

# The Need for Adoption

**Adoption works.** It increases the **emotional, physical, and cognitive capacities** of the children who are adopted. It improves the life chances of the **biological mother**. It saves vast amounts of money for the public. It brings much happiness, both to the adopting parents and to the adopted child. It is good for all involved.

The welfare reform debate offers one of the best chances to promote adoption. Sharply rising **out-of-wedlock births** add steadily to the long-range costs of welfare, because being born out of wedlock significantly increases the chances of **ending up on welfare**. At the same time, up to two million couples waiting to adopt frequently find themselves hamstrung by **government agencies and government practices**.

## 1. The State of Adoption in America

Over the past 25 years there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of **children born out of wedlock**, children being raised by **single parents, families on welfare**, and children entering the foster care system because of abuse and neglect. Family disintegration is widespread. There also has been a sharp decrease in the number of children being adopted, with formal adoptions dropping by almost 50 percent: from 89,000 in 1970 to a fairly constant 50,000 annually throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.<sup>1)</sup>

According to Christine Bachrach, former Director of the Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), adoption has declined since the early 1970s primarily because of a drop in the proportion of white mothers who place their babies for adoption. Birth mothers who have continued to place their babies for adoption are more likely to have well-educated mothers, are still at school, have never worked, and are older. Also, they are more likely to place daughters for adoption than sons.

**Women likely to adopt** tend to be married, sterile,<sup>2)</sup> and 30 years of age or older. Nearly half of all women with these characteristics have adopted.<sup>3)</sup>

The National Council for Adoption estimates that of the 50,000 children adopted annually, 25,000 are healthy children under age two, 10,000 are healthy children over age two, and 15,000 are children with "**special needs**" (the social work term of art for children considered difficult to place because of their age, physical or mental condition, race or ethnicity, or need to be placed with siblings).<sup>4)</sup> About one-third of these adoptions are arranged by government-funded and government-managed public agencies, some by contract with private agencies. Another one-third are arranged by private, mostly nonprofit agencies, and the rest are contracted outside of agency auspices, mostly through lawyers in private practice. **International adoptions** accounted for an additional 8,000 adoptions during 1994.

Adoption fell out of favor among social workers during the 1970s, even as single parenthood and abortion became more widespread. Advocates of government-sponsored social programs argued that increases in welfare would make it possible for unmarried mothers to rear children without the assistance of a father.<sup>5)</sup> According to U.S. Census Bureau, "out of around 12 million single parent families in 2014, above 80% of them were headed by single mothers. Today 1 in 4 children under the age of 18 — a total of about 17.4 million — are being raised without a father, and 45% of them live below the poverty line."<sup>6)</sup> In 2013, four in ten births were to unmarried women, at a rate of 41

percent. This rate has not changed for six consecutive years.<sup>7)</sup> Yet, as is evident from the high foster care numbers<sup>8)</sup> and from the chronic problems associated with the absence of fathers, such as [crime](#), [poor school performance](#), [poor health status](#), and [low income](#),<sup>9)</sup> that view has turned out to be a tragic mistake. By contrast, children adopted by two parents are doing as well as their peers raised in their own intact families.<sup>10)</sup>

## 2. Patterns of Parental Neglect

The rapid increase of illegitimacy and the staggering problems of [children born out of wedlock](#) and raised without fathers are well documented.<sup>11)</sup>

- In 2011, 35.7 percent of women who gave birth in the last year—1,467,435 women—were not married at the time they gave birth.<sup>12)</sup>
- Between 2001 and 2006, the rate of unintended pregnancies ending in abortion decreased from 47% to 43%.<sup>13)</sup>
- In 2008, 51% of pregnancies in the United States were unintended. Between 2001 and 2008, intended pregnancies decreased and unintended pregnancies increased, a shift previously unobserved. Large disparities in unintended pregnancy by relationship status, income, and education increased; the percentage of unintended pregnancies ending in abortion decreased; and the rate of unintended pregnancies ending in birth increased.<sup>14)</sup>
- In 2012, 397,000 children were in foster care, a 25-year low. However, in 2013 the number had increased to 402,000.<sup>15)</sup>
- The estimated 402,378 children in foster care as of September 2013 were in the following types of placements: 47 percent in nonrelative foster family homes, 28 percent in relative foster family homes, 8 percent in institutions, 6 percent in group homes, 5 percent on trial home visits (situations in which the State retains supervision of a child, the child returns home on a trial basis for an unspecified period of time, and after 6 months the child is considered discharged from foster care), 4 percent in preadoptive homes, 1 percent had run away, and 1 percent in supervised independent living.<sup>16)</sup>
- According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), an estimated 1,520 children died from [abuse and neglect](#) in 2013. This amounts to four children dying *every day* from abuse or neglect.<sup>17)</sup>

Approximately 40 percent (39.9%) of [child victims were maltreated](#) by their mothers acting alone; another 17.6 percent were maltreated by their fathers acting alone; and 17.8 percent were [abused by both parents](#).<sup>18)</sup> There is insufficient data to adequately track the number of infants abandoned by their drug-addicted mothers over the years. According to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 12,000 infants were abandoned in 1991.<sup>19)</sup> In response to this crisis, there has been a proliferation of “boarder baby”<sup>20)</sup> homes to care for these children until their parents can be located and rehabilitated. A 1993 General Accounting Office report showed that 10,000 infants were being boarded in hospitals for no medical reason. Less than 40 percent of the boarder babies – and none of the abandoned babies – were expected to leave in the care of their parents.

The average total cost of caring for these babies in hospital after their medical treatment is almost \$13,000.<sup>21)</sup> Nonetheless, only 2.5 percent of the boarder babies and 6 percent of the abandoned infants were expected to go into adoptive placements.<sup>22)</sup> The vast majority of these children will spend years in and out of the foster care system while the biological mother attempts to get her life together.<sup>23)</sup>

**Federal efforts** to deal with this have been small and swamped by the size of the problem.<sup>24)</sup> When Representative Harris Fawell (R-IL) introduced the At-Birth Abandoned Infants Act (H.R. 2936) in 1994 to help move abandoned babies out of the system and into permanent adoptive homes, the child welfare establishment lobbied against it, arguing that creating a two-tiered system – a fast track for new-born abandoned babies and a slower, less responsive one for older children – was unfair.<sup>25)</sup> The bill was not enacted.

<sup>1)</sup> This number does not include informal adoptions by relatives that frequently take place within families – something extended families have always done for other members in need.

<sup>2)</sup> Though black women who adopt are less likely to be sterile; see United Nations “Child Adoption: Trends and Policies”, (United Nations Publications, 2009), 116.

Christine Bachrach, Kathryn A. London, and Penelope L. Maza, “On the Path to Adoption, Adoption Seeking in the United States, 1988,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 53, (August 1991): 705-718.

<sup>3)</sup> United Nations “Child Adoption: Trends and Policies”, (United Nations Publications, 2009), 116. Christine Bachrach, “Adoption as a Means of Family Formation: Data from the National Survey of Family Growth,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 45, (November 1983): 859-865.

<sup>4)</sup> However, the term often causes initial resistance or apprehension on the part of potential adopting parents, who may fear having enormous burdens placed upon them. Many experts complain of the unnecessary and inordinate use of the term by state workers, the consequence frequently being the loss of a home for the child.

<sup>5)</sup> Robert Rector, “How Welfare Undermines Marriage and What to Do About It,” *Heritage Foundation* no. 4302 (November 17, 2014). Available at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/11/how-welfare-undermines-marriage-and-what-to-do-about-it>.

Robert Rector, “Combating Family Disintegration, Crime, and Dependence: Welfare Reform and Beyond,” *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* no. 983 (March 17, 1995).

<sup>6)</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Family Groups (Table FG10),” 2014;

U.S. Census Bureau, “Household Relationship and Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years, by Age and Sex (Table C2),” 2014;

U.S. Census Bureau, “Poverty Status, Food Stamp Receipt, and Public Assistance for Children Under 18 Years by Selected Characteristics (Table C8),” 2014.

<sup>7)</sup> Child Trends Databank, *Births to Unmarried Women*, 2015.

<sup>8)</sup> These numbers rose from 262,000 in 1982 to 402,378 in FY 2013.

American Public Welfare Association, *VCIS Research Notes*, November 1991; Administration for Children and Families, “The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Report,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014): 21. Available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport21.pdf>.

<sup>9)</sup> , <sup>11)</sup> Patrick F. Fagan, “Rising Illegitimacy: America's Social Catastrophe,” *Heritage Foundation F.Y.I.* no. 19 (June 29, 1994).

<sup>10)</sup> See section on “Benefits for Children”

<sup>12)</sup> American Community Survey Reports, *Social and Economic Characteristics of Currently Unmarried Women With a Recent Birth: 2011* Rachel M. Shattuck and Rose M. Kreider, (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2013), 2-4.

<sup>13)</sup> Lawrence B. Finer and Mia R. Zolna, “Unintended Pregnancy in the United States: Incidence and Disparities, 2006,” *Contraception* 84, no. 5 (2011): 478-485.

<sup>14)</sup> Lawrence B. Finer and Mia R. Zolna, “Shifts in Intended and Unintended Pregnancies in the United States, 2001–2008,” *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. S1 (2014): S43-S48.

<sup>15)</sup> Child Trends Databank, “Foster Care,” (2014). Available at <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=foster-care>

<sup>16)</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway, “Foster Care Statistics 2013,” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, 2015), 4.

<sup>17)</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities 2013: Statistics and Interventions," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2015), 2.

NCANDS defines "child fatality" as the death of a child caused by an injury resulting from abuse or neglect or where abuse or neglect was a contributing factor.

<sup>18)</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, "Child Maltreatment 2006," (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 30

<sup>19)</sup> Report to Congress, "National Estimate on the Number of Boarder Babies, the Cost of Their Care, and the Number of Abandoned Babies," (DHHS/ASPE, August 1993), ii; hereinafter cited as DHHS/ASPE Report.

<sup>20)</sup> Boarder babies are babies left in the hospital by absconding mothers. Most frequently, these mothers are drug addicts with multiple serious problems.

<sup>21)</sup> Report to Congress, "National Estimate on the Number of Boarder Babies, the Cost of Their Care, and the Number of Abandoned Babies," (DHHS/ASPE, August 1993), p. ii

<sup>22)</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Foster Care Statistics 2013," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau: 2015), 3.

U.S. General Accounting Office, *Report to Congress: National Estimates on the Number of Boarder Babies, the Cost of Their Care, and the Number of Abandoned Infants*, (August 1993); hereinafter cited as GAO Report.

<sup>23)</sup> Most boarder babies are cases of neglect of a severity which easily would justify termination of the parental rights of the mother. However, "family preservation" guidelines (as opposed to the best interests of the child) lead to prolonged and frequently futile efforts at maternal reform.

<sup>24)</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Report to Congress: National Estimates on the Number of Boarder Babies, the Cost of Their Care, and the Number of Abandoned Infants*, (August 1993).

<sup>25)</sup> The opponents, the Child Welfare League of America and the American Public Welfare Association, also argued that the child's first right is to his biological family, not to care and nurturance, and that family preservation services must first be attempted with the mother - even if she had abandoned her baby.

This entry draws heavily from [Promoting Adoption Reform: Congress Can Give Children Another Chance](#).

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