

Adoption of Children in 1951

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Adoption is the legal process by which the relationship of parent and child is established between persons who are not so related by nature. This article, which is taken from a more detailed statistical report, suggests answers to certain questions about the circumstances under which adoptions take place. Who are the children being adopted? What are their ages, their race, their birth status? Who places the children for adoption? What are the adoption rates in different States?

THE number of children adopted has increased sharply in recent years. In 1951 an estimated 80,000 petitions for adoption were filed in the United States—an increase of 60 percent from the number filed in 1944.¹ Comparable data for those 2 years on the type of adoption—by relatives or nonrelatives—are available for only 11 States. In this small and perhaps unrepresentative group, however, the number of children adopted by stepparents or other relatives increased 65 percent between 1944 and 1951, and the number adopted by nonrelated persons went up 85 percent.

Several factors account for the increase in the number of adoptions. Among them is the large number of homes broken by death, divorce, or desertion during and after World War II. In many instances the mother remarried, and the child was subsequently adopted by the stepfather. Another factor has been the increase since 1944 in the number of children born out of wedlock—a group representing a major source of adoptable children. Still another factor is the growing emphasis on finding permanent homes by adoption for children who have been in institutions and boarding homes for long periods of time with no continuing relationship with parents or other relatives.

Source of Data and Definitions

The data presented here are de-

* Program Analysis Branch, Division of Research, Children's Bureau. See the report, *Adoption of Children, 1951: A Statistical Analysis* (Children's Bureau Statistical Series, No. 14), 1953.

¹ The 1951 estimates are projected from reports made by 33 State public welfare agencies; the 1944 estimates from the reports of 22 States.

rived from reports received from State departments of welfare regarding children under age 21 for whom adoption petitions were filed during the report year—for most of the States the year ended December 31, 1951. Twenty-five States provided data for 90 percent or more of all the adoption petitions filed in their jurisdictions (the reporting standard for the study); their reports form the basis of this analysis. While eight other States reported, their reports did not meet this standard and were therefore considered incomplete.

The unit of count used is an adoption petition filed. The data therefore include some children who were not ultimately adopted, since some—though relatively few—adoption petitions were withdrawn or denied. The petition may have been filed by stepparents or other relatives or by nonrelatives, and the data include children placed independently as well as those placed by recognized child-placing agencies. In an "independent placement," children are placed in the adoptive home by parents, friends, relatives, physicians, lawyers, or others, without the aid of a recognized child-placing agency. A "recognized child-placing agency" is a public child-placing agency or a voluntary agency that maintains acceptable standards of social work. In many States, these are agencies that are licensed or certified by the State department of welfare.

State Adoption Rates

Nation-wide data on adoptions are not available, since many States do not collect adoption statistics. The adoption reports from the 25 States that supplied substantially complete

information give, however, an indication of what the national picture may be. These States are distributed among all regions of the country and include about a third of the total child population under age 21; they reported a total of 25,294 petitions for adoption during the year. The 25 States are not necessarily representative of all States in the country; in fact, they are somewhat more rural than the Nation as a whole, as indicated by the fact that the proportion of children living in urban areas in these States is less than that for the United States—49 percent as compared with 58 percent. As a result of this difference in urbanization, the rates of adoption may also be different, and the number of independent placements, the proportion of children born out of wedlock, and other factors may be underestimated in this report.

The adoption rates varied widely among the 25 States. The number of children for whom adoption petitions were filed, per 10,000 children under age 21 in each State (excluding the Territories and possessions), ranged from 5.5 in Kentucky to 27.6 in Oregon, as shown in the listing below.

25 States	13.0
Arkansas	6.3
Connecticut	15.7
Delaware	13.2
Florida	17.8
Georgia	6.9
Hawaii	29.6
Indiana	20.4
Iowa	17.8
Kansas	18.1
Kentucky	5.5
Louisiana	6.2
Maine	24.4
Minnesota	16.3
New Hampshire	14.2
New Mexico	15.9
North Dakota	10.1
Oregon	27.6
Puerto Rico	0.9
Rhode Island	15.4
South Dakota	11.4
Texas	14.9
Vermont	17.1
Virgin Islands	3.8
Virginia	11.0
Wisconsin	12.1

The urban States reported the highest adoption rates. The 11 States with 50 percent or more of the children living in urban areas have a combined rate of 16.4 adoption petitions per 10,000 children, while the other 14 States have a combined rate of 10.4.

A partial explanation of the higher urban rates may lie in the fact that child-placing agencies and the agencies providing services to unmarried mothers are more often located in urban areas. Many unmarried mothers who want to offer their children for adoption go to large cities for this purpose. The low adoption rates in the rural States also raise the question, however, of whether the need for adoption services is being met in these areas.

Racial Differences

Of the 25,294 children for whom adoption petitions were filed in the 25 States, only 6 percent were nonwhite although the nonwhite child population in these States was 14 percent. For the five States (Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Virginia) with the highest proportions of nonwhite children the difference was even greater. Ten percent of the children who were adopted were nonwhite, but 29 percent of the total child population were nonwhite.

There are several reasons for the relatively smaller number of adoptions among nonwhite persons. One factor is the inadequacy of adoptive services for Negro children; another is the inability of agencies to find adoptive homes for them. Another reason for the small number of Negro adoptions may be that many adoptable Negro children are "taken in" by relatives or friends. Although there has been no legal process, these children often live with families just as they would if they had been adopted. There may be economic reasons why the adoption does not take place, or the failure to adopt may result from lack of understanding of what the legal process means to the child and the family.

Relation of Adoptive Parents to Child

Adoption is ordinarily considered the process by which a child becomes

a member of a family to which he is unrelated. Fifty-two percent of the adoption petitions in the 25 States reporting in 1951, however, were filed by stepparents or other relatives— aunts, uncles, and grandparents, for example. The remaining 48 percent were filed by persons unrelated to the child.

Most of the adoptions by relatives were by stepparents. There are many advantages, both for the child and the adopting parent, in adoption. Adoption confers a legal status on the parent-child relationship, entitling the child to certain rights—for example, guardianship, inheritance, support, name, and the status in the family that he would have had if he had been born to both parents. Since adoption deprives a child of the same rights from his natural parents, however, careful consideration should be given to whether the child gains or loses by adoption by a stepparent. For the stepparent, adoption guarantees that no one else has a claim on the child or can interfere in plans for him.

The interests of all persons concerned should be adequately safeguarded in all adoptions, whether they are made by relatives or nonrelated persons. In adoptions by relatives, however, the circumstances are usually assumed to be less hazardous than in those by nonrelatives, and the same safeguards are not always required.

In adoptions by stepparents the children are generally not infants, they have usually been living with one of the parents and are not being placed outside the home, their birth status is generally socially acceptable, and the adoption process is for legal and financial reasons rather than for the social protection of the child. Because of the differences between "relative" and "nonrelative" adoptions, these two types of adoption will be discussed separately whenever the distinction seems important and practical.

Agency and Independent Placements

Thirty-one percent of the 25,294 children for whom adoption petitions were filed in 1951 in the 25 reporting States had been placed in the adop-

tive home independently—without the aid of a social agency—by parents, friends, relatives, physicians, lawyers, or others. Twenty-seven percent had been placed by a recognized child welfare agency—3 out of 5 of them by a voluntary agency. No placement was involved in the remaining 42 percent of the adoptions; the child was adopted by a person, usually a relative, in whose home he had always lived, or he was adopted by stepparents and came into the home through the marriage of his natural parent to the petitioner.

Independent placements are especially frequent in adoptions by persons not related to the child. In nearly half the adoptions by nonrelatives, the children were placed in the adoptive home independently. This large group of children, many of whom were very young and many of whom had been born out of wedlock, were therefore without the safeguards that accompany placement by a social agency.

Though many independent placements fortunately turn out satisfactorily, such placements are fraught with danger. The adopting parents have no assurance that a careful study has been made of the child's physical condition, family background, or intellectual potentialities. They may not be certain that the child is legally available for adoption or that they are secure against claims from the natural parents, who may change their minds about the child upon more deliberate consideration. The child has less protection against being placed in the home of parents who are unfit to rear him. Moreover, the child may have been unnecessarily separated from his own parents, when proper help and guidance could have kept the family together.

Though the number of children placed for adoption independently was still large in 1951, the situation has shown some improvement in the past few years. In the 17 States for which comparable data are available, 55 percent of the children adopted by nonrelatives in 1948 were placed independently. By 1951, the percent had dropped to 51. The improvement is not large, but it may indicate a growing awareness of the importance of having adoption proceedings car-

ried out under the guidance of an authorized agency.

Age at Adoption

Most children are young when adopted. In the 25 States reporting in 1951, the median age of the children for whom adoption petitions were filed was 3.3 years at the time the petition was made; two-fifths of the children were under age 2. These were the ages of the children at the time the petition was filed. For many children, placement in adoptive homes was made some time before the petition was filed.

Children adopted by persons who were not related to them were younger, on the average, than those adopted by relatives. Of those adopted by nonrelatives, two-thirds were under age 2 at the time the petition for adoption was filed. In contrast, only about one-tenth of the children petitioned for by related persons were under age 2, as shown below.

Age at time of petition	Petitions filed by—	
	Relatives	Non-relatives
Total number reported..	11,375	10,318
Total percent.....	100	100
Under 6 months.....	3	25
6 months, under 2 years....	8	41
2 years, under 6 years.....	38	22
6 years, under 14 years.....	40	10
14 years, under 21 years....	11	2

The difference in the ages of the children adopted by relatives and those adopted by nonrelatives reflects the different circumstances under which the two types of adoption occur. Stepparents make most of the adoptions by relatives. Since children do not usually acquire stepparents at a very early age, only a small proportion of the children adopted by relatives are under age 2.

One reason that the children adopted by nonrelatives are likely to be very young is the fact that it is easier for social agencies to find homes for younger children than for older ones. Many adoptive parents consider older children "undesirable" merely because of their age. Social workers, however, believe that many older children are adoptable and that they would fit into a family in a way that would be satisfying to them-

selves and to the adoptive parents.

In addition, many of the children in nonrelative adoptions are placed independently. These children are even younger than those placed through social agencies, as shown in the following tabulation.

Age at time of placement	Placement made—	
	By agencies	Independently
Total number reported..	5,015	5,899
Total percent.....	100	100
Under 1 month of age.....	11	51
1 month, under 3 months....	15	8
3 months, under 6 months....	19	6
6 months, under 1 year.....	22	6
1 year, under 6 years.....	26	21
6 years, and over.....	7	8

More than half the children placed independently were less than 1 month old when they were placed, which means that many of them were placed directly from the hospital or shortly thereafter. Agency placements, in contrast, tended to occur when the child was a little older; only 11 percent of the children were under a month old when they were placed by the agency.

The children placed by the agency are older because of the time required by the agencies to make studies of the adoptive parents, the natural parents, and the children, and also to make sure that the legal requirements governing the surrender of the child are met before placements. Such procedures are not usually followed in independent placements.

Birth Status

The children for whom adoption petitions were filed in the 25 States that made complete reports in 1951 were divided almost equally between those born out of wedlock and those

born in wedlock. Nonrelatives petitioned to adopt most (69 percent) of the children born out of wedlock, while relatives made the petitions for most (75 percent) of the children born in wedlock.

Children born out of wedlock and not adopted by relatives are the children most vulnerable to "black" and "gray" market adoption practices.² The unmarried mother is likely to be young (2 out of every 5 unmarried mothers are teenagers), and she is likely to find it hard to provide for her baby, since her earning capacity is usually limited. Often her parents or relatives are unable or unwilling to help her care for the child. In addition, she finds it difficult to face the social stigma attached to unmarried motherhood.

These circumstances, coupled with the heavy demand from prospective parents for an adoptable child, often lead to hasty and perhaps ill-considered negotiations. The increasing number of children born out of wedlock in this country—87,000 in 1938 and 133,200 in 1949—makes it more important than ever to provide services for unmarried mothers and their children that will cope with the dangers of hasty placements.

Of the adoptive children born in wedlock, most—whether they are adopted by relatives or nonrelatives—come from homes broken by divorce, desertion, or separation.

Adopted children born in wedlock	Petitions filed by—	
	Relatives	Non-relatives
Total number reported..	7,772	2,635
Total percent.....	100	100
Both parents dead.....	2	3
One parent dead.....	19	15
Both parents living and together.....	4	25
Both parents living, marriage broken.....	70	46
Other and not reported.....	5	11

A fairly large proportion (25 percent) of the children born in wedlock and adopted by nonrelatives had parents who were still living to-

² The term "black market" means an adoption made for financial profit and without the help of a recognized child-placing agency; by "gray market" is meant an adoption similarly made but in which profit is not the primary motive.

Birth status	Total reported		Petitions filed by—			
			Relatives		Non-relatives	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Born out of wedlock....	10,336	100	3,224	31	7,112	69
Born in wedlock.....	10,407	100	7,772	75	2,635	25

gether. The material presented in this study does not show why this happens—why parents who are not separated give up their children to others. There are, of course, several possible reasons. Perhaps the parents

had more children than they felt they could support, perhaps one or both parents were ill, or perhaps the parents had married shortly before or after the birth of the child and could not face the social disapproval

of the situation. These are situations, whatever their cause, in which the services of a social worker are needed to make sure that adoption takes place only when it is the best solution for the child and the parents.