

*AdoptOHIO*

# **Phone Survey Results**

**Prepared for**  
**The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services**  
**Office for Children and Families**  
**Adoption and Kinship Section**

**By**  
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This parent survey interviewing report is being submitted to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) as a product of the evaluation of the *Adopt*Ohio program being conducted by Steven R. Howe and Associates, LLC. The primary author of this report was Kristin Valerius. For further information, please contact:

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# Phone Survey Results

## Executive Summary

Four hundred and fifty parents<sup>1</sup> were interviewed during 2003 regarding their experience with adoptions in Ohio. Respondents were randomly selected from the state Family and Children Services Information System (FACSIS) from among those parents who had applied for adoption but who had not yet been matched to a particular child. The purpose of the survey was to assess the satisfaction of parents waiting for adoption within Ohio and to suggest possible solutions to system weaknesses. Parents giving consent were contacted a second time six months later to track their progress through the system.

As a result of focusing on waiting parents, the sample was disproportionately white and high-income compared to the population of adoptive parents in Ohio. In other words, the pool of parents who are recruited into the system more closely matches the pool of waiting children than it appears from looking at a sample of waiting parents. Parents who are quickly matched to waiting children do not spend a long time waiting and are therefore under-represented in the parent pool. Results should be interpreted cautiously for African American respondents and lower income respondents for two reasons. There are fewer of them in the waiting pool than in the average group of new applicants (because of being matched more quickly). Further, those who are not matched quickly may differ in unknown ways from those who are. Despite the intention to focus on waiting parents, only one-quarter of the respondents were waiting for an adoptive match. The remaining respondents either had finalized or were in the process of finalizing an adoption or intended to adopt a child internationally. Better data are required if the state is to accurately plan for upcoming recruitment efforts.

Although a majority of waiting children are above the age of ten, only 16% of the respondents were looking to adopt a child over ten or were willing to take a child of any age. Recruitment efforts should particularly target parents who are willing to adopt older children and support services should be provided to encourage such adoptions. Although African American children wait longer to be adopted, a majority of parents appear to be willing to adopt African American children, suggesting this may not a barrier to successful matching. There is a need to recruit families who are willing to adopt children who have emotional or behavioral problems or a history of sexual abuse, as few families are willing to take on these challenges. There does not appear to be any significant discrepancies between the parent gender preferences and the available children.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, all respondents will be referred to as parents even though they may not have finalized an adoption or have other biological or adoptive children.

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Overall, satisfaction was high with most aspects of the adoption system. Parents who had not been matched to a potential child were the most dissatisfied. Satisfaction rates and comments indicate that ongoing communication with one's caseworker is the single most important adoption service. Many waiting parents felt that better collaboration among agencies and counties would help facilitate successful adoptions.

Contrary to findings from focus group research, most parents did not feel that adoption subsidies played a critical role in their decision to adopt. This indifference may be due to the high number of higher-income families in the sample, or it may be indicative of a general feeling of helplessness regarding how subsidies are determined. Although two-thirds of the parents indicated that their caseworker had provided information on all of the subsidies available in Ohio, many parents did not recall details about their subsidies. Despite state and federal mandates that subsidies be negotiated according to a family's needs, half of the respondents indicated that they had no input into the amount of the subsidy. One-quarter of parents felt that their needs were not considered during the decision and one-third of parents felt that their subsidy did not adequately provide for the needs of their child. Caseworkers may have used information on parents' needs that had already been provided, such as in the application or home study, to determine the subsidy amount.

One-third of the respondents were pursuing adoption in another country. These parents were more likely to be white, higher income, and unwilling to adopt children with special needs. Forty percent of these families had initially pursued adoption locally although many were frustrated with long waiting periods and poor communication. Besides the unavailability of preferred children within the state, these respondents indicated that they decided to adopt internationally for three primary reasons: 1) they were concerned that local adoptions ran a high risk of being disrupted by a biological family who returned to take the child; 2) parents did not want to be foster parents and felt the system placed too much pressure on them to be foster parents; and 3) they were under the impression that they would not be eligible for adoption locally due to age or marital status restrictions. It is possible that changes could be made within the system to provide accurate information and improve practices, thereby enabling the successful placement of Ohio's children with some of these parents.

Parents said that their experiences as foster parents and their caseworkers were the most helpful sources in making a decision to adopt. No other sources were useful to a majority of respondents. Responses regarding the OAPL website, Children's Books, and features books support current proposed changes, including removing children from the website who already have an adoptive family identified, discontinuing the OAPL book, and including a more general publication among the features books.

There is a need for a standard introductory set of information to be provided to all parents who apply for adoption. By including strategic information such as information on subsidies, how to look for adoptive children, resources, parent rights etc., many of the difficulties faced by respondents in this sample may have been avoided.

## Introduction

In an effort to learn more about the needs of potential adoptive families, 450 adults who had indicated that they were interested in adoption were interviewed over the phone between June and December of 2002. All respondents were randomly selected from FACSIS as having applied for adoption within the last two and one-half years and there having been no indication that an adoption or placement had occurred during that period. If a married couple was listed, either spouse could participate although they were considered a single respondent.

For many of the selected families, the only accurate contact information in the database was for the caseworker. Multiple attempts were made to contact the caseworker or to use public telephone records to obtain a current phone number. However, it was necessary to initially select over 900 families in order to provide enough contacts with actual phone numbers. All families were contacted a minimum of eight times, although many families were never reached. Respondents giving consent were re-contacted six months later to complete a second interview. Some of the original respondents could not be contacted, and a few did not want to participate in the second interview. The following table shows the response rates for the first and second interviews. Families for whom there was no known phone number were removed so that percentages are calculated out of the total number of people who could be called (Time 1=583 and Time 2=425) rather than the total sampled (n=954).

**TABLE 1: RESPONSE RATES**

	<b>Time 1 (n=583)</b>		<b>Time 2 (n=425)</b>	
	N	%	N	%
Total Sampled	954		450	
No number listed	250		0	
Listed number incorrect	111		25	
Unusable due to errors	7	1%	6	1%
No Answer	81	8%	59	9%
Refused	45	14%	37	14%
Completed	450	77%	323	76%

Ideally, every parent who was able and willing to adopt a child could be immediately matched to a waiting child. However, many parents experience long periods of waiting. The purpose of the survey was to assess parents' satisfaction while waiting for adoption in Ohio and to suggest possible solutions to system weaknesses. Consequently, the sample parameters were designed to randomly select anyone in the FACSIS database who had applied to be an adoptive parent in the state of Ohio within the last two years but had not yet been matched to a particular child nor finalized their adoption. While completing the interviews it became apparent that there were frequent inaccuracies in the state database regarding the status of each respondent's adoption status—almost all of which appeared to be due recent data not being included in FACSIS

Respondents were classified into one of the following adoption status groups:

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**Finalized**—their adoption was already completed and they were not looking to adopt another child

**Pending**—they had been matched to a particular child, but the adoption had not been finalized

**Unmatched**—they were interested in adoption, but had not yet identified a specific child to adopt

**Foster Care Only**—they were currently either a foster parent or applying to be a foster parent, and were not interested in adoption

**International**—they either had adopted or were intending to adopt a child from another country, and were not interested in adopting any children in Ohio.

**Disrupted**—this status was added in the second interview for anyone who had previously been matched with a particular child to adopt, but the adoption did not go forward.

One of the advantages of the second interview was the ability to track the movement of each respondent through the adoption system. The following table shows the percentage of people in each status group during the first interview (Time 1) in the different status groups at six months later (Time 2). In other words, the percentages add to 100% within rows.

**TABLE 2:  
ADOPTION  
STATUS GROUPS**

		Time 2 Status															
		Finalized		Pending		Disrupted		Unmatched		Foster		Internat.		Missing		Total	
Time 1 Status		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	Finalized	51	52	8	8			6	6	1	1	1	1	31	32	98	22
	Pending	29	31	32	34	11	12							23	24	95	21
	Unmatched			9	8			55	51	2	2	1	1	41	38	108	24
	Foster Only			1	8					10	77			2	15	13	3
	International											110	81	26	19	136	30
<b>Total</b>		<b>80</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>450</b>	

## Demographic Characteristics

The majority of the sample (88%) was white, while only 11% was African American. This racial distribution is not representative of the population of people who apply for adoption in Ohio or who actually adopt, but is rather an artifact of sampling waiting parents. Generally, African American families move through the system more quickly than white families do because there are more African American children available for adoption and African American parents are more likely to express a preference for an African American child. As a result, the overall pool of waiting parents contains disproportionately more white families than it should relative to how many apply for adoption. It is important to note that the findings from this survey may not apply equally to African American and white families. The conclusions regarding African American families should be considered preliminary since they were drawn on a much smaller sample (n=47, 10%).

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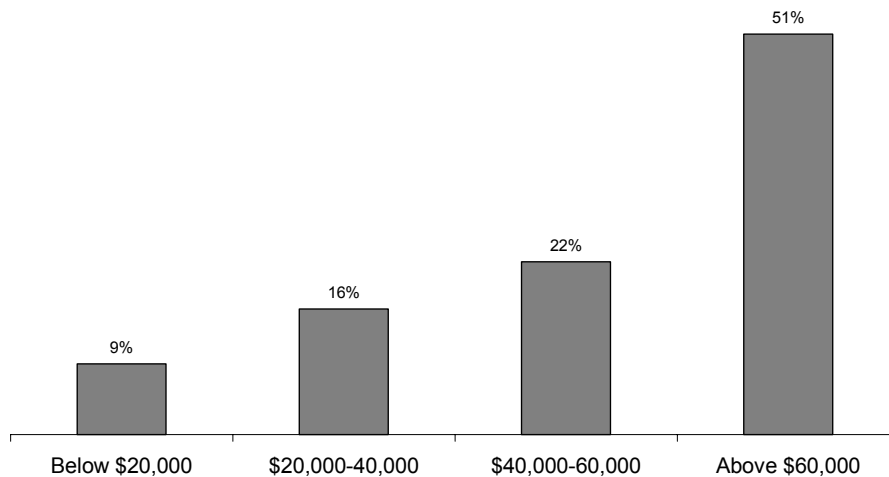
In some ways, this study's usefulness was limited by focusing on waiting parents. It cannot be used to determine how satisfied parents are who enter the system (because presumably parents who enter and are quickly matched and placed will be more satisfied than parents who must wait). However, the study is valuable for highlighting some of the reasons why parents wait and for highlighting some problems with the use of FACSIS that result in out-of-date information. Parents who apply for adoption and who have preferences that easily match the pool of waiting children quickly move off the waiting list. Generally, parents who remain on the waiting list do so for one of three reasons:

- They have preferences that do not match the pool of waiting children;
- Their caseworker has reason to be hesitant to place a child with them; or
- They have been overlooked by caseworkers, perhaps secondary to high turnover of caseworkers.

To a larger extent than is apparent in the results of this study, the right parents are being recruited into the system—although they are not represented in the sample of waiting parents. In other words, when it comes to recruiting potential adoptive families, there is not as large of a mismatch between incoming parents and waiting children as it may seem if one is only examining waiting parents.

The majority of respondents were protestant (55%) or Catholic (28%). Nine percent indicated another religious preference while 7% indicated they had no religious preference. Ninety-two percent of respondents felt that their religious faith was very or somewhat important to them on a daily basis. On average, the respondents had just less than 15 years of education and were 40 years old. Figure 1 shows the income distribution of the sample. Half the respondents had annual incomes of \$60,000 or more. The respondents lived in 78 counties across the state of Ohio. Thirty-eight percent of respondents had biological children living with them and 20% had foster children.

**Figure 1: Income Distribution of Respondents**



## Recruitment

It is important to know how many adoptive homes are available and how well those homes match the pool of waiting children. While many former restrictions on acceptable placements have been removed (such as restricting adoption by a foster parent) each family has preferences about what type of child they would like to adopt, and these preferences may restrict the children available for matching. We asked parents why they decided to adopt as well as what sort of children they were looking to adopt in order to determine if there are certain types of children in the system that are underrepresented in the adoption preferences of waiting families. Such a mismatch between parent preferences and waiting children would suggest a systemic need to recruit additional families who are interested in adopting the available children. Table 3 lists the adoption preferences of respondents according to their adoption status.

**TABLE 3: ADOPTION PREFERENCES**

	Finalized		Pending		Unmatched		Foster		Internat.		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>GENDER</b>												
Male	5	11	3	7	15	34	1	2	20	46	44	10
Female	6	8	7	9	16	21	1	1	47	61	77	17
No gender preference	87	27	85	27	77	24	10	3	68	21	327	73
<b>AGE</b>												
< 2 years	38	22	22	13	18	10	4	2	93	53	175	45
2-10 year	33	22	30	20	53	35	2	1	34	22	152	39
> 10 years	4	12	6	18	20	61	3	9			33	8
No age preference	3	9	11	33	13	39	3	9	3	9	33	8
<b>RACE</b>												
White Only	26	23	16	14	29	25	3	3	41	36	115	26
African American or	5	15	12	36	13	39	1	3	2	6	33	7
Other Only	3	9			1	3			28	88	32	7
Any except Af. Amer.	14	21	12	18	24	35	1	2	17	25	68	15
No race preference	50	25	55	27	52	20	8	4	48	24	202	45

Note: Percentages are calculated out of all of those listing a given preference and are to be read across the table. The total percentage indicates how many in the overall sample had a given preference.

One of the most surprising findings of this survey was the number of parents who were not actually waiting to adopt a child even though there was no evidence in FACSIS that they were not still waiting. If the results of this survey were applied to the general population of parents who have applied for adoption in Ohio, it would suggest that only *one-quarter* of the parents who are recorded as waiting for adoption are available for a child. Of course, some of the parents who should have been listed as already finalized or placed. However, even when the focus is more narrowly on the parents who have not received a placement and are not interested in international adoption, there is evidence that some of the parents had backed away from pursuing adoption for a variety of reasons, including discouragement at not finding the right child and caseworkers who do not maintain

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accurate records or stay in contact with the parents. There is a need for records to be kept more current and for ongoing outreach to parents who are waiting for extended periods. Feedback from the parents on communication with the caseworkers suggests that many waiting parents have a strong need for better outreach. Parents who have been waiting for an extended period and are no longer interested in adoption should be removed from FACSIS.

Respondents were asked why they chose to pursue adoption. The most common reasons given were a desire to help children in need (n=205, 46%) and infertility (n=216, 48%). Those who cited infertility were more likely to be looking for a child below the age of two. Other reasons given for adoption included religious callings (n=16, 4%), a desire to have children even though they were single (n=16, 4%), and a personal history with adoption or foster care as a child (n=9, 2%).

Overall, the sex of a child does not appear to be a strong factor in recruiting the right adoptive families. The majority of respondents (73%) had no preference regarding the sex of the child. International<sup>2</sup> parents, however, were more likely to want to adopt a girl (35% preferred a girl compared to 15% preferring a boy). If these parents were removed from the analysis, the remaining parents were almost evenly split between those who preferred a boy and those who preferred a girl. Analyses from the last five years examining differences in the length of time children wait to be adopted confirm that a child's gender does not significantly affect a child's waiting time until adoption (see *AdoptOhio* Evaluation Report for Period Ending March 31, 2003).

**AGE:** With respect to age, there is a more substantial mismatch between parent preferences regarding who they would like to adopt and the actual children available for adoption. While 53% of the children waiting for adoption in 2002 were over the age of ten (see *AdoptOhio* Evaluation Report For Period Ending March 31, 2003), only 16% of the respondents were looking to adopt a child over ten or were willing to take a child of any age. Surprisingly, unmatched parents were more likely to be willing to adopt an older child. In fact, of those parents who were willing to adopt older children or children of any age, the majority of them were unmatched parents. Given the number of older children in need of adoption, it is surprising that these families have not found an appropriate match. Table 3 also indicates that a majority of international parents are seeking to adopt infants. If these international parents are taken out of the analyses, it appears that nearly half of parents (45%) are not looking for an infant, but are looking for a child between the ages of two and ten. Despite this finding, there remains a great need to recruit more parents willing to adopt children over the age of ten. Efforts to reduce unnecessary delays from initial custody to permanent commitment may make it more likely that children will be younger when they become available for adoption.

While few respondents (16%, n=66) either had no age preference or were interested in older children, it is worth noting their characteristics, as more need to be recruited. These parents were more likely to make under \$40,000, less likely to list infertility as a reason for adoption, and more likely to have biological and foster children living in their home. Many want to adopt children in need regardless of the child's characteristics. This supports looking to foster parents as an effective source for recruiting appropriate families for older children.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this report, all parents who intend to adopt a child in another country are referred to as "international parents". These are to be distinguished from parents who intend to adopt a child within the state of Ohio who will be referred to as "local parents".

**RACE:** In 2002, 54% of the children waiting for adoption were African American, while 44% were white. In general, African American children wait longer to be adopted than white children (see *AdoptOhio* Evaluation Report for Period Ending March 31, 2003). The responses from this survey suggest that race may not be as big of a barrier to a successful match between adoptive parents and children as previously thought. If the international families are not included in the sample, over 60% of respondents either had no racial preference or were willing to take an African American or biracial child. These families were more likely to be protestant, to have been a foster parent, and to have lower incomes than other respondents were. When parents did have a racial preference, it was rarely for white children only—although over 86% of the sample was white, only 23% of respondents said they were looking to adopt only a white child. While not all respondents were hoping for a white child, few expressed preference for an African American child. Of those indicating some racial preference, only seven percent (n=31) specified that they were interested in an African American or biracial child. It is unclear why many white parents who are adopting locally would be interested in adopting a child from a different racial background (i.e. Asian, Hispanic, etc.) but would not be interested in adopting an African American child. It is possible that the low percentage of families looking specifically to adopt African American children is the result of a small number of African American respondents in the sample (n=47, 11%). However, of those African American parents, only 34% responded that adopting an African American or biracial child was important, while over 64% of them had no racial preference.

These results suggest that the time African American children spend waiting for adoption may be partially attributed to the way parents are matched to children rather than the willingness of families to take African American children. It is possible that caseworkers are less likely to match white families with African American children if those families do not directly indicate their interest in such children. Previous research from focus groups and depth interviews suggests that caseworkers are hesitant to challenge a family's racial preferences due to concerns about compliance with the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act. However, families have indicated that they did not realize the finality of the preferences that were listed at the time of their initial application. Parents indicated that while they initially were hesitant to take a particular child, they became more comfortable with the idea after having experience with the system. It may be that asking parents to lock themselves into specific preferences so early in the adoption process limits their future opportunities to adopt children that do not match these preferences perfectly.

**SPECIAL NEEDS:** Table 4 reveals that many parents were willing to adopt children with a variety of special needs. However, fewer respondents were willing to adopt children struggling with two particularly problematic special needs—emotional or behavioral disorders and a history of sexual abuse. This is concerning because older children are more likely to be contending with such needs, making it even more difficult to find suitable adoptive placements for these children. Previous research with focus groups of adoptive parents suggests that parents are more willing to take on such problems if more services and resources are made available for adoptive children struggling with these issues. It is likely that the increased cost of providing such services is outweighed by the overall economic and emotional cost of maintaining children in foster care.

**UNMATCHED RESPONDENTS:** It might seem intuitive that respondents in the unmatched status group were waiting for an adoptive child because there are no children that meet their preferences. However, these parents did not have overly restrictive preferences. They were more likely than other

**TABLE 4: WILLINGNESS OF RESPONDENTS TO ADOPT CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS.**

	Willing		Unwilling		Unsure	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A Sibling Group	299	75	79	20	20	5
History of Physical Abuse or Neglect	271	68	90	23	37	9
Prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol	237	60	95	24	65	16
Developmental Disability	226	57	108	27	64	16
Medical Condition	207	52	88	22	104	26
Physical Disability	178	45	162	41	58	15
History of Sex Abuse	168	42	178	45	53	13
Emotional or Behavioral Disorder	169	42	155	39	175	19

parents to be willing to adopt an older child, and a majority of them were willing to adopt children with a variety of special needs, including developmental disabilities, a history of abuse and neglect, prenatal substance exposure, and being part of a sibling group. Almost half of these waiting parents were willing to adopt a child who had been sexually abused or had an emotional or behavioral disorder. Despite this willingness, these respondents have waited an average of 14 months longer than the rest of the respondents.

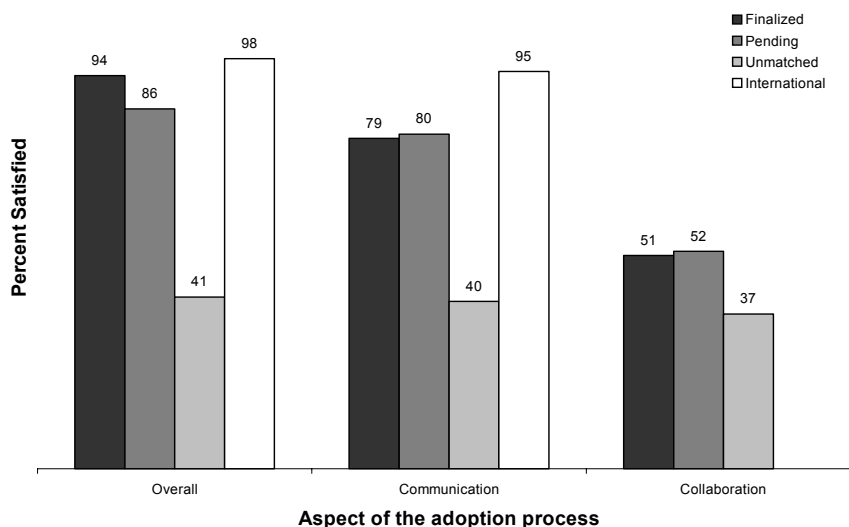
Parents were asked why they had not been matched to an child. Some parents acknowledged that they had stopped strongly pursuing adoption due to life changes (such as a pregnancy) or frustration with the system. Still others acknowledged that few children meet their preferences. However, there were parents who did not understand why they were not matched and who felt they had been poorly served by their agency. Many of the parents had never heard from their caseworker, felt they had been lied to, or felt that their agency lost interest in them after they declined a potential adoptive placement. Still others were told that there were not any children available even for foster care, or that their agency would not work with other counties to make placements. With high caseworker turnover in some agencies, it is quite possible that these waiting parents had slipped through the cracks. However, there may also be situations where agencies are hesitant to place children with a particular family even though they have approved the family’s home study. Rather than tell these families they cannot adopt children, these families are left to languish. Such a practice consumes system resources and contributes to a general feeling among parents that the system is indiscriminant, unresponsive, and bureaucratic. Overall, a better system is needed for maintaining contact with waiting parents. Similarly, it may be helpful for parents to receive standard information on how to advocate for themselves to find the right match for their family. Agency workers need to be empowered to disapprove home studies when they have evidence that a particular family would be unsuitable. Finally, better collaboration between agencies and counties will ensure that waiting children are matched effectively to waiting parents.

## Satisfaction

**OVERALL:** Parents were asked how satisfied they were with three aspects of the adoption process. Figure 2 shows the satisfaction rates for each status group. Not surprisingly, respondents who had finalized their adoptions were the most satisfied group, while those in the unmatched group were

the least. In general, the international respondents were satisfied with every aspect of their adoption experience although their satisfaction rates did not differ from those of the finalized group. We also inquired into the type of agency—a public county agency or private agency—with which each respondent had worked the most. Respondents who were satisfied were approximately evenly distributed between public and private agencies. However, of those parents who were not satisfied, 82% of them had worked primarily with a county agency.

Figure 2: Parent Satisfaction Rates by Status Group



The following section presents findings on the satisfaction of parents adopting locally only. Parents adopting internationally will be discussed in a separate section.

**PRIOR TO THE ADOPTION:** The home study and adoption training generally serve as an applicant’s first point of entry into the system. Across all status groups, most respondents were pleased with each of the services—satisfaction ranged from 85% to 98%.

Of all the resources used to get information about the adoption process, one’s caseworker is the most important. Nearly 75% of all respondents felt that their caseworker was a useful source of information as they were looking for a child to adopt, and most were satisfied with their communication. However, not all respondents were satisfied. In particular, 55% of those in the unmatched status group were dissatisfied with their communication. General comments offered at the end of the survey described circumstances where caseworkers never returned phone calls, did not adequately prepare the parents for the process, and misled them about the needs of foster children. These comments were particularly poignant and conveyed a sense of desperation and abandonment felt by waiting parents. One respondent said, “We want them to contact us...even if it’s just to let us know that we haven’t been forgotten.” Similarly, the unmatched respondents were the most dissatisfied with the way that their agency collaborated with other agencies (26%). General comments suggested that if their agency were more willing to work with other agencies—particularly

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counties that are geographically distant—they would have a greater chance of being matched to a child.

During the six months between the first and the second survey, 22 respondents decided that they were no longer interested in adoption. For several of the respondents this was because of changes in their family status (divorce, pregnancy, retirement, etc.). However, almost half of these respondents indicated that it was the lack of communication from their caseworker and frustrating periods of waiting for a child that resulted in a decision that it was too painful to persist in the system.

While respondents in the finalized groups were satisfied with the pre-adoption services that were offered, those in the remaining status groups were less so. Only 63% of all those with pending adoptions and 46% of those in the unmatched group were satisfied with these services. The pre-adoption services that respondents would like to have received include more assistance in finding children, preparation classes for biological children in adoptive families, and better collaboration with other counties and agencies. However, the most common desire was better communication. It seems keeping in contact with prospective parents is the best service of all!

**DURING THE ADOPTION:** Agencies vary drastically in the way they determine whether a child should be placed with a particular family. Most parents who had been matched to a child indicated that they were told about the potential child by informally speaking with their caseworker over the phone (56%). Although many agency workers indicate that collaborative preplanning meetings are effective, few respondents reported attending a matching or preplanning conference (5%). Overall, most people (81%) who had been matched to a child were satisfied with the process. Despite this high level of satisfaction, a small minority of families (9%) reported feeling pressured by a caseworker to adopt a particular child; most of these experiences involved pressure to adopt more children than the family felt prepared for, or pressure to adopt a sibling who had needs that were too great for the family.

In general, most respondents felt that they were well prepared for the adoption process (94% finalized, 78% pending). However, when asked whether they felt their adoptive children had been well prepared, they were less sure. Ten percent of respondents were not satisfied with their child's preparation while another 43% felt they did not have enough experience to evaluate the preparation. Parents should be made aware of what steps were taken to help their child transition to their new adoptive home. That less than 50% of respondents were satisfied with this preparation, suggests the need for improvement.

Negotiating a subsidy and adoption-related services are important in making many adoptions feasible. Focus groups with foster and adoptive parents have indicated that the availability of subsidies is a critical factor in enabling parents to move from foster to adoptive status. Table 5 (next page) lists the number of respondents who were receiving some form of subsidy for their adoptive child out of all respondents who were matched with a child. Only 22% of finalized and pending parents felt that an adoption subsidy was critically or somewhat important in their decision to adopt.

The income distribution of this sample may be one reason respondents felt indifferent about the role of subsidies. The majority of families in the sample had annual incomes over \$60,000. Only

**TABLE 5: RESPONDENTS RECEIVING VARIOUS ADOPTION SUBSIDIES**

Total For Finalized & Pending Respondents	n=129	%
Non Recurring	57	44
Medicaid	83	64
Title IV-E Adoption Assistance	40	31
State Adoption Maintenance Subsidy	25	19
State Adoption Special Services Subsidy	27	21
Monthly payment but don't know any details	7	5
Refused to respond to subsidy questions	1	.7

23% of the families in this income bracket felt the subsidies were important, in contrast to the 64% of those earning \$20,000-40,000 annually who felt subsidies were important. Although the number of families making less than \$40,000 is small (n=34) it is understandable that families on limited incomes would be more concerned about state and federal assistance to care for another dependent. Based on parent preferences, families with lower incomes are also more likely to adopt older children or children with special needs making adoption subsidies even more necessary.

Some parents may have felt indifferent about subsidies because they felt as if they had little control or input into the process. In other words, parents who are committed to adopting may choose to do so regardless of their subsidy options if they feel they cannot influence the outcome. Federal and state regulations specify that Title IV-E Adoption Assistance (AA) and State Adoptions Maintenance Subsidies (SAMS) be negotiated by the agency with families according to family need. However, almost half of those who qualified did not feel they were asked for input in determining the subsidy amount. Twenty-eight percent of families did not feel as if their agency took into consideration the needs of their family and adoptive child in determining the amount of subsidy. One-quarter of the qualified respondents felt that it was difficult to reach agreement on the amount of subsidy or the services that would be provided for their child. Thirty-four percent felt that their subsidy did not adequately meet the needs of their adoptive child, and 41% worried that their child will have future needs for which they will be unable to provide.

Most respondents (75%) felt that they had a good understanding of the subsidy options that were available, and 64% indicated that their caseworker had provided information on all of the types of subsidies available in Ohio. However, it was not possible to verify parent's actual knowledge of the specific types of subsidies available, and our experience was that many parents did not recall much about the subsidy they received or the negotiations. Although parents may lack many details on subsidies, they feel adequately prepared. This might mean that subsidies are not that important to them or that they did not realize their options. Providing parents with standardized information at the onset of their adoption application, including details on all the subsidies available in Ohio, may help.

**POST ADOPTION:** Parents who had finalized their adoption generally reported a high degree of satisfaction. Seventy-five percent of parents were satisfied with the post adoption services they received. Most had such a positive experience that two thirds of all finalized respondents would consider adopting another child locally in the future.

## International Adoptive Parents

One-third of the parents had adopted or were planning to adopt a child from another country. The majority of international parents were white. Although 50% of them were Protestant and 35% were Catholic, they were more likely than other status groups to be Catholic. As with the other status groups, they indicated their religious faith was very important. International respondents were more likely than local respondents were to be in the upper income bracket (67% compared to 44%) which may limit the amount of parents that apply for international adoption. International adoptions can be expensive, often involving long periods of travel to other countries and costly bureaucracy. There were no age differences between international and local respondents.

The majority of these parents (60%) had planned to adopt internationally when they initially contacted the local system. Many of the private agencies provide specialized home studies and other requirements for international adoptions. As such, 89% of the international parents had worked predominantly with private agencies within Ohio. Often these parents are registered with FACSIS, but their record not be updated when they complete their international adoption. Thus, it appears as if these parents are still waiting to find an adoptive match, causing them to be over represented in this sample of waiting parents. As stated earlier, if the state is to accurately report its recruitment efforts and availability of waiting parents it is important that the system better account for parents who do not intend to adopt any children locally.

It is helpful to understand the experience of international parents as 40% of these parents originally had tried to adopt in Ohio before they decided to adopt internationally. These respondents indicated that they were not having any luck or were discouraged by the lack of communication and amount of bureaucracy. Some parents were discouraged by the system for reasons that cannot be changed, such as the lack of available infants; however, it is also important to determine if there are weaknesses within the system that encourage parents to look elsewhere to adopt children.

The most frequent reason given for adopting internationally was fear of losing a child because of an open adoption system that is perceived to favor the rights of the biological parent. There has been a good deal of media attention when biological parents disrupt adoptive families, although such disruptions are quite rare overall. If provided accurate data on the frequency of such occurrences, agencies could help improve the perception of the Ohio system by actively addressing this concern with parents and communicating the likelihood of this risk. Furthermore, there is data to suggest that international adoptions are also vulnerable to disruptions when parents were misled about the needs of the child they were adopting. Although parents are expecting to adopt a child without special needs, these children sometimes have too many needs for the parents and are turned back over to the local system for help. The state has a stake in ensuring that all parents who adopt internationally are well informed and that the international agencies conduct their services with integrity and full disclosure to prevent disruptions.

Other respondents indicated that they decided to adopt internationally because they felt undue pressure to become a foster parent prior to adoption and did not think they could cope with the heartache of becoming attached to a child they could not adopt. While foster to adopt situations may make adoption quicker and in many cases easier, there may understandably be a subset of

parents for whom this is not a desirable option. As the state increasingly encourages foster-to-adopt placements, it will need to evaluate whether there is an appropriate niche for families who do not want to foster.

Finally, many respondents indicated that they did not feel the local system was willing to place children with them because they were older or single. However, on average, the international parents were no older than the remaining parents were (Mean=40 years). While some parents are clearly misinformed about local adoption policies, parents also provided credible reports of agencies that did seem to have questionable regarding such parental factors as age at time of application. Further research needs to investigate the frequency and ways to prevent such practices.

Despite these considerations, the local non-availability of sought after children is probably the most common reason for adopting internationally. Given the demographic background of a majority of children awaiting adoption in Ohio (older, special needs, or African American), the international respondents are indeed less likely to find the type of child they are looking for in state. Seventy-one percent of international respondents were looking to adopt an infant, compared to 33% of all local respondents. They were more likely to be interested in only white children (32% compared to 23%) and were less likely to consider African American or biracial children (1% compared to 10%), although they were willing to take children who were a variety of other races. They were also more interested in adopting girls. Many of the families were seeking to adopt children in countries where female infanticide has been reported (e.g., China, India). It is possible that this increased interest in adopting girls could be the result of parents trying to rescue female infants. Finally, international respondents were less likely to be willing to adopt a child with any special needs (e.g., physical or developmental disability, medical condition, sexual or physical abuse, emotional or behavioral disorder, prenatal substance exposure, etc.) Such preferences make it much more likely that these parents would have to wait a long time before being matched locally. Thirty-six percent of respondents said that long waiting periods or the lack of available children led them to adopt internationally. Indeed, international respondents expected to wait four months less than local respondents did and actually waited almost ten months less.

## Changes to the System

Currently, all children who are available for adoption must be listed on the Ohio Adoption Photo Listing website. Even children with an identified adoptive family must be listed, although there is a heart icon next to their listing to indicate their pending status. Agency workers and parents have indicated through focus groups that the current heart system is not optimal. Parents often get discouraged because the only children listed that meet their preferences all have hearts. Agencies are overloaded by calls about children who already have an adoptive match. As a result, they cannot return all of these calls and families become frustrated at the lack of contact. Rather than the current system, it has been suggested that it should not be possible to see children listed on the website if they already have a family with an approved home study who is likely going to adopt them. Seventy-eight percent of the parents who had used the OAPL system were in favor of such a change.

The second proposed change involved the mandatory adoption training. It has been suggested that this training be split into two sections. The first section would be completed before finding a potential child to adopt (if an application was made before a child had been identified). The second

section would be completed after being matched to a potential child. All classes would be completed before the adoption was finalized. There are two possible benefits of such a change:

- Agencies could provide training more cost-effectively by reducing the amount of training that is provided for families who never complete an adoption.
- Parents would be better able to apply the information and training they are receiving to a specific situation rather than a hypothetical match. This could enable parents to retain more of the training and get specific questions and needs addressed.

Sixty-three percent of parents were in favor of such a change.

## Marketing Tools

One important aspect of the *AdoptOhio* program has been the marketing efforts that include media advertisements, an annual conference, the OAPL listings, and other strategies to raise the visibility of Ohio’s children waiting to be adopted. We asked parents which sources of information they had found most helpful in making a decision to adopt. The results are shown in Table 6.

**TABLE 6: USEFULNESS OF VARIOUS SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

Source	Useful		Not Useful		No Experience	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Caseworker	139	70	34	17	24	12
Family/Friend	63	32	31	16	103	52
OAPL Web	38	34	44	22	70	35
OAPL Book	47	24	35	18	90	45
Feat Book	23	12	21	11	111	56
Other Web	78	39	24	12	90	45
Adoption Guide	78	39	11	6	81	41
Help Me Grow	66	33	6	3	125	63
Conference	56	28	10	5	117	59
Adoption Event	22	11	15	8	145	73
TV Advertisement	45	23	49	25	101	51
TV Other	63	32	37	19	95	48
Radio Advertisement	26	13	37	19	133	67
Radio Other	27	14	31	16	136	69
News Advertisement	32	16	35	18	128	64
News Other	37	19	32	16	125	63
Being a Foster Parent	104	52	6	3	84	42

Only a few sources of information were useful to a majority of respondents. One’s caseworker and the experience of being a foster parent were clearly the most helpful sources in making a decision to adopt. Conversely, no more than 25% of respondents felt that any source was not useful. Note that respondents were given the option to say that they did not have any experience with a particular source. Many respondents had no experience with communication channels designed to reach a broad audience. Three fourths of the parents had not attended an adoption event even though such events are reported to be successful in helping match waiting parents and children. Sixty-three

percent of respondents had not used Help Me Grow, the centralized hotline for adoption in Ohio. A majority of parents could not recall any media advertisements or programming on adoption.

ODJFS is in the process of planning changes to the OAPL website, photo book, and features books making feedback on these sources of particular interest. The respondents were divided on the OAPL website. One-third had no experience with the listing, one-third thought it was useful, and one-third felt it was not useful. A slightly larger group (45%) had no experience with the OAPL book and an even greater number (56%) had no experience with a features book. Less than one quarter of the respondents felt the OAPL Children's Books and feature books were helpful. This feedback is consistent with current plans to discontinue the Children's Books and add a broad-based publication to the features book that would apply more directly to all parents.

## Recommendations

- Implement procedures so the FACSIS data can be updated regularly and kept more accurate. Such procedures should include a procedure for maintaining contact with parents who are on the list for an extended period of time with no successful match as well as the ability to identify parents who are registered with the system but intend only to adopt internationally.
- Recruitment efforts should be geared particularly to finding parents interested in adopting older children. This may include targeting parents from lower income brackets who are not adopting for reasons of infertility. It may be necessary to provide additional services or subsidies to encourage such adoptions.
- All parents should be given a standard set of information on adoption at the time of application. While this information should include many details, this report has identified the following as being useful:
  - The various types of subsidies and how they should be negotiated;
  - The rights of adoptive parents regarding discrimination based on age, marital status, or other such conditions;
  - Steps for playing an active roll in searching for a potential adoptive child including maintaining discussions with one's caseworker, attending an adoption event, using the OAPL listing, etc.; and
  - General information on adoption disruptions, including disruptions due to biological family members and the potential difficulties of international adoptions.
- Caseworkers need to understand that ongoing communication is the single most important adoption service. Appropriate training and caseloads can help enable positive practices.

## EVALUATION OF THE ADOPTION PROGRAM

- Future research should explore the willingness of families to adopt African American children even though they do not list African American child as a specific preference as well as caseworker perspectives on such matches.
- More resources should be made available for families adopting children who have emotional or behavioral problems or who have a history of sexual abuse.
- Future research needs to investigate the practice of approving home studies despite evidence that an adoptive placement would be unwise. It is unclear how frequently this occurs. Caseworkers need to be empowered not to approve home studies in such circumstances, rather than misleading parents and creating the perception that there are qualified families than are really available.
- The state needs to determine if there will be an ongoing role for parents who are interested in adoption but are not interested in being foster parents and how to best serve such parents.
- Children who have already been matched with an adoptive family should not be visible on the web.
- Further research should be done on the idea of splitting mandatory adoption training into two segments to be provided before matching and after matching.