the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) in 1994 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997. MEPA, as amended by the Interethnic Adoption Provisions in 1996, focused on reducing the time that children wait to achieve permanency, eliminating discrimination (racial, ethnic, or nationality) in children's foster care and adoptive placements, and required that agencies recruit adoptive and foster families that reflect the background of children in care. MEPA also required that states document a plan to diligently recruit families for the children in foster care. Three years later, ASFA added pressure for states to ensure children were adopted in a timely manner and placed stricter timelines on agencies to terminate parental rights. ASFA also compelled states to record efforts to find adoptive homes for children and mandated child-specific recruitment through use of national and state adoption exchanges.

Growth of Adoption Recruitment

The force of legislative efforts, combined with the need for adoptive homes for numerous children, prompted many states and agencies to increase their adoption recruitment activities. During the late 1990s, many states began statewide campaigns to recruit adoptive families. At the federal level, a national adoptive parent recruitment and retention campaign, AdoptUSKids, was developed and sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau. This national effort, begun in 2002, created a series of television advertisements as well as a national online photolisting of children.

Effectiveness of Recruitment Strategies

To date, there have been very few high-quality evaluations of the effectiveness of adoption recruitment strategies. There is a wide body of anecdotal evidence suggesting that one technique is more effective than another, yet relying on these accounts as evidence might be misleading. For example, what works in one community may not work in another community. Television may be effective in a large metropolitan area, but presenting information at a booth at a local music festival may be more effective in a smaller, rural area. Measuring success in adoption recruitment is also difficult. Is it enough to say that many families inquired about adoption because of a strategy or is it better to measure the number that actually go on to be home studied or adopt? It also may take more than one strategy to get a family interested in adoption. While seeing a billboard of a waiting child may be what gets a family to call, it is very likely that a family also saw television specials on adoption or has a neighbor who has adopted. Isolating which strategy "recruited" such a family is difficult. Understanding what works in adoption recruitment is a complicated endeavor that adoption researchers should investigate more rigorously.

GUIDELINES TO RESEARCH

Report Focuses on Women's Interest

This report focuses on women's interest in adoption. The NSFG survey interviews both men and women, yet the instruments differ by gender group. The instrument for women asks about interest in adoption but the instrument for men does not. Ideally it would be useful to consider men's interest in adoption as well as women's, although prior research does suggest females are more likely to consider adoption than males (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2002).

Three Groups of Women Are Considered

This analysis highlights findings about three groups of women ages 18 to 44, one overall group and then two subsets of the overall group. These groups were created using data from the NSFG for both 1995 and 2002. The questions from the survey instruments needed to create these groups were the same in both years allowing for comparisons of the size and characteristics of the groups between the two years.

Interested Women

Women are considered interested if they currently are seeking to adopt or considered adopting in the past. Specifically, this group includes women who answered yes to the question:

> *At this time, are you currently seeking to adopt a/another child?*
> For women who have already adopted or report trying to adopt a child that lives with them or lived with them in the past, they are asked if they are currently seeking to adopt *another* child.

This group also includes women who answered "no" to the above question, but then answered "yes" when asked the question:

> *Have you ever considered adopting a/another child?*
> For women that have already adopted or report trying to adopt a child that lives with them or lived with them in the past, they are asked if they ever considered adopting *another* child.

Interested Women Who Are Currently Seeking to Adopt

This report also looks more closely at women currently seeking to adopt a child, a subgroup of the women interested in adopting. These are the women who, as described above, answer yes to the question:

> *At this time are you currently seeking to adopt a/another child?*
> For women who have already adopted or report trying to adopt a child that lives with them or lived with them in the past, they are asked if they are currently seeking to adopt *another* child.

Interested Women Who Took Steps to Adopt

Another subgroup of the interested group of women are those who took steps toward adopting. Women who answered "yes" when asked whether they were currently seeking to adopt or had ever considered adopting were also asked about steps they took toward adopting. Specifically, this group includes women who answered "yes" to the question:

> *Have you placed a newspaper ad or contacted an adoption agency, a lawyer, a doctor, or other source about adopting a/another child?*

This group also includes women who ever considered adopting a child and answered "yes" to the question:

> *Did you ever contact an adoption agency, a lawyer, a doctor, or other source about adopting a/another child?*

Since the focus of this report is on recruitment and identifying potential adoptive parents for foster children, the analysis did not include women who adopted in the past or those currently in the process of

adopting a child that lives with them or lived with them in the past unless they are seeking to adopt or considering adopting another child. Hence the women in this study who adopted in the past or are currently in the process of adopting a child that report interest in adopting or taking steps toward adopting are referring to another child.

Interest Extends Beyond Just Foster Care Adoption

It is important to keep in mind that while the focus of this report is on foster care adoption, the questions in the NSFG survey ask about adoption generally. Women interested in adoption may be considering a private domestic adoption or an international adoption. Adoptions from foster care, however, do represent a growing portion of all adoptions. Research by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau found the total number of adoptions in the United States remained fairly steady between 1992 and 2001 at around 127,000 adoptions, yet the portion of adoptions that were private (including independent, kinship, and tribal), international, or through public child welfare agencies changed dramatically. Adoptions through public child welfare agencies accounted for approximately 39 percent of all adoptions in 2001, up from 18 percent in 1992. At the same time, the portion of international adoptions increased from 5 to 15 percent between 1992 and 2001. Private, independent, kinship, or tribal adoptions decreased substantially from 77 percent in 1992 to 46 percent in 2001. The NSFG questions do not distinguish the type of adoption a woman is contemplating. This report thus provides a description of the potential pool of adopters of foster children and considers implications for the foster care system in recruiting women from the same pool of women who seek to adopt through other means.

Estimates Are Less Precise for Current Seekers Due to Small Sample Sizes

The sample sizes for the analysis of women currently seeking to adopt and their preferences about the types of children they would be willing to adopt are relatively small. This has two implications for this research: (1) Readers should be cautioned that estimates of the characteristics and preferences of women currently seeking to adopt provide approximates but should not be considered precise percentages. (2) When estimates are not overly precise, it is difficult to compare differences between estimates. As a result, information on differences between current seekers in 1995 and 2002 and between various subgroups is limited.

Data Collected between 1995 and 2004

The latest cycle of NSFG data used in this analysis were from 2002. As is often the case with survey data, a few years are needed to collect and process the data. As a result, these data were only recently released to the public. Therefore, when the report refers to women currently seeking to adopt, it is referring to women who were seeking to adopt in 2002. Moreover, while these data provide the most up-to-date information on interest in adoption, it is possible that levels of interest and the types of women interested may have changed since 2002. Similarly, the analysis of the recruiting landscape is based on the first round of CFSRs, most of which were conducted between 2000 and 2004. Much may have changed since that time, particularly for those states that conducted their CFSRs early in the process.

KEY FINDING: MOST STATES USE MULTIPLE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

During the late 1990s, many states began new statewide campaigns to recruit adoptive families. Other states with already existing campaigns in place expanded their efforts. Recruiting initiatives during these years included the development of the Wednesday's Child program that was established in multiple states around the nation, the expansion of the One Church, One Child initiative, and the use of state and national adoption exchanges. As states increased their recruitment strategies, the Federal Government also ramped up its recruitment efforts through the AdoptUSKids national campaign, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau.

States Use Multiple Types of Recruitment Strategies

In this study, researchers considered the variety of recruitment strategies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia and found that all states do some type of adoption recruitment (Table 1). Adoption recruitment strategies generally can be classified into three types:

General (46 states)
Aims to reach a large audience of prospective adoptive families by raising community awareness and speaking generally about the need for adoptive homes for children in care. Examples of general recruitment include public service announcements and billboards that describe a need for adoptive families. General recruitment efforts do not feature specific children.

Targeted (43 states)
Aims to find adoptive homes for a particular group of children (e.g. teenagers). Some examples of targeted recruitment include airing radio ads in Spanish on Spanish-language stations to recruit homes for Spanish-speaking children in care and making presentations at black churches in the communities of black children who need homes.

Child-Specific (51 states)
Aims to find an adoptive home for a specific child. Often child-specific recruitment is used for children who may be "difficult-to-place" due to special needs (i.e. older or minority children, sibling groups, or children with behavioral problems and disabilities). Some examples of child-specific recruitment include photolistings of children on web sites and weekly features in newspapers that typically include a photo and biography of the child.

All states and the District of Columbia use child-specific recruitment as part of their recruitment strategy and most states also incorporate general and targeted recruitment as part of their strategies. The majority of states use all three types of recruitment in their strategies to recruit adoptive homes. In fact, only two states reported using just one recruitment type as part of their overall recruiting strategy.

Table 1: States' Adoption Recruitment Strategies

Strategy	All States	
General		
Any General Recruitment	46	88%
Targeted		
Any Targeted Recruitment	43	84%
Child-Specific		
Any Child-Specific Recruitment	51	100%
Combining Strategies		
One Strategy	2	4%
Two Strategies	9	18%
All Three Strategies	40	78%

KEY FINDING: INTEREST IN ADOPTION INCREASED BETWEEN 1995 AND 2002

Women's Interest in Adopting Increased by 38 Percent between 1995 and 2002

Based on the NSFG survey estimates, 18 million women reported being interested in adopting in 2002. This represents a 38 percent increase since 1995, when 13 million women reported interest. The 18 million women interested in 2002 represents a third (33 percent) of the population of women ages 18 to 44, up from a quarter (24 percent) of women (13 million) in 1995.

Increases across Nearly All Demographic Groups

More women reported an interest in adopting in 2002 than in 1995 in nearly all age, race and ethnic, income, education, and religious groups. Interest of women who are involuntarily infertile or whose race is classified as other non-Hispanic remained steady.

Increases for Groups of Interest

Some of the groups of interest to recruiters seeking homes for foster children saw notable increases:

♦ Black women reported an increase in interest of 35 percent (from 25 percent of black women reporting interest in 1995 to 34 percent in 2002).

♦ Interest increased by 29 percent for Hispanic women (from 24 percent of Hispanic women reporting interest in 1995 to 30 percent in 2002).

♦ Interest increased by 50 percent for lower-income women, those with family incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty level (from 19 percent of low-income women reporting interest in 1995 to 29 percent in 2002).

♦ Interest also increased 41 percent among Protestant women (from 25 percent of Protestant women reporting interest in 1995 to 36 percent in 2002).

♦ Interest increased 73 percent for women 18- to 24-years-old (from 16 percent of women ages 18 to 24 in 1995 to 27 percent in 2002).

KEY FINDING: MANY WOMEN INTERESTED IN ADOPTION ARE WILLING TO ADOPT SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

Many Foster Children Waiting to Be Adopted in 2002 Have Special Needs

The Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System (AFCARS) provides information on the characteristics of children waiting to be adopted. According to this data source, 126,000 children were waiting to be adopted from foster care in 2002. Many of these children have special needs, a classification often given to children who are older, a minority, part of a sibling group, or who have disabilities. For example, of the children waiting, 34 percent are older than 10 years of age (Table 2). The majority (64 percent) are minorities. More than half (55 percent) are waiting in non-relative foster care, and nearly half (49 percent) had been in care for over three years. Prior research also suggests that many of these children experience disabilities (Leslie et al., 2003).

Many Women Are Willing to Adopt Children with Special Needs

A subgroup of women interested in adoption is those that are *currently seeking* to adopt. In 2002, this group totaled approximately 760,000 women, up since 1995 when approximately 500,000 women were seeking to adopt. The women in this group tend to be older, are often white, are frequently married, have higher incomes, usually live in metropolitan areas, and are often Protestant (table 3). It is of note that so many of the currently seeking women are in the 35- to 44-year age range. Many women may think about adopting for many years before actually seeking to adopt. Or older women may be more likely to consider adoption as they reach the end of their child bearing years, although this does not appear to be a result of infertility necessarily. Contrary to popular perceptions, women who are currently seeking to adopt often already have children and only a minority of these women are involuntarily infertile. These demographic patterns appear similar to estimates from 1995, although small sample sizes make it difficult to detect differences between the two years.

What is particularly notable about the women currently seeking to adopt in 2002 is that so many are willing to adopt children with characteristics similar to those waiting to be adopted. In the NSFG survey, women currently seeking to adopt were asked the types of children they preferred to adopt and those they would be willing to accept. Many women are willing to adopt (either preferred or would accept) a child with characteristics similar to those waiting in foster care. For example,

♦ Ninety-seven percent of women currently seeking to adopt would be willing to adopt a minority child. In the foster care population, the majority of children waiting to be adopted are minorities (64 percent).

♦ Nearly a third of women (31 percent) said they would be willing to adopt a child that is 13 years old or older. About one third of the children waiting to be adopted are older than 11.

♦ Many children in foster care also experience disabilities. Ninety percent of women report a willingness to adopt a child with a mild disability and 31 percent said they would adopt a child with a severe disability.

♦ Many children in foster care waiting to be adopted also have siblings who are waiting too. Seventy-five percent of women said they would be willing to accept a sibling group.

Readers should be cautioned that due to small sample sizes, estimates of the characteristics and preferences of women currently seeking to adopt provide approximates but should not be considered precise percentages.

Table 2: Profile of Children Waiting to Be Adopted from Foster Care in 2002*

126,000 Children Waiting

Age Groups	Percent of Children
Less than 1 year	3
1 through 5 years	32
6 through 10 years	30
11 through 15 years	29
16 through 18 years	5
Race Ethnicity	
Black Non-Hispanic	42
White Non-Hispanic	36
Other Non-Hispanic	9
Hispanic	13
Currently Living	
Pre-Adoptive Home	16
Foster Family (Relative)	16
Foster Family (Non-Relative)	55
Group Home or Institution	11
Length of Time in Continuous Foster Care	
Less than 1 year	11
2 years	21
3 years	20
over 3 years	49
Age When Removed from Home	
Less than 1 year	25
1 through 5 years	37
6 through 10 years	28
11 through 15 years	9
16 through 18 years	0

* Source: The AFCARS Report, August 2004, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Table 3: Profile of Women Currently Seeking to Adopt in 2002

760,000 Women Seeking
(Sample Size = 113 women)*

Age Groups	Percent of Women
18 through 24 years	16
25 through 29 years	13
30 through 34 years	17
35 through 44 years	54
Race Ethnicity	
Black Non-Hispanic	26
White Non-Hispanic	47
Other Non-Hispanic	7
Hispanic	20
Living Arrangement	
Currently Married	63
Living with Partner	8
Single	29
Income	
Under 150% poverty	25
150-299% poverty	19
300% poverty or higher	56
Employed	
Working	66
Not working	34
Education	
No HS or GED	11
HS or GED	42
Some College	28
College or higher	19
Religion	
No religion	12
Catholic	21
Protestant	64
Other religions	3
Fertility	
She's involuntarily infertile	12
Already has children	60
Residence	
Metropolitan	93
Non-Metropolitan	7
Willing to Adopt	
Older child	31
Sibling group	75
Minority race	97
Severe disability	31
Mild disability	90

* Readers should be cautioned that due to small sample sizes, estimates in this table should be considered approximate percentages.

KEY FINDING: PORTION OF INTERESTED WOMEN TAKING STEPS TO ADOPT DECREASED BETWEEN 1995 AND 2002

Women Interested in Adopting Were Less Likely to Take Steps to Adopt in 2002 than in 1995

In 2002, 10 percent (1.9 million) of the women who reported an interest in adopting took steps toward this end. This represents a decline since 1995, when 16 percent (2.1 million) of the women who reported interest took steps. While the overall number of women who took steps to adopt remained fairly steady between 1995 and 2002 (1.9 and 2.1 million, respectively), due to the larger pool of women interested in adoption, the portion of those that took steps decreased.

Taking Steps Did Not Decline Significantly for Some Groups of Women

Declines in the percentages of interested women taking steps toward adoption occurred for many groups, although for some groups of interested women the percent that took steps remained fairly steady. Specifically, step taking remained steady for interested 30- to 34-year-olds, black women, Hispanic women, unmarried women, and lower-income women (women with family incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty level).

More Women Decide Not to Pursue and Fewer Are Turned Away

Of the women who took steps and did not adopt, the survey provided information about their outcomes. More women simply decided not to pursue the process in 2002 than did in 1995 (90 and 77 percent, respectively). At the same time, fewer of those who took steps and did not adopt report that they were turned down in 2002 (5 percent) than were in 1995 (15 percent). These findings suggest that agencies might be doing a better job informing interested adopters about the process and what is involved so that only those that are truly able and willing go on to pursue the process. This may ultimately be better for agencies if it allows them to concentrate on those most likely to adopt.

KEY FINDING: INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT ACTIVITIES SEEK TO TRANSLATE INTEREST INTO ACTION

The findings in this report suggest that strategies are needed not to just raise awareness about adoption, but to encourage families actually to take steps toward adopting. States conduct general, child-specific, and targeted recruitment through a variety of activities. Table 4 shows the number of states engaged in different recruitment activities and describes some recruitment tools that states use.

Table 4: States' Specific Recruitment Strategies

Strategy	All States	
Media	42	82%
Photolistings (Books and Internet)	51	100%
Faith-Based	32	63%
Fost-Adopt	10	20%
Language-Based	10	20%
Word-of-Mouth	11	22%

In the next pages, these different recruitment strategies are described and specific examples are highlighted that represent some of the most innovative, unique, and replicable strategies states currently use. These strategies reflect a greater need not to just make families aware of the need for adoptive families, but to personally engage and retain families in the recruitment process.

INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY: MEDIA-BASED INITIATIVES

A majority of states use media (television, radio, newspaper/other print media, or the Internet) to find adoptive homes for children. Some examples of media recruitment include articles in newspapers or magazines, advertisements on television, and interviews with recruiters on radio stations. A smaller, but significant number of states use child-specific media-based recruitment like a weekly television feature showcasing a child or a photolisting book displayed within the community. States also use the media through adopt-a-thons or telethons on radio and television stations, which focus on getting children adopted and raising public awareness. The Internet, however, is quickly becoming another form of media that adoption agencies are using to reach adoptive families. While not traditionally known as media-based recruitment, the Internet has quickly become a mainstay in many states' recruitment strategies as a way to photolist children, provide information about the adoption process, and manage inquiries.

Innovative Example: Texas's Use of Internet

When the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) put its state Adoption Exchange photolisting of children, the Texas Adoption Resource Exchange (TARE), online in 1995, they were one of the first groups in the United States to do so. However, the Exchange felt that they could do more to connect prospective families with the faces they saw on the computer screen. Titled "Voices of Love," TARE added child's voices to accompany their photos on the web site in 1998. The response to these sound clips was very positive. TARE, however, was not content to leave families with only the child's voice and still photo and added videos of the children to their web site in March 1999. During the first seven days these videos were on the web site, there were over 750 downloads of children's videos. Currently, the TARE web site features videos, links to Wednesday's Child segments, Heart Gallery photos, and registers all children on the AdoptUSKids Web site.

Back in 1995, when the TARE first went online, the Internet was in its infancy. Yet, TARE realized that the Internet could provide a useful tool to reach families and believed that adding voices and videos to children's photos would provide a powerful and emotional appeal to families. Now that use of the Internet is a facet of daily life, prospective families look to the TARE web site to learn more about the adoption process, what types of children are waiting, and most importantly, to find children they wish to adopt. TARE notes that inquiries through the web site have continually increased as the web site has grown.

INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY: PHOTOLISTINGS

Ask any adoption recruiter about an effective way to reach families and he or she will likely say that families need to see the children before they will become interested in adopting. One common way to show children to families is through photolistings. Table 2 shows that all states and the District of Columbia photolist children in either books or on the Internet. Photolistings of children usually include a photograph and short biography. States photolist children through a variety of media, including books, pamphlets, bulletins, and the Internet (like Texas's Adoption Resource Exchange mentioned previously). There are also national photolistings of children like the AdoptUSKids web site. These photolistings offer prospective parents the opportunity to view the children in care who need homes. Some states, however, have undertaken different methods to show their children to the public.

Innovative Example: New Mexico Heart Gallery

In the summer of 2000, a professional photographer decided to expand her family by adopting a child from foster care. She was taken aback by the lifeless "mug shots" that the New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department (CYFD) used to help find families for waiting children. She wondered if there was a way to make the photos of children come to life and highlight what special individuals these children are. CYFD recognized the potential in this unique approach, and in 2001, the first Heart Gallery opened in Santa Fe. Nearly five years later, the Heart Gallery has spread around the United States to over 40 states and a few foreign countries. Despite the widespread attention it has received, the Heart Gallery is a relatively simple way for New Mexico to depict its waiting children. Each year, professional photographers around the state donate their time and often materials to take a photograph of a waiting child. In addition to photographers, galleries, caterers, framers, printers, and other individuals donate their time, services, or space to support the program.

The Heart Gallery is a useful tool for any agency because it is easily replicated and can be done with little to no money. This grassroots effort builds on the resources that are in each community; whether it is gallery owners, photographers, photo framers, etc. More importantly, the Heart Gallery serves as a powerful child-specific and general recruitment tool. In New Mexico, the Heart Gallery offers an opportunity for prospective families to meet specific children through their photographs. However, in other areas, where there are too many waiting children to photograph, the Heart Gallery shows only a slice of the children waiting for a family. The Galleries raise general awareness of the need for adoptive homes, not only through positive media coverage of the Gallery openings, but because these galleries sit in libraries, banks, and other places where families go each day. In addition, each Gallery opening also serves as an opportunity to educate the attendees about adoption and foster care. Finally, the developers of the Heart Gallery believe it to be an effective recruitment tool. An article about New Mexico's Heart Gallery in the national magazine, *Parade*, garnered 600 inquiries.

INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY: FAITH-BASED INITIATIVES

States use faith-based recruitment to reach out to the community through a powerful ally: churches. Many states look to the faith community to find homes for adoptive children through such programs as One Church, One Child. In the absence of a formal program like One Church, One Child, agencies may ask ministers to make a presentation on the needs of children to their congregation or allow a recruiter to make a presentation.

Innovative Example: Florida's One Church, One Child Program

The One Church, One Child Program of Florida (OCOC) began in March 1988 as a statewide effort to assist the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) in finding adoptive homes for African-American children in care. The program follows the philosophy: "Find at least one family per church to adopt at least one child." OCOC operates in churches throughout Florida by making presentations to church members and asking ministers to discuss the need for adoptive homes. Florida's Governor has proclaimed the third Sunday of November each year as One Church, One Child Sunday where all churches are encouraged to include mention of adoption in their weekly bulletins and preachers are urged to discuss adoption from their pulpits. OCOC also participates in National Prayer Day and asks participating churches to pray for adoptive families, children in care, and those families who have yet to come forward to adopt. In addition to adoption, One Church, One Child lets congregation members know that they can contribute to helping a child without adopting by spreading the word about the needs of children and supporting the members of the community who decide to adopt.

The One Church, One Child program was an obvious strategy for Florida in addressing the large percentage of black children in care who tended to wait longer to be adopted than their non-black counterparts. Previously, the adoption community had not tapped into this resource, as agencies in the United States typically did not engage the black community. The church is a major focal point of the black community and an invaluable asset when it comes to finding families. Working through churches allows the program to reach families and educate them about adoption and foster care. It also prompts families who had typically adopted children informally to consider formal adoption. While finding one family in each church to adopt at least one child might seem minimal, the actual number of children adopted through this program becomes much larger when considering that this is the goal for each of many churches. In addition, it is often the case that there is more than one family in each church who comes forward. It is the continual presence of One Church, One Child in peoples' lives through their church that keeps the vivid reminder of children needing homes in front of the community.

INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY: FOST-ADOPT INITIATIVES

Increasingly, since the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, more states are looking to find "resource" families who will foster children and then adopt them if permanency becomes necessary. This quickens the path to permanency for children and may decrease the number of placements that they have to go through to achieve permanency. Several states reported "Fost-Adopt" initiatives to increase the pool of resource families who were willing to foster and then adopt children. In addition, some states use child-centered, family-focused recruitment, which includes holding meetings with all of the stakeholders in a child's life (including birth parents) and working together to find a permanent placement that fits the child's needs. This technique looks to find a permanent resource for a child among the people who have been or are currently a part of the child's life.

Innovative Example: California's (Los Angeles County) Permanency Partners Program (P3)

Los Angeles County's Permanency Partners Program (P3) is a collaborative effort between the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the nonprofit Consortium for Children to find legally permanent homes and connections for older youth in care. P3 was modeled after the Cold Case Cowboys, a group of retired law enforcement officers who conduct intensive part-time investigations to solve "cold cases." A local stakeholder recommended that DCFS implement a similar strategy to find permanent resources for older children in care. In the P3 program, experienced mediators or Permanency Partners, who are also retired social workers, work with youth to establish one or more adult connections with the goal of reunifying the youth with his or her family or moving the youth from long-term foster care into adoption or guardianship. Frequently, the adult connections that the mediators try to help the youth make involve someone the youth knows or knew at some point, but may have lost contact with as he or she moved through the system. The Permanency Partner meets with the youth to talk and establish a relationship and then helps them to identify people in the youth's life. The partner intensively studies the youth's case record to identify any adults who may become a resource for the youth. The P3 program contacts these individuals, which sometimes requires volunteer investigators, and discusses the possibility of that person becoming a resource for the youth. If the person is open to the idea, the individual meets with the youth to begin relationship building. The youth, youth's social worker, Permanency Partner, and adult work closely together to define the relationship and take steps to achieve legal permanency.

The Permanency Partners Program is intended to address the reality that in Los Angeles County, 8,000 youth ages 12 to 18 live in placements that are not considered legally permanent, such as long-term foster care. Many of the youth who are considered appropriate for the program include those who have previously been resistant to adoption. For some of these youth, permanency achieved through a person whom they know may alleviate some of the feelings of betrayal of birth families that they have surrounding adoption. The program also sees that services are in place to support the relationships once a connection for a youth has been found. The P3 program fits into Los Angeles County's goal of moving youth out of long-term foster care and encourages youth to actively participate in planning for permanency. The program has been so successful in identifying a plan for permanency and working towards it, that DCFS has expanded this pilot program throughout the County and plans to hire more retired social workers to serve as permanency partners for youth.

INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY: LANGUAGE-BASED INITIATIVES

States frequently take steps to tailor recruitment towards specific groups of individuals. For example, a number of states incorporate language into their recruitment to reach families that speak a particular language, such as Spanish, by airing commercials in that language on television or radio stations or posting flyers in that language around the community. However, states not only target specific race and ethnic groups, they may also target groups like parents, nurses, business professionals or any other collection of individuals whom the agency feels may be interested in adoption. Often, agencies look at the pool of adoptive parents they already have and aim to find more families like them.

Innovative Example: New York's (New York City) Hispanic Outreach

The New York Council on Adoptable Children (COAC) was started in 1970 as a grassroots organization by a group of adoptive parents who were frustrated by the length of time that it took to adopt a child from foster care. More than 30 years later, the organization has blossomed into an organization that operates statewide to help children achieve permanency. In New York City, COAC focuses on finding homes for African-American and Hispanic children and other children with special needs: older children, emotionally or medically fragile children, and sibling groups. In recruiting homes for Hispanic children, COAC engages in a number of activities and practices that target the Hispanic community. COAC's strategy to target Hispanic families starts with the fact that all staff members are culturally proficient and the majority of staff are bilingual in English and Spanish. In addition, all materials, brochures, forms, orientation sessions, and homestudies are conducted in both English and Spanish. Outreach is targeted to the Hispanic community through public service announcements on Latino radio stations, television spots on major Latino television networks, booths/tables at street fairs, festivals, and gatherings, and presentations at community groups, churches, and professional forums. The message that COAC presents in this community is "there are children from your community who need a home."

In 1970, when the New York Council on Adoptable Children was created, there were a number of minority parents who wanted to adopt minority children, but the process for adopting these children was slow. Many of New York City's children, particularly African-American and Hispanic children, languished in care until they were discharged at age 18. COAC targeted Hispanic communities to try to reduce the time many Hispanic children spend in care. In making all parts of the recruitment and licensing process available in both English and Spanish, they hope to make families feel more comfortable. In addition, seeing someone in their community (a recruiter) who "looks like them" and is energetic about their job appeals to many families.

INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY: WORD-OF-MOUTH INITIATIVES

A small, but significant number of states report using word-of-mouth or other foster and adoptive parents to recruit adoptive families. Word-of-mouth recruitment can happen very simply by a parent sharing his or her experiences with a neighbor or might involve an interview with adoptive parents printed in the newspaper. States have taken different approaches when using foster and adoptive parents as recruiters. In some states, the process is formal, yet, word-of-mouth recruitment invariably happens informally as adoptive parents share their experiences with friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors.

Innovative Example: Oklahoma FutureWare Parties

Oklahoma Department of Human Services' (DHS) FutureWare parties put a new twist on parties that sell products by "selling" the idea of adoption. Implemented statewide, these events were titled FutureWare parties because the OK DHS believed that foster care and adoption are about the future and, in particular, the future for the children in care. At a FutureWare party, a foster or adoptive parent invites friends, neighbors, family members, or other acquaintances to an event at his or her house, which will educate the attendees about the needs of children in care and adoption. While at the party, attendees can view foster care and adoption videos, watch a video showing what the process of coming into care is like for the child, and hear about the experiences of the hosting foster/adoptive parent. Foster care and adoption workers are also on hand to answer any questions.

Oklahoma believes that resource families are important recruitment tools. FutureWare parties offer adoption and foster care staff a chance to work together to find families, while getting other foster and adoptive families involved in recruiting their peers. The parties also stress that one need not adopt or foster a child to help and that they can help children in care by passing the information that they learn along, hosting a FutureWare party, or simply supporting the foster/adoptive parent hosting the party. The parties provide a neutral, perhaps more comfortable, and non-pressured environment for prospective families to learn about adoption and foster care. FutureWare parties also provide a unique opportunity for follow-up with prospective families. With traditional recruitment, a prospective family may call a hotline, receive a packet of information, and either wait for a recruiter to call them or attend an orientation session. Following a FutureWare party, the prospective family has not only made personal contact with a recruiter, but they also have a personal connection to the host family who can provide follow-up for the agency by touching base with the family and answering any questions that come up. FutureWare parties are also easy to replicate. In fact, all Oklahoma DHS workers have information, outlines, and other tools to help them set up FutureWare parties on the statewide email program. This ensures that staff can find this information at any time if they have a family who wants to host a party or if there is demand for a FutureWare party in a particular area.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT?

This first-time national look at the state of adoption recruitment provides vital information about progress made in recruiting adoptive families for foster children and directions for where the field might go next. The findings reveal extensive recruitment activity occurring in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, with most states using a mix of approaches, attempting to both raise awareness generally about the need to find adoptive families for foster children, but also trying to recruit homes for specific children. Possibly as a result of these efforts, the field of adoption recruitment has witnessed a dramatic increase the number of women interested in adopting. This increase presents an extraordinary opportunity for adoption advocates seeking to find homes for children in need of families, both domestically and internationally. As it is a particular concern of the National Adoption Day Coalition, this increase in interest also presents an important opportunity to channel interest into potential foster care adoptions.

At the same time, a more disconcerting trend has also occurred. Women interested in adopting are less likely to take steps to do so. While troubling, this finding is important. It suggests raising awareness about adoption is not enough to ensure enough homes for children in foster care will be found. New strategies will need to not just raise awareness but encourage families to actually take steps toward adopting. Moreover, to the extent that recruitment occurs in conjunction with the adoption process, to successfully translate interest into action the actual foster care adoption process and perceptions of the process might be improved.

Extensive Recruitment Activity across States

This report documents that all 50 states and the District of Columbia are engaged in recruiting families to adopt the foster children in their care. All states are using strategies that focus on finding a home for a specific child. Most states are combining this strategy with efforts to raise awareness about adoption generally and to find homes for targeted groups of children for whom finding homes can be more difficult, like teens. Most states initiated statewide recruiting strategies in the late 1990s. These efforts were followed by several larger national efforts, like the AdoptUSKids campaign that began in 2002 and was sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau.

Dramatic Increase in the Pool of Potential Adopters

This proliferation of campaigns and recruitment strategies in the late 1990s may have successfully raised awareness about adoption. Interest in adoption increased 38 percent between 1995 and 2002, with the proportion of women ages 18 to 44 expressing an interest in adoption growing from a quarter to a third. This increase might reflect a growing social acceptance of adoption as a way to grow a family. Advertising campaigns tell prospective adopters they do not have to be "a hero to be a hero" or "perfect to be a perfect parent." These findings also reflect other research that suggests the portion of Americans who have a very favorable opinion of adoption has increased since 1997 (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2002). Thus, these findings suggest that the pool of potential adopters has grown, presenting a tremendous opportunity for adoption advocates and recruiters to channel interest into potential adoptions.

Interest Often Does Not Translate into Action

While interest has increased, the portion of interested women that take steps to adopt has decreased. The percentage of interested women who take steps toward adopting declined from 16 percent in 1995 to 10 percent in 2002. Just one in ten women in 2002 who expressed an interest in adopting took steps. Interested adopters may not take steps because they hear or learn that the process might be difficult or they find out more about the children available and believe they cannot parent a child with these needs. Another contributor to this trend might be that more women were older in 2002, due to the baby boom, and therefore may have been less likely to take steps. Further analyses of the data to assess the effects of population shifts, however, did not suggest that this was a significant factor. Improvements in fertility technology in the last decade might also have led to a decline in taking steps if women who had considered adoption later found they could conceive themselves.

Key Groups Are Interested and Taking Action

The report documents significant increases in interest for several groups of note to those recruiting families for children in foster care. With many minority children in foster care, a notable finding of the report is that interest among Hispanic and black women has increased, and the portion that take steps has not declined as it has for many other groups. The lack of decline in step taking for these groups may reflect the efforts of targeted recruitment campaigns in black and Hispanic communities. Also, interest increased and step taking did not decline for women ages 30 to 34 and unmarried women, groups of women that might have the time and resources to care for a child with a disability. Interest also increased and step-taking did not decline for low-income women. Financial supports available to adoptive families may have helped to ensure adoption is a viable option for many lower-income families. Another encouraging finding is that interest increased substantially for young women ages 18 to 24. Since many people consider adopting for some time before pursuing the process, this is a potentially positive trend that may result in more adoptions in the future.

Potential Homes for Special Needs Children Likely Exist

These findings suggest that homes for older children, minority children, children in sibling groups, and children with disabilities may exist. Significant proportions of women currently seeking to adopt report a willingness to raise children with these characteristics.

Direction and Templates for Future Recruitment Strategies

A rise in interest suggests past strategies to raise awareness about adoption may have been particularly effective. At the same time, fewer women are taking steps, which would suggest a need for new strategies that encourage women to actually adopt. Prior studies have suggested that many people who adopt from foster care have some exposure to foster care, familiarity with the process, or know the children they are adopting (Geen, Malm, and Katz, 2004). Strategies that increase familiarity with foster care or personalize the process may make it more likely that potential adopters take steps toward adopting through foster care. This report highlights several examples of innovative activities that may provide templates for future efforts. The activities represent a personal approach and engender familiarity with the foster care process. They are also community-based and may make the foster care adoption process more consumer-friendly. Many are also long-standing, easily replicable, and relatively low-cost.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS?

While states are making substantial efforts to recruit adoptive homes for children in foster care, these findings suggest many new directions the field might take to ensure that all children find the permanent, loving families they need and deserve in a timely manner. Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations suggest guidelines for the development of future strategies to recruit and retain adoptive families:

Shift in Messaging from Awareness to Taking Action

These findings suggest significant progress has been made in generating interest and awareness around adoption. While this is an important first step, the findings also reveal that future campaigns are needed to encourage those interested and able to adopt a foster child to actually take steps toward that end. Future campaigns might shift from telling prospective parents that anyone can adopt, to telling interested adopters *how* they can adopt. New campaigns could describe the process, walk interested adopters through the steps, and seek ways to generate greater familiarity with the foster care process and foster children.

Channel Interest toward Foster Care Adoption

The findings in this report also suggest an opportunity to encourage the option of foster adoption compared with other types of adoption. Foster care adoption may be less costly than other types of adoption and often offers financial supports and post-adoption services to families that other types of adoption may not provide. Moreover, it is a means by which to help children in one's own community who need homes. Future recruitment efforts need to ensure that foster care adoption is an option potential adopters consider when thinking about adoption. Interested individuals might not think of foster care adoption first when considering alternatives, and may be more inclined to consider private domestic adoption or international adoption. Campaigns should alert potential adopters of the foster care adoption option and emphasize that foster care adoption is a way to help children in their own communities.

Use Targeted Recruitment to Focus on High-Propensity Groups

The report identifies key groups of women for whom interest is up and levels of step taking have not declined: 30 to 34 year olds, black and Hispanic women, unmarried women, and lower-income women. States might consider more expansive targeted efforts toward these groups of women. The examples highlighted in this report provide possible templates. The One Church, One Child initiative reaches black women; FutureWare Parties are likely to reach 30- to 34-year-olds; and Spanish language recruitment materials may reach Hispanic women. The Permanency Partners Program also suggests that when exploring a child's network for potential foster parents, targeting efforts at the "front end" of cases presents an important opportunity for finding adoptive homes for children.

Encourage Individuals Not Taking Steps to Participate in Other Ways

There are many ways to support the foster care adoption process other than by adopting. With so many individuals interested in adopting but not taking steps, the field might consider strategies to encourage these individuals to support foster care adoption in other ways. For example, lawyers might volunteer their time to represent parents seeking to adopt a child from foster care. Marketing and public relations executives might team with a local child welfare agency to help them make their Web sites and brochures more appealing to potential adopters. Business executives might help child welfare agencies ensure their adoption process is customer friendly and welcomes potential adopters. Mental health professionals might offer support groups or counseling to assist adoptive families. Individuals might volunteer to offer respite to families that have adopted children or simply provide other forms of family support.

Develop a Consumer-Friendly Foster Care Adoption Process

In order to sell the foster care adoption process as a viable option to potential adopters, the process itself must be efficient and consumer-friendly. For interested families, the first call that they make or web site that they see may leave lasting impressions. Approximately two-thirds of

women currently seeking to adopt are working and most already have children. Given their busy schedules, the agency may only have one opportunity to make a good impression. Moreover, even potential adopters who do not go on to adopt will likely tell their friends and family about their experiences. Agencies therefore have an interest in making the process more consumer friendly. Three stages of the process should be considered as part of efforts to make the process more consumer-friendly:

> First Contact: Agencies should ensure their Web sites and brochures are welcoming and easy to understand and navigate. Private adoption agencies might offer helpful examples or marketing firms might provide pro bono assistance. Who answers the phone is also important. Some experts have suggested that a social worker or counselor might best respond to interested individuals when they call (Katz, 2005). While screening is essential, some experts suggest that it might occur later in the process (Katz, 2005).

> Navigating the Process: Families interested in adopting may benefit from having an advocate assigned to them to help them navigate the process. Prior research suggests that the foster care adoption process is child-centered and the roles of agency workers can be complex as they try to find the best home for the child but also meet the needs of the interested families (Geen et al., 2004). The private or international adoption processes might provide useful models for integrating parent advocates into the foster care adoption process.

> Available Supports and Services: A study of potential adoptive parents found they have significant concerns about the outcomes of children they might adopt from foster care (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2002). They fear these children will be less well-adjusted and more likely to have problems at school. To meet these children's needs, potential adopters want assurance that children will have health insurance for preexisting conditions and that counseling services and support groups will be available for the child and the adoptive parents. Agencies will not only want to ensure these services are available, but also clearly convey their availability in recruitment campaigns.

Use Available Resources to Develop New Recruitment Strategies

The Federal Adoption Opportunities Program (AOP), through grants to state and local agencies, seeks to eliminate barriers to adoption and help find permanent families for children who would benefit from adoption, particularly children with special needs. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which administers the program, might target grants to enhance recruitment activities. Grants could be used for improving adoption Web sites and responses to inquiries, developing adoption support services for families seeking to adopt, or funding positions for parent advocates.

Test the Effectiveness of Recruitment Strategies with Rigorous Research

All states are conducting recruitment activities, yet there is little research indicating what works. Rigorous evaluations and better data are needed to understand which strategies result in successful adoptions. A recent United States General Accountability Office report echoed this recommendation, suggesting that better data and evaluations could improve processes and programs for adopting children with special needs (US General Accountability Office 2005). Research should look not only at what efforts successfully recruit potential adoptive parents, but also which strategies are effective at recruiting foster parents, as so many foster parents go on to adopt. The good news for adoption recruitment is that much is happening and interest is up, but as the field moves forward, it will become increasingly necessary to know what strategies translate interest into action and result in more children in foster care finding permanent and loving homes.

GLOSSARY AND KEY ACRONYMS

GLOSSARY

Adoption Recruitment
Adoption recruitment includes the practices, methods, and procedures by which an adoptive family is located. Adoption recruitment can take many forms from individualized local efforts to national campaigns. Recruitment includes not just finding families willing to adopt a child unknown to them, but also exploring the network of family members and friends the child already knows or recruiting foster parents who might eventually adopt a child.

General Recruitment
General recruitment efforts aim to reach a large audience of prospective adoptive families by raising community awareness and speaking generally about the need for adoptive homes for children in care.

Targeted Recruitment
Targeted recruitment strategies aim to find adoptive homes for a particular group of children.

Child-Specific Recruitment
Child-specific recruitment aims to find an adoptive home for a specific child. Often child-specific recruitment is used for children who may be "difficult-to-place" due to special needs, such as they are older, a minority, part of a sibling group, or have a disability.

Approval Process
The process of approving a potential adoptive family typically involves background checks, a home study, adoptive parent training, and, if the adoption is in another state, completion of the ICPC (Interstate Compact for Placement of Children).

Matching
Matching is the process by which the agency selects a potential adoptive family that is best for a particular child. Potential adopters' strengths are assessed in relation to the needs of individual children waiting to be adopted.

Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)
A child's parents' parental rights must be terminated to make the child "free" for adoption. Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) permanently eliminates all rights that a parent has to make decisions about his or her child and is a necessary step before parental rights can be granted to another individual or individuals. In some cases, the parents may voluntarily relinquish their parental rights.

Adoption Subsidies and Services
States provide a subsidy to adoptive parents to help assist with the child's care. The amount of the subsidy can vary by state and the needs of the child. The federal government reimburses states for a portion of the subsidy, and some states choose to use state funds to increase the subsidy amount. States also may provide additional services, such as tuition reimbursement.

KEY ACRONYMS

TPR: Termination of Parental Rights
ASFA: Adoption and Safe Families Act
MEPA: Multi-Ethnic Placement Act
CFSR: Child and Family Services Review
PIP: Program Improvement Plan (part of CFSRs)
ICPC: Interstate Compact for Placement of Children
DHHS: United States Department of Health and Human Services

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