

Nationally Representative Data: 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents

The proposed session will present findings from the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents (NSAP), the first-ever survey to provide representative information about the characteristics, adoption experiences, and well-being of the American population of adopted children and their families.¹ Findings for this presentation are based on the authors' analyses for *Adoption USA: A Chartbook Based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents*, to be published in November 2009.

While adopted children comprise only a small portion of the overall U.S. child population—about 2 percent according to Census data—their absolute number is sizable, at approximately 1.8 million.² This group of children is of particular concern to policy makers and the public both due to the government's role in establishing adoptive parent-child relationships as well as the potential vulnerabilities of some segments of this population. Those who experienced abuse or neglect, who underwent a drastic life change through adoption at an older age, or whose adoptive parents may have been unprepared for potential challenges of adoptive parenting may be at increased risk for negative outcomes, compared to non-adopted children.

Previous studies of adopted children have been based on small, convenience samples whose findings cannot be generalized to the broader population of adopted children, or on administrative systems maintained by public child welfare agencies which generally exclude data on children adopted privately domestically or internationally. Thus, the NSAP fulfills a longstanding need for nationally representative data on adopted children and their families.

The proposed session will present descriptive analyses of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of adopted children and their families, their experiences with and satisfaction with adoption, and their well-being. We will present findings for all adopted children in aggregate, as well as separately for the three major "types" of adoption:³ public agency (i.e., children adopted from foster care), international, and private domestic (including those adopted independently and those adopted through private agencies). For many demographic and well-being variables, we will also compare the characteristics of adopted children with the general population of American children, using data from the National Survey of Children's Health. We will also briefly include contextual information about adoption policy and practice, in order to provide context in which the findings can be interpreted.

Key findings include:

- Overall, about half of adopted children (49 percent) are male. However, 33 percent of internationally adopted children are male, largely as a result of adoptions from China. Chinese population-control policies established in the late 1970's, in combination with a

¹ Collaborative efforts between officials at the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) culminated in the development of the NSAP survey instrument and administration of the survey. Federal officials and contractor staff consulted with the State Department's Office of Children's Issues during the development of the NSAP instrument to gain insight on the questions pertaining to international adoptions.

² Estimate based on weighted data from the NSAP. This estimate excludes children in informal adoptions (i.e., without legally finalized adoptions) as well as those living with at least one biological parent, most of whom are living in step families.

³ American families can adopt a child from the foster care system (i.e., public agency or foster care adoption), a child from another country (i.e., international adoption), or an American child who is not part of the foster care system (i.e., domestic private adoption, private agency adoption or independent adoption). Approximately two-thirds of all adoptions in the United States are stepparent adoptions (Kreider, 2003). Since these adoptions are different in that the child is biologically related to one parent, specific questions in the NSCH and the NS-CSHCN screened out stepparent adoptions.

Chinese preference for male children, have contributed to a large number of girls adopted from China by American parents.

- Adopted children tend to be somewhat older than children in the general population. For example, 14 percent of adopted children are under 5 years old, compared with 27 percent of children in the general population.
- Adopted children are less likely than are children in the general population to live in households with incomes below the poverty threshold (12 compared with 18 percent). However, nearly half (46 percent) of children adopted from foster care live in households with incomes no higher than two times the poverty threshold.
- Overall, four out of ten adopted children are in transracial adoptions—that is, their parents reported that both adoptive parents are (or the single adoptive parent is) of a different race, culture, or ethnicity than their child. The majority of adopted children are non-white, but the majority of adopted children have white parents. Transracial adoptions are most common for children whose families adopted internationally.
- Over two-thirds of adopted children—69 percent—live with two married parents, and they are just as likely to do so as children in the general population.
- Most adopted children (85 percent) are in excellent or very good health. At the same time, the parents of 26 percent of adopted children report that their child experiences moderate or severe consequences of any of 16 possible medical or psychological conditions.
- The majority of adopted children also fare well according to measures of social and emotional well-being. For example, only a small minority of adopted children have ever been diagnosed with disorders such as attachment disorder, depression, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or behavior or conduct disorder. However, compared to the general population of children, adopted children are more likely to have ever been diagnosed with—and to have moderate or severe symptoms of—depression, ADD/ADHD, or behavior/conduct disorder.
- More than half of school-age adopted children have excellent or very good performance in reading and language arts and in math, according to their parents. Furthermore, 69 percent are engaged in school (i.e., they care about doing well in school and regularly do homework), but they are slightly less likely to be engaged in school than are children in the general population (81 percent).

Findings pertaining to the adoption process include:

- Adopted children typically have parents who said they chose to adopt in order to provide a permanent home for a child, to expand their family, and/or because of infertility. Among the three adoption types, children adopted from foster care are least likely to have parents report infertility as a motivation for adoption, and most likely to report being motivated because they had previously adopted their child's sibling.
- Adoption expenses for children adopted privately in the United States or internationally are considerably higher than for children adopted from foster care.

- Almost all adopted children ages 5 and older (97 percent) know they were adopted. Among children adopted by non-relatives, about one-third have a pre-adoption agreement regarding openness (i.e., contact with birth family members), and roughly one-third also have had post-adoption contact with birth family members.
- Three out of ten adopted children have a parent who reported that at least one adoption-specific support they needed was not received. Such supports include meeting with agency staff, child and parent adoption support groups, parent training, and web-based resources. Receipt of these services varies by adoption type, with children adopted internationally typically the most likely to have parents who received particular services.

Findings specific to children adopted from foster care (about 661,000 children) include:

- 153,000, or 23 percent, were adopted by relatives.
- 262,000, or 40 percent, were adopted by someone who knew them prior to the adoption (including relatives).
- 454,000, or 69 percent, were adopted by someone who was previously their foster parent.
- 355,000, or 54 percent, have special health care needs.

Findings specific to children adopted domestically from sources other than foster care (about 677,000 children) include:

- 276,000, or 41 percent, were adopted by relatives.
- 301,000, or 44 percent, were adopted by someone who knew them prior to the adoption (including relatives).
- 218,000, or 32 percent, have special health care needs.

Findings specific to children adopted from international sources (444,000) include:

- 128,000, or 29 percent, have special health care needs.
- Six out of ten internationally adopted children had been adopted from Asia, with over half of them (33 percent of all international children) coming from China.

Data sources and methods

The NSAP is an add-on module to the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH). The NSCH uses the sampling frame of the National Immunization Survey (NIS), which contacts over a million households annually. After the NIS screener and/or survey are completed, the State and Local Area Integrated Telephone Survey (SLAITS) module is administered if households include any children under age 18. SLAITS most recently fielded the NSCH in 2007-08. In each household, one child under age 18 was randomly selected, and a parent or guardian knowledgeable about the child's health answered questions about the child's and the family's health and well-being and provided information about demographic characteristics. The 2007 NSCH included information about approximately 86,000 focal children. If the focal child was adopted, an adoptive parent of the child was asked to participate in the NSAP, a 40-minute telephone survey. NSAP interviews were carried out between April 2007 and June 2008 regarding approximately 2,000 children, as shown in Table 1 below. (Adopted children who were also living with a biological parent, whose adoptions were assumed to be primarily step-parent adoptions, were excluded from the NSAP.)

Table 1. Sample Sizes for Adopted Children in the NSCH and NSAP

	All adopted children	International adoptions	Foster care adoptions	Private domestic adoptions	Non-adopted children
NSCH	2,737	667	885	1,185	≈ 84,000
NSAP	2,087	539	694	854	N/A

Source: Bramlett, Matthew D. 2008. An overview of the National Survey of Adoptive Parents. Presented at the 2008 NCHS Data Users' Conference, Aug. 11-13, 2008, Washington, DC.

A nationally representative sample of adopted children can be examined in detail using the NSAP. With a data file that links the NSAP and NSCH, analyses using this sample can include not only the topics covered in the NSAP, but also the data elements included in the NSCH. So, for example, we have compared differences in child characteristics measured in the NSCH such as health conditions for children adopted from foster care, internationally, and privately domestically.

It is important to note that the findings are descriptive in nature, and the analyses generate information about how adopted children and their families are faring—and even, at a more basic level, to obtain estimates of how many adopted children there are, as well as their demographic characteristics. The study is not experimental so we cannot know for certain whether identified associations are confounded by factors not measured in the NSAP, and—since the data are not longitudinal—we cannot know for certain whether some conditions existed earlier in time than others (one of several necessary conditions to infer causality).