

Barriers to Black Children in Adoption

Synthesis Paper: [Promoting Adoption Reform: Congress Can Give Children Another Chance](#)

1. Neglect of Young Black Children

Interracial adoptions account for about 8 percent of adoptions and consist primarily of adoptions of black children by white parents.¹⁾ There are more black children waiting in foster care than there are prescreened black families ready to adopt them. With the need for permanent adoptive homes growing more acute and the exit rate from foster care slowing continually, the likelihood of multiple placements for black children increases.²⁾ Indeed, some 24 percent of the children in foster care today have been in three or four different homes.³⁾ According to Ira Schwartz of the University of Michigan, 53 percent of all children in Michigan who entered the foster care system as newborns are still in foster care at age four.⁴⁾ A number of regional studies confirm this trend and demonstrate that black children typically wait two to three years longer than white children for adoptive homes.⁵⁾

The length of stay in foster care is very important. The longer the newborn stays in foster care, the more at risk he is of approaching the “difficult to adopt” age and the greater the problems associated with long-term foster care become. If half the children who arrive in foster care at birth are still in it at age four, the system is not serving their needs.

This statistic highlights the need for termination units – specialized units of social workers who work with the courts to determine whether the parental rights of an abusing or neglectful parent should be withdrawn so that the child may be placed for adoption. If the “best interest of the child” principle is used, this decision will be made quickly. If the “family preservation” principle is used, the decision will be delayed again and again, often until repeated neglect convinces the authorities that parental rights must be removed. At this point, in addition to having suffered even more, the child is older and more difficult to place.

Given these figures, public welfare agencies are a major source of neglect of young black children. The bias against adopting early, when the child is most adoptable, feeds the foster care system and ensures a larger clientele for public agencies. The present system of financing foster care and not financing adoptions perversely rewards this form of government neglect.

2. Black Families and Adoption

There is some evidence that blacks adopt at a much higher rate than whites if one controls for family structure, income, and age of parents.⁶⁾ A 1983 Department of Health and Human Services study⁷⁾ put these comparable rates at:

- 7 adoptions per 10,000 black families for all black families;
- 2 adoptions per 10,000 white families for all white families; and
- 2 adoptions per 10,000 Hispanic families for all Hispanic families.

Controlling for age of parents (below 55), family income (above poverty level), and family structure (intact families), the rates change to:

- 18 adoptions per 10,000 black families within the range;
- 4 adoptions per 10,000 white families within the range; and
- 3 adoptions per 10,000 Hispanic families within the range.

These figures convey the reality of much higher adoption rates among blacks than among whites or Hispanics for children in public welfare agencies who are available for adoption.⁸⁾ There is, however, conflicting evidence that white women were more likely to make adoption plans than black women.⁹⁾

To meet the needs of all children within their own racial communities by placing them in couple-headed families above poverty, the same study suggests that the response rate among black families would have to be far higher than it is. It would need to approach 44 per 10,000 families for blacks, compared with 6 per 10,000 families for whites and 6 per 10,000 families for Hispanics. This would require an enormous increase in the rates of adoption by blacks and Hispanics. Richard Barth of the School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley sums up the conclusions to which these data lead:

The growth of African-American adoptions have increased by 92% in the last 5 years and Hispanic adoptions by 80%. The growth of African American adoptions would have to grow four times faster than that during the next five years in order to give African American children parity of access to adoption. For Hispanic children, the growth rate would have to double for their opportunity to be adopted to reach parity with Caucasian children.¹⁰⁾

To achieve these levels of adoption will require a great community effort by black and Hispanic people.

As well-run private agencies demonstrate, large pools of adoptive parents can be developed over time. Even pools of parents for “harder to place children” can be developed when the effort is made by a committed organization. For instance, Down's syndrome children are adopted quite quickly because there is a network of screened parents in place and ready to adopt. Similarly, a pool of parents ready to adopt HIV-positive babies has been developed by the National Council for Adoption.

In a 1980 study of black parents, sociology professor Robert Hill of the Institute for Urban Research at Morgan State University estimated that three million black households are interested in adopting children. This translates into one hundred black families for every black child in foster care waiting for adoption.¹¹⁾ Given this potential, a pool of prescreened adoptive parents big enough to take care of the needs of black children represents an achievable goal.

The private sector can best develop this pool because private organizations are motivated to do so. Building pools of parents is not the strong suit of public agencies.¹²⁾ Some private organizations in the black community have achieved remarkable results. Recently, for instance, in just one year, Detroit's Homes for Black Children placed 132 children in black homes – more than all the other 13 child welfare agencies in the city.¹³⁾ To increase the rate of adoption within black families, the leadership of the black community should commit itself strongly to using private organizations.

Although the emphasis should be on making it easier for black families to adopt, blocking transracial adoptions just because the children are black and the parents are white discriminates against many needy black children because of race. Moreover, it does not increase the rate of in-race adoption. California, despite a law requiring a 90-day search for a same-race family before a child can be adopted across racial lines, still has twice as many black children as white children waiting for adoption, often for long periods.¹⁴⁾

The Institute for Justice last year filed suit on behalf of a white foster couple who had cared for a black child since birth. When the child became eligible, they sought to adopt him but were blocked by the public welfare agency because they were not black. Even when black parents were not found, the agency persisted in blocking this adoption. No one can argue that this was in the best interest of the child.¹⁵⁾ Similar racial discrimination prevented the adoption of a white child by a black couple who had fostered the child since birth.

In 1984, liberal black columnist Carl T. Rowan argued against the “abominable notion that race must be the dominant factor in deciding who can deliver loving care and protection to a child.” Rowan equated the position of black social workers who support only in-race adoption with a 1954 statement by a segregationist Mississippi editor that “every child has the right to be educated among children and by teachers of the same racial background.”¹⁶⁾ Furthermore, according to professor Rita Simon, sociologist at the American University and expert in transracial adoption, “The data in our studies and indeed in all the studies that have been done show that transracial adoptions serve the children's best interests.”¹⁷⁾

Still, opposition to transracial adoption is strong. When former Senator Howard Metzenbaum (D-OH) steered S. 1224 through Congress in 1993, he did so to outlaw obstacles similar to the above restrictions that exist in most states. But the Clinton Administration, which supports race matching, succeeded in changing the legislation so that lack of race matching could be used to deny or delay a placement.¹⁸⁾ Instead of encouraging solutions, such as private adoption agencies that specialize in placing black children, the Administration's policy aggravates the problem.

The Bunning Amendment, incorporated into the House-passed welfare bill, repeals the Clinton policy. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) had a similar amendment (S. 637) to the Senate version of the welfare reform bill. The Children's Defense Fund supported the Clinton Administration's approach,¹⁹⁾ despite the evidence of researchers such as Rita Simon, who shows that transracial adoption does not damage the child emotionally or developmentally and that transracially adopted children do just as well as those adopted by parents of their own race.²⁰⁾

Race matching can be achieved easily if there are enough prescreened adoptive parents. The difficulty lies not in the lack of parents but in the poor track record of public agencies in building a pool of black adoptive parents.

¹⁾ Christine Bachrach, Patricia F. Adams, Soledad Sambrano, and Kathryn A. London, “Adoptions in the 1980's,” *Advanced Data from Vital and Health Statistics of the National Center for Health Statistics*, No. 181 (January 5, 1990).

²⁾ “Actual numbers and percentages of substitute care exits among minority children did rise significantly during the 1980s, but any gains in the numbers of exits among black and Hispanic children were totally nullified by continued increases in the total numbers of these minority children in the substitute care population during the same period.... The fact that the exit numbers of minority children are smaller than those of white children will result in additional increases in the proportion of minority children in care. If current trends continue, minority children will become the clear majority in the nation's substitute care population in the next few years. There already are more minority children than white children in the substitute care systems of several large urban states today. Social policy implications of minority children becoming the numerical majority in the U.S. substitute care population are profound and complex and should be seriously examined.” From Toshio Tatara, “A Comparison of Child Substitute Care Exit Rates Among Three Different Racial/Ethnic Groups in 12 States, FY 84 To FY 90,” *VCIS Research Notes* No. 10, American Public Welfare Association, Washington, D.C., June 1994.

³⁾ Data supplied by the David Thomas Foundation for Adoption, P.O. Box 7164, Dublin, Ohio 43017.

- ⁴⁾ Ira Schwartz, Robert M. Ortega, and Gideon Fishman, "Michigan Infants in the Child Welfare System," report from the University of Michigan Center for the Study of Youth Policy; data from Department of Social Services CSMIS Data Event History File 12 89.
- ⁵⁾ Richard P. Barth, Mark Courtney, and Barbara Needel, "The Odds of Adoption vs. Remaining in Long-Term Foster Care"; paper presented at the Second Annual Child Welfare Conference, Washington, D.C., March 17, 1994. See also S. Kossoudji, "Race and Adoption in Michigan," in D. Mont and R. Avery, eds., *Public Agenda Adoption Policy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), and D. Mont, "Race and Gender Differences in the Adoption of Special Needs Children," unpublished manuscript (Ithaca, N.Y.: Department of Consumer Economics and Housing, Cornell University, April 1993), both quoted in Barth et al., "The Odds of Adoption vs. Remaining in Long-Term Foster Care."
- ⁶⁾ There are no ongoing survey data which sample for adoption rates. This makes the estimation of incidence and rates spotty over time and more difficult to estimate accurately.
- ⁷⁾ Charles P. Gershenson, "Community Response to Children Free for Adoption," *Child Welfare Research Notes* No. 3, Children's Bureau, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, March 1984.
- ⁸⁾ However, if blacks are serving at a rate much higher than their presence in the nation, then the issue of bias against blacks either does not hold up or, at a minimum, is more complex.
- ⁹⁾ Christine Bachrach, "Adoption Plans, Adopted Children and Adoptive Mothers," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 48 (May 1986), pp. 243-253
- ¹⁰⁾ Richard P. Barth, Mark Courtney, and Barbara Needel, "The Odds of Adoption vs. Remaining in Long-Term Foster Care"; paper presented at the Second Annual Child Welfare Conference, Washington, D.C., March 17, 1994.
- ¹¹⁾ Robert B. Hill, *Research on the African-American Family* (Westport, Conn.: Auburn House, 1993).
- ¹²⁾ According to Tony Oliver of Roots in College Park, Georgia, the state of Georgia has 127 counties and child welfare agencies, but only seven counties have adoption units.
- ¹³⁾ William Raspberry, "Why Won't Adoption Agencies Place Black Children?" *The Washington Post*, December 22, 1990, p. A15.
- ¹⁴⁾ Richard Barth reported his findings at a meeting on transracial adoption sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation in Washington, D.C., in February 1994.
- ¹⁵⁾ Press release, "Institute for Justice Challenges Barriers to Interracial Adoption," April 13, 1995.
- ¹⁶⁾ Carl T. Rowan, "Should Whites Adopt Blacks?" *The Washington Post*, July 13, 1984, p. A19; quoted in Rita J. Simon and Howard Alstein, *Transracial Adoptees and Their Families* (New York: Praeger, 1994), p. 7.
- ¹⁷⁾ , ²⁰⁾ Rita Simon, "Serving the Children's Best Interest," *Interrace Magazine*, August/September 1994, pp. 40-42.
- ¹⁸⁾ Rita Kramer, "Adoption in Minority and White," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 1994.
- ¹⁹⁾ Marian Wright Edelman, letter to the editor, "We Want Adoption for All the Children," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 1994, p. A-25.

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