

# Adopting Children from U. S. Public Foster Care: A Sociological Analysis with Practical Implications

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## Abstract

Adoption has increased in importance as both an exit goal and exit outcome for 20-25% of children in public foster care. Although reunification with parents or another biological relative retains primacy as the first option for permanency planning, the percentage of children actually reunified with a biological family member has decreased by nine percent from 60% to 51%. The author uses data collected by the federal government and reported in AFCARS Reports collected over 16 fiscal years to analyze the principal demographic characteristics of children in U. S. public foster care; examine adoption and reunification as exit goals and outcomes for children in foster care; and link patterns and trends in the data with innovative strategies aimed at improving the effectiveness of the public foster care system in regard to permanency planning and post-placement family wellbeing. Although the AFCARS data analyzed indicate that the U. S. public foster care system has improved in a number of areas, the author takes the position that more can be done both to prevent family disruptions and to support positive permanency planning outcomes. She also advocates improving some existing policies along with developing new proactive strategies.

**Keywords:** U. S. foster care system; adoption or reunification as foster care exit outcomes; proactive versus reactive foster care policies; improving the wellbeing of reunified and post-adoptive families in need of services or support.

## INTRODUCTION

Sociologists in the U. S. became interested in the field of family studies after World War II. However, despite all that sociologists have researched and written about families since then, with some notable exceptions, sociologists and sociology journals have generally neglected the topic of adoption.

More than 60 years ago H. David Kirk began to study and write about the role of adoption in building families. Kirk's (1984) book, *Shared Fate: A Theory and Method of Adoptive Relationships*, first published in 1964, remains a classic both in regard to theory and methodology. An adoptive father himself, Kirk directed the Adoption Research Project at McGill University in

Canada from 1951 to 1961. This project compiled data about the attitudes and experiences of 2000 adoptive families in Canada and the United States. Most of the families were headed by infertile couples. In *Shared Fate*, Kirk talked about the "role handicap" which characterized the experience of adoptive parents as well as infertility being stigmatized and infertile couples experiencing discrimination. In analyzing the adoptive families he studied Kirk observed and introduced the important concepts of "rejection-of-difference" and "acknowledgment-of-difference." Parents who rejected the difference claimed to be no different than biological parents and did not discuss the adoption while the latter accepted that they were different and did acknowledge

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their child/ren were adopted. The following quote sums up the importance of Kirk's book to the field of adoption research:

*Shared Fate* was important for two reasons. First, it analyzed adoption as an important social institution rather than as an arrangement made by individuals seeking to solve a range of personal problems. Second, it promoted a decisive shift in the world of adoption away from simulation and toward diversity as the foundation for family-making. (<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/topics/sharedfate.htm>)

Unfortunately, Kirk's book was not widely acclaimed by sociologists and, therefore, it did not break the so-called "adoption invisibility barrier."

Other sociologists have written books about adoption. Some books have been written solely by sociologists; others have been written in conjunction with authors in related fields-- for example, Feigelman and Silverstein 1983; Simon and Altstein, 1990, 1992; Simon, Alstein and Melli 1994; Simon and Roorda 2000; Tessler, Gamache and Liu 1999; Momin 2008; and Ruggiero 2007.

Sociologists also have published their work on adoption in social work, adoption, or psychology journals-- for example, Feigelman (1997); Feigelman et al. (1998); Ruggiero and Johnson, 2009; Tessler and Gamache 2012; Ruggiero 2014; and Park and Wonch Hill 2014.

Articles written by sociologists on adoption have appeared in a few sociology journals. Goldberg's (1997; 2001) work on adoption from Romania was published in *Marriage and Family Review* and in the *International Review of Sociology*. Canadian sociologist Miall (1987, 1996) published two papers on adoption: "The Stigma of Adoptive Parent Status" and "Community Constructs of Involuntary Childlessness: Sympathy,

Stigma, and Social Support" which both appeared in the journal, *Family Relations*. In 1994, Miall also published "Community Constructs of Involuntary Childlessness: Sympathy, Stigma, and Social Support" which appeared in the *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*. In 2000, March and Miall published "Adoption as a Family Form" in the journal, *Family Relations*. Fisher's (2003a) critique of the portrayal of adoption in college texts and readers on families also appeared in *Family Relations*.

Fisher (2003b) must be credited with finally breaking the "adoption invisibility barrier" when his article, "Still 'Not Quite as Good as Having Your Own'? Toward a Sociology of Adoption," appeared in the volume 29 of the prestigious sociology journal, *Annual Review of Sociology*. In 2014, Wildeman and Waldfogel's article, "Somebody's Children or Nobody's Children? How the Sociological Perspective Could Enliven Research on Foster Care," appeared in volume 40 of *Annual Review of Sociology*. Wildeman and Waldfogel raised awareness of a second area that sociologists have long neglected: children in foster care. Wildeman and Waldfogel (2014)<sup>1</sup> make a solid argument for how the sociological perspective and the use of multiple methodologies can contribute significantly to social scientists' understanding of children in the U. S. foster care system. They talk about how children get into foster care and the effects of being in the foster system, especially long term.

Since the permanency planning goal for a sizeable minority of children in foster care may involve their being adopted rather than being reunified with their biological family, the topics of adoption and foster care are related. This paper has three objectives: 1) to use national-level data collected by the U. S. Department

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<sup>1</sup>Wildeman is a sociologist with a specialty in demography and Waldfogel has graduate degrees in public policy and education. Readers interested in a comprehensive historical overview of the U. S. foster care system are directed to Wildman and Waldfogel (2014: 602-605).

of Health and Human Services (Children's Bureau) and reported in Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) collected over 16 fiscal years to examine patterns in the demographic characteristics of children in U. S. public foster care over time; 2) to examine AFCARS data on adoption versus reunification as exit goals and outcomes; and 3) to link the patterns and trends observed in the empirical sections of this paper with proactive strategies aimed at improving the effectiveness of the public foster care system in regard to permanency planning and pre- and post-placement family wellbeing.

### Research Plan

The empirical component of this paper is based on secondary analysis by the author of AFCARS data for fiscal years 1998 through 2013. AFCARS data are reported by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Children's Bureau) in Reports 10-21. The federal government began to report statistics on children in the U. S. foster care system in FY 1998. At this writing, AFCARS Reports are available through FY 2013.<sup>2</sup> Appendix A discusses the strengths and limitations of using AFCARS data.

### DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN THE POPULATION OF CHILDREN IN U. S. PUBLIC FOSTER CARE, FY 1998-FY 2013<sup>3</sup>

The analysis of AFCARS data reveals several interesting demographic trends. **First, the number of children in public foster care in the U. S. dropped by more than 150,000 children from FY 1998 through FY 2013.** In FY 2013, however, the pattern of decline was reversed, showing an increase of more than five thousand children (see Table 1 in Appendix B). The questions of whether the jump in the number of children in public foster care for FY 2013 is an anomaly

or will reflect a reversal of the downward direction of the numbers reported between FY 2002-2012 awaits future data. If this figure begins a reversal of direction, then analysts need to pay attention to the factors that may be involved.

**Second, the average age of children in foster care has declined.** The median age of children in public foster care was 9.6 years old in FY 1998. This figure reached a high of 10.9 years in FY 2003, then declined steadily to 8.2 years in FY 2013. The pattern for mean age of children in foster care was similar but showed less variation. The mean age of 9.6 years for children in foster care reported for FY 1998 reached a high of 10.2 years in FY 2002. Subsequently, the mean age of children in the U. S. foster care system declined to a low of 8.9 years in FY 2013 (see Table 2 in Appendix B).

As Table 3 shows, the percentages of children under 12 months of age in foster care *increased* by less than two percent. Those aged 1-2 years *increased* by less than five percent. Children aged 3-4 years *increased* only slightly. Children aged 5-9 and 10 years and older both showed modest *declines* overall (see Table 3 in Appendix B).

**Third, the race-ethnic composition of children in foster care has changed in important ways.** First, the percentage of African-American children in foster care *declined* consistently by one fifth. Once comprising

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<sup>2</sup>A fiscal year is different from a calendar year. The U. S. federal government defines a fiscal year as beginning on October 1 of a given year and ending on September 30 of the following year. For example, FY 1998 began on October 1, 1997 and ended on September 30, 1998.

<sup>3</sup>Demographic data for the variables described in this section are presented in Tables 1- 3 in Appendix B at the end of this paper. The author includes all tables relevant to the text of this paper in Appendix B for two reasons: 1. that sociologists and other social scientists interested in AFCARS data have a launching point from which to do further research on children in the U. S. foster care system, and 2. that readers of this paper who wish to look at the specific data on which the empirical component of this paper is based may do that.

37% of all children in foster care,<sup>4</sup> in FY 2013, African-American children comprised 22% of the foster care population. Second, White Non-Hispanic children in foster care increased by 10% over time. Third, the percentage of Hispanic children in care increased from a low of 15% (in FY 1998) to a high of 25% (in FY 2003). Subsequently, the percentage of Hispanic children in foster care hovered at 20-21% (see Table 4 in Appendix B).

**Fourth, males consistently outnumbered females in public foster care by 4-5%** (see Table 5 in Appendix B). Unfortunately, the reasons for this gender disparity are not addressed in AFCARS Reports. One hypothesis is that boys are more likely than girls to engage in violent or disruptive behavior. Because if their unmanageable behavior they are more likely to end up in foster care. A second hypothesis is that physical abuse is often more apparent with boys than girls. Although both boys and girls may be sexually abused by a parent or other caretaker, sexual abuse in families is more likely to involve female children who are victimized by an older male relative. Also, sexual abuse can be more easily hidden from public scrutiny than physical abuse. Therefore, it may go on for years before it is discovered.

**Fifth, over time, the data show positive changes in the average length of stay of children in foster care.** Both the median and the mean stay in care declined over time. In FY 1998, for example, the median stay in care was 20.5 months and the mean stay, 32.6 months. In FY 2013, these averages dropped to 12.8 years and 21.8 years respectively (see Table 6 in Appendix B). **Sixth, when specific lengths of stay in foster care are examined, only two time frame categories show the greatest percentage of change.** The most dramatic movement out of foster care was for children who had been in care for three or more years. The percentage of children who had spent at least 36 months in foster care category *declined* by 18% over time. The other positive change is that children moving through the foster care

system in less than 12 months increased by 11%-- from 35% in FY 1998 to 46% in FY 2013. The two middle length of time in foster care categories, 12-23 months in care and 24-35 months in care, showed very little or virtually no change respectively over time. Positive changes in the two extreme categories of stay in care-- under 12 months and 36 months or longer, show that at least some of the children have moved through the foster care system more quickly in recent fiscal years (see Table 7 in Appendix B).

## WAYS to EXIT the PUBLIC FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

Children may exit the system officially by being reunified with a parent or other biological relative, through adoption, emancipation, or guardianship. The principal exit strategy for children is reunification. When the goal of reunification is unlikely and after parental rights have been terminated, the case goal for waiting children becomes adoption. Since the late 1990s, adoption has gotten increased attention at both federal and state levels as an option for exiting foster care. Each fiscal year since AFCARS data have been reported, at least one in five children left state care because they were adopted by a non-relative. Financial incentives to states and adoptive families may be involved in encouraging adoptions of children from the U. S. public foster care system.

## CHANGES IN FEDERAL LEGISLATION: FROM REUNIFICATION TO GREATER OPENNESS TO ADOPTION

Pre-1997, federal legislation focused primarily on child abuse prevention, treatment, and family reunification with adoption viewed as a last-ditch effort.

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<sup>4</sup>Reported in Recent Demographic Trends in Foster Care, Data Brief 2013-1. ACYF Office of Data, Analysis, Research, and Evaluation, September, 2013, Discussion: p. 5.



In 1997, with the **Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)**, adoption was given a more central role in permanency planning for children unlikely to be reunified with biological parents.

Since the **ASFA of 1997**, the goal of adoption for children in foster care who will not be reunited with their biological parents has become more important. A number of changes have been developed at the federal level to increase the number and reduce the time frame in foster or other state care for children in state custody who are deemed free for adoption. The historical timeline in Appendix C (at the end of this paper) shows the federal government's involvement, through major legislation, to better regulate and change the actions of states relative to children in state custody because of parental abuse and/or neglect. This timeline includes legislation put in place between 1974 and 2011. The **ASFA**:

1. required states to have a permanency plan for a child in state care *within one year*;
2. required *termination of parental rights for children who have been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months of their lives OR whose parents have killed or seriously injured another child in the family*; and
3. *offered financial incentives to states that increase adoptions of children from foster care over the previous year's total*. The federal government offered financial incentives to states of up to \$4,000 per adoption and \$6,000 in cases of special needs adoptions.<sup>5</sup>

In 2003, the **Adoption Promotion Act (APA)** came into effect. This U. S. federal statute, signed into law by then President George W. Bush, re-authorized \$43 million per year in funds for performance-based adoption incentives to states which increased the number of children adopted from foster care. These incentive payments were drawn from Part E of Title IV of the Social Security Act.

This act added a new type of bonus to the Adoption Incentive Payments Program for adoptions of children **ages 9 or older**. In 2004, the **Children's Bureau Discretionary Grant Program's** priorities included permanency for older children as a special emphasis. The **Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)** added an *award category* for adoptions of older children called the Adoption Excellence Awards; and the **Collaboration to AdoptUSKids** launched a *national multimedia adoptive family recruitment campaign* and has been studying the factors that contribute to successful special needs adoptions, primarily adoptions of older children, and barriers to adoption from foster care. In 2008, **The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act** became federal law.<sup>6</sup> The 2008 Act amended parts B and E of title IV of the Social Security. The goals were "to connect and support relative caregivers, improve outcomes for children in foster care, provide for tribal foster care and adoption access, improve incentives for adoption, and for other purposes."

The creation of these federal acts and initiatives implied that there would be concomitant annual increases in federal funding and financial resources to states to support them. Unfortunately, the federal sequester of January, 2013 and subsequent financial constraints have drastically reduced the amount of money available to states for social welfare goals, including providing financial incentives to promote domestic adoption of teens and older youth still in the public foster care system.

<sup>5</sup>Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, P.L. 105-89, pdf available at: [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=105\\_cong\\_public\\_laws&docid=f:publ89.105.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=105_cong_public_laws&docid=f:publ89.105.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/congress\\_adopt.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/congress_adopt.pdf) (retrieved on 8-9-13)

## TRENDS in PERMANENCY PLANNING for CHILDREN in PUBLIC FOSTER CARE: REUNIFICATION or ADOPTION

AFCARS data for fiscal years 1998-2013 report that the percentage of children for whom reunification was the goal *increased* by 14% over time from 39% to 53% (see Table 8 in Appendix B). However, during the same time frame, the percentage of children for whom reunification was the Exit Plan *Outcome* (e.g., actually happened) *declined* by 9%, from a high of 60% to a low of 51% (see Table 9 in Appendix B.). These data suggest that, in the most recent fiscal years, only about half of the children for whom reunification was the targeted goal actually were reunified with a parent or other biological relative. This inconsistency in the Exit Plan Outcome versus Goal of reunification implies that the Exit Strategy Goal for some of the children who did not get reunified changed to adoption.

The AFCARS data analyzed in this paper show that between 20-25% of the children in public foster care had adoption as their Exit Plan *Goal* (see Table 10 in Appendix B). However, when the percentage of children *actually adopted* is calculated on the base of the number of children *waiting to be adopted* in a given fiscal year, this percentage increased fairly consistently over time, from nearly three in 10 (31%) of the waiting children to almost 5 in 10 (49%) (see Table 11 in Appendix B). As a measure of the success of adoption as an Exit *Outcome*, the increase in adoptions over time is a hopeful sign for giving adoption priority as a permanency planning decision for waiting children for whom family reunification was not feasible.

However, in every fiscal year, more children were waiting to be adopted than were actually adopted (see the last column of Table 12). The “numbers gap” varied from a high of almost 17,000 children in FY 2000 to a low of about 8,500 children in FY 2012. There are several plausible hypotheses for this numbers gap. One

is that some children for whom the goal of reunification initially planned had their Exit Goal changed by the court to adoption. The second hypothesis is that some children may not have had an Exit Outcome Goal set until later in their foster care stay, at which time their Exit Goal became adoption. A third hypothesis is that the process of exiting foster care moved too slowly for thousands of children.

Unfortunately, despite legislation created at the federal level, the time that foster children may wait for a permanent family can vary from months to years. The process of termination of parental rights depends, in part, on the courts whose caseload may be very large. Second, if parental rights are terminated, children must wait in foster or group homes for an adoptive placement to be found. Unless a foster parent or relative steps up to adopt them, delays may drag on. Once placed in a pre-adoptive home, the children must wait for the legal process of adoption to be completed.

Some children either remained in the foster care for the long term *or* did not have case goals in place. For example, in FY 1998, 7% of the children in care were identified as being in long-term foster care and 22% as not yet having a case plan goal established. By FY 2013, the percentages of children in long-term care had dropped slightly from 7 to 5%. Perhaps more importantly, the percentages of children who did not have a case goal in place dropped markedly, from 22% to 7%.

Regarding the ages of the children who get adopted, in general, younger children were likely to be adopted in the greatest numbers. The data on the age ranges of children when their adoption was finalized are organized into six age ranges in Table 13: <1 year, 1-5 years, 6-9 years, 10-14 years, 15-17 years, and 18-20 years. These data show a consistent 9% *increase* in the percentages of children under age five who were adopted from public foster care over time. For children

aged 10-14 years, the data showed a percentage *decrease* of nearly six percent overall in their adoptions. When children in foster care reach the age of 15 and older, the likelihood of their being adopted is slim (see Table 13 in Appendix B). The patterns of adoption of younger children raises the question of what happens to older teens who do not get adopted? The likely answer is that they age out of the foster care system and became homeless.

The data in Table 14 show that, prior to their being adopted, the majority of the children in foster care lived in foster family settings, typically with foster parents who were **not** biological relatives. The practice of placing foster children with non-relatives varied from approximately 52-59%. In contrast, the percentages of relative pre-adoptive foster placements were much smaller, varying between 16% and 24%. Only 10-17% of children targeted for adoption lived in their pre-adoptive homes (see Table 14 in Appendix B). These data raise questions about the connection between reunification, adoption, and pre-adoptive placement settings. If more children were placed initially with biological relatives would their prospects of reunification with a family member be better and take place sooner? Also, why has the percentage of children living in a “trial home setting” been so small over time-- one percent or less?

With the data reported in Table 14 regarding pre-adoptive placement settings in mind, it is not surprising that the majority of children who become available for adoption are adopted by their foster parents. Foster parent adoptions ranged from a high of 64% to a low of 53%.<sup>7</sup> The data also show a consistent *increase* in “other relative” adoptions of children in public foster care over time and, except for FY 2013, a *concomitant decrease* of non-relative adoptions (see Table 15 in Appendix B). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that foster parents and other relatives got the first opportunity to interact with and adopt the youngest, less troubled adoptees; whereas, in general, older, more troubled adoptees

wait longer in the foster care system to be adopted by unrelated others.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the family structures which adoptees join, at least two thirds entered married couple families. The next largest adopter category was single women. The percentages of single women adoptive parents remained relatively consistent over time, varying between a high of 31% in FY 1999 and 2000 to a low of 26% in FY 2006. AFCARS data show that only two to three percent of single men adopted from the foster care system. The unmarried couples category of adopters was also in the single digits and showed only a two percent increase over time (see Table 16 in Appendix B).

### **RISKS to CHILDREN, POTENTIAL ADOPTERS, and SOCIETY of CHILDREN WAITING TOO LONG in FOSTER CARE**

Based on his analysis of AFCARS data for FY 2009, Zill (2011) concluded that nearly 50,000 children will stay in foster care for five or more years and 30,000 will remain there until to be adopted from the foster care system in a *given year*. Part of Zill’s (2011) conclusion was they reach adulthood.<sup>9</sup> He also stated that fewer than 15% of the children in foster care are likely based on the risks and delays of adopting from public foster

<sup>7</sup>The AFCARS reporting system changed how it calculated this variable for 2013. For FY 1998-2012, relatives who were also foster parents were classified in these data *only* as relatives. In FY 2013, states were encouraged to classify adoptive parents into all the categories that applied to them. Therefore, foster parents could also classify themselves as relatives, non-relatives, or either. Of the children adopted by a foster parent in 2013, 2,535 (8.6%) were identified as also being a relative of the child; 7,032 (24 %) were identified as being a non-relative, and 19,861 (67.4%) did not identify whether the foster parent was a relative or a non-relative. Because the categories are not mutually exclusive, the total for this variable for FY 2013 adds up to 120% rather than 100%.

<sup>8</sup>The term unrelated others is used to refer to adopters who are neither biological relatives nor a child’s foster parents.

<sup>9</sup>Zill, N. May, 2011. Report entitled “Adoption from Foster Care: Aiding Children While Saving Public Money.”

<http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2011/05/adoption-foster-care-zill>

care. In FY 2009, a peak year for adoptions of children in state custody, Zill (2011) reported that just over twice as many children had a case goal of adoption *and* had parents whose rights had been legally terminated by the courts—that is, were available to be adopted. Both the private and public costs of youth having no family on which to rely are heavy.

For potential adoptive parents, Zill (2011) identified three legitimate areas of concern: the long-term effects of adopting a child who has experienced early pre-adoption traumas, the unknown genetic risk factors a child may carry in his/her DNA, and the delays in foster care adoption.

The public costs of removing abused and severely neglected children from their birth families and caring for them in foster families, group homes, or institutions are substantial. Zill (2011) reported that state and federal expenditures for public foster care *yearly* amount to more than \$9 billion under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act *alone*. Does it make sense to use Social Security funds for this purpose? The Social Security system was intended to provide basic support for senior citizens. Clearly, Social Security is already an over-burdened fund. Therefore, at the federal level, the decision to use Social Security funds to provide financial assistance to waiting foster children and adoptive families should be re-examined. Necessary funding to assist waiting foster children and adoptive families should come from other sources.

“Although exact amounts are difficult to disentangle, even more money is spent for publicly-subsidized medical care for foster children and food stamps, cash welfare, and child care payments to the families that care for them.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to dollars spent, one must also include the longer-term costs that society incurs from developmental risks associated with child maltreatment and family disruption. Zill (2011) pointed out

that children in the U.S. foster care system are a disproportionate number of their share in the general population of young people who encounter problems with authority (i.e., have serious disciplinary problems in schools and drop out of high school). They are also more likely to be unemployed, homeless, produce children while unmarried teenagers, abuse drugs and alcohol, commit crimes and be over-represented in state and federal prison populations. According to Zill (2011),

“in 2004 there were almost 190,000 inmates of state and federal prisons in the U.S. who had a history of foster care during their childhood or adolescence. These foster care alumni represented nearly 15 percent of the inmates of state prisons and almost 8 percent of the inmates of federal prisons. The cost of incarcerating former foster youth was approximately \$5.1 billion per year.”<sup>11</sup>

In a 2007 report, California, the state which has the largest number of children in public foster care in the U.S., reported the following statistics about foster children who aged out of the system via emancipation-- that is without having a family on which to rely:

- 63% left care without a place to live;
- 51% had no job;
- Emancipated females were four times as likely to be on public assistance than was the general population;
- Fewer than three percent went to college.
- Although foster children made up less than one percent of California’s population, they accounted for 40% of those living in homeless shelters and were represented disproportionately in that state’s prison

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<sup>10</sup>Zill, 2011.

<sup>11</sup>Zill, 2011.



population.<sup>12</sup>

If these statistics are even reasonably accurate, then, in situations where reunification with a biological parent or relative is impossible, adoption should be promoted as a timely, first-choice option for waiting children to become part of stable families. Unfortunately, adoption still seems to have a public stigma attached to it. The stigma of “being less than the real thing” is attached, in some people’s minds, to both adopters and adoptees. This belief can affect the actions of professionals who make decisions about permanency planning, people considering adoption, others. Adoptive parents and adoptees may also encounter prejudice and discrimination in their day-to-day interactions in the school system and possibly elsewhere in their communities.

### LINKING AFCARS TRENDS TO PROACTIVE PRACTICES AND POLICIES

Since U.S. adoption policies are controlled by state governments and are affected by both formal and informal practices, innovative adoption strategies need to be directed at both the state and federal levels. The AFSCARS data analyzed and reported earlier in this paper show that the number of children in the U.S. foster care system declined by more than 150,000 children between fiscal years 1998 and 2013. However, in FY 2013, more than 400,000 children were still in foster care. Regarding race-ethnicity, the percentage of Black and African American children in care *declined* significantly over time. The percentage of Hispanic children declined, peaked at 25%, then *stabilized* at 20-21%. The percentage of children of “other” and mixed race *increased* as did the percentage of Non-Hispanic White children in foster care.

AFCARS data trends also show, in general, that children are moving through the system faster. Second, regarding projected Exit Goal Outcomes, reunification

is taking place but has declined by nine percent. Third, the percentage of adoptees among those children waiting to be adopted has also increased. However, this third trend is more likely to reflect the permanency plan experience of younger than older children in foster care. Specifically, the data show that, even after changes in federal laws and acts, foster children ages 15-17 years and especially those 18 years and older have a very small to dismal chance of being adopted respectively.

Unfortunately, changes in the federal acts and initiatives discussed earlier in this paper do not necessarily compel or reflect uniform changes in the behavior of foster care case workers, DCYF supervisors, family court judges, and others connected with making decisions about the futures of children in foster care across states. A data brief released by the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) in September, 2013 reported the contributions of specific states and counties to the changing patterns of children in U. S. public foster care.<sup>13</sup> According to data presented in Figure 2 of this ACYF report, 10 states accounted for more than 90% of the *decline* in the foster care population between 2002 and 2012,<sup>14</sup> and three of these states for more than 50% of the *decline* of children in the public foster care.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, 10 states showed “some increase” in children in their foster care systems<sup>16</sup> and two states accounted for “relatively large increases.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it is clear that some states have been more successful in reducing the number of children in foster care than others. Child welfare policy analysts need to

<sup>12</sup>California Progress Report. January 17, 2007. “Expanding Transitional Services for Emancipated Foster Youth: An Investment in California’s Tomorrow.” The Children’s Advocacy Institute. <http://www.childrenuniting-nations.org/who-we-are/foster-care-statistics/>

<sup>13</sup>Recent Demographic Trends in Foster Care, Data Brief 2013-1. ACYF Office of Data, Analysis, Research, and Evaluation, September, 2013, Table 2, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup>CA, NY, FL, OH, IL, MD, PA, MI, GA, and NJ.

<sup>15</sup>CA, NY, and FL.

<sup>16</sup>WY, KY, OK, UT, AR, MS, IA, WV, NV, and IN.

<sup>17</sup>TX and AZ.

look to the successful states for models of what works best in the interest of children and families whose lives get connected with the foster care system.

The proactive strategies that follow are intended to add to the list of ways to bring about positive change in the foster care system and to assist and maintain the wellbeing of troubled biological and adoptive families.

### **Develop More and Better Pro-Active Strategies**

In line with the shift to a pro-active agenda, changes in current practice models must include pro-active strategies to provide better support to at-risk families before their child/ren are removed from their parents' care and experience the trauma of family disruption and state involvement. Important recommendations for pro-active changes should include, but not be limited to, the following:

1. identifying families at risk of child abuse and neglect as early as possible at the community/neighborhood level and doing that without stigmatizing or alienating these families;
2. working with/through churches and faith-based groups across religious denominations, and other volunteer organizations to help provide for families' and children's basic needs like low- or no-cost access to healthy food, health screenings, etc.;
3. providing easy access to, and transportation for, parent training during the pre- and post-natal stages for interested, low-income parents in at-risk populations;
4. developing models for "best practices" community outreach pilot programs;
5. identifying private and public funding sources and working with skilled grant writers to apply for and secure funds to support best-practices pilot programs.

6. allocating state funds to test the effectiveness of each alternative during and after best practice programs are put in place; and

7. changing the culture of public child welfare system in states that support "doing business as usual" instead of developing innovative policies and practices that work in the best interests of children and families;

Sociologists are experts at understanding social structures and culture. Social structures refer to the ways that people and groups relate to one another and which both directs and sets limits on human behavior (Henslin 2012). People create a culture to sustain and reinforce the values, beliefs, norms, and practices which a given social structure supports. Moreover, since cultures are passed on from generation to generation without much, if any, critical thinking by people socialized into that culture may restrict members' thinking and behavior to a business as usual model rather one that raise questions about best practices-- innovative ways of thinking and behaving.

The U. S. public foster care system is a social structure which has created a powerful culture that sustains it. Core components of this culture are often hidden to outsiders and, therefore, are extremely difficult to challenge and, as with many organizations, very resistant to change. However, additional positive change is possible.

Such changes may come about through initiating brain storming sessions which include diverse stake holders, broader discussion of best-practice models that are being used in some states and communities, and incorporating research results from high quality studies into testing out new policy strategies.

### Revise the Reactive Practices and Policies Currently in Place Regarding Allegations of Child Abuse:

1. When investigating allegations of child abuse or neglect:

a. Institute standardized practices across states to provide due process evaluations/assessments of the “evidence.” The evidence should be reviewed by trained medical and other professionals, not by case workers.

b. Avoid stigmatizing the parents who are accused of abuse or neglect. This is especially important in investigations of child abuse or neglect that are found to be *unsubstantiated*.

c. Look first for qualified relatives or neighbors rather than strangers with whom to place the child during the review process. Compensate them appropriately while they are caring for the child/children.

2. When a claim of child abuse is substantiated, to minimize disruption of school and community for the child, look for, train and license responsible relatives (or family friends) as foster parents and place the child with them.

3. Standardize policies across states for the maximum time frame in which a parent of a child in foster care must make the necessary life changes for reunification to proceed.

### Strengthen Strategies Which Expedite Adoptions:

Sometimes the wheels of the foster care system move too slowly. When it is in the best interest of the child and prospective adopter(s), the following are suggested as ways to expedite the process.

1. Offer more consistent incentives to prospective adopters:

a. Financial: More dollars to increase the numbers

of adoptions, especially of older children in foster care. Adoption incentives should be based on cost of living and will vary by region and state.

b. Respite Services: Train more and better respite workers with whom adoptive parents can leave their child/ren for at least a few hours or overnight, as needed. Provide adoptive parents with a list of trained and bonded respite workers in the area where they live and vouchers for respite care;

c. Provide more transparency (accountability) by states regarding:

1. the length of time children spend in foster care before they are adopted;

2. the number and type of settings in which the child/ren have lived prior to being referred to pre-adoptive parents;

3. the priority that home finders/caseworkers give to specific adopter characteristics (e.g., age, race-ethnicity, gender, marital status, socioeconomic status, etc.); and

4. the process through which adoptive families are identified; and

5. a reasonable time frame for moving waiting child/ren to pre-adoptive homes;

2. Expand the parameters of who is considered eligible to adopt an older child from the foster care system. Consider, for example, single women, empty nesters in their fifties and single men who can provide good role models for older male children. Eliminate age and racial requirements as criteria preventing a child’s placement with a prospective adoptive parent or family. Regarding transracial placements, the children’s *desire* and *need* for a permanent, loving parent/family should take precedence over race-ethnicity.

3. Do more effective outreach to locate potential adopters.

a. make finding adoptive parents for older waiting U. S. children a priority;

b. provide better preparation for life in their new family both to pre-adoptive parents and to pre-adoptees ages three and older;

c. provide financial support for post-adoptive counseling in positive relationship building in adoptive families and other services to families who need them.

### **Emancipated Youth**

In situations where adoptive families cannot be found for older children who are getting close to aging out of foster care, the foster care system should recruit and train resource families to act in the capacity of surrogate parents or grandparents in regard to the former foster child's needs like finding work and housing and answering other questions that may arise. Ideally, emancipated teens would have the opportunity to spend time on holidays and other occasions with the resource family. It should be the obligation of all parties to develop a contract regarding the behavior expected of the surrogate family and emancipated youth. A case worker should meet with the exiting teen and the surrogate(s) to understand what is expected of each and the boundaries of their relationship. Depending on their circumstances, the length of involvement and boundaries might vary for surrogates and exiting youth.

### **CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION**

Changing economic opportunities and conditions along with greater geographic distances from kin have adversely affected many contemporary families. With declining job opportunities for adults with less than a high school education and few or no marketable

skills, the demise of job security for many middle and working-class jobs, and the lack of social supports provided by relatives in times of need, today's families have become more fragile. The shift from communal/traditional to post-modern societies and beyond has affected families in both negative and positive ways. The decline of community has affected biological and adoptive families negatively, especially families with special needs children. Because these families can become overwhelmed easily, they will need a variety of social supports and wrap-around services close to where they live-- services which continue to be available at low or no cost after reunification or adoption takes place. A village-like model of interdependent housing for families, including adoptive families, can be developed in cities, suburban communities, or in semi-rural settings.<sup>18</sup> Subsidies for housing and services may be paid, in part, by funding from states and the federal government as well as through grants from philanthropic organizations, private donations, and community organizations, including churches and other faith-based groups.

Future sociological research should focus on evaluating these program and policy changes. On the organizational level, a major question to answer is whether, and under what circumstances, existing child welfare policies are beneficial to children in foster care and their families? What policies or practices need to be modified and in what specific ways? On the interpersonal level, sociologists can play an important role in studying the long-term success of reunification as well as older-child adoptions from foster care. These research foci would require collecting primary data at the macro (organizational) and micro (family) levels.

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<sup>18</sup>See the model is based on STIL, Stockholm Cooperative for Independent Living, developed by Adolf Ratzka in 1996 and the Swedish in-home assistance programs of the 1980's. [www.independentliving.org/docs-ratzka199605.html](http://www.independentliving.org/docs-ratzka199605.html)



Are sociologists willing to take on the many challenges of undertaking such research? Evaluation research is costly, time-consuming, and unpopular among those who wield the power in organizations which rest on flawed policies that produce negative, unintended outcomes. However, having these data and analyses would be well worth the effort because they could lead to better informed foster care policies which genuinely put the wellbeing of vulnerable children and their families first.

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## APPENDIX A: Strength and Limitations of Using AFCARS Data

AFCARS Reports have the principal strength that the federal government has the resources for compiling statistics on children in U. S. foster care at the national, state or territory, and county levels. Therefore, these reports provide a singularly important source of data about children in U. S. foster care.

Unfortunately, AFCARS data are not user-friendly to researchers outside of AFCARS statisticians. First, the aggregated form in which these data are available to interested researchers presents a major challenge to the secondary analyst. The most important limitation centers on the limited type and level of analysis researchers can do with these data. By reporting only single-variable statistics in AFCARS Reports, secondary analysts who work with AFCARS data cannot use them to do more sophisticated bi-variate and multivariate analyses.

There is no one in authority to answer questions. The NRC-CWDT which apparently used to provide some assistance to researchers working with AFCARS data closed operation on September 30, 2014. I contacted the designated person at the Regional Office in May, 2015 with my questions and concerns but did not receive any response.

Second, researchers usually wish to get access to, and use, the most current and accurate statistics for each fiscal year in a timely fashion. Unfortunately, AFCARS data estimates may be designated as Preliminary, Interim, or Final. For example, the data reported in AFCARS Report 12 for FY 1998 through FY 2002 inclusive are designated as *Final* estimates. This report is dated October, 2006. In contrast, the data presented in AFCARS Report 10 for FY 2003, reported in June, 2006, are designated as Interim. AFCARS Reports 11, 13-19 and 21 contain data designated as Preliminary. Report

20 contains data estimated at two points: in July and November of 2013. So there may be time differences in a given fiscal year about when reports are compiled.

A third major challenge is inconsistencies in numbers and the lack of number totals for any variable distributions included in AFCARS Reports. For example, in FY 2013, 50,608 children were reported in care but the total number of children for whom age at adoption was available as calculated by the author was 50,603 children. There are also some inconsistencies in totals across AFCARS Reports.

A fourth challenge is that the majority of AFCARS Reports provide Preliminary estimates for a given fiscal year; however, these statistics may be collected or reported in June, July, or November of the next calendar year. There is no explanation for why numbers reported for some fiscal years vary in the month in which they are reported.

A fifth issue is the lengthy time lag in reporting Final estimates data for a given set of fiscal years, as noted in Footnote 2 of this paper.

Finally, since national-level statistics are compiled from data reported by individual states and U. S. territories, the risk of potential errors may occur at any reporting point along the way in collecting national-level AFCARS data. Despite these limitations, AFCARS Reports provide one of the few, if not the only, opportunity for sociologists to examine a number of demographic variables about children who enter the foster care system, how long they remain in foster care and the circumstances under which they leave.

**APPENDIX B: Tables 1-16****Table 1. Number of Children in Public Foster Care in the U. S., Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	Number of Children in Public Foster Care <sup>b</sup>
1998	559,000
1999	567,000
2000	552,000
2001	545,000
2002	533,000
2003	520,000
2004	517,000
2005	513,000
2006	510,000
2007	491,000
2008	463,000
2009 <sup>b</sup>	423,773
2010	408,425
2011	400,540
2012	399,546
2013	402,378

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year. For example, FY 1998 began on October 1, 1997 and ended on September 30, 1998.

<sup>b</sup>Totals reported for FYs 2009-2013 are from AFCARS Report 21, estimates as of July, 2014, page 1.



**Table 2. Average Age of Children in U. S. Public Foster Care, FY 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	Median Years Old	Mean Years Old	Total Number of Children in Care <sup>b</sup>
1998	9.6	9.6	(559,000)
1999	10.1	9.9	(567,000)
2000	10.4	10.0	(552,000)
2001	10.6	10.1	(545,000)
2002	10.8	10.2	(533,000)
2003	10.9	10.2	(520,000)
2004	10.9	10.1	(517,000)
2005	10.6	10.0	(513,000)
2006	10.2	9.8	(510,000)
2007	9.9	9.7	(491,000)
2008	9.8	9.7	(463,792)
2009	9.7	9.6	(416,672)
2010	9.2	9.4	(408,425)
2011	8.8	9.3	(404,878)
2012	8.5	9.1	(396,827)
2013	8.2	8.9	(402,378)

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data provided in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>b</sup>Statisticians appear to have rounded the number of children in foster care in AFCARS Reports for FY 1998-2007 to the nearest thousand. Beginning in FY 2008, exact counts/estimates appear to be reported.

**Table 3. Age Ranges of Children in U. S. Public Foster Care in Percentages, FY 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	% Under 12 Months Old	% 1-2 Years Old	% 3-4 Years Old	% 5-9 Years Old	% 10 and Older Years	Total %
1998	5.1	10.1	10.4	27.1	47.3	100
1999	4.1	10.2	9.8	25.5	50.4	100
2000	4.1	10.5	9.4	24.0	52.0	100
2001	4.3	10.5	9.4	22.6	53.2	100
2002	4.4	10.7	9.6	23.3	52.0	100
2003	4.9	11.1	9.5	20.6	53.9	100
2004	5.2	11.4	9.7	20.3	53.4	100
2005	5.7	12.1	10.0	20.2	52.0	100
2006	6.0	12.7	10.1	20.5	50.7	100
2007	6.0	13.3	10.4	20.7	49.6	100
2008	5.8	13.7	10.5	20.5	49.5	100
2009	5.9	14.3	11.0	21.0	47.8	100
2010	6.0	14.5	11.5	20.8	47.2	100
2011	6.0	14.4	12.0	21.3	46.3	100
2012	6.4	14.7	12.4	22.6	43.9	100
2013	6.6	14.9	12.1	23.4	43.0	100

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data provided in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

**Table 4. Race-Ethnicity of Children in U. S. Public Foster Care in Percentages, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	% White Non-	% Black or African Hispanic	% Hispanic of Any Race American	% Other <sup>b</sup>	Total % <sup>c</sup>
1998	35	43	15	7	100
1999	35	38	17	10	100
2000	38	39	15	8	100
2001	38	38	17	8	101
2002	39	37	17	8	101
2003	39	35	25	1	100
2004	40	34	18	7	99
2005	41	32	18	8	99
2006	40	32	19	9	100
2007	40	31	20	9	100
2008	40	31	20	10	101
2009	40	30	20	10	100
2010	41	29	21	10	101
2011	41	27	21	10	99
2012	45	22	21	13	101
2013	45	22	21	12	100

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>b</sup>This category includes children of AI/AN Non-Hispanic, Asian Non-Hispanic, Asian/PI Non-Hispanic, Hawaiian/PI Non-Hispanic, two or more races and of unknown/undetermined race-ethnicity.

<sup>c</sup>Data on age as reported on September 30 of the FY. Totals of less or more than 100% are likely because of rounding by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb>.

**Table 5. Gender of Children in U. S. Public Foster Care, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	Males		Females	
	%	N	%	N
1998	52	(289,544)	48	(269,456)
1999	52	(296,793)	48	(270,204)
2000	52	(289,187)	48	(262,813)
2001	52	(285,505)	48	(259,495)
2002	52	(279,457)	48	(253,543)
2003	53	(273,138)	47	(246,862)
2004	53	(271,780)	47	(245,220)
2005	52	(269,036)	48	(243,964)
2006	52	(267,027)	48	(242,973)
2007	52	(256,438)	48	(233,562)
2008	53	(243,740)	47	(219,260)
2009	53	(222,685)	47	(200,999)
2010	52	(214,354)	48	(193,998)
2011	52	(209,532)	48	(190,932)
2012 <sup>b</sup>	52	(209,131)	48	(190,355)
2013	52	(210,738)	48	(191,608)

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>b</sup>AFCARS Reports provide two different numbers for FY 2012, one number estimated in July and the other estimated in November. The number of males and females the author reported in Table 5 is number of males and females reported in July of that fiscal year. The alternate numbers are 207, 947 for males and 189, 113 for females reported for FY 2012 in November of that fiscal year.



**Table 6. Children's Average Length of Stay in U. S. Public Foster Care, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	Median Months	Mean Months	Number of Children in Care <sup>b</sup>
1998	20.5	32.6	(559,000)
1999	19.8	31.8	(567,000)
2000	19.8	32.3	(552,000)
2001	19.2	32.5	(545,000)
2002	18.1	31.7	(533,000)
2003	17.6	31.2	(520,000)
2004	16.5	30.0	(517,000)
2005	15.5	28.6	(513,000)
2006	15.5	28.3	(510,000)
2007	15.5	27.5	(491,000)
2008	15.8	27.2	(463,792)
2009	15.4	26.7	(416,672)
2010	14.0	25.3	(408,425)
2011	13.5	23.9	(404,878)
2012	13.1	22.7	(396,827)
2013	12.8	21.8	(402,378)

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>b</sup>This number refers to how many children were in foster care on September 30 of a given fiscal year.

**Table 7. Children's Length of Stay in U. S. Public Foster Care by Time Frame, Fiscal Years 1998-2013****Child's Length of Stay in Foster Care**

Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	% Under 12 Months	% 12-23 Months	% 24-35 Months	% 36 Months or Longer	Number of Children in Care <sup>b</sup>
1998	35	20	12	32	(559,000)
1999	35	20	14	30	(567,000)
2000	35	21	13	32	(552,000)
2001	36	19	12	31	(545,000)
2002	38	20	12	29	(533,000)
2003	38	21	12	28	(520,000)
2004	40	21	12	27	(517,000)
2005	42	21	12	25	(513,000)
2006	42	22	12	24	(510,000)
2007	41	22	12	23	(491,000)
2008	42	23	12	24	(463,792)
2009	42	22	12	23	(416,672)
2010	45	22	12	22	(408,425)
2011	45	23	11	20	(404,878)
2012	47	23	12	18	(396,827)
2013	46	27	13	14	(402,378)

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>b</sup>This number refers to how many children were in foster care on September 30 of a given fiscal year.

**Table 8. Percentages and Numbers of Children in Public Foster Care for Whom Reunification Was the Exit Plan Goal, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>b</sup>	Number of Children in Foster Care <sup>a</sup>	Children for Whom Reunification was the Exit Plan GOAL	
		% <sup>c</sup>	N
1998	559,000	39	(220,428)
1999	567,000	42	(239,006)
2000	552,000	41	(228,932)
2001	545,000	43	(235,432)
2002	533,000	46	(244,796)
2003	520,000	48	(249,549)
2004	517,000	49	(255,280)
2005	513,000	51	(262,706)
2006	510,000	49	(248,054)
2007	491,000	48	(235,655)
2008	463,000	49	(226,867)
2009	423,773	49	(202,065)
2010	408,425	51	(202,389)
2011	400,540	52	(199,123)
2012	399,546	53	(202,894)
2013	402,378	53	(204,621)

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Totals reported here for the FY 2009 -FY 2013 are from AFCARS Report 21, estimates as of July, 2014, page 1.

<sup>b</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>c</sup>Percentages in this column were calculated by dividing the number of children for whom reunification was the Exit Plan Goal (numerator) by the total number of children in foster care in a given fiscal year (denominator).

**Table 9. Percentages and Numbers of Children in Public Foster Care for Whom Reunification Was the Exit Plan Outcome, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>b</sup>	Number of Children Exiting Foster Care in Each Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	Children for Whom Reunification was the Exit Plan OUTCOME	
		%	N
1998	(257,000)	60	(155,267)
1999	(250,100)	58	(145,341)
2000	(272,000)	57	(156,050)
2001	(269,000)	57	(154,645)
2002	(282,000)	56	(158,597)
2003	(282,000)	55	(155,499)
2004	(283,000)	54	(151,648)
2005	(287,000)	54	(150,608)
2006	(303,000)	53	(154,103)
2007	(293,000)	53	(153,868)
2008	(273,000)	52	(148,340)
2009	(277,606)	51	(140,061)
2010	(257,906)	51	(128,913)
2011	(246,438)	52	(125,908)
2012	(240,936)	51	(122,173)
2013	(238,280)	51	(121,334)

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Numbers are estimated on September 30 of each fiscal year.

<sup>b</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year. For example, FY 1998 began on October 1, 1997 and ended on September 30, 1998.

**Table 10. Percentages and Numbers of Children in Public Foster Care for Whom Adoption Was the Exit Plan Goal, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	Number of Children in Foster Care in Each Fiscal Year <sup>b</sup>	Children in Foster Care with Adoption as the Exit Plan GOAL	
		%	N
1998	559,000	20%	(114,448)
1999	567,000	20%	(114,213)
2000	552,000	21%	(114,125)
2001	545,000	22%	(117,818)
2002	533,000	21%	(110,983)
2003	520,000	20%	(105,171)
2004	517,000	20%	(102,777)
2005	513,000	20%	(100,949)
2006	510,000	23%	(117,380)
2007	491,000	24%	(118,867)
2008	463,000	24%	(111,225)
2009	423,773	25%	(102,615)
2010	408,425	25%	(96,772)
2011	400,540	25%	(94,629)
2012	399,546	24%	(93,165)
2013	402,378	24%	(91,694)

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>b</sup>Numbers are estimated by AFCARS for September 30 of each fiscal year.



**Table 11. Percentages and Numbers of Children Actually Adopted from U. S. Public Foster Care in Relation to the Number of Children Waiting to be Adopted, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	Children Actually Adopted		Number of Children Waiting to be Adopted <sup>c</sup>
	% <sup>b</sup>	N	
1998	30.6	38,221	125,000
1999	32.1	41,692	130,000
2000	35.9	47,040	131,000
2001	36.3	46,778	129,000
2002	41.2	51,124	124,000
2003	42.0	50,355	120,000
2004	43.6	51,413	118,000
2005	45.0	51,323	114,000
2006	39.1	50,379	129,000
2007	39.6	52,235	132,000
2008	44.1	54,284	123,000
2009	48.6	55,684	114,556
2010	48.9	52,340	107,011
2011	47.8	49,866	104,236
2012	50.4	51,229	101,719
2013	49.4	50,281	101,840

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>b</sup>The author calculated the percentages in this column based on the number of children waiting to be adopted in a given fiscal year.

<sup>c</sup>AFCARS defines "waiting children" as those who have a case goal of adoption and/or whose birth parents' rights have been terminated. This definition does not include children 16 and older whose parents' rights have been terminated and who have a case goal of emancipation. See AFCARS REPORT 6 for FY 1999, available at: <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/june2001.htm>

**Table 12. Children in Public Foster Care for Whom Adoption Was the Exit Plan Goal, Children Waiting to Be Adopted, and the Gap between the Numbers, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>b</sup>	Children with Adoption as Their Exit Plan Goal	Children Waiting to be Adopted	Gap <sup>a</sup> between between the Two Numbers
	N	N	N
1998	114,448	125,000	+10,552
1999	114,213	130,000	+15,787
2000	114,125	131,000	+16,875
2001	117,818	129,000	+11,182
2002	110,983	124,000	+13,017
2003	105,171	120,000	+14,829
2004	102,777	118,000	+15,223
2005	100,949	114,000	+13,051
2006	117,380	129,000	+11,620
2007	118,867	132,000	+13,133
2008	111,225	123,000	+11,775
2009	102,615	114,556	+11,941
2010	96,772	107,011	+10,239
2011	94,629	104,236	+9,607
2012	93,165	101,719	+8,554
2013	91,694	101,840	+10,146

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>The positive (+) number shows the gap (difference) between children waiting to be adopted and those for whom adoption was the Exit Plan Goal in a given fiscal year. That is, in every fiscal year more children were available for adoption from the foster care system than originally had the Case Goal of adoption.

<sup>b</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

**Table 13. Age Ranges of Children at Adoption from the U. S. Public Foster Care System in Percentages, Fiscal Years 1998-2013<sup>a</sup>**

Fiscal Year <sup>b</sup>	% <1 Year	% 1-5 Years	% 6-9 Years	% 10-14 Years	% 15-17 Years	% 18 Plus	Total % <sup>c</sup>
1998	1.7	45.5	31.0	18.4	3.1	0.3	100
1999	1.8	45.0	30.2	19.3	3.4	0.3	100
2000	1.8	45.4	29.2	19.8	3.5	0.3	100
2001	1.9	46.0	27.8	20.1	3.9	0.3	100
2002	1.9	46.1	26.3	21.3	4.1	0.3	100
2003	1.9	47.2	25.0	21.0	4.6	0.4	100
2004	1.8	48.8	23.7	20.5	4.9	0.35	100
2005	2.2	50.5	27.9	14.1	5.1	0.3	100
2006	2.2	52.0	23.0	17.5	5.0	0.3	100
2007	2.1	53.7	22.7	16.4	4.8	0.3	100
2008	2.0	54.0	22.7	15.9	5.0	0.4	100
2009	2.0	54.3	22.8	15.9	4.7	0.3	100
2010	2.1	53.7	22.8	16.2	4.8	0.4	100
2011	2.1	54.3	22.2	16.2	4.9	0.3	100
2012	2.1	55.0	23.0	16.0	5.0	0.3	100
2013	2.3	54.8	22.5	15.4	4.6	0.4	100

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10-#21.

<sup>a</sup>Data on age was reported on September 30 of each fiscal year.

<sup>b</sup>Each Fiscal Year (FY) begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>c</sup>To be consistent with most of the total percentages which add up to 100%, the total percentages for three fiscal years are either rounded up to 100% from 99.9% (FY 2012) or down to 100% from 100.1% (FY 2003, 2005 ).

**Table 14. Children's Pre-Adoption Placement Settings, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>b</sup>	Foster Family Home Setting		Pre-Adoptive Visit Setting	Trial Home Setting	Other Settings <sup>a</sup>	Total of All Settings	
	Relative %	Non- Relative %				%	N
1998	24.0	58	10.0	1.0	7.1	101.1	(125,000)
1999	20.0	59	13.0	0.3	8.1	101.1	(130,000)
2000	19.4	58	13.4	0.3	8.9	100	(131,000)
2001	18.8	58.5	13.0	0.3	9.4	100	(129,000)
2002	16.6	55.6	16.6	0.3	10.9	100	(124,000)
2003	16.3	54.6	16.6	0.4	12.0	99.9	(120,001)
2004	17.4	55.4	14.5	0.4	12.3	100	(117,999)
2005	18.5	55.5	12.9	0.6	12.5	100	(114,002)
2006	17.6	57.1	13.1	0.7	11.5	100	(123,000)
2007	23.6	52.2	13.0	0.7	10.4	99.9	(132,000)
2008	23.0	53.4	12.7	0.6	10.2	99.9	(123,000)
2009	22.1	53.8	13.8	0.6	9.7	100	(114,086)
2010	22.2	54.9	12.7	0.6	9.6	100	(106,881)
2011	23.2	54.3	12.5	0.6	9.5	100	(104,059)
2012	24.0	53.2	12.8	0.7	9.3	100	(101,545)
2013	24.1	53.2	13.0	0.6	9.1	100	(109,475)

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10 - #21.

<sup>a</sup>Other settings include group homes, institutions, supervised independent living, and unknown (e.g., runaways).

<sup>b</sup>Each Fiscal Year (FY) begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

**Table 15. Prior Relationship of Adoptees to Adoptive Parents,<sup>a</sup> Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

Fiscal Year <sup>b</sup>	Foster	Relative	Non-Relative	Total	
	Parent			%	%
1998	64	16	21	101	(37,001)
1999	64	16	20	100	(47,001)
2000	61	16	18	100	(51,001)
2001	59	24	17	100	(50,010)
2002	61	24	15	100	(56,000)
2003	62	23	15	100	(49,924)
2004	59	24	16	100	(51,999)
2005	60	25	15	100	(51,000)
2006	59	26	15	100	(51,000)
2007	57	28	15	100	(52,000)
2008	54	30	16	100	(55,000)
2009	54	32	14	100	(51,474)
2010	53	32	15	100	(49,454)
2011	54	31	15	100	(47,268)
2012	56	30	14	100	(49,341)
2013 <sup>c</sup>	61	27	12	100	(48,472)

**Source:** Compiled by the author from AFCARS Reports #10 - #21.

<sup>a</sup>For FY 1998-2012, AFCARS classified relatives who were also foster parents only as relatives. Between FY 2004-2014, 393 children were adopted by step parents; data on relationship to child was missing for 2,471 children in FY, 2013.

<sup>b</sup>Each Fiscal Year (FY) begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year.

<sup>c</sup>In FY 2013, AFCARS encouraged states to classify adoptive parents into all of the categories that applied to them. Therefore, foster parents who adopted could also classify themselves as relatives or non-relatives. The author recalculated the percentages and numbers to remove the overlap in categories and to make the data for FY 2013 consistent with the way AFCARS calculated these data in previous fiscal years.



**Table 16. Family Structures into Which Adoptees Were Placed, Fiscal Years 1998-2013**

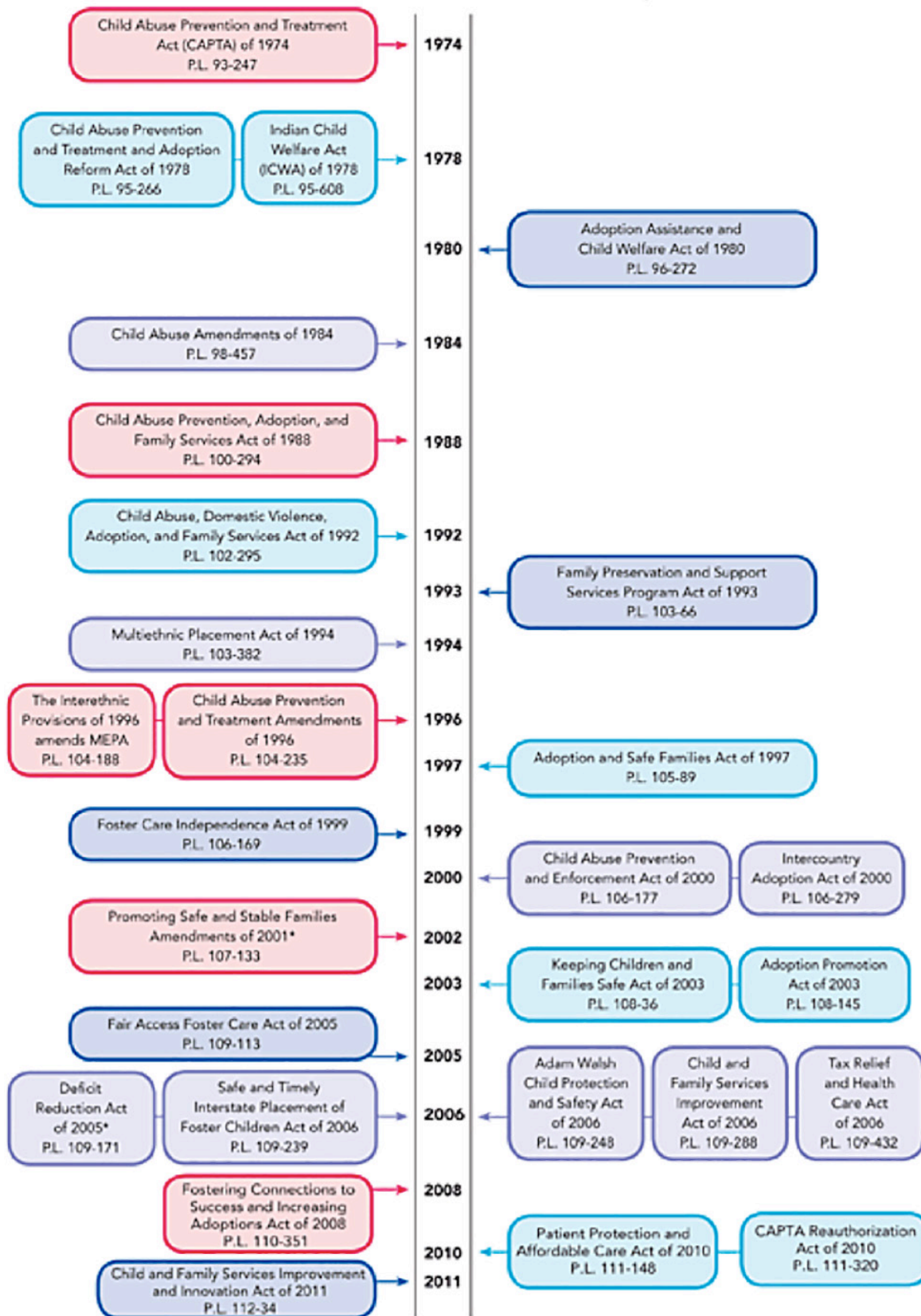
Fiscal Year <sup>a</sup>	% Married Couple	% Single Female	% Single Male	% Unmarried Couple
1998	67	30	2	1
1999	66	31	2	1
2000	66	31	2	1
2001	67	30	2	1
2002	66	30	2	2
2003	67	28	3	2
2004	68	27	3	2
2005	68	27	3	2
2006	69	26	3	2
2007	68	27	3	2
2008	69	28	3	2
2009	66	28	3	2
2010	67	28	3	2
2011	68	27	3	2
2012	68	27	3	2
2013	67	27	3	3

**Source:** Compiled by the author from data in AFCARS Reports #10 - #21.

<sup>a</sup>Fiscal year (FY) refers to the federal government Fiscal Year which begins on October 1 of a given year and ends on September 30 of the following year. For example, FY 1998 began on October 1, 1997 and ended on September 30, 1998.

APPENDIX C

**Timeline of Major Federal Legislation Concerned With Child Protection, Child Welfare, and Adoption**



\*Some acts were enacted the year following their introduction in Congress.

**About the Author:** Josephine A. Ruggiero is an applied sociologist who has extensive research, publications, and personal experience in adoption. She earned her MA and Ph.D in sociology at Fordham University in the Bronx, NY. Trained and licensed both to adopt and to be foster parents in the state of Rhode Island, the author and her husband had experiences that familiarized them with the culture of foster care and who gets to adopt children from the foster care system. Ruggiero and her husband are the adoptive parents of three biological siblings born in Russia.