

Understanding Adoption

*Numbers, Language, Research
& New Directions*

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Today's Journey



Adoption by the Numbers

Current statistics and trends in the U.S.



The Language of Adoption

Key terms, definitions, and evolving language



What the Research Tells Us

Outcomes, identity, mental health, and resilience



A New Study: The LRMF

My qualitative research on adult adoptee experiences



01

Adoption by the Numbers

Current U.S. statistics on foster care, domestic, and international adoption

The Big Picture

~5M

Americans
are adopted

329K

Children in
foster care (FY24)

47K

Foster care
adoptions (FY24)

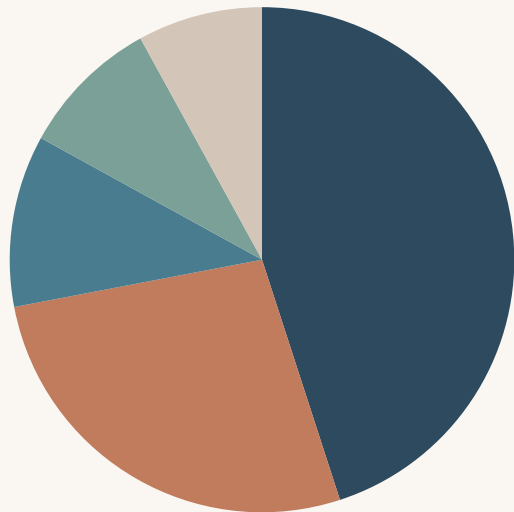
15K+

Youth aged out
of care (FY24)

Sources: AFCARS FY 2024; U.S. Census; National Council For Adoption

How Children Exit Foster Care (FY 2024)

Of the 176,730 youth who exited foster care:



■ Reunification (45%) ■ Adoption (27%)
■ Guardianship (11%) ■ Emancipation (9%)
■ Other (8%)

45%

reunified with families

27%

adopted from foster care

15,379

youth aged out of the system

30%

spent 2+ years in care

Types of Adoption & Trends



Foster Care Adoption

~47K/yr

Peaked at 66K in 2019.
Continued decline since.
Many children wait 2+ years.



Private Domestic Adoption

~25.5K/yr

Relatively stable numbers.
Includes infant placements
through agencies/attorneys.



International Adoption

Sharp Decline

Peaked at 23K in 2004.
Dramatic decline due to
policy changes worldwide.



02

The Language of Adoption

Key terms, definitions, and why language matters

The People in the Adoption Constellation

Adoptee / Adopted Person

A person who was adopted. Person-first language is preferred by many.

Birth Parent / First Parent

The biological parent(s) who conceived and/or gave birth to the child. Terminology preferences vary.

Adoptive Parent

The parent(s) who legally adopted the child, assuming all social and legal parental rights.

Adoption Triad / Constellation

The interconnected relationship among adoptee, birth parents, and adoptive parents.

Birth Family / Family of Origin

The adoptee's biological relatives, including siblings, grandparents, and extended family.

Note: Individual preferences for terminology vary. Always honor the language a person uses for their own story.

Types of Adoption

Closed / Confidential

No identifying information shared between birth and adoptive families. Records are sealed.

Semi-Open

Limited information exchange, often through an intermediary such as an agency.

Open

Ongoing relationship between birth and adoptive families, with varying degrees of contact.

Domestic

Adoption within the same country, either through the public foster care system or private agencies.

International / Intercountry

Adoption from another country, governed by the Hague Convention and U.S. immigration law.

Transracial

Adoption across racial lines, bringing unique considerations around identity, culture, and belonging.

Key Concepts in Adoption



Adoption Fog / Coming Out of the Fog

The term is widely used in adoptee communities and is associated with Verrier's (1993) primal wound framework, though the experience it describes is recognized across many adoptee accounts.



Relinquishment / Placement

The act of a birth parent voluntarily or involuntarily losing parental rights. Language preferences vary.



Search & Reunion

The process of an adoptee or birth parent seeking and potentially reconnecting with biological relatives.



Original / Amended Birth Certificate

The original lists birth parents; the amended version reflects adoptive parents. Access varies by state.



Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)

The legal process ending the parent-child relationship, making a child legally free for adoption.



PAL vs. HAL

Positive Adoption Language emphasizes affirming terms; Honest Adoption Language prioritizes lived experience.

Types of Adoptees & Related Identities

The adoption experience is not monolithic — many paths lead to questions of identity and belonging

Foster Adoptee

A person adopted from the foster care system after parental rights were terminated. May have experienced multiple placements before permanency.

Late Discovery Adoptee (LDA)

A person who learns they were adopted later in life, often in adulthood. Term coined by Ron Morgan in 1995. Often discovered through DNA testing.

MPE (Misattributed Parentage)

An umbrella term for anyone who discovers their parent(s) are not genetically related — includes NPEs, LDAs, and donor conceived persons.

Transracial / Transcultural

A person adopted by parents of a different race or culture. Navigates unique challenges around race, ethnicity, and cultural belonging.

Birth / Infant Adoptee

A person adopted as an infant, typically through a private domestic adoption. Often placed shortly after birth through an agency or attorney.

NPE (Not Parent Expected)

A person who discovers one or both presumed parents are not biological parents. Originally “Non-Paternity Event” in genealogy.

Donor Conceived Person (DCP)

A person conceived through sperm, egg, or embryo donation. May or may not know their genetic origins. LDDCP refers to late discovery. This population is growing rapidly as IVF is now 2.6% of all US Births

Kinship Adoptee

A person adopted by a relative (grandparent, aunt/uncle, etc.). May involve informal or formal legal arrangements.

The rise of direct-to-consumer DNA testing has dramatically expanded awareness of these experiences.



Political Landscape

How do the current policy changes impact the adoption landscape?

Abortion Restrictions & the Adoption Landscape

What Dobbs, Project 2025, and restricted access could mean for adoption

What the Data Shows

- ~30,000 additional births/year in states with total abortion bans (2.3% increase)
- Disproportionately affects young, low-income, and minority populations
- Some agencies report 10-20% increases in infant placements post-Dobbs
- National abortion numbers have actually risen (1.14M in 2024) due to interstate travel and telehealth
- Project 2025 would further restrict medication abortion (63% of all abortions), defund Title X, and redirect abortion searches to adoption

The Turnaway Study

91%

of women denied abortions
chose to parent, not relinquish

Those who did relinquish had the poorest mental health outcomes and the highest regret

Implications for the LRMF

- More relinquishments = more people navigating lifelong adoption identity, loss, and meaning-making
- Coerced or constrained relinquishment deepens ambiguous loss for both adoptees and birth parents
- Adoption-competent counseling becomes even more critical as the population grows



03

What the Research Tells Us

Outcomes, identity, mental health, and resilience across the lifespan

Adoption & Mental Health

What Research Shows

- Adopted individuals are overrepresented in mental health settings — but are often pathologized rather than understood
- Separation from biological family is itself a significant event, regardless of circumstances or age at placement
- Grief and loss in adoption are often ambiguous and disenfranchised — not recognized by society or even the adoptee
- Identity complexity is inherent, not a symptom — adoptees navigate dual (or multiple) family systems across the lifespan
- Research has historically centered on adoptive parent perspectives; adoptee voices remain underrepresented
- Adoption is a heterogeneous experience — no single story fits all, and no single outcome should be expected

Key Insight

Adoption is a lifelong relational experience that inherently involves loss, separation, and identity negotiation. These are not peripheral to adoption — they are central to it, and they unfold across the entire lifespan.

Notable Researchers

Brodzinsky, Grotevant, McRoy
Boss, Doka, McAdams, Zubov
Sisson, Foster (Turnaway Study)
Juffer & van IJzendoorn

Identity, Loss & Meaning-Making Across the Lifespan

Identity

Adoptees navigate dual identities across biological and adoptive families. Identity work intensifies in adolescence and re-emerges in adulthood (Grotevant).

Loss & Grief

Adoption involves ambiguous loss (Boss) and disenfranchised grief (Doka) — losses not always recognized or validated by society.

Meaning-Making

Adoptees construct narrative identity (McAdams) to make sense of their story. How adoption is integrated shapes well-being across the lifespan.

Lifespan Change

Adoption is not a single event but a lifelong process. Grotevant's model shows how adoption identity is not resolved in childhood but revisited and renegotiated across the full lifespan.

The Counseling Competence Gap

Many mental health professionals receive little to no training specific to adoption.
Some adoptive parents report needing to educate their child's therapist about adoption issues.

What Adoption-Competent Counseling Requires

Understanding Adoption as Lifelong

Not a one-time event but a process that unfolds differently at each life stage

Recognizing Ambiguous Loss

Validating grief that is not socially recognized — the loss of what could have been

Centering the Adoptee Voice

Listening to adoptees' own narratives rather than imposing external frameworks

04

A New Study: The LRMF

Exploring adult adoptee experiences through the Lifespan Relational Meaning-Making Framework

The Lifespan Relational Meaning-Making Framework

A new integrative model framing adoption as a lifelong relational and meaning-making process



Lifespan Developmental Theory

Grotevant

Identity formation unfolds across the lifespan. Adoptees revisit adoption meaning at each developmental stage.



Relational & Loss Theories

Boss & Doka

Ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief are central to the adoptee experience — losses without clear resolution.



Narrative Identity Theory

McAdams

People construct life stories to make meaning. How adoptees narrate their story shapes identity and well-being.

Together, these form the LRMF — an integrative lens for understanding adult adoptee experience

Understanding the LRMF: A Plain Language Guide

Think of adoption not as an event that happened to you, but as the climate you grew up in.



The Climate Primary Layer

Adoption as Developmental Context

The foundational conditions of your development. Placement age, family openness, attachment, genealogical discontinuity. You did not choose them. They shaped you from the beginning.



The Weather Middle Layer

The Settled Arrangement

Most daily life proceeds within the climate without adoption as the central focus. This is just the weather everyone expects. Present, real, occasionally noticeable, but not acute. Not a storm.



The Storm Engaged Layer

Activation Event

Something activates what was always structurally present. A birthday. A health diagnosis. A reunion. Having a child. The weather that was always there becomes impossible to ignore.

The LRMF describes what adoptees are working through when the storm arrives — and why it keeps returning.

The Lifespan Relational Meaning-Making Framework

Three layers. Each answers a different question about why adoptees are who they are.

The Lifespan Relational Meaning-Making Framework (LRMF)

A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Adult Adoptee Experience

ENGAGED LAYER

Active When Settlement Is Disrupted

Three interdependent dimensions · Foundational core of loss

Activation events · Response pathways

(See Figure 1 for full architecture)

What are adoptees working through when the settled arrangement is disrupted?

↓
disrupts

MIDDLE LAYER

The Settled Arrangement

A provisional equilibrium in which adoption is present but not acute

Real

*Adoption conditions shape experience
without demanding constant attention
Most daily life proceeds without adoption
as the central organizing feature*

Provisional

*Settlement can be disrupted
Activation events make visible
what was always structurally present
but temporarily quiet*

Why is adoption not always foregrounded in daily experience?

↑
shapes

PRIMARY LAYER

Adoption as Developmental Context

The conditions within which identity forms from the beginning

Placement Age

Timing of adoption

Communicative Openness

Information access in family

Attachment Security

Early relational foundation

Genealogical Discontinuity

Biological gaps · Relinquishment circumstances

Why are adoptees who they are? Where did the foundational questions come from?

Finding the Invisible Population

Same-race domestic adoptees are often assumed to be the unaffected baseline. We were advised this population would be difficult to recruit.

46

people responded to our initial outreach

15

completed in-depth interviews

The assumption that invisibility means disengagement was the first thing the data challenged.

The Study: Design & Focus

Study Overview

Methodology:

Qualitative

Population:

Adult adoptees

Framework:

Lifespan Relational Meaning-Making Framework (LRMF)

Core Themes:

Identity, belonging, loss/grief, and meaning-making

Implications:

Adoption-competent counseling practice

Four Core Domains

**Identity &
Meaning-Making**

**Belonging,
Rejection
& Connection**

**Loss, Grief &
Integration**

**Lifespan
Developmental
Change**

Study Participants at a Glance

Demographic snapshot of 15 adult adoptees in the IPA study

87%

Women

40s-70s

Primary age range

87%

White

70%

Graduate or
Bachelor's degree

Adoption Profile

- All participants: domestic same-race adoption (study design)
- 87% always knew they were adopted; 13% late discovery
- 1 participant removed via child welfare
- Age range: early 40s to mid-70s across the sample

What Participants Tell Us

93%

say adoption played a significant role in their identity

93%

have searched for biological relatives

60%

have children of their own

Why This Research Matters



For Adoptees

Validates lived experience across the entire lifespan. Centers adoptee voices in research that has historically prioritized other perspectives.



For Counselors

Addresses the gap in adoption-competent training. Provides a framework for understanding the complexity of adoptee identity and grief.



For the Field

Advances understanding of adoption as a relational and developmental process. Bridges theory and practice for future research.



Questions & Discussion

What resonated with you today?

What questions do you have about adoption research or the LRMF?

Thank You

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