



Persons Seeking to Adopt

Most Americans favor adoption,¹ and many have at some point considered adoption. However, relatively few have taken concrete steps toward adopting a child, and fewer still have actually adopted a child. This factsheet examines some of the more recent statistics and trends regarding American adults who seek to adopt an infant or child.

How Many People Are Seeking to Adopt?

Over one-third of Americans have ever considered adopting (Harris Interactive, Inc., 2002; Princeton Survey Research

¹ A 1997 study from Princeton Survey Research Associates concluded that 90 percent of Americans have a favorable or somewhat favorable opinion of adoption, while a 2002 poll by Harris Interactive, Inc., found that 94 percent of adults have a favorable or somewhat favorable attitude toward adoption.

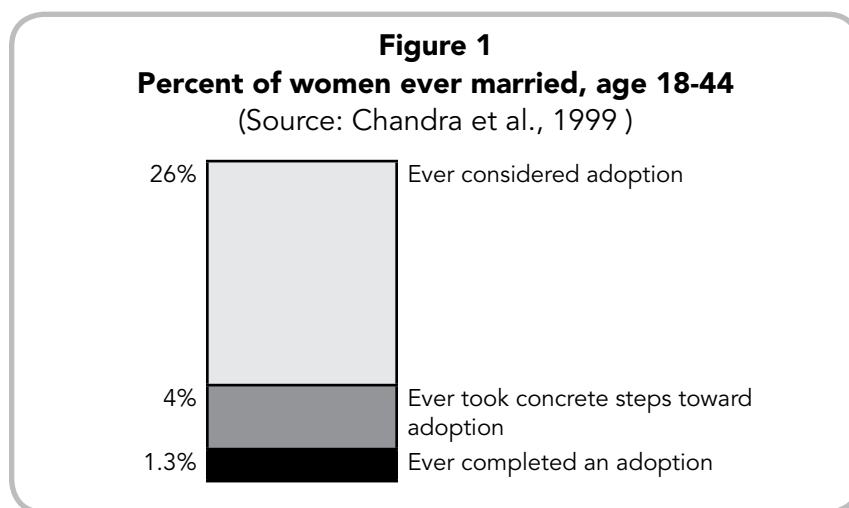


Associates, 1997), but no more than 2 percent of Americans have actually adopted (Mosher & Bachrach, 1996). Somewhere between those percentages lies the number of people seeking to adopt—that is, those who have taken concrete steps to adopt a child.

Data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) included responses of more than 10,000 women who were interviewed about topics that included adoption. Analysis of the data led researchers to the following conclusions (Chandra, Abma, Maza, & Bachrach, 1999):

- In 1995 there were nearly 10 million ever-married American women ages 18 to 44 who had *ever considered adoption*, and this number amounted to more than one-fourth (26.4 percent) of all ever-married women.
- About 16 percent of those who had considered adoption (4 percent of the total of ever-married women), or 1.6 million women, had *ever taken concrete steps toward adoption*; this percentage may represent those seeking to adopt.
- Only 31 percent of those who had taken concrete steps (1.3 percent of the total of ever-married women), or 487,000 women, had *ever completed an adoption*.²

The graph below uses the responses of women in the NSFG to show the breakdown from those who considered adoption to those who took concrete steps to those who actually adopted.



² Total adoptions in the United States remained stable at about 127,000 for the period 1992-2001 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2004).

Who Are the People Seeking to Adopt?

The 1995 NSFG also reported on the characteristics of the ever-married women ages 18 to 44. Having considered adoption, having taken steps toward adoption, and having actually adopted were more common among women who were older, who had never had children, who had some fertility impairment, and who had ever used fertility services (Chandra et al., 1999). The study also showed that the prevalence of adoption increased with age, education, and income.

The characteristics of those who actually adopted also varied according to whether they adopted an unrelated child or a related child. The NSFG showed that adoption of an unrelated child was most common among childless women, those with fertility impairments, White women, and those with higher levels of income and education. The adoption of a related child was more common among Black families and families with low incomes and low levels of education (Mosher & Bachrach, 1996).

The Harris survey of over 1,400 Americans found that the highest percentages of Americans who had considered adopting a child were those ages 35 to 54, married, and female (Harris Interactive, 2002). In contrast to the NSFG findings, Harris found that income and education were not factors in whether someone had considered adopting. The greatest difference between populations was between Hispanic and non-Hispanic respondents: Hispanic populations had a far greater likelihood of considering adoption than African-American or White populations.

Why Don't All Adoption Seekers Adopt?

All of these studies found a significant discrepancy in percentages between those who have considered adoption and those who actually adopted. The NSFG study also showed a discrepancy in percentages between those who took steps to adopt and those who actually adopted. The reasons for these discrepancies may be attributed, at least in part, to the types of children that prospective adoptive parents are seeking.³ While there are more than 118,000 children in public foster care awaiting adoption (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005), potential adoptive parents are not always seeking to adopt from the foster care system.

³ The NSFG study conducted in 1995 was the first time during the four studies conducted since 1973 that the study's researchers gathered information about preferences regarding the child to be adopted (Chandra et al., 1999).

What Are Some Trends in Adoption Seeking?

The 2002 Harris survey focused on this question. Public foster care includes a disproportionate number of children of color and many older children, as well children in sibling groups and children who have experiences of neglect or abuse. Those polled in the Harris survey indicated they would be more willing to adopt older children and children of different races. However, they expressed concern about adopting children with health or behavioral problems. Additional concerns unrelated to the child's characteristics included whether the birth parents would try to regain custody and whether the costs of the adoption would be affordable.

Several trends were observed by Chandra et al. (1999) from the 1995 NSFG data:

- The percent of ever-married women who had ever adopted declined from 2.1 percent in 1973 to 1.3 percent in 1995.
- At the same time that fewer women had ever adopted a child, an increasing proportion of those women had adopted stepchildren and children of relatives.
- The demand for adoption appears to have remained stable over time. In 1988, NSFG reported that 204,000 were *currently taking steps* to adopt; in 1995 the number was 232,000. In 1988, 31 percent of those who *had ever sought to adopt* had actually adopted a child; in 1995, the figure was also 31 percent.
- Adoption and adoption seeking were more prevalent among women who had never had children and women who had some fertility impairment, but there were many women without those characteristics who were seeking to adopt. The researchers conclude that the relationship between demand for adoption and infertility may be weakening, partly as a result of the increase in adoption of related children or stepchildren.

Future Research

A number of questions remain to be answered about those who seek to adopt. Some possibilities for future research include:

- Current statistics on who seeks to adopt for both men and women
- More information on what keeps people who are considering adoption from taking concrete steps toward adoption
- Exploration of whether different ethnic/racial/socioeconomic groups adopt for different reasons or adopt different types of children

References

Chandra, A., Abma, J., Maza, P., & Bachrach, C. (1999). Adoption, adoption seeking, and relinquishment for adoption in the United States. *Advance Data* (No. 306) from Vital and Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National center for Health Statistics, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved February 16, 2005, from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad306.pdf>

This publication includes data from the National Surveys of Family Growth through 1995, using data on nationally representative samples of over 10,000 women. Data from 2002 (Cycle 6) have not yet been analyzed.

Harris Interactive, Inc. (2002). *National Adoption Attitudes Survey*. Retrieved February 16, 2005, from the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute website: http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/survey/Adoption_Attitudes_Survey.pdf
This survey was commissioned by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption to examine attitudes on adoption from over 1,400 men and women, focusing on attitudes toward adoption from foster care.

Mosher, W. D. & Bachrach, C. A. (1996). Understanding U.S. fertility: Continuity and change in the National Survey of Family Growth, 1988-1995. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 28(1). Retrieved February 16, 2005, from <http://www.agi-usa.org/pubs/journals/2800496.html>
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This report provides statistics on adoptions in the United States through 2001.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2005). *National adoption and foster care statistics*. Data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System. Retrieved February 16, 2005, from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#afcars
This web page links to statistics on children in foster care.