



ADOPTION EDUCATION, LLC

HISTORY OF ADOPTION IN THE UNITED STATES

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TO ACCESS THE QUIZ FOR HISTORY OF ADOPTION:

After reading this course, please sign back on to www.adopteducation.com. Go to the table of contents and click on the last section. Go to the final page of this section to take the quiz. Click the NEXT arrow at the bottom of the last page to begin question 1 of the quiz.

HISTORY OF ADOPTION IN THE UNITED STATES

ADOPTION HISTORY IN BRIEF

Since ancient times and in all human cultures, children have been transferred from adults who would not or could not be parents to adults who wanted them for love, labor, and property. Adoption's close association with humanitarianism, upward mobility, and infertility, however, are uniquely modern phenomena. An especially prominent feature of modern adoption history has been "matching". During much of the twentieth century, matching was the philosophy that governed non-relative adoption. Its goal was to make families socially that would "match" families made naturally. Matching required that adoptive parents be married heterosexual couples who looked, felt, and behaved as if they had, by themselves, conceived other people's children. What this meant in practice was that physical resemblance, intellectual similarity, and racial and religious continuity between parents and children were preferred goals in adoptive families. Matching was the technique that could inject naturalness and realness into a family form stigmatized as artificial and less real than the "real thing." Matching stood for safety and security. Difference spelled trouble. This notion was unusual in the history of family formation, especially because the most obvious thing about adoption has been that it is a different way to make a family. Practices that aimed to hide this difference ironically made modern adoption most distinctive.

In the United States, state legislatures began passing adoption laws in the nineteenth-century. The Massachusetts Adoption of Children Act, enacted in 1851, is widely considered the first "modern" adoption law. Adoption reform in other western industrial nations lagged. England, for example, did not pass adoption legislation until 1926. Observers have frequently attributed the acceptance of adoption in the United States to its compatibility with cherished national traditions, from immigration to democracy. According to this way of thinking, solidarities achieved on purpose are more powerful—and more quintessentially American—than solidarities ascribed to blood. Yet adoption has always had a symbolic importance that outstripped its statistical significance. Adoption has touched only a small minority of children and adults while telling stories about identity and belonging that include us all.

During the twentieth century, numbers of adoptions increased dramatically in the United States. In 1900, formalizing adoptive kinship in a court was still very rare. By 1970, the numerical peak of twentieth-century adoption, 175,000 adoptions were finalized annually. "Stranger" or "non-relative" adoptions have predominated over time, and most people equate adoption with families in which parents and children lack genetic ties. Today, however, a majority of children are adopted by natal relatives and step-parents, a development that corresponds to the rise of divorce, remarriage, and long-term cohabitation.

Conservative estimates (which do not include informal adoptions) suggest that five million Americans alive today are adoptees, two to four percent of all families have adopted, and 2.5 percent of all children under 18 are adopted. Accurate historical statistics about twentieth-century adoption are, unfortunately, almost impossible to locate. A national reporting system existed for only thirty years (from 1945 to 1975) and even during this period, data was supplied by states and territories on a purely voluntary basis.

We do know that adoptive kinship is not typical. Families touched by adoption are significantly more racially diverse, better educated, and more affluent than families in general. We know this because in 2000, "adopted son/daughter" was included as a census category for the first time in U.S. history.

Since World War II, adoption has clearly globalized. From Germany in the 1940s and Korea in the 1950s to China and Guatemala today, countries that export children for adoption have been devastated by poverty, war, and genocide. Because growing numbers of adoptions are transracial and/or international, many of today's adoptive families have literally made adoption more visible than it was in the past. But total numbers of adoptions have actually declined since 1970. In recent years, approximately 125,000 children have been adopted annually by strangers and relatives in the United States.

Modern adoption history has been marked by vigorous reforms dedicated to surrounding child placement with legal and scientific safeguards enforced by trained professionals working under the auspices of certified agencies. In 1917, for instance, Minnesota passed the first state law that required children and adults to be investigated and adoption records to be shielded from public view. By midcentury, virtually all states in the country had revised their laws to incorporate such "minimum standards" (see section below) as pre-placement inquiry, post-placement probation, and "confidentiality and sealed records" (see section below). At their best, these standards promoted child welfare. Yet they also reflected eugenic* anxieties about the quality of adoptable children and served to make adult tastes and preferences more influential in adoption than children's needs.

Since 1950, a number of major shifts have occurred. First, "adoptability" expanded beyond "normal" children to include older, disabled, non-white, and other children with special needs (see section on "special needs" adoptions below). Since 1970, earlier reforms guaranteeing confidentiality and sealed records have been forcefully criticized and movements to encourage search, reunion, and "open adoption" have mobilized sympathy and support. The adoption closet has been replaced by an astonishing variety of adoption communities and communications. Adoption is visible in popular culture, grassroots organizations, politics, daily media, and on the internet.

Adoption history illustrates that public and private issues are inseparable. Ideas about blood and belonging, nature and nurture, needs and rights are not the exclusive products of individual choices and personal freedoms. They have been decisively shaped by law and public policy and cultural change, which in turn have altered Americans' ordinary lives and the families in which they live and love.

This course introduces the history of child adoption in the United States by profiling people, organizations, topics, and studies that shaped adoption during the twentieth century.

1693-1850 1851-1900 1901-1919 1920-1946 1946-1964 1965- present Adoption History in Brief	
1693	Governor Sir William Phips of Massachusetts adopts a son, marking the first recorded legal adoption in the colonies.
1729	After Indians massacred adult settlers in Natchez, Ursuline nuns found the first orphanage in North America in Natchez, Mississippi. The name of the orphanage is unconfirmed.
1769	William Russell of Georgia leaves 300 pounds in his will to Anna Hunter for her dowry. Hunter is a "foster child" who lives with Russell's family. During the colonial era, most orphans are taken in by relatives or people in their community, who either treat them as indentured servants or raise them as their own children, but never adopt them legally.
1801	The Hebrew Orphan Society, the first Jewish orphanage in the United States, is established in Charleston, South Carolina.
1822	The Colored Orphan Asylum, the first orphanage for African American children, is established in Philadelphia.
1850	Alabama passes a law stating that an adopted child has the right to inherit property from adoptive parents. The first "orphan train," initiated by the Children's Mission for the Children of the Destitute, leaves Boston. About 30 street children are taken to foster homes in New Hampshire and Vermont.
1851	Massachusetts passed the first modern adoption law, recognizing adoption as a social and legal operation based on child welfare rather than adult interests. Historians consider the 1851 Adoption of Children Act an important turning point because it directed judges to ensure that adoption decrees were "fit and proper." How this determination was to be made was left entirely to judicial discretion.
1854	New York Children's Aid Society, under the direction of reformer Charles Loring Brace, launched the orphan trains.
1868	Massachusetts Board of State Charities began paying for children to board in private family homes: in 1869, an agent was appointed to visit children in their homes. This was the beginning of placing-out, a movement to care for children in families rather than institutions.
1872	New York State Charities Aid Association was organized. It was one of the first organizations in the country to establish a specialized child-placement program, in 1898. By 1922, homes for more than 3300 children had been found.

1887	Michigan passed the first law in the United States regulating the placement of children within the state. ¹
1891	Michigan was the first state to require that “the [the judge] shall be satisfied as to the good moral character, and the ability to support and educate such child, and of the suitability of the home, or the person or persons adopting such child.”
1895	Michigan passed a state law requiring out-of-state, child-placement agencies to post a bond for each child the agency brought into the state of Michigan. ¹
1898	The Catholic Home Bureau was organized in New York by the St. Vincent De Paul Society. It was the first Catholic agency to place children in homes rather than orphanages, a model soon followed in other cities.
1904	The first social work school, the New York School of Applied Philanthropy, opened its doors.
1909	First White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children declared that poverty alone should not be grounds for removing children from families. When children required placement for other reasons, however, they were to be placed in family homes, “the highest and finest product of civilization.”
1910-1930	The first specialized adoption agencies were founded, including the Spence Alumni Society, the Free Synagogue Child Adoption Committee, the Alice Chapin Nursery (all in New York) and the Cradle in Evanston, Illinois.
1911	Dr. Arnold Gesell founded the Juvenile Psycho Clinic (later the Clinic of Child Development) at Yale.
1912	Congress created the U.S. Children's Bureau in the Department of Labor “to investigate and report on all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people”; Julia Lathrop was appointed as its first chief, the first woman to head a federal agency.
1912-1921	Baby farming (the taking in of an infant or child for payment), commercial maternity homes, and adoption ad investigations took place in Boston, New York, Baltimore, Chicago, and other cities.
1915	Bureau for Exchange of Information Among Child-Helping Organizations founded (renamed Child Welfare League of America in 1921).
1916	Lewis Terman's revision of the Binet scale popularized the intelligence

	available for adoption, and trends toward measuring their mental potential as one part of the adoption process, usually with mental tests, grew out of the eugenics movement in the early part of the century.
1917	Minnesota passed first law mandating social investigation of all adoptions (including home studies) and providing for the confidentiality of adoption records.
1919	The Russell Sage Foundation published the first professional child-placing manual; U.S. Children's Bureau set minimum standards for child-placing. Jessie Taft authored an early manifesto for therapeutic adoption, "Relation of Personality Study to Child Placing."
1919-1929	The first empirical field studies of adoption gathered basic information about how many adoptions were taking place, of whom, and by whom.
1921	Child Welfare League of America formally renamed and organized. The League adopted a Constitution that defined standard-setting as one of the organization's core purposes; American Association of Social Workers founded.
1924	First major outcome study, <i>How Foster Children Turn Out</i> , published.
1927	Ida Parker conducts a study of adoptions in Boston, and discovers that nearly 70 percent of them are independent. Adoptions are often arranged through attorneys rather than agencies or governmental organizations. Open adoptions (where the birth mother meets the adoptive parents) are the norm. Many unwed mothers advertise their children for sale in newspapers.
1929	After 75 years, the "orphan train" movement ends. The Orphan Train was a social experiment that transported children from crowded coastal cities of the United States to the country's Midwest for adoption. By the end of its run, an estimated 200,000 orphaned, abandoned, or homeless children were relocated.
1933	Edna Gladney successfully lobbies to have references to "illegitimacy" removed from birth certificates in Texas. At this time, many states mention children's out-of-wedlock status on their birth certificates, or else issue them birth certificates of a different color.
1934	The state of Iowa began administering mental tests to all children placed for adoption in hopes of preventing the unwitting adoption of retarded children (called "feeble-minded" at the time). This policy inspired nature-nurture studies at the Iowa Child Welfare Station that eventually served to challenge hereditarian orthodoxies and promote policies of early family placement.

1935	Social Security Act included provision for aid to dependent children, crippled children's programs, and child welfare, which eventually led to a dramatic expansion of foster care; American Youth Congress issued "The Declaration of the Rights of American Youth".
1937-1938	First Child Welfare League of America initiative that distinguished minimum standards for permanent (adoptive) and temporary (foster) placements.
1938	The Child Welfare League advocates secrecy in adoption proceedings.
1939	Valentine P. Wasson published <i>The Chosen Baby</i> , a landmark in the literature on telling children about their adopted status.
1944	In <i>Prince v. Massachusetts</i> , a case involving Jehovah's Witnesses, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the state's power as <i>parens patriae</i> to restrict parental control in order to guard "the general interest in youth's well being."
1948	Following World War II, the Displaced Persons Act enables more than 200,000 refugees to come to America, including approximately 3,000 orphans. The first recorded transracial adoption of an African-American child by white parents took place in Minnesota.
1949	New York was the first state to pass a law against black market adoptions, which proved unenforceable in practice. Pearl Buck founds Welcome House, an organization promoting the adoption of Asian American children.
1951	An estimated 70 percent of adopted children are infants. Prior to the development of infant formula in the late 1920s, most adoptees were older children.
1953	Congress allows up to 500 special visas for orphans adopted by U.S. servicemen or civil servants during the Korean War. The Refugee Relief Act allows an additional 4,000 orphan visas to be granted over the next three years, but this provision is not able to accommodate all the orphans waiting to be adopted. Uniform Adoption Act first proposed. Few states ever adopted it; Jean Paton founded Orphan Voyage, the first adoptee search support network.
1953-1954	Child Welfare League of America conducted nationwide survey of adoption agency practices.

1953-1958	The first nationally coordinated effort to locate adoptive homes for African American children, the National Urban League Foster Care and Adoptions Project.
1954	Helen Doss published <i>The Family Nobody Wanted</i> . Jean Paton published <i>The Adopted Break Silence</i> , the first book to offer a variety of first-person adoption narratives and promote the notion that adoptees had a distinctive identity.
1955	The Child Welfare League of America holds the first professional conference on adoption. Child Welfare League of America national conference on adoption in Chicago announced that the era of special needs adoption had arrived; Congressional inquiry into interstate and black market adoptions, chaired by Senator Estes Kefauver (D-TN), suggested that poor adoption practices created juvenile delinquency; Proposed federal law on black market adoptions introduced by Senators Kefauver (D-TN) and Edward Thye (R-MN), but it never passed Congress; National Association of Social Workers founded, consolidating a number of other social work organizations; Bertha and Harry Holt adopted eight Korean War orphans after a special act of Congress allowed them to do so; Pearl S. Buck accused social workers and religious institutions of sustaining the black market and preventing the adoption of children in order to preserve their jobs; Adopt-A-Child founded by the National Urban League and fourteen New York agencies to promote African-American adoptions.
1956	Harry and Bertha Holt form Holt International Children's Services, a non-profit Christian adoption agency, adopt eight Korean children, becoming pioneers in inter-country adoption.
1957	Congress lifts all numerical quotas for orphan visas. International Conference on Intercountry Adoptions issued report on problems of international adoptions; U.S. adoption agencies sponsored legislation to prohibit or control proxy adoptions. [A common practice in the 1950s, 'proxy adoptions' allowed U.S. citizens to adopt in foreign courts by designating a proxy agent to act in their place.]
1958	Child Welfare League of America published <i>Standards of Adoption Service</i> (revised in 1968, 1973, 1978, 1988, 2000); Indian Adoption Project began.
1959	UN Assembly adopted Declaration of the Rights of the Child, endorsed in 1960 by Golden Anniversary White House Conference on Children and Youth.
1960	May 11: Pharmaceutical company G. D. Searle receives government approval to sell the first birth control pill. Within 18 months, over 400,000 American women will start taking the oral contraceptive to

	<p>babies available for adoption in the U.S.</p> <p>Psychiatrist Marshall Schechter published a study claiming that adopted children were 100 times more likely than their non-adopted counterparts to show up in clinical populations. This sparked a vigorous debate about whether adoptive kinship was itself a risk factor for mental disturbance and illness and inspired a new round of studies into the psychopathology of adoption.</p>
1961	The Immigration and Nationality Act incorporated, for the first time, provisions for the international adoption of foreign-born children by U.S. citizens.
1963	National Institute of Child Health and Human Development established as part of the National Institutes of Health; U.S. Children's Bureau moved from Social Security Administration to Welfare Administration.
1964	H. David Kirk published <i>Shared Fate: A Theory of Adoption and Mental Health</i> , the first book to make adoption a serious issue in the sociological literature on family life and mental health.
1965	The Los Angeles County Bureau of Adoptions launched the first organized program of single parent adoptions in order to locate homes for hard-to-place children with special needs.
1966	The National Adoption Resource Exchange, later renamed the Adoption Resource Exchange of North America (ARENA), was established as an outgrowth of the Indian Adoption Project. [The Indian Adoption Project lasted from 1958-1967. During an era when matching dominated adoption practice, it placed 396 Native American children from 16 western states with white families in Illinois, Indiana, NY, Massachusetts, Missouri and other states in the East and Midwest.]
1968	During the third term of Governor Nelson Rockefeller, New York becomes the first state to provide an assistance program for children waiting to be adopted.
1969	President Nixon created the Office of Child Development in HEW to coordinate and administer Head Start and U.S. Children's Bureau functions.
1970	Adoptions reached their century-long statistical peak at approximately 175,000 per year. Almost 80 percent of the totals were arranged by agencies.
1971	Florence Fisher founded the Adoptees Liberty Movement Association "to abolish the existing practice of sealed records" and advocate for "opening of records to any adopted person over eighteen who wants, for any reason, to see them."

	photo listings to promote the adoption of older children.
1972	<p>National Association of Black Social Workers opposed transracial adoptions; <i>Stanley v. Illinois</i> substantially increased the rights of unwed fathers in adoption by requiring informed consent and proof of parental unfitness prior to termination of parental rights.</p> <p>Congress passes the Multi-ethnic Placement Act, which stipulates that any agency receiving federal funds cannot delay or deny the adoption or foster placement of a child based on its race or ethnicity.</p> <p>The National Adoption Center is founded to promote the adoption of children throughout the United States, particularly those with special needs.</p>
1973	<p><i>Roe v. Wade</i> legalized abortion.</p> <p>The Committee for Single Adoptive Parents is founded by Hope Marindin.</p> <p>Anna Freud, Joseph Goldstein, and Albert Solnit publish <i>Beyond the Best Interests of the Child</i>. Their book advocates the importance of considering children's needs in the adoption process.</p>
1975	<p>April: The U.S. military evacuates over 3,300 children from Vietnam in Operation Babylift.</p>
1976	<p>Concerned United Birthparents is founded by Lee Campbell. A small group gathered to provide mutual support for birthparents, men and women who had surrendered children to adoption.</p> <p>Social workers Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor advocate for "open adoption," where birth parents and adoptive parents meet each other.</p> <p>The governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis, announced an Adoption Week for his state. Later that same year President Gerald Ford proclaimed that Adoption Week would be celebrated nationally.</p>
1978	<p>The Indian Child Welfare Act is passed, mandating that a child's nation or the Bureau of Indian Affairs must be notified before a Native American child is placed for adoption. A child may be placed with parents of another culture only after attempts to place the child in a Native American home have been exhausted.</p> <p>American Adoption Congress was founded in 1978 as a volunteer, non-profit organization bringing together on a national level local and regional search, support, and advocacy groups.</p>
1979	<p>The Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International is formed.</p>

1980	<p>Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act offered significant funding to states that supported subsidy programs for special needs adoptions and devoted resources to family preservation, reunification, and the prevention of abuse, neglect, and child removal.</p> <p>The National Council for Adoption is formed to promote high standards in adoption procedures and provide information on adoption.</p>
1981	<p>In Chicago, the Rev. George H. Clements founds the "One Church, One Child" movement to recruit black adoptive parents for black children through churches.</p>
1987	<p>The Orphan Train Heritage Society of America, Inc., is formed to serve as a resource center for former orphan train adoptees and the public.</p> <p>The Reagan Administration forms an Interagency Task Force on Adoption to promote adoption.</p>
1989	<p>UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.</p>
1990	<p>National Adoption Week became National Adoption Month nationwide.</p>
1993	<p>The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption is passed. This international agreement sets uniform standards for the protection of adopted children.</p>
1994	<p>The United States signs the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.</p> <p>Multiethnic Placement Act was the first federal law to concern itself with race in adoption. It prohibited agencies receiving federal funds from denying transracial adoptions on the sole basis of race, but permitted the use of race as one factor, among others, in foster and adoptive placements. A 1996 revision to this law, the Inter-Ethnic Adoption Amendment, made it impermissible to employ race at all.</p>
1996	<p>Bastard Nation founded. Its mission statement promoted "the full human and civil rights of adult adoptees," including access to sealed records.</p>
1997	<p>President Bill Clinton signs the Adoption and Safe Families Act which stressed permanency planning for children and represented a policy shift away from family reunification and toward adoption.</p>
1998	<p>Oregon voters passed Ballot Measure 58, allowing adult adoptees access to original birth certificates. This legal blow to confidentiality and sealed records was stalled by legal challenges to the measure's constitutionality, which eventually failed. The measure has been in effect in Oregon since June 2000.</p>

2000	The Child Citizenship Act of 2000 allowed foreign-born adoptees to become automatic American citizens when they entered the United States, eliminating the legal burden of naturalization for international adoptions. Census 2000 included “adopted son/daughter” as a kinship category for the first time in U.S. history.
2007	The United States ratified the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption on December 12, 2007 in the Netherlands.
2008	The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption entered into force for the United States on April 1, 2008.

Additional dates for the timeline is from PBS American Experience, *Daughter from Danang*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/daughter/timeline/timeline2.html>.

1 National Orphan Train Complex, State Laws Help Stop Trains, <http://www.orphantraindepot.com/StateLawsStopTrains.html>.

MINIMUM STANDARDS

For most of the twentieth century, “standards” and “safeguards” were interchangeable terms for adoption reformers. They believed that adoption was an urgent social problem in need of greatly expanded public regulation. The state’s responsibility to protect child welfare was the animating principle behind minimum standards. Once legislated and enforced, these basic legal rules and social procedures would limit risk by constraining adoptions based purely on money or sentiment. Standards would require that placements be approved (if not actually arranged) by social work professionals operating in agencies rather than by baby farmers or other amateurs who specialized in independent (or private) adoptions. The most vigorous advocates of minimum standards were concentrated in the U.S. Children’s Bureau and the Child Welfare League of America.

The standards they had in mind involved certification of child-placers, investigation of the child and adult parties to adoption, and supervision of new families after placement and before finalization. In 1917, Minnesota passed the first state law mandating that children’s adoptability and prospective parents’ suitability be investigated before adoption decrees were granted. Two decades later, more than twenty states had translated similar standards into law. By midcentury, virtually all states in the country required individual and organizational child-placers to be licensed and the vast majority had new or revised adoption statutes on the books echoing reformers’ constant refrain: investigate and supervise. New record-keeping protocols included comprehensiveness, consistency, and confidentiality and sealed records. When Minnesota legislated adoption investigations, it was also the first state to seal adoption records.

Because early field studies revealed that many courts handled adoption petitions casually and legal requirements, where they existed, were often ignored, minimum standards were considered the most feasible path toward improvement. Typical early statements argued that unregulated placing-out was full of error and catastrophe. “Unless carried out in accordance with approved standards,” declared Edmond Butler, Executive Secretary of New York’s Catholic Home Bureau, child placing would add to the “thousands of human wrecks” already seeking public charity and “be responsible for destroying the future welfare of very many if not most of those intended to be helped.”

Minimum standards were formulated in positive as well as negative terms. Birth parents should be beyond rehabilitation, children should be “normal,” and adopters should be “industrious and thrifty,” of the same religion as the child, and not too “advanced in years.” Adopters were presumed to be married couples—and many surely were—but no rigid codes excluded singles from consideration. Religion was the only factor singled out for matching by adoption laws passed or revised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Minimum standards helped to modernize adoption by subjecting family-formation to new forms of bureaucratic control and professional oversight. By turning helping practices into calculable operations, for instance, they enhanced the role of scientific authority in the adoption process. Standardizing the way families came into being was both the premise and the purpose of outcome studies and other ambitious enterprises in adoption knowledge.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND SEALED RECORDS

The fact that adoption information has been both highly regulated and extremely controversial is one of the hallmarks of modern adoption. At first sketchy and incomplete, data contained in the adoption records of early twentieth-century courts and agencies was available to anyone curious enough to search it out. The same was true of uniform birth records, which were products of state efforts to standardize birth registration during the first third of the twentieth century.

In 1917, the Minnesota adoption law was revised to mandate confidential records, and between the world wars, most states in the country followed suit. Confidential records placed information off limits to nosy members of the public but kept it accessible to the children and adults directly involved in adoption, who were called the “parties in interest.”

Confidentiality was advocated by professionals and policy-makers determined to establish minimum standards in adoption, decrease the stigma associated with illegitimacy, and make child welfare the governing rule in placement decisions. In practice, confidentiality placed a premium on adoptions arranged anonymously, without any identifying contact between natal and adoptive parents. Confidentiality also meant that when courts issued adoption decrees, states produced new birth certificates, listing adopters’ names, and sealed away the originals, which contained the names of birth parents, or at least birth mothers.

Many adopters, especially those whose infertility made them long for exclusive parent-child ties, surely preferred anonymity as well. Confidentiality made it possible for some of these parents to avoid telling their children that they were adopted at all. The relatives of many unmarried birth mothers also favored confidentiality. Especially during the postwar baby boom, when more out-of-wedlock births occurred in middle-class families than had been the case earlier in the century, mortified parents argued that their daughters should have a second chance to lead normal, married lives. Maternity homes proliferated to shield non-marital pregnancies from public view and helped to make adoption a topic of embarrassment and shame.

Anonymity and new birth certificates were both consistent with matching, which set out to make new families “as if” they had been made naturally. Confidentiality was converted into secrecy only after World War II. Secrecy meant that even adult adoptees, to their great surprise and frustration, could not obtain information about their births and backgrounds. The intentions behind confidentiality were benevolent, but sealed records created an oppressive adoption closet.

Even though sealed records were recent inventions, rather than enduring features of adoption history, they were largely responsible for the adoption reform movement that gathered steam in the 1970s. New York housewife Florence Fisher set out to find her birth mother and inspired adoptees around the country when she founded the Adoptees’ Liberty Movement Association, a pioneering reform organization that called sealed records “an affront to human dignity.” At the time, few adoption activists realized the newness of the policies they sought to overturn by opening sealed records, facilitating search and reunion, and advocating open adoption. Records activism attracted great sympathy but achieved relatively few practical victories and sealed records continue to provoke heated controversy today. Many states have established mutual consent registries, which aim for compromise between the rights of adult adoptees to obtain birth information and the assurance that many birth mothers were given that their identities would remain confidential. Sealed records are also the target of militant activism by such groups as Bastard Nation, which succeeded in passing Ballot Measure 58, an open records law, in the state of Oregon in 1998.

Until 1945, however, most members of adoptive families in the United States had perfectly legal access to birth certificates and adoption-related court documents and most agencies acted as

passive registries through which separated relatives might locate one another. Disclosure—not secrecy—has been the historical norm in adoption.

THE HISTORY OF SPECIAL NEEDS ADOPTION

Systematic efforts to locate families for children who were “hard-to-place” did not really occur until midcentury. It was only after World War II that agencies began to test the feasibility of adoptions previously ruled out of bounds because they were considered difficult, risky, and likely to fail: African-American children and children of racially and ethnically mixed heritage, children with physical and mental disabilities, older children, and sibling groups. Efforts to arrange such adoptions challenged older views, influenced by eugenics*, that only normal, white children were qualified for family life. Special needs adoptions were founded on a novel philosophy at odds with matching: “Adoption is appropriate for any child without family ties who is in need of a family and for whom a family can be found to meet his need.” This new slogan came to life for the American public through the writing of Pearl Buck, a best-selling novelist, and popular narratives like *The Family Nobody Wanted*.

Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that class differences have significantly shaped Americans’ openness to the adoption of children with special needs. Working-class adopters have tended to be less demanding than their middle- and upper-class counterparts that adoptees live up to high standards of intellectual achievement or that children be scientifically selected to meet their specifications. Before the special needs revolution at midcentury, when social workers were still reluctant to place less-than-perfect children, many ordinary families expressed both willingness and desire to raise many different kinds of children as their own. At the same time, other would-be adopters actively sought out children who would measure up to their expectations for background, behavior, appearance, and education. Well-educated adopters were particularly interested in identifying children who could take advantage of a college education.

By the 1960s, statewide adoption resource exchanges were helping with special needs placements. In 1968, the national Adoption Resource Exchange of North America (ARENA) was founded, partly as an outgrowth of the Indian Adoption Project. New parent-led organizations were also crucial in publicizing the needs of children with a wide variety of special needs. The Open Door Society of North America began in Montreal in 1959 and migrated to the United States from Canada, where chapters began in many states. The Council on Adoptable Children, headquartered in Ann Arbor, also emerged in the 1960s. Led by adoptive parents Peter and Joyce Forsythe, the group sponsored an important conference, “Frontiers in Adoption,” in October 1967. By 1969, there were at least 47 organizations in the United States whose mission was to advocate for “waiting” children. Many were local groups, like Transracial Adoptive Parents in Illinois and Families for Inter-Racial Adoption in Boston. In the mid-1960s, single parent adoptions were first tried in order to locate homes for hard-to-place children.

Special needs pioneers changed adoption culture dramatically. Their vision of family defied the claim that adoptive kinship had to be invisible in order to be authentic, insisting instead on the purposeful and open inclusion of difference. This value, in turn, reflected an even broader shift in conceptions of national belonging and citizenship in the United States after World War II. Special needs adoptions symbolized the civil rights revolution within the adoption world. Their accomplishment was not only to offer more different kinds of families to more different kinds of children, but to openly welcome multiculturalism and multiracialism within the family as well as within the history, demography, and politics of the country at large.

* ***“Eugenics” the study of or belief in the possibility of improving the qualities of the human species or a human population, esp. by such means as discouraging reproduction by persons having genetic defects or presumed to have inheritable undesirable traits***

(negative eugenics) or encouraging reproduction by persons presumed to have inheritable desirable traits (positive eugenics).

THE HISTORY OF TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIONS

Placement across racial lines—which almost always involved non-white children and white adults—challenged matching by suggesting that visible difference was compatible with love and belonging. During the first half of the century, anecdotes about children of color accidentally placed with white parents circulated in journalism, fiction, and professional literature. With few exceptions, these stories were considered tragic and shocking. The problem of racial mixups in adoption illustrated an important point. Most Americans believed in the naturalness of race-matching, but race-matching could be very difficult to achieve, so it was not at all natural in the sense of being automatic. In practice, color confusion was common, and parents and social workers alike expressed deep concern about how to categorize mixed-race children for the purpose of matching.

Making families inter-racial on purpose was the point of most international adoptions from Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam as well as adoptions arranged by the Indian Adoption Project after 1945. Attitudes toward these transracial placements reproduced the historical color line in the United States, which was emphatically black and white. White parents were more likely to accept “yellow,” “red,” or even “brown” children. Those who took in “black” children were considered the most transgressive. After World War II, demographic pressures shaped this trend at least as powerfully as civil rights ideology. New contraceptive technology like the pill, legalized abortion after *Roe v. Wade*, and the sexual revolution all decreased the supply of healthy white infants, along with the stigma surrounding illegitimacy. The result was that some white parents reconsidered their preference for same-race adoptions.

Black children and white parents have always defined the debate about transracial adoption, achieving a symbolic importance that overshadowed their tiny numbers. After *Loving v. Virginia*, a 1967 Supreme Court case that made laws prohibiting racial intermarriage unconstitutional, some states, such as Louisiana, continued to ban transracial adoptions. Family-making between blacks and whites was invariably what these statutes aimed to prevent. Even at their peak around 1970, perhaps 2,500 such adoptions were finalized each year, and no more than 12,000 African-American children in all were placed in white homes before 1975. Researchers, policy-makers, and child welfare professionals carefully scrutinized these adoptions in hopes of discovering whether inter-racial families helped or hurt children, and how. Outcome studies rarely showed that children’s development or identity were positively harmed, but they still could not answer the most important question: Was transracial adoption a socially desirable or undesirable policy in a society dedicated to pluralism but also polarized by racial strife?

Determined would-be parents were usually the impetus in the first black-white adoptions. Interestingly, they often lived in overwhelmingly white parts of the country. The first recorded adoption of an African-American child placed in a white home took place in Minnesota in 1948. In Washington, a white couple, the Johnstons, took an African-American child into foster care in 1944, when she was only six weeks old, and adopted her—against the advice of their social worker—when she was nine. Campaigns during the 1950s to promote African-American adoptions inspired other white couples to inquire about transracial adoption. Worn down by the discrimination that made it difficult to find enough same-race parents for all the children of color in need, a few agencies began cautiously placing mixed-race and African-American children in white homes. Some, but not all, of these families became targets of violence and harassment. A program of the Children’s Home Society of Minnesota called PAMY (Parents to Adopt Minority Youngsters) found that its first such placements in the early 1960s were blessedly uneventful.

Transracial adoptions were only a “little revolution,” concluded project director Harriet Fricke, in relief. Black children were kin, not projects in racial reconciliation or pawns in racial conflict.

The debate about transracial adoption changed course in 1972, when the National Association of Black Social Workers issued a statement that took “a vehement stand against the placements of black children in white homes for any reason,” calling transracial adoption “unnatural,” “artificial,” “unnecessary,” and proof that African-Americans continued to be assigned to “chattel status.” The organization was so committed to the position that black children’s healthy development depended on having black parents that its President, Cenie J. Williams, argued that temporary foster and even institutional placements were preferable to adoption by white families. This opposition slowed black-white adoptions to a trickle. In 1973, the Child Welfare League of America adoption standards, which had been revised in 1968 to make them slightly friendlier to transracial adoption, were rewritten to clarify that same-race placements were always better. The child welfare establishment never supported transracial adoptions.

A number of new agencies, staffed almost entirely by African Americans, such as Homes for Black Children in Detroit and Harlem-Dowling Children’s Service in New York, renewed the effort that had started in the late 1940s and 1950s to find black homes for black children. In spite of successful efforts to boost the numbers of black adoptive families, objections to whites adopting African-American children were never translated into law. Minority group rights to children were legally enforceable only in the case of Native American children, and only after the 1978 passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act.

Since 1972, the numbers of black-white adoptions have declined, but this may have as much to do with stubborn private preferences and prejudices among white adopters as with organized opposition or public policies that created new barriers to transracial placements. International adoptions, after all, increased quite dramatically at just the moment when the transracial adoption of African-American children was becoming controversial. They continued to accelerate throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, when Americans adopted more than a quarter of a million foreign children. International placements have increased much more dramatically than domestic transracial adoptions. Why? There are many reasons, but a simple one stands out. Most children have come from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. They did not represent the specific kind of difference that had bothered Americans and had tortured their history most. Children adopted from overseas were not black.

THE HISTORY OF SINGLE PARENT ADOPTIONS

Every state in the country currently allows single adults to adopt children. This may be less surprising than the fact that singles have been legally eligible to adopt since the first adoption laws were passed in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, the “spinster” who took in children was a staple of Victorian moral fiction and a recurrent figure in adoption narratives. A fair number of unmarried women adopted children in the early decades of the twentieth century. They often raised children in pairs as well as alone, illustrating that the vast majority of adoptions by lesbians and gay men have been arranged as single parent adoptions, whether they actually were or not. But formal legal eligibility did not imply tolerance, let alone acceptance. Singles were viewed as less desirable parents than married couples. Men were considered far less desirable than women, if they were considered at all.

The number of families headed by single parents increased in the United States throughout the twentieth century, due mainly to rising rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing, but their increasing prevalence did little to dispel fears that growing up in such families would harm children, both emotionally and economically. Many state welfare officials enacted regulations

making it difficult or impossible for agencies to place children in the care of single individuals. By midcentury, encouraged by the popularization of Freudian ideas and therapeutic approaches to child welfare, agency workers were determined to find “normal” families for parentless children. To be normal, households had to be headed by heterosexual, married, couples who were comfortable with a division of labor between non-working wives and bread-winning husbands. This ideal made single applicants for adoption abnormal by definition. If they wanted children so badly, why weren’t they married? Who would take care of children whose single mother worked for a living? What would become of children, especially boys, who grew up without fathers? In 1958, the adoption standards issued by the Child Welfare League of America stated simply that adoptive families should include both a mother and a father. No mention was made of single parents at all.

In the popular imagination, unmarried adults figured as birth parents, not adopters. The stigma attached to illegitimacy could be reason enough for unwed mothers to surrender children to married couples who could, at least, legitimize their birth status. Why heap more shame on unlucky bastards by having them adopted by single parents?

Still, single parents did adopt prior to the 1960s, although there is no way of knowing how many. The number was probably small. We know very little about who these adopters were or what kind of children they took in, although it is certain that most were women and probable that they adopted more relatives (i.e., nieces and nephews) than unrelated children. Adoption statistics offer few clues.

Systematic efforts to recruit single parents began only in the 1960s, initiated by advocates of the special needs revolution in adoption. These advocates insisted that children who were hard to place should have equal opportunities to grow up in families in spite of their mental or physical disabilities, advanced ages, minority or mixed-race status, or a combination of these factors. Many potential adopters, however, were looking for healthy white infants, and these private preferences slowed the practical progress of special needs adoptions, as did agency policies that favored or limited placements to infertile couples.

The first organized effort to enlist single parents was a program of the Los Angeles Bureau of Adoptions. In 1965, this public agency sought out single African-Americans in order to locate same-race parents for African-American children for whom married parents could not be found. Over the next two years, the agency placed a total of thirty-nine children with single mothers and one child with a single father, a fairly small number considering the hundreds of children in care. The Los Angeles Bureau of Adoptions also experimented with placing minority children with white married couples. For even the most daring agencies, however, transracial adoptions represented a partial solution to the urgent needs of children of color, especially as the controversy over placing black children in white families heated up in the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to Los Angeles Bureau director Walter A. Heath, two parents were preferable, “but one parent is better than none.” By the time it revised its adoption standards in 1968, the Child Welfare League of America conceded that married parents were an unattainable luxury for some children. Single parent adoptions were permissible in “exceptional circumstances” where the child would not otherwise be adopted.

The story of single parent adoptions illustrates change as well as continuity in the history of adoption. That some adults previously considered ineligible or even entirely unfit for parenthood were eventually recognized as a positive resource for children attests to the democratization of adoption, which now includes many more kinds of people than it did in the past, at least in theory. At the same time, single parent adoptions prove that matching children and parents on a hierarchy of more and less desirable characteristics persists. Approximately one-third of children adopted from the public foster care system and one-quarter of all children with special needs are adopted by single individuals today, but many fewer singles adopt healthy infants domestically or

internationally. This strongly suggests that single parents offer families of last resort for desperate children who have no other choices. They are as unwanted as the children they take in.

Adoption had evolved significantly as a social institution during the past century, but the cultural values that mark certain children, adults, and families as more and less worthy have been stubborn and very slow to change.

HOME STUDIES

The term “home study” was not common until the mid-twentieth century, but investigations of potential foster and adoptive homes were hardly new in 1950. Children who rode the orphan trains in the nineteenth-century, or who were placed-out during the early years of the twentieth century, were supposed to be given to responsible adults who possessed adequate resources to care for them. At least in theory, child-placers were charged with insuring that families who took in children born to others had the money, food, and room—not to mention wisdom, patience, and love—to do the job.

The major finding of early adoption field studies was that home investigations were either not done well or not done at all. Progressive-era reformers were appalled by baby farms and other black-market adoptions that illustrated how children might be casually, cruelly, or commercially placed with just about anyone for just about any reason. They complained that sloppy and unregulated arrangements jeopardized child welfare and argued that states had a duty to the public to insure that placements were made according to minimum standards, including the investigation of homes. In 1891, Michigan called on judges to “investigate” before entering final adoption decrees, but no state made such investigation mandatory until the Minnesota Adoption Law of 1917 charged public authorities with making an “appropriate inquiry to determine whether the proposed foster home is a suitable home for the child.”

Between 1917 and mid-century, most states revised their laws to include such an inquiry. Enforcement was weak, however, and many states did not require that investigations take place before children were placed. This loophole made it considerably more difficult to remove children in undesirable placements because many of those children had already been living in their new homes for a long time. Judges who handled adoptions often found themselves in a no-win situation: severing attachments between children and their foster families was likely to compound problems caused by poor placements themselves.

The whole point of investigating homes was to predict, in advance, the likelihood that any given child would find security and love and turn out well in the end. During the first several decades of the century, social workers made the novel argument that only trained and experienced professionals could make such predictions accurately. Yet most professional home investigations began by gathering facts that were readily visible to any attentive observer. Reports typically documented mothers’ housekeeping and cooking skills, water supply, refrigeration, heating, and distance to church and school. Investigators asked if foster children would be expected to work and if they would have rooms of their own.

The moral qualifications of prospective foster parents were evaluated by inquiring about the regularity of church attendance, steadiness of work, sobriety, reputation, and the well-being of any children (“own” or foster) already living in the home. Questions about income, property, and literacy were also routine, giving rise to widespread suspicions—still prevalent today—that adoption, which regularly transferred children from poor to middle-class homes, was hopelessly corrupted by class and cultural biases. Whatever one’s view, the home study illustrates one of the impossible balancing acts that adoption has performed over time: weighing the obvious

advantage of belonging to a family blessed by wealth and educational privilege against the belief that child welfare should never be calculated in dollars and cents.

Child-placers during the Progressive era did not begin or end their investigations by running white gloves over windowsills. They also believed that home investigations should explore the intangible qualities that made the difference between happy and unhappy homes. Were parents kind? Were their expectations of children reasonable? Would they be able to see things from the child's point of view? These questions were as consequential for children as they were tricky to answer with certainty. One solution to this problem, frequently mentioned in child-placing manuals, was to obtain independent character references from neighbors and community leaders. Why? Child-placers realized that foster parents could misrepresent themselves and deceive investigators bent on uncovering the facts.

The transition from home investigations to home studies marked the spread of therapeutic approaches that emphasized psychological interpretation over empirical documentation in the investigation process. During the post-World War II era, home studies were protracted probes of parental worthiness in which personality profiles ranked equally with financial stability and physical health and in which matching aspired to both physical resemblance and temperamental compatibility. In a major national study of adoption practice at midcentury, for example, agencies reported that their investigations concentrated on such qualities as personal adjustment, happy marriages, congenial relationships with family and friends, ability to love a child, and resolution of the grief that accompanied childlessness. Applicants were asked about their families of origin, their "sexual adjustment," and their reasons for wanting to adopt. The motivation of infertile couples became an especially sensitive issue in the adoption process.

Over time, adoption investigations became complex helping operations. The goal was not simply to accept or reject applicants on the basis of fixed standards, but to evaluate the strengths and weakness of their not-yet-realized parental capacity. Professionals influenced by Freudian psychology believed that people interested in adopting were, more often than not, unaware of their own motivations and unable to determine for themselves if they were emotionally ready for parenthood. The sincerest and most enthusiastic couples might be fooling themselves and never know it, whereas couples who expressed ambivalence might be perfectly suited to the task of raising adopted children. In either case, home studies aimed to reveal a truth deeper than words.

The most common explanation for the growing psychological emphasis in home studies was simple: supply and demand. Adoption was influenced by market forces, so couples were more frequently "screened out" when demand was high. Popular journalistic coverage of the "baby shortage" began as early as the 1930s and adoption statistics occasionally confirmed that applicants did sometimes dramatically outnumber available babies. According to this view, increasing competition allowed agencies to impose different, more selective standards for healthy white infants. After 1945, concerns about the different, less selective (and therefore discriminatory) standards used to place African-American, mixed-race, and other hard-to-place children also supported this view. Today's rhetoric about "screening in" adopters of children with special needs has led to a similar conclusion. When it comes to hard-to-place children, prospective parents are welcomed as "partners" and "allies" rather than scrutinized as subjects.

Home studies have had as many critics as defenders because their timing, duration, and results have been extremely unpredictable. Individuals and couples interested in adopting also wondered, reasonably enough, why they had to subject themselves to evaluations that most parents would find not only uncomfortable intrusions, but intolerable violations of their reproductive freedom. Recognizing, however, that agencies had the authority to give or withhold the children they sought, many adoption applicants resigned themselves to a family-making process in which professionals played God. Sometimes they complained about being put in a "fish bowl" or subverted the home study process by sharing with others what they had learned

about the qualities social workers preferred, implying that the entire procedure was nothing but a hypocritical game in which theatrical skill and the “right answers” mattered more than good intentions or truth. Others simply decided to live without children or turned to independent adoptions, which tended to treat would-be parents as generous people with something to offer rather than clients whose motivations required strict scrutiny.

The rationale for regulating adoption legally and socially—as well as the considerable difficulty of doing so—is apparent in the history of home studies. States believed that investigation was necessary to make families in which children would be reliably loved and protected, and in which belonging without blood would be authentic belonging nonetheless. Yet states never gave agencies a monopoly over adoption. (Only Delaware in 1952 and Connecticut in 1957 banned non-agency adoptions, and because it was so easy to cross state lines to adopt. These were largely symbolic acts.) The result was that the agency professionals most dedicated to home studies always had to compete with more flexible, less strenuous arrangements. Changing investigatory fashions reflected trends in social work, in the world of child welfare, and in the broader culture and economy. What was being tested and why may have changed, but at the heart of the modern home study was an enduring belief. Because kinship without blood was fragile and risky, systematic inquiry and interpretation were needed in order for it to succeed.

ADOPTION ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

Concerned United Birthparents

Founded in Massachusetts in 1976, **Concerned United Birthparents** (CUB) is currently headquartered in Encinitas, California and has 10 chapters and over 400 members around the United States. Its original mission was “to provide support for birthparents who have relinquished a child to adoption; to provide resources to help prevent unnecessary family separations; to educate the public about the life-long impact on all who are touched by adoption; and to advocate for fair and ethical adoption laws, policies, and practices.” A 2003 revision of this statement formally extends CUB’s supportive mantle to cover “all family members separated by adoption” rather than birth parents alone.

CUB has offered vital organizational resources and a political voice chiefly to those birth mothers who felt most disempowered in the era before the sexual revolution normalized premarital heterosexuality and *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal: young, unmarried white women whose middle-class families considered their out-of-wedlock pregnancies a source of terrible shame and moral failure. Many were packed off to maternity homes in the 1950s and 1960s, where they waited out their “confinements” in isolation and loneliness and then surrendered healthy newborns to childless couples under policies of confidentiality and sealed records. These infant placements were in great demand and often conformed to matching, which aimed to replicate nature so closely that natal relatives were made to disappear altogether. This kind of adoption promised to permanently solve two problems at once: infertility and illegitimacy.

CUB came into existence at precisely the moment when this promise was no longer convincing. Members were inspired by search and reunion pioneers among adult adoptees, particularly Jean Paton, founder of Orphan Voyage, and Florence Fisher, of the Adoptees’ Liberty Movement Association (ALMA). At the same time, the second wave of feminism was forcefully pursuing reproductive rights and arguing that “the personal is political.” Although white feminists were more closely identified with the struggle for safe and legal abortion than with the protection of women’s childbearing rights, the logic and rhetoric of reproductive choice encompassed birth mothers, at least in theory. Why should women be pressured to give up their children forever simply because

they were unmarried, or young, or poor, or without adequate support? Didn't equality require the freedom to decide when to have children as well as when not to have them?

Lee Campbell, a banker's wife, placed a personal ad in the *Boston Globe*, hoping that others who had surrendered children would reply. The result was a meeting at a Cape Cod church in July 1976, and a new organization was born. The women who attended came together out of personal need. They did not all share an ideological commitment to either women's or children's rights and frequently disagreed on matters other than the suffering caused by having given up a child. Yet they discovered they had a lot in common, just as members of feminist consciousness-raising groups did at the time. Gradually, their shared experience of surrendering children under extreme pressure evolved from a personal complaint into a subject of social analysis and a matter of social justice.

"Birthmother" was the term they coined to describe themselves. They considered it a compromise of sorts between "natural mother," prevalent at the time, and "biological mother," which many adoptive parents preferred but CUB members found insultingly mechanical. The term's emphasis on birth reclaimed without apology an important place in an adoption process that had too often rendered them invisible and irrelevant. In addition to Campbell, other CUB pioneers included Mary Anne Cohen, Susan Darke, Gail Hanssen, Kathy Leahy, Joanne McDonald, and Sandy Musser. (Musser later became a celebrated and controversial figure as the first search consultant to go to jail. She was convicted on thirty-five counts of fraudulently obtaining confidential records and spent four months in federal prison in 1993 and 1994.) Carole Anderson joined CUB two years after its founding and became one of the group's most important theoreticians. These women articulated an adoption narrative that was empowering but also full of pain and frustration. Their feelings about the permanence of biological kinship were heartfelt, and so were their views about the devastating, long-lasting effects of surrender on parents and children.

This was a far more ambivalent view of adoption than the sunny picture prevalent between 1940 and 1970, and it revived themes that had a long history: that natal families should be preserved whenever possible and that adoption was extremely risky, unwise, and damaging. Adoption, these women suggested, was not a choice, but proof that they had been deprived of choice. Surrender was a product of material deprivation, social stigma, and political powerlessness rather than a voluntary act.

At a time when feminists emphasized the common plight of all women, CUB's analysis exposed cracks in the gender consensus even as it revealed changing demographic patterns among birth mothers themselves. Married women who occupied privileged class positions were most likely to be adoptive mothers, whereas women without money were punished for their poverty and girls from middle-class families were ostracized for their premarital sexual activity with pressure to give up their babies. A majority of birth mothers before World War II were married women, but statistical analyses have shown that by the mid-1960s, single women had taken their place. Class privilege divided these two categories of women. CUB represented the latter.

The consequences of adoption for children were as negative as they were for mothers, according to CUB. Adoptees were destined to live without crucial knowledge of their genetic origins and family background, and were disadvantaged by growing up in families where they did not resemble their relatives or "fit in" in other ways. Adoptive parents might provide love and care, and these were precious resources in cases where children had been abandoned by chaotic and dysfunctional natal families. But in most cases, CUB members believed, adoption could not compensate for children's loss of essential, natural connections.

This suggested that family preservation was CUB's top priority. CUB never opposed adoption outright, but its argument was that the vast majority of adoptions could and should be prevented. This echoed a position staked out by professionals and policy-makers involved in placing-out and social welfare early in the twentieth century. Instead of adoption services, vulnerable young

families should be given the support they needed to overcome their challenges and stay together. Ironically, CUB emphasized family preservation at just the moment when the American welfare state was beginning to contract under effective attack by the right. The expansive safety net they envisioned might have been an alternative to surrender for those women who placed children mainly for economic reasons. But that vision did not survive the Reagan revolution. Recent welfare reform policies have concentrated simultaneously on decreasing out-of-wedlock births and promoting heterosexual marriage as anti-poverty measures. But family preservation programs have been decisively subordinated to policies emphasizing faster terminations of parental rights and adoptive placements.

CUB began as a support group, reaching out to new members with a newsletter, the *CUB Communicator*. It also attracted a great deal of mainstream media attention from newspapers, women's magazines, and television. Lee Campbell, CUB's first president, made four appearances on the popular "Donahue" talk show, for instance. But the first time she was interviewed, by a Boston television station, she was hidden in shadows, evidence of how difficult it was even for committed activists to go public with their stories. Lorraine Dusky, author of the 1979 memoir, *Birthmark*, was told by other birth mothers that they could not bring themselves to purchase copies of the book even though they wanted to read it. Embarrassment that cashiers might believe they were "one of them" was more than they could bear. Coming out as a birth mother was still cause for severe disgrace.

It was in this judgmental atmosphere that CUB mobilized to promote adoption reform. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the group cooperated with other organizations interested in ending secrecy and promoting search and reunion, including Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association (ALMA). More recently, it has worked with Bastard Nation. CUB members testified at some of the earliest hearings about open records in state legislatures around the country and before the U.S. Congress. Many members of the organization believe that openness is preferable to secrecy in cases where adoption is unavoidable, and the organization went on record in favor of open adoptions in its early years. But it withdrew support after seeing evidence that adopters were renegeing on their agreements, most of which are not legally enforceable. CUB members worry that "openness" may simply be a new way to pressure vulnerable girls and women into surrender and make adoption more palatable.

CUB made good on its critical view of adoption and its defense of family preservation by sponsoring a number of programs that aimed to keep young mothers and newborns together through practical help with housing and jobs. In 1978, CUB was also involved in establishing the American Adoption Congress, an umbrella group representing individuals, search organizations, and others devoted to adoption reform.

CUB is still largely identified with the cause of birth mothers. The fact that large numbers of unmarried mothers today keep their babies proves that the stigma of illegitimacy has been reduced very dramatically in recent decades. But birth mothers' stories still evoke shock and condemnation in a culture that cannot forgive women who surrender children, whether their decisions were made freely or under pressure. In comparison, birth fathers have attracted little notice.

Now over thirty years old, CUB's recent activities suggest that the group hopes to advocate effectively for a new and different generation of birth parents. There have been efforts to incorporate more men, publicize their stories of search and reunion, and address their needs. Even in the twenty-first century, however, men have not yet made the dramatic transition from paralyzed privacy to public engagement that CUB pioneered for the women who first gave life to children and then had to live with the pain of giving them up and living without them.

Bastard Nation

A feisty organizational newcomer to the landscape of adoption reform, **Bastard Nation** was a term first coined by Marley Greiner, a contributor to the Usenet newsgroup, alt.adoption. The group was formally incorporated in 1996 by co-founders Marley Greiner, Shea Grimm, and Damsel Plum. Influenced by the Internet and by the in-your-face activist style of AIDS-era groups such as Queer Nation, Bastard Nation had a website before it had a significant membership. Concerned about negative media portrayals of adoption and, above all, about the issue of confidentiality and sealed records, Bastard Nation is made up primarily of adult adoptees, although birth parents, adoptive parents, and others who support the group's platform of unconditional adoptee rights are allowed to join. Bastard Nation has a reputation for refusing to compromise on its principles. Its radicalism has elicited reactions ranging from admiration to shock and dismay.

Bastard Nationals, as they like to call themselves, are fiercely determined to accomplish two primary goals: open access to records as a matter of basic civil rights and unfettered expression for adult adoptees. Unlike some other adoption organizations, who argue that reforming confidentiality and sealed records is important in order to promote adoptees' mental health or who advocate mutual consent registries as a compromise between the rights of birth parents and adoptees, Bastard Nation maintains that adoption secrecy must end because it is a symbol of shame about illegitimacy, infertility, and adoption itself. Members deliberately use the term "bastard" in order to ridicule adoption stigma and contend that stigma will diminish only with more frank, angry, and humorous sharing of experiences among adult adoptees. They militantly oppose their second-class status, insist that they should have exactly the same relationship to the state (and the information it possesses) as other citizens, and deplore the tendency to cast adoptees as perpetual children regardless of their age.

Members of Bastard Nation have participated in numerous public demonstrations against confidentiality and sealed records and in favor of adoption dignity, including protests against reform organizations, such as the National Council for Adoption, which opposes open records. The Bastard Nation website offers information about state laws, search and reunion, and resources for effective grassroots political and media activism.

The high point of Bastard Nation's own effectiveness was the passage of an open records law in Oregon in 1998. Ballot Measure 58, the first such law in the country to be passed by voter referendum, gave adoptees twenty-one years of age or older access to their birth certificates upon request. This policy has been in effect in the state since June 2000. Since then, adult adoptees in Oregon have been entitled to information about their births that remains off limits throughout most of the rest of the country.

U.S. Children's Bureau

The **U.S. Children's Bureau** (USCB), was established by Congress in 1912 and is perhaps best known for its campaigns to reduce infant mortality and eradicate child labor. The first federal agency to be headed by a woman, Julia Lathrop, it was also the most important home in the federal government for advocates of adoption regulation. The USCB encouraged reforms in state adoption laws, disseminated original research, and sponsored conferences on child placement issues and priorities. The first major conference on child welfare standards, for example, took place in 1919 under USCB auspices. Its published summary included a resolution on desirable practices in child-placing and supervision drafted by Edmond Butler, Executive Secretary of New York's Catholic Home Bureau, the first Catholic agency to use family homes rather than congregate institutions. In adoption, as in many other issues related to American family life, child welfare was the paramount concern of the USCB. It worked closely with organizations like the

Child Welfare League of America to extend the power of government and allied professionals over the adoption process. Minimum standards were a typical strategy.

The work done by the USCB on adoption was often galvanized by scandals related to baby farming and black market adoptions. USCB field agents documented deplorable conditions in maternity homes and orphanages and spearheaded investigations of placing-out and interstate traffic from the 1910s through the 1960s. Although the USCB itself provided no adoption services, thousands of adults seeking children wrote to the USCB in hopes of realizing their dreams. Each inquiry was answered promptly and respectfully; letter-writers were referred to local or state agencies whose staff and standards were deemed reliable. From its inception, the USCB worked to educate the public about the importance of regulating adoption. Pre-placement investigation, post-placement supervision, and lengthy probationary periods, according to the USCB, were the minimum standards necessary to safeguard children and adults and insure that adoptive families turned out well.

Today, the U.S. Children's Bureau is located in the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families.

POST-ADOPTION

'Telling' Your Child of His/Her Adoption

"Telling" has been a chronic dilemma in the history of adoption because it highlights the problem of making adoptive kinship real while also acknowledging its distinctiveness. During the twentieth century, adoption professionals maintained a firm consensus that children placed in infancy should be told of their adopted status early in life. Adoptive parents did not always agree, and anecdotal evidence suggests that many children were told in adolescence, on the eve of marriage, or even later in life. Young draftees during the two world wars, for example, were sometimes surprised to discover they had been adopted. In the era before most states passed laws mandating confidentiality and sealed records, the birth certificates needed for military induction introduced many soldiers and sailors to the fact that the people who had raised them were not the same as the people who had conceived them.

In the era of matching, before many special needs, transracial, and international adoptions made the fact of adoption visible, many adoptees were never told at all. Resistance to telling was a problem that symbolized adopters' understandable but illogical insecurity, according to social workers, who suspected that difficulties with telling were linked to unresolved infertility. By midcentury, anxiety about telling was a big enough problem that many agencies required adopters to pledge, in writing, that they would tell. How-to-tell conversations became routine parts of the adoption process. Telling became a central ritual of adoptive family life.

Why were adoptees supposed to be told? The reason had less to do with honesty than it did with emotional inoculation against stigma. Parents would be wise to tell children about their adoptions with kindness and love before they learned the truth from unfeeling relatives, nosy neighbors, or cruel classmates. Behind telling was the hope that convincing children early on of their selected status would protect them from the painful realization that many people considered adoption second-rate.

Telling emerged as the central purpose of a growing children's literature, including classic books like *The Chosen Baby* (1939) and *The Family That Grew* (1951). These books, sometimes accompanied by detailed instructions about when, how, who, and what to tell, literally made adoption go down as easily as a bedtime story, a tradition that continues to this day. No single

formula existed for the timing or content of telling, but advice literature certainly gave the impression that there were right and wrong ways to talk and feel about adoption. "If you yourselves have fully accepted your child's adoption," one writer noted in 1955, "you will be able to make him accept it, fully and happily." Parents who told successfully would be rewarded by children who were at peace with their adoptive status. Parents who did not were asking for trouble.

Until fairly recently, the preferred telling method stressed the "chosen child." Parents were instructed to use the words "chosen" and "adopted" early, often, and always in a happy and relaxed tone of voice. Even with infants too young to understand, repeating phrases like "my precious adopted daughter" and "my dear little adopted son" promised to boost children's self-esteem and prepare them for the inevitable encounter with negative ideas about adoption. Terminology was tricky. Calling natal parents "real" or "natural," for instance, posed problems for parents hoping to communicate that being adopted was dignified and special. The debate about better and worse adoption terms is still ongoing.

Questions about birth parents, as well as the fact of adoption itself, were always at stake in telling. Because adoption was synonymous with upward mobility, adoptees' natal backgrounds frequently included "feeble-mindedness," poverty, alcoholism, mental illness, criminality, sexual immorality, and other sordid characteristics. What exactly should children be told about these? Here too, advice literature stressed the importance of talking casually about children's birth parents. Parents were assured that curiosity about the people who had given them life was inevitable among adoptees, especially at the point when they were old enough to understand sex.

In many cases, answering children's questions involved highly selective communication, if not outright lies. Even though many Americans regarded illegitimacy with moral disapproval and adoption as a eugenic risk, adopters were supposed to maintain that birth parents (particularly mothers) were good individuals who had made selfless decisions for their children. Surrender was an act of love, not abandonment. Adoption was a wonderful choice, not a last resort.

All the effort and emotion that surrounded telling proved that adoptees were different than non-adopted children. But the paradoxical goal of telling was to make adoptees feel that they were the same, just as real as the real thing.

Search and Reunion

Search and reunion have been prominent features of adoption reform and activism in recent decades, and they appear as central themes in many adoption narratives. The effort to locate birth parents and other natal relatives has a long history in adoption, however, since there was never a time when relatives separated by adoption did not seek to find them later in life. Throughout the era of the orphan trains in the nineteenth century, and during the heyday of placing-out (Early in the twentieth century, "placing-out" was the term that designated all non-institutional arrangements to care for dependent children), information about the backgrounds of children placed temporarily or permanently was no mystery. During the formative stages of modern adoption, social workers and other child-placers frequently served as agents of disclosure. When adoptees came to them with questions about their backgrounds, they assumed it was part of their job to provide answers. The difficulties adoptees encountered in searching were more likely to be caused by sloppy or non-existent records than by design.

This changed with confidentiality and sealed records, but only gradually. Beginning with the Minnesota Adoption Law of 1917, states began to treat adoption as a secret in hopes of reducing the stigma associated with illegitimacy and preventing natal relatives from interfering in adoptive families. Advocates believed that privacy in adoption would protect child welfare by shielding

adoptees from public embarrassment while also reinforcing the integrity, autonomy, and “realness” of adoptive kinship. It was only after World War II that these new policies became so rigid that adoptees themselves were denied access to records, such as original birth certificates, that non-adopted citizens took for granted. It is curious that the enduring emphasis on telling children about their adoptions reached its height during the very same period when detailed information about natal origins became virtually impossible to obtain. To tell was considered only truthful, but it required a vague kind of truth-telling at odds with search and reunion. No practical details were conveyed, and certainly no identifying information.

For decades around midcentury, adoptees who expressed desires to learn more about their natal relatives, or find them, were considered maladjusted products of less than successful adoptive families. According to this way of thinking, children whose adoptive parents offered true love and belonging would have no reason to search. They already felt like members of complete and genuine families. The expectation that adoption could erase and should replace natal families completely, which gave rise to the practice of matching, turned any curiosity about origins into a sign of trouble.

Many adoptees, though, were plagued by questions about their pasts. They found it impossibly difficult to accept their adoptive status as a significant fact to be simultaneously accepted and permanently ignored. When their questions persisted, the typical solution was to offer therapy to adoptive parents (especially for unresolved feelings about infertility) rather than information to adoptees. Until at least 1970, clinical perspectives on emotional disturbance in adoptees emphasized that worries and fantasies about birth parents were the ingredients of psychopathology. So close was the connection between searching and poor adoption outcomes that even Jean Paton, founder in 1953 of the first adoptee search organization in the United States, Orphan Voyage, formulated a “search hypothesis” in which the impulse to seek out natal relatives corresponded directly to the security and happiness of the adoptive home.

Considering how widespread the belief was that only insecure, unhappy adoptees wondered about their genealogy or sought out their birth parents, it is all the more remarkable that so many adoptees did both. Jean Paton was among the first to propose that the need to search was both a psychological necessity for individuals and a social necessity that would bring about much-needed reform. Convinced that adoptees were capable of creating innovative new mechanisms for reunion, such as voluntary reunion registries, Paton argued “that the desire to know the natural parents can be the deepest and most compelling factor in an adopted child’s life. . . . Unless this desire resolves into reality it may be obscured in a long diversion, and in many cases this will be accompanied by years of unproductive behavior.”

The rise of new adoption reform movements in the 1960s and 1970s marked a turning point in the history of search and reunion. Civil rights movements had already increased public awareness of the heterogeneous origins of the American population, celebrated quests for “roots,” and elevated authenticity over convention and honesty over pretense. In such a climate, adoptees who set out to come to terms with their natal pasts were understandable and sympathetic figures. By the mid-1970s, influential statements on adoption and identity, such as *The Adoption Triangle*, announced what was already obvious to many adoptees: children who had more than two parents grew up aware of a generational rift in family life that non-adopted children never experienced. Search and reunion was the logical way to address this rift. Interpreted as a symbol of healing rather than disturbance, searching was perfectly normal.

Ironically, some advocates of search and reunion have been just as dogmatic as those who made the case against search and reunion in earlier generations. Open records activists have sometimes insisted, just as their opponents did, that the relationship between genealogical knowledge and healthy identity was stable and predictable across the entire adopted population. Where the proponents of confidentiality and sealed records considered blood ties so threatening

to the security of adoptive kinship that permanent secrecy was required, proponents of openness considered them so essential that no child could hope to become emotionally whole without them. Arrogance characterized both sides of the argument. Everyone agreed that they knew what was right and true and best for everyone else.

The movement toward search and reunion has done much to promote greater honesty about differences in family life. It has offered concrete assistance to numerous adoptees and birth parents with an interest in reunion, not only helping long-lost relatives find one another, but assuring them that doing so can be a positive step in the adoption process rather than a sign of failure. If the movement has also underlined the blood-is-thicker-than-water bias that has been such a prominent feature of American family life, that is only one of many ironies in modern adoption history.

LANGUAGE OF ADOPTION ¹

The language of adoption is changing and evolving and it has become a controversial issue over the use of terms. The terminology while designed to be more appealing or less offensive to some persons affected by adoption, may simultaneously cause offense or insult to others. The two contrasting sets of terms are commonly referred to as positive, or respectful, adoption language (PAL) and honest adoption language (HAL).

Positive Adoption Language

Minneapolis social worker Marietta Spencer first introduced "Positive Adoption Language" around the mid 1970s. It reflects the point of view that (1) all relationships and connections between the adopted child and his/her previous family have been permanently and completely severed once the legal adoption has taken place, and that (2) "placing" a child for adoption is invariably a "decision" the empowered birth mother makes, free of coercion or pressure from external circumstances or other people.

The reasons for its use: In many cultures, adoptive families face adoptism. Adoptism is made evident in English speaking cultures by the prominent use of negative or inaccurate language describing adoption. To combat adoptism, many adoptive families encourage positive adoption language.

The reasons against its use: Many natural parents see "positive adoption language" as terminology which glosses over painful facts they face as they go into the indefinite post-adoption period of their lives. They feel PAL has become a way to present adoption in the friendliest light possible, in order to obtain even more infants for adoption; ie, a marketing tool. These people refer to PAL as "Adoption Friendly Language" or AFL.

Non-preferred:	PAL term:
your own child	birth child; biological child why - Saying a birth child is your own child or one of your own children implies that an adopted child is not.
child is adopted	child was adopted why - Some adoptees believe that their adoption is not their identity, but is an event that happened to them. Others contend that "is adopted" makes adoption sound like an ongoing disability, rather than a past event.
give up for adoption	place for adoption or make an adoption plan why - "Give up" implies a lack of value. The preferred terms are more emotionally neutral.
real mother/father/parent	birth, biological or genetic mother/father/parent why - The use of the term "real" implies that the adoptive family is artificial, and is not as descriptive.

natural parent	<p>birth parent or first parent</p> <p>why - The use of the term "natural" implies that the adoptive family is unnatural, and so is not a descriptive or accurate term. Although it can be seen as unnatural to conceive and relinquish children, the purpose is to present the adoption of those children in need as natural. The term "natural" in its origin means a family by the natural means of conception and birth and its primal bond which exists by itself since the beginning unless it's severed.</p>
your adopted child	<p>your child</p> <p>why - The use of the adjective "adopted" signals that the relationship is qualitatively different from that of parents to birth children.</p>
surrender for adoption	<p>placed or placed for adoption</p> <p>why - The use of the adjective "surrendered" implies "giving up." For many parents placing a child for adoption is an informed completely voluntary choice. For others, there is no choice as the parent's rights were terminated because the parent was deemed to be unfit.</p>

Honest Adoption Language

"Honest Adoption Language" refers to a set of terms that reflect the point of view that: (1) family relationships (social, emotional, psychological or physical) that existed prior to the legal adoption often continue past this point or endure in some form despite long periods of separation, and that (2) mothers who have "voluntarily surrendered" children to adoption (as opposed to involuntary terminations through court-authorized child-welfare proceedings) seldom view it as a choice that was freely made, but instead describe scenarios of powerlessness, lack of resources, and overall lack of choice.

HAL also reflects the point of view that the term "birth mother" is derogatory in implying that the woman has ceased being a mother after the physical act of giving birth. Proponents of HAL liken this to the mother being treated as a "breeder" or "incubator". Terms included in HAL include the original terms that were used before PAL, including "natural mother," "first mother," and "surrendered for adoption."

The reasons for its use: In most cultures, the adoption of a child does not change the identities of its mother and father: they continue to be referred to as such. Those who adopted a child were thereafter termed its "guardians," "foster," or "adoptive" parents. Most people use "Honest Adoption Language" (HAL) because it is the original and most widely-used terminology. Many of those directly affected by adoption loss believe these terms more accurately reflect important but hidden and/or ignored realities of adoption. It also has the advantage of not excluding further contacts, sometimes even allowed since the beginning and never totally severed.

The reasons against its use: The term "Honest" implies that all other language used in adoption is dishonest. Adoptive parents feel disrespected by language that does not consider them, as the people who were fully responsible for a child's upbringing, to be the only parents.

Non-preferred:	HAL term:
birth mother/father/parent	<p>mother, natural mother, first mother (or father/parent)</p> <p>why – The term "birth mother" is viewed as being derogatory, limiting a woman's purpose in her child's life to the physical act of reproduction and thus implying that she is a "former mother" or "breeder." HAL terms reflect the point of view that there is usually a continuing mother-child relationship and/or bond that endures despite separation.</p>
birth child	<p>natural child, child of one's own</p> <p>why - The term "birth child" is viewed as being derogatory, implying that the adoptee was a "birth product" produced for the adoption market, and having no relationship or connection with his or her natural mother past the event of having been born. It also implies that the mother is a "birth mother" with no connection to her child or interest in her child past this point.</p>
place for adoption give up for adoption	<p>surrender for adoption (have) lost to adoption (are) separated by adoption</p> <p>why - HAL acknowledges that past adoption practice facilitated the taking of children for adoption, often against their mother's expressed wishes. Many women who have gone through the process and who lost children to adoption believe that social work techniques used to prepare single mothers to sign Termination Of Parental Rights papers closely resembles a psychological war against natural motherhood; hence the term "surrender." "Surrender" is also the legal term for the mother's signing a Termination of Parental Rights. "Make a plan" and "place for adoption" are viewed by HAL proponents as being dishonest terms which marginalize or deny the wrenching emotional effect of separation on the mother/child dyad and imply the mother has made a fully-informed decision.</p>

mother/father/parent (when referring solely to the parents who had adopted)	adoptive mother/father/parent why - Referring to the people who have adopted the child as the mother or father (singular), ignores the emotional and psychological (and often physical) presence of a second set of parents in the child's life. In contrast to RAL, HAL reflects the opinion that there are two sets of parents in the adopted person's life: adoptive parents and natural parents.
adopted child	adopted person or person who was adopted why - The use of the adjective 'adopted' signals that the relationship is qualitatively different from that of parents to other children. The use of the word "child" is accurate up until the end of childhood. After that the continued use of "child" is infantilizing.

1 Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_of_adoption

ADOPTION STATISTICS

Historical statistics on domestic adoptions during the twentieth century are interesting, but they are scarce and can also be misleading. Field studies did not even begin to estimate numbers of adoptions, or document who was being adopted by whom, until almost 1920. When researchers began to tally adoptions, they did so in only a handful of Northeastern and Midwestern states and based conclusions about statewide patterns on records from a few counties, usually in urban areas.

A national reporting system for adoption existed only between 1944 and 1975, when the U.S. Children's Bureau and the National Center for Social Statistics collected data voluntarily supplied by states and territories using data primarily drawn from court records. The number of states and territories participating varied each year, ranging from a low of 22 in 1944 to a high of 52 in the early 1960s. In 1975 with the dissolution of the NCSS, the reporting system ended.

Today, most statistics available about adoption are being gathered by private organizations, such as universities and foundations. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 requires states to collect information about the adoptions of children in public foster care using the annual Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), but these are the only adoption-related statistics regularly reported by governments.

Even when the federal government was trying to keep track, during the three decades after World War II, adoption statistics were incomplete. They never included informal adoptions, which were beyond the reach of law and uncountable by definition. The summary data that did exist tended to obscure trends that were as important as total figures. How many children were adopted by relatives and how many by strangers? How many were arranged independently or by agencies? How many involved infants or adolescents? What factors explain regional and state differences in the past and present? Why, for example, are adoption rates in Wyoming and Alaska higher today than in California, Delaware, and Texas? Have any or all of these patterns changed over time? We can guess, but usually on the basis of partial or non-existent numbers.

We know one thing with certainty on the basis of historical statistics. Adoptions were rare, even at the height of their popularity, around 1970. What is paradoxical is that adoptions have become rarer during the past several decades, just they have become more visible. A total of approximately 125,000 children have been adopted annually in the United States in recent years, a sharp drop since the century-long high point of 175,000 adoptions in 1970. Growing numbers of recent adoptions have been transracial and international—producing families in which parents and children look nothing alike—and the attention attracted by these adoptive families has led many Americans to believe that adoption was increasing. The adoption rate has actually been declining since 1970, along with the total number of adoptions.

Estimates suggest that adoptive families are atypical as well as few in number. Approximately 5 million Americans alive today are adoptees, 2-4 percent of all families have adopted, and 2.5 percent of all children under 18 are adopted. Adoptive families are more racially diverse, better educated, and more affluent than families in general. We know this because Census 2000 included “adopted son/daughter” as a kinship category for the first time in U.S. history. It is possible that the demographic profile of adoptions arranged many decades ago was just as distinctive. We simply do not know.

Special-purpose adoption laws have existed in the United States since the middle of the nineteenth century. More than a century ago, however, very few Americans entered courts in order to formalize kin ties. Divorce, still very unusual at the turn of the twentieth century, was more common than adoption. After 1900, numbers of adoptions in the United States began to climb. Why? First, a new culture of children's innocence and vulnerability placed a premium on

their welfare and secure membership in families. Second, tangible benefits, such as those available through the social security system established during the 1930s, offered practical incentives for Americans to legalize family bonds.

For the period before 1945, however, we have practically no detailed national statistics. After 1945, the number of total adoptions increased steadily, with numbers of adoptions doubling in the decade after World War II to reach approximately 100,000 annually by the mid-1950s. During this period, the proportion of non-relative adoptions arranged by agencies also increased significantly, a partial victory for child welfare professionals who had been advocating expansive regulation, uniformity, and minimum standards for decades. Before 1945, independent placements probably represented more than half of all adoptions. These decreased to an all-time low of 21 percent in 1970.

The statistical picture for international adoptions is uniquely clear because the federal government counts all legal immigrants, including immigrant “orphans,” as they are still called. (We also know that approximately 500 American children are adopted annually by foreigners, mostly in Canada and Europe, but in comparison to this country’s status as a “receiving country,” we know practically nothing about the United States as a “sending country.”) We know with some precision how many children born in South Korea have been adopted by U.S. citizens during the past fifty years—well over 100,000—and figures available through the Department of State tell us the number of Vietnamese, Guatemalan, Romanian, Chinese, and children of other nationalities who have been incorporated into American families through adoption. In the past decade, international adoptions have increased dramatically as a component of the adoption total: the 2002 figure of 20,009 was more than triple the 1992 figure, and comprised approximately 16 percent of all adoptions.

In addition to knowing where international adoptees come from and how many of them there are, we also know that well over 60 percent are girls and virtually all have been non-relatives. That does not mean that non-relative adoptions are on the rise, however. Because divorce and remarriage have become more common, relative adoptions (by step-parents, for example) have become much more prevalent among domestic adoptions in recent decades.

Numerically significant adoptions are not necessarily socially sensitive adoptions. Relative adoptions have become more common in recent decades but have attracted relatively little notice. Exactly the opposite is true for transracial adoptions. These have been covered extensively in the press and studied intensively by researchers, but their importance is symbolic rather than statistical. The largest number of transracial adoptions occurred in the years around 1970, when there were perhaps a few thousand annually. Opportunity, an Oregon program, conducted one of the only national surveys of black adopted children; it documented 7,420 total adoptions in 1971, of which 2,574 were transracial. This was a tiny number, considering that almost 170,000 adoptions were finalized in the country that year. Why did outcome studies focus on a small number of African-American children adopted by white parents but ignore the thousands of children adopted by relatives? The former was controversial and the latter was not.

Since all kinds of adoptions were and still are rare, the reason to subject them to quantitative inquiry has had little to do with sheer numbers. Governments and private organizations have compiled adoption statistics because numbers have been crucial in adoption policy debates. Proof that adoptions arranged in the black market turned out poorly was valuable ammunition in the campaign against disreputable independent adoptions, for instance, while proof of how professionally arranged adoptions turned out could make or break the reputation of agencies. Numbers were also accorded great meaning within the placement process. The I.Q. scores of children, the ages of aspiring parents, and the educational levels of birth parents were all, at one time or another, treated as key indicators of where and with whom they belonged.

Social researchers who conducted pioneering studies of child placement, such as Sophie van Senden Theis, author of *How Foster Children Turn Out*, believed that counting was a privileged method of accumulating knowledge and approaching truth scientifically. They were sometimes surprised or disturbed by what statistics and correlations revealed—that many adopters failed to inform their children about their adoptions or that “telling” was not a reliable predictor of positive outcomes—but they were always confident that compiling aggregate data would improve the lives of individual children. Statistical evidence based on many adoptions was often compared with anecdotal evidence, which revealed the details of one child’s or family’s story. Numbers were often considered more objective than narratives, and therefore more legitimate and trustworthy as a basis for policy and practice.

That adoption statistics have been gathered so haphazardly suggests that the effort to tie adoption reform to adoption knowledge has been a partial success, at best. But they also embody a uniquely modern faith in numbers and a widespread belief that they could be trusted to plan and govern the future.