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Reasons for Attrition Among Public Adoption Seekers

By

Erika Weissinger

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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Doctor of Philosophy

in

Public Policy

in the

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University of California, Berkeley

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Abstract

Reasons for Attrition Among Public Adoption Seekers

by

Erika Weissinger

Doctor of Philosophy in Public Policy

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Jane Mauldon, Chair

The purpose of this study is to identify the main reasons public adoption seekers do not complete the adoption process. I conduct interviews with public adoption seekers from two California counties who dropped out of the process. I find that the most common reasons given for dropping out of the process are

- changes in personal circumstance (for reasons such as losing a job or becoming ill);
- dissatisfaction with agencies (for reasons such as poor customer service, the process being too lengthy, or perceived discrimination);
- being too busy; and
- having an insufficient income or being unable to meet the housing requirements.

In examining the relationship between the socioeconomic characteristics of prospective adoptive parents and attrition, I find that lower-income adoption seekers most often drop out because they experience instability in their personal circumstances, have insufficient income, or do not meet agency housing requirements. I find that middle- and upper-income adoption seekers most often drop out due to insufficient time to complete the steps in the process or dissatisfaction with foster care adoption agencies.

Although many reasons for dropping out may seem to be beyond the influence of agencies, I argue that if the foster care adoption process were more efficient, prospective parents would be less likely to drop out due to life-changing events or due to being too busy to complete the

process. Agencies appear to have room for improvement in terms of providing better customer service, making the process more clear and efficient, and complying with federal legislation.

Dedication

Dedicated to children in need of parents and the families who wish to adopt them.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the prospective and adoptive parents who welcomed me into their homes and shared their stories with me. I am grateful to the caseworkers and agency personnel for their candor and willingness to share their insights about how systems can improve for children and families involved in the foster care adoption process.

Thank you to my committee for your ongoing support and patience. Thank you to my adviser, Jane Mauldon, for our many conversations in which you shared your ideas and pushed me to be more rigorous in my thinking. Thank you to Jill Duerr Berrick for your enthusiasm for this topic and thoughtful critique of my drafts. Thank you to Robert Reich for the ideas generated in Leadership and Social Change about how agencies and leaders can improve. Joan Hollinger's Child and Family Law course planted the seeds for this dissertation and was instrumental to my thinking about race and class in the foster care adoption process.

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Thank you to my husband, Jeff Deason, for your early edits and willingness to listen to my ideas during our Tilden hikes. Thank you to my family for your encouragement, and for accepting nothing less than completion from me. Thank you to my brother, Mo, for taking Tristan and Cole on adventures so I could write.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

List of Tables

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this study is to identify the main reasons foster care adoption seekers[1] do not complete the adoption process. At any point in time, more than 100,000 children in foster care in the United States are awaiting placement in adoptive homes. On average, they have been waiting for more than 3 years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Researchers generally attribute this to a shortage of available adoptive homes. The shortage is puzzling, however, because survey evidence indicates that there are many more prospective parents interested in adopting children in foster care than there are available children (Princeton Survey Research Associates, 1997; Chandra, Abma, Maza, & Bachrach, 1999; Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption & Harris Interactive, 2007).

A study conducted by researchers at the Urban Institute and the Kennedy School of Government (Geen, Malm, & Katz, 2005; Wilson, Katz, & Geen, 2005) offers two possible explanations for the shortage of available adoptive parents. The first explanation, given by foster care agency officials, is that although many people appear to be interested in adoption, they are not interested in adopting the types of children who are available (e.g., children who are older or who have special needs, such as the developmentally disabled, sibling groups, or those in a minority ethnic group). However, data from numerous surveys indicate that many adoption-seeking couples and individuals are in fact willing to accept children with the same characteristics as most available children in foster care (Chandra et al., 1999; Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption & Harris Interactive, 2007; Macomber, Zielewski, Chambers, & Geen, 2005). Thus, while a misalignment between prospective parent preferences and available children may explain the shortage in part, it does not provide a complete answer.

The second explanation offered by the Urban Institute–Kennedy School study is that agencies are not doing the right things to retain prospective parents who inquire about adoption. This view casts the issue as a problem of *retention* rather than of *recruitment*. Recruitment involves obtaining sufficient numbers of qualified applicants, whereas retention involves keeping prospective parents engaged once they embark upon the adoption-seeking process.

While acknowledging that there may be problems with adoptive parent recruitment, I focus on the problem of retaining prospective adoptive parents once they have inquired about foster care adoption. I examine this problem by conducting an in-depth analysis of why prospective parents drop out of the

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[1] I use the terms "public" and "foster care" adoption seekers interchangeably. "Foster care adoption" refers to adopting a child who has been in foster care. This is not to be confused with "fost-adopt" which is a concurrent planning process by which foster parents also serve as preadoptive placements and is a subcategory of foster care adoption.

adoption-seeking process. I conduct interviews with the following types of respondents from two California counties:

- couples and individuals who contacted a social services agency to inquire about adoption and whom county agencies identified as having dropped out of the adoption-seeking process;
- couples and individuals who adopted a foster child; and
- agency caseworkers who are involved in adoptive parent recruitment, training, and licensing, as well as the child/parent matching process.

I find that the most common reasons given for dropping out of the process are:

- changes in personal circumstance (for reasons such as such as losing a job or becoming ill);
- dissatisfaction with agency (for reasons such as poor customer service, the process being too lengthy, or perceived discrimination);
- being too busy; and
- having an insufficient income or being unable to meet the housing requirements.

I distinguish between positive and negative attrition as well as attrition that is within or beyond agency influence. I make recommendations for policy changes focusing on areas in which negative attrition within the agency's influence is occurring. Although many reasons may seem to be beyond the influence of agencies, I argue that if the foster care adoption process were more efficient, prospective parents would be less likely to drop out due to life-changing events or due to being too busy to complete the process.

In examining the relationship between the socioeconomic characteristics of prospective adoptive parents and attrition, I find that lower-income respondents most often dropped out because they experienced changes in personal circumstance, had insufficient income, or did not meet housing requirements. Middle- and upper-income respondents most often dropped out due to time constraints and dissatisfaction with agency. Additionally, frustration with agency rules and processes were common among middle- and upper-income applicants. Many Caucasian interviewees said they were deterred by experiences with caseworkers who were resistant to transracial adoption.

This study contains six chapters. The first chapter provides the context and background on children in foster care awaiting adoption and describes what we know about couples and individuals who may be interested in adopting them. It also describes findings from prior studies about foster care adoption seekers' perspectives on the adoption process. The second chapter considers the market for foster care adoption through the lens of economic demography. It also explores how issues of race and socioeconomic status affect the foster care adoption process. The third chapter provides theoretical explanations for

attrition. I provide details on the adoption-seeking process and hypothesize about factors that affect attrition. The fourth chapter describes my research methodology and sample population. The fifth chapter describes interview findings, and the sixth chapter presents policy recommendations based on these findings.

Chapter 1: Context

In this chapter, I provide the context and background on children in foster care awaiting adoption and describe what we know about couples and individuals who may be interested in adopting them. I describe the different types of adoption available to seekers and the role of public agencies in foster care adoption. I describe findings from prior studies about foster care adoption seekers' perspectives on the adoption process.

Children Awaiting Placement

According to the Administration for Children and Families, in fiscal year (FY) 2010 there were more than 107,000 children in the U.S. foster care system waiting to be adopted, and they had been in temporary placements for an average of 3 years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Children are considered to be waiting when either (1) the goal in their case plan is adoption or (2) their parents' legal rights have been terminated.[2] On average, the parental rights of the waiting children had been terminated for more than 2 years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

While children wait for adoptive parents, they live with relatives, in foster homes, in group homes, and in institutional facilities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Since many of these placements are designed to be temporary, many children live in a state of uncertainty while awaiting adoption. In FY 2010, more than 27,000 children aged out of foster care at the age of 18 without ever having been placed in a permanent home. Aging out of foster care is a concerning outcome because these youth face many risks, including homelessness, mental health issues, low educational attainment, unemployment or low-wage jobs, and welfare dependency (Courtney, 2005).

In response to concerns that children in foster care wait too long for adoptive homes, Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). The primary purpose of the law was to shorten the length of time a child spends in foster care and speed up the process of legally freeing children for adoption. The two approaches implemented by ASFA to achieve this goal were (1) tightening the timelines by which parental rights must be terminated and (2) implementing a new state adoption incentive payment program.

A report released by the U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO) found that, while foster care adoptions did increase post-ASFA, it is difficult to determine what percentage of the increase in adoptions can be attributed to the legislation.

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[2] Analysis of Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) excludes children whose parental rights have been terminated if they have a goal of emancipation and are age 16 or older.

The GAO concluded that major barriers to helping children achieve permanency through adoption persist (U.S. GAO, 2002). Analysis of Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data have revealed that much of the initial increase in adoptions post-ASFA can be attributed to foster parents or relatives adopting the children already in their care (Geen et al., 2005). General applicant adopters who were unrelated to the child were responsible for less than 10% of the increase (Geen et al., 2005). A leading study on this issue states:

> If child welfare agencies are going to be successful in significantly reducing the number of children who are waiting to be adopted, they will need to recruit additional general applicants…and ensure that their current policies or practices do not inadvertently discourage general applicants from completing the adoption process (Geen et al., 2005, p. 2).

Despite the apparent need for more general applicant adoptive homes, this type of placement accounted for only 15% of foster care adoptions, while foster parents or relatives were responsible for 85% of foster care adoptions in FY 2010 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Given these proportions, clearly, agencies should do more to engage with existing foster parents to encourage them to adopt the children already in their care. However, the purpose of this study is to examine agency practices around retaining newly interested prospective parents, many of whom may start out as foster parents but intend to become adoptive parents.

Types of Adoption

Adoption, defined as establishing "a legal parent-child relationship between a child and one or two adults who are not the child's biological parents…affords adoptive parents rights and responsibilities identical to those of biological parents" (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). There are three types of adoption:

- Foster care adoption: Children adopted from foster care are those who, prior to their adoption, were involved with the child protective services system and removed from their families due to their families' inability or unwillingness to provide appropriate care. Public child welfare agencies oversee such adoptions, although they may contract with private adoption agencies to perform some adoption functions.
- Private domestic adoption: This group consists of children who are adopted privately from within the United States and who were not part of the foster care system prior to their adoption. Such adoptions may be arranged independently or through private adoption agencies.
- International adoption: This group includes children who originated from countries other than the United States. Typically, adoptive parents work with private U.S. adoption agencies, which coordinate with adoption agencies and other entities in children's countries of origin (Vandivere et al., 2009).

5

Figure 1.1 below shows that among all adopted children in 2007 (excluding those living with at least one biological parent, such as stepfamilies), 25% were adopted from other nations. Of the remaining children adopted domestically, approximately half were adopted from foster care while the other half were adopted privately (Vandivere et al., 2009).

Figure 1.1 Distribution of Adopted Children by Adoption Type
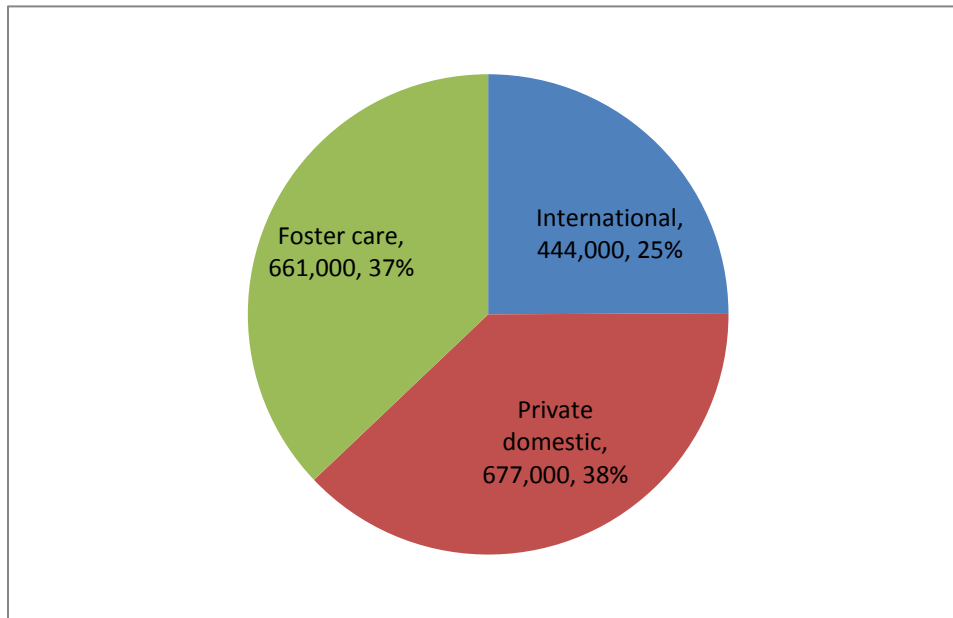
Source: Vandivere et al., 2009

This study focuses on the adoption of children from foster care, though I provide some discussion of the other types of adoption.

Within the realm of foster care adoptions, AFCARS identifies four types of relationships adoptive parents may have had with the child prior to adoption: stepparent, other relative, foster parent, and nonrelative. The Children's Bureau defines these categories as follows:

- Stepparent: spouse of the child's birth mother or birth father
- Other relative: a relative through the birth parents by blood or marriage
- Foster parent: a nonrelative foster family home which later adopted; the initial placement could have been for the purpose of adoption or for the purpose of foster care
- Nonrelative: adoptive parent fits into none of the categories above

Many foster parents are on the path to adoption from the outset but are willing to serve as concurrent planning or "fost-adopt" placements. In other words, they

start out fostering a child, but their intention from the outset is to adopt a child in foster care. I discuss this concept in more detail in a subsequent section.

Prospective Parents Seeking Children

Explanations about who drops out of the adoption-seeking process and why must be grounded in an understanding of who is likely to want to adopt in the first place, as well as who is likely to want to adopt children in foster care specifically. Because adoption is an alternative to biological parenthood, it is not surprising that couples who desire children but are unable to have them are viewed as the most likely to seek adoption (Bachrach, London, & Maza, 1991).

Individuals interested in adoption include those for whom adoption would not necessarily have been their first choice as a family-building strategy were it not for the factors that prevented them from having biological children. This group may consider adoption to be one among many strategies for family building. Alternatives to adoption include *in vitro* fertilization and surrogacy. Adoption might be a last resort for these individuals and couples, dependent on whether the alternatives are unsuccessful, too cumbersome, believed to be unethical, or too costly. Once adoption is considered, these individuals must choose between public and private adoption, as well as between domestic and international adoption.

Others interested in adoption include those who may be able to have children biologically but who prefer to adopt as an expression of moral values, such as concerns about overpopulation or human rights, prolife sentiments, or the desire to parent children who are already born and need caregivers. The type of adoption these individuals pursue is likely to depend on which among these reasons is their primary motivation, as well as on their financial circumstances. For instance, those wishing to adopt due to prolife values might engage a private adoption agency that works directly with pregnant mothers who are dissuaded from having abortions. Adopters motivated by human rights concerns and those who want to parent children in need of caregivers might pursue public or international adoption.

We can infer that public adoption seekers choose this option from an array of alternatives. Whether their motivation stems from biological circumstances, moral views, altruism, or a combination of many factors, they have decided that public adoption is an option they wish to pursue. Some public adoption seekers may still be in the process of exploring their options and are likely to engage in a process of weighing their options over time. For these individuals a public agency may be one of many adoption agencies they contact. For other individuals, contacting a public adoption agency is the first expression of a deeply held intention to adopt a foster child.

It is perplexing that so few general applicants adopt children in foster care because many sources suggest that prospective adoptive parents in the U.S. are not in short supply (Chandra et al., 1999; Wilson et al., 2005; Macomber et al., 2005). Based on estimates from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), 18 million women (33% of all women age 18-44) reported being interested in adopting in 2002 (Macomber et al., 2005). Of these women, almost 2 million, or 10%, took concrete steps toward adoption, such as contacting a lawyer or an adoption agency.

Many women in the NSFG survey reported a willingness to adopt children with characteristics similar to those of children waiting to be adopted. For instance, the vast majority of women seeking to adopt said they would be willing to accept a minority child; 90% reported willingness to adopt a child with a mild disability; nearly one third said they would be willing to adopt a child 13 years old or older; 31% said they would accept a child with a severe disability; and the majority were willing to accept a sibling group (Macomber et al., 2005). Another study found that among Americans who have considered or are considering adoption, 71% considered foster care adoption as their primary method for creating or expanding their family (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption & Harris Interactive, 2007).

Despite these findings, in a National Adoption Day Coalition research report, state administrators said the primary barrier they face in helping children achieve permanency through adoption is difficulty in finding interested and able families to adopt (Macomber et al., 2005). Nearly every state (47) reported that this was a significant problem. Finding homes for children with special needs (i.e., older or minority children, sibling groups, and children with behavioral problems and disabilities) and finding homes "to reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the adopted children" were the two most commonly reported concerns (Macomber et al., 2005).

The discrepancy between those who express a willingness to adopt children in foster care and those who actually adopt may be due in part to the difference between what people say they are willing to do when surveyed and what they actually do. However, the gap between those who appear to be willing to adopt children in foster care and those who actually adopt them is so vast that it is puzzling and therefore worthy of further exploration. Interviews with foster care adoption seekers who do not ultimately adopt children in foster care will provide us with some better understanding of this puzzle.

Explanations for the Adoptive Parent Shortage

There are many possible explanations why public adoption agencies have difficulty finding enough parents for the waiting children, even though interest in foster care adoption does not appear to be lacking. Some prospective parents may be deterred because they believe that foster care agencies will not see them

as suitable (e.g., because they are gay or lesbian, single parents, or of an ethnicity different from most potential adoptees). It is possible foster care agencies do indeed discourage some of these types of parents.

Other prospective parents may not be as willing to accept certain types of children in foster care as they were when being surveyed. Parents otherwise willing to adopt may be deterred by the financial strain of adoption, another consideration that may seem more remote when being surveyed. Otherwise willing parents may also be deterred by the experience of interacting with foster care agencies and their bureaucratic processes. These prospective parents may then redirect their efforts toward other adoption options provided by competing private and international adoption agencies. Still others may have unresolved fertility issues and either become pregnant while awaiting an adoptive child or, upon learning more about foster care adoption, decide they would prefer to pursue fertility treatment.

Another deterrent for prospective adopters may be the decrease in the number of healthy infants available for adoption in the U.S. due to the improved effectiveness of contraception, the legalization of abortion, and the increased societal acceptance of children born out of wedlock (Freundlich, 1998; Bachrach, Stolley, & London, 1992). Knowledge of this decline in available healthy infants domestically may dissuade some from pursuing adoption through a U.S. agency before considering alternatives such as *in vitro* fertilization, surrogacy, or international adoption.

The Role of Public Agencies and Their Criteria for Adoptive Parents of Foster Children

While the focus of my study is on county public adoption processes, public adoption in the United States occurs through a variety of avenues, including state, county, and private nonprofit organizations known as foster family agencies (FFAs). Although a comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of state, county, and privatized public adoption services would be an interesting and important topic for further study, such an undertaking exceeds the scope of my research. As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, I interviewed only respondents who contacted county public agencies.[3] However, here I briefly describe the various institutions through which public adoptions might occur to provide further context for the county public adoption process in contrast to the alternatives. I also describe the criteria agencies have for adoptive parents of foster children and explore how these criteria might affect recruitment and retention of these prospective parents.

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[3] A few respondents contacted FFAs (in addition to the county agency) as another possible route to adopting a child from foster care; however, my interviews did not explore in detail a comparison between respondent experiences with FFAs and county agencies.

In counties where the state is responsible for foster care adoptions, the county remains responsible for foster care placements, but must coordinate with state adoption workers when the foster child has a goal of adoption. State caseworkers conduct the recruitment, training, and licensing process for parents interested in adoption. In counties where the adoption process is managed internally, the recruitment and training processes for foster and adoptive parents are generally the same. However, specialized county adoption workers conduct adoptive home licensing and adoption finalization.

In California, during the time that I conducted my research, adoptions were administered at the level of the state, counties, or FFAs depending on the policy of the geographic area. By the time my research concluded, California underwent a process known as realignment, which resulted in state-administered adoptions being delegated to counties who could outsource to FFAs if they so chose.

By way of background, in 1986, the California state legislature allowed the establishment of FFAs to alleviate problems faced by the overburdened foster care system. FFAs are community-based, nonprofit organizations licensed by the state to provide foster family care and adoption services (California Department of Social Services, 2009). Today, about a third of California children in foster care are placed with FFAs (Center for Social Services Research, 2009), and FFAs account for the adoption of more than 10% of the children adopted in the public child welfare system each year (California Alliance of Child and Family Services, 2009). Some counties that contract with FFAs use them only for children who are considered hard to place. Other counties use them for almost all their foster and adoptive home recruitment and licensing needs.

Within California, there is a spectrum in the degree to which privatization and use of FFAs have occurred among social services agencies. On the most privatized end of the spectrum, some counties exclusively utilize FFAs for all foster and adoptive placements. Other counties conduct all the steps in the adoption process internally. Still others conduct some adoption processes internally and outsource other aspects to FFAs. Given the expanding reach of FFAs, counties wishing to keep adoption services in-house must examine the ways they can continually improve their processes and ensure that they do not inadvertently dissuade otherwise qualified couples and individuals from serving as county foster or adoptive parents.

Public Agency Criteria for Prospective Adoptive Parents

In determining the ideal adoptive placement for foster children, agencies have preferences and mandates that can provide insights into why general applicants might be disadvantaged in the foster care adoption process. Agency selection criteria might provide some additional explanation for attrition and explain why many may not choose to pursue public adoption in the first place.

In an effort to provide continuity and stability for children in foster care, agencies prefer providers who have prior relationships with the children. This preference creates a disadvantage for general applicants. Conversely, it creates an advantage for kinship placements as well as foster parents who are willing to become adoptive parents. Even if relatives do not have a prior relationship with the child, they still receive placement priority. Thus, to the extent that there is competition among prospective adoptive parents for specific children, general applicants are often the least desirable providers from the agency's standpoint.

Under ASFA regulations, caseworkers may implement concurrent case plans, meaning that children in foster care may have two simultaneous goals. Under most circumstances, when a child enters care, the child's primary goal is reunification with parents, and the secondary goal is adoption. Most children do not become eligible for adoption until after spending some time in foster care with a goal of reunification. As a result, most adoptive parents first foster the child they ultimately adopt. Under ideal circumstances, the child is placed with a foster parent who will help with the reunification process but who is also interested in adopting if reunification cannot be achieved. Concurrent planning is meant to minimize the moves children in foster care experience. When considering placements for a child eligible for adoption who does not have relatives willing to adopt, agencies prioritize those who already have a bond with the child.[4]

As shown in Figure 1.2 below, adoptions by nonrelatives have remained relatively stable over time, whereas adoptions by relatives have tripled in the same period. Given the agency criteria for adoptive parents favoring relatives and preexisting foster parents, it is not surprising that adoption by nonrelative placements have not increased to the same extent as adoption by the other types of placements.

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[4] Since AFCARS captures only one goal for each child, information about the percentage of children with concurrent goals is not available.

Figure 1.2: Relationship of Adoptive Parents to Children, Prior to Adoption, 1998-2009[5]
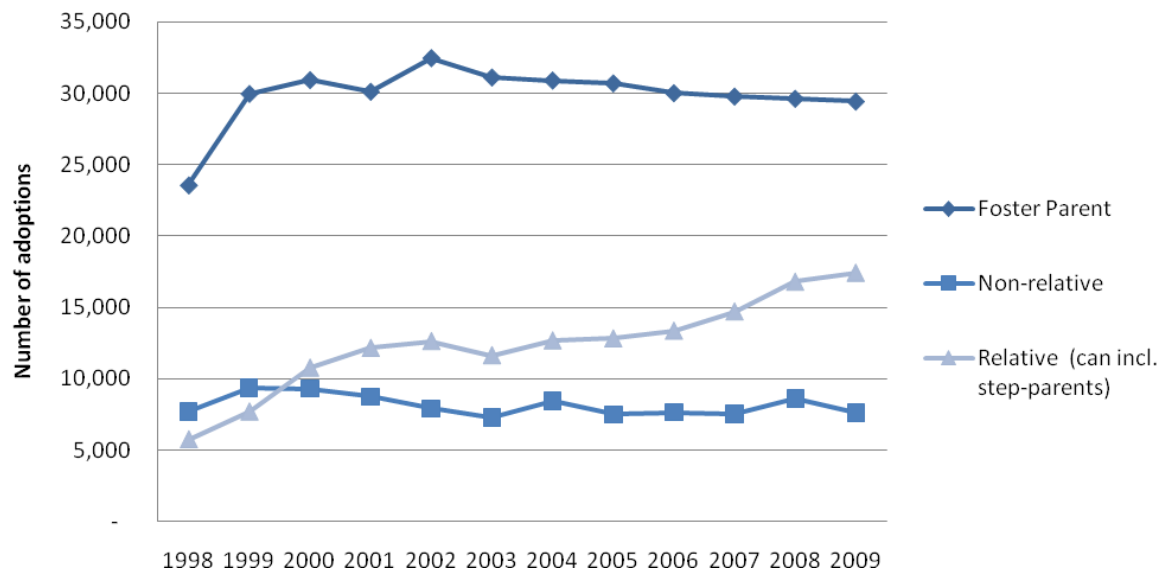
In short, agency preferences may heighten the risks involved for general applicants (nonrelatives and those who are not yet serving as foster parents), as discussed further in subsequent sections.

The demographics of prospective parents also factor into agency preferences, and certain demographic characteristics may be less desirable from the standpoint of public agencies. Although historically agencies were unwilling to consider single parent adopters, this is no longer the case for most agencies. Single parents or unmarried couples adopted 33% of foster care adoptees in 2010 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). However, seven states still require couples to be married prior to adopting a child in foster care.[6] Table 1.1 below shows the family structure into which children were adopted in FY 2010.

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[5] Relatives who serve as foster parents are counted in the "Relative" category.
[6] Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Dakota, and Utah.

12

Table 1.1: Family Structure of Child's Adoptive Family in FY 2010

Family Structure	Number	Percent
Married Couple	34,973	67%
Unmarried Couple	1,140	2%
Single Female	14,465	28%
Single Male	1,392	3%

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011

Lesbian or gay parents were responsible for 4% of all foster care adoptions (Gates, Badgett, Chambers, & Macomber, 2007).[7] One survey found that 60% of agencies accepted adoption applications from gays and lesbians (Gates et al., 2007).[8] However, prejudice and discrimination persist:

> One third of agencies [surveyed] would reject a gay or lesbian applicant, either because of the religious beliefs guiding the agency, a state law prohibiting placement with [gay or lesbian] parents, or a policy of placing children only with married couples (Gates et al., 2007).

Many placement agencies actively recruit nontraditional families. For instance, one such agency, Family Builders by Adoption, a Bay Area not-for-profit organization, states on its website: "We welcome traditional families, single parent families, gay and lesbian families, transracial and multiracial families" (www.familybuilders.org, accessed December 10, 2007). Even if discrimination occurs in a minority of states and agencies, the negative effects can spill over to nondiscriminating agencies.

In terms of age, most states require applicants to be over age 21, though some states specify that the applicant must be over age 18 or 19. While older age can be a barrier for prospective adoptive parents, given that many children in need of adoptive placements are themselves older (27% of the children awaiting adoption in 2010 were 12 or older), agencies are now more willing to consider adoption by older parents.

The race or ethnicity of prospective parents plays an important role in recruitment, retention, and placement efforts. Although the Multiethnic Placement Act prohibits denying or delaying placements because of the child's or the prospective parent's race, color, or national origin, as discussed further in

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[7] Researchers for this study were unable to distinguish between public and private adoptions by gay and lesbian parents, so this number includes both.

[8] The survey had a 40% response rate. "Almost 40 percent of all agencies and 83 percent of public agencies reported making at least one adoption placement with a lesbian or gay man. Overall, 1.3 percent of reported adoptions by these agencies were to self-identified lesbian or gay parents" (Gates et al., 2007).

subsequent sections, caseworkers do still use race as an important factor in recruiting prospective parents and making placements.

According to a publication from the Children's Bureau, in terms of personal characteristics, agencies generally seek prospective parents with the ability to provide a safe and nurturing environment for a prospective child (www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/homestudyreqs.cfm). They also seek prospective parents who are willing to be flexible "in dealing with the needs of foster children and their birth families, and [have] a willingness to work with the social services agency in meeting program requirements." Additionally:

> All members of the foster family household must pass background checks that show no convictions for certain crimes or records of substantiated child abuse or neglect. In most states, other specific requirements include:
>
> • sufficient family income to meet the family's needs and financial obligations;
>
> • sufficiently good physical health to be able to meet the demands of caring for children;
>
> • being free of communicable diseases, illnesses, or disabilities that would either endanger the child or interfere with the provision of care;
>
> • no evidence of mental health conditions that would impair the ability to provide safe, consistent care for children; and
>
> • possession of a valid driver's license, reliable transportation, and sufficient vehicle insurance (www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/homestudyr eqs.cfm).

Findings From Prior Studies

Few studies have examined the perspectives and experiences of adoption seekers, but those that have been conducted are instructive. Prior studies have noted a high attrition rate and have found that prospective parents drop out for a combination of reasons. However, no prior studies have specifically targeted dropouts for in-depth, one-on-one interviews.

A study examining the retention of callers to a New York City adoption hotline found that of the 146 callers interviewed for the study, 35 callers (24%) attended an orientation and only 15 (10.3%) completed the home study process (Festinger & Pratt, 2003). The most commonly cited reasons given by those who did not attend an orientation were time commitments of prospective parents (26.9%) and changes in circumstances, such as pregnancies, job changes, relocation, or financial problems (20.2%). Fewer responses (11.5%) cited unresponsiveness of the agency. When asked about general barriers to the adoption of children from

foster care, concerns included the children's problems (21%), the length of the process (17%), and the role of birth families (14%) (Festinger & Pratt, 2003).

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption survey included a small population of Americans with experience in the foster care system who were asked about their thoughts on adopting children in foster care. Among those most interested in foster care adoption, only 23% completed the process and finalized the adoption of a child. Nearly half chose not to engage in the process after obtaining information by phone, and 22% attended an orientation but subsequently decided not to continue. The "general" reasons cited for ending the foster care adoption process included red tape, personal reasons, financial concerns, inconvenient schedules, and issues with agency staff. The "process" reasons for discontinuing the foster care adoption process included paperwork, the time-consuming process, background checks, and investigations (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption & Harris Interactive, 2007).

A team of researchers from the Urban Institute and the Kennedy School of Government conducted the most comprehensive research on this topic to date (Geen et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2005). This study used data from multiple sources, including a national survey of adoption managers and focus groups of individuals currently engaged in the adoption process. The primary goal of the study was to document interest in foster care adoption among general applicants nationally. The research team found that the shortage of available adoptive homes could be attributed more to problems of *retention* than to problems of *recruitment*.

Data from the Urban Institute and the Kennedy School of Government national survey of adoption managers suggest that there are approximately 240,000 calls each year from persons seeking to adopt children in foster care, but the vast majority drop out early in the process. Most state officials believe that fewer than half of the persons requesting information attend an orientation session or complete an application. Officials interviewed in this study believe that, although there is a strong demand for adoption, applicants are not interested in adopting the type of children available in the foster care system.

A shortcoming of this study is that researchers were unable to interview prospective parents who contacted social services agencies but did not attend an orientation session. As a result, they were unable to "directly answer the questions surrounding why so many persons who call agencies for information do not go on to attend an orientation session with the agency" (Geen et al., 2005, p. 25). My study will fill this gap by including interviews with prospective parents who did not engage in the adoption process beyond making a phone call to an agency, as well as those who dropped out later in the process.

Chapter 2: The Market for Children and the Role of Race and Class in Foster Care Adoption

In this chapter, I discuss how economic theory might help us understand the behavior of prospective adoptive parents. I discuss controversies surrounding race and class in foster care adoption and provide a brief history of policies meant to overcome discrimination on the basis of race in foster care adoption.

Economic Demography and the Market for Children

My theories in this chapter as well as Chapter 3 about who is likely to drop out of the adoption seeking process versus who is likely to persist are largely informed by expected utility theory. Expected utility theory holds that actors' choices among options with uncertain outcomes reflect their valuations of those options. Included in these valuations are preferences about ultimate outcomes as well as tolerance for uncertainty and risk.

Economic theory can provide insight into adoption-seeking behavior and can help explain why prospective adopters might drop out. Economic decisions within families encompass labor market participation and consumption decisions, including how many children couples and individuals choose to have and at what point in their life they have them. Although using economic language to describe motivations for having children may be uncomfortable or even offensive to some, empirical evidence shows that economic factors significantly affect fertility and family-building decisions. Thus, economic theory provides a useful framework for this discussion. Nobel Laureate Gary Becker has famously applied classical economic theory to explain various aspects of family formation, including marriage, divorce, and childbearing (Becker, 1981, 1992). Although his work does not explicitly address adoption, the general concepts from his work concerning the market for children are applicable.

The supply of available children and the demand for children are the main factors to consider. Below, I describe supply-side issues in the market for children, such as the characteristics of adoptable children, as well as the number of available children and how long they have been waiting. I then describe demand-side factors impacting the decision-making process of prospective parents. Finally, I discuss what these theories tell us about who is likely to drop out of the foster adoption process versus who is likely to persist.

The Supply of Children in Foster Care

On any given day, more than 100,000 children are in the U.S. foster care system awaiting adoption (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). These children are likely to be older, members of a minority group and generally are survivors of abuse or neglect. Many children are in sibling groups for whom

agencies seek a common placement. On average, the children were 5 years old when they were removed from their parents and are an average of 8 years old today (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). This age difference reflects two factors. First, younger children are adopted more quickly. Second, children wait an average of 3½ years to be adopted. The majority (53%) are male, and, of the total population, about 64,084 (60%) have had the parental rights terminated for all living parents. Below is a table detailing the race/ethnicity of children in U.S. foster care awaiting adoption. As Table 2.1 shows, the children are disproportionately children of color relative to the population as a whole.

Table 2.1: Race/Ethnicity of Children Waiting to be Adopted on September 30, 2010

American Indian/Alaskan Native, non-Hispanic	2%
Asian, non-Hispanic	0%
Black	29%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic	0%
Hispanic (of any race)	22%
White	39%
Unknown/unable to determine	1%
Two or more races	6%

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011.
Note: All races exclude children of Hispanic origin.

Analysis of AFCARS data has revealed that African American children wait longer to be adopted than White or Latino children. Older children also wait longer, especially those over 8 years of age (DeVooght, et al., 2011).

Because of the difficulties many of these children have faced, both prior to and after entering foster care, children awaiting adoption are more likely to have a variety of behavioral, emotional, and/or health problems than children who have not been in foster care. These problems may include attachment disorder, eating disorders, and oppositional-defiant disorder, to name a few. Many children in foster care perform poorly in school; they lag behind their non-foster peers academically and are more likely to have behavior and discipline problems (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002).

The Demand for Children

There are many reasons why couples and individuals want to become parents, including identity fulfillment, family completion, and partnership solidification (Morgan & King, 2001). Raising a child can "bring predictable routines to daily life that promote well-being and provide continuity to one's narrative" (Morgan & King, 2001). While these factors motivate couples and individuals to have

children, as discussed in Chapter 1, additional factors may motivate them to adopt rather than have biological children.

Economic factors also influence demand for children. Becker posits that parents are rational economic actors who weigh the costs and benefits of having children. His theories are even more relevant to adoptive parents because "they rarely become parents through happenstance and must take positive steps to become parents" (Bachrach et al., 1991).

Becker shows that demand for children is impacted by various factors, including their price and the labor/leisure tradeoff involved with having them. In other words, parents must make choices about how many children they wish to have versus how much they wish to consume other goods. As in traditional economic theory, parents maximize their utility subject to a budget constraint. Adoption benefits "consist of all those factors contributing to the motivation to have a child, whereas costs may include not only the financial costs of adoption but also barriers such as long waiting lists, agency requirements for certain parent characteristics, and uncertainty of success in adopting the type of child desired" (Bachrach et al., 1991, as reprinted in 1994, p. 232).

The theories of Thomas Malthus (1776–1834) provide a useful point of departure in considering theories about the tradeoffs between child quality and quantity as well as the cost of children. In his time, marriage was considered a precondition of family formation and childbearing. He described marriage as an economic act requiring income to achieve. He theorized that the younger couples are when they marry, the more children they are likely to have. Therefore, he reasoned that income would have a positive effect on fertility. Given fixed resources, he predicted that people would have fewer children once the population became too large because people would become poorer. Malthus' theories did not accurately predict the population trends that followed. On the contrary, as incomes rose, fecundity actually decreased, suggesting in economic terms that children are inferior goods. Subsequent economists have endeavored to explain this phenomenon.

Tradeoffs Between Child Quality and Quantity

Becker explains the inverse relationship between income and fertility in terms of utility tradeoffs between child quantity and quality. Child quality is defined as the child's observable characteristics, including the child's health, physical appearance, intelligence, talents, and level of education. Becker observes empirically that in larger families, investment in education per child is lower. He posits that higher-income individuals derive more utility from having high-quality children than from having a greater quantity of children. As a result, they are likely to have fewer children and invest more per child in education. As the income level of parents rises, they are likely to substitute away from quantity and toward quality. Moreover, as returns to higher levels of education are greater in

18

a given society, parents in societies that value education highly are more likely to invest in child quality over child quantity.

Recognizing that there is tremendous variability in the supply of waiting children in foster care as well as prospective parents and their preferences, let us assume for a moment that there is some consensus about the most desirable characteristics to be had in a child. Focusing on one characteristic in particular, we could imagine that most prospective adoptive parents would hope for a child who is able to perform well in school. We know that, compared to the average child, children in foster care are less likely to perform well in school. Applying the quality–quantity theory to prospective foster care adopters, then, leads us to hypothesize that, all else being equal, the higher the income of adoption seekers, the more likely they are to drop out of the foster adoption seeking process due to the perception that children in foster care are on average lower in quality. Among those who choose to adopt, higher-income applicants are likely to adopt fewer children than other applicants because they know they must make a substantial and disproportionate investment in the development of a child's quality skills.

To summarize, quality–quantity theory suggests that as the income of prospective adoptive parents increases, they are likely to substitute away from child quantity and toward child quality. As a result, I predict that upper-income adoption seekers are more likely to drop out of the foster care adoption-seeking process and are less likely to pursue this type of adoption in the first place. Conversely, low-income adopters are more likely to stay engaged in the process because they are less likely to prioritize child quality as highly as upper-income adoptions seekers do.

Cost of Children Theory

Another explanation given for the inverse relationship between fertility and income considers the overall cost of children in terms of both the parents' time and the expenses of child rearing and education. Becker observes that although economic growth raises family incomes, it also raises the cost of children. In terms of direct costs, children from high-socioeconomic-status households are generally more costly to their parents than the children of low-socioeconomic-status households because they require more expensive inputs, such as the cost of rent, household goods, and other experiences common to the household (Becker, 1981). In addition, the cost of educating the child must be factored into the child's cost overall.

In terms of indirect inputs, the value of parents' time, especially the wife's, must be taken into consideration (Ben-Porath, 1982; Becker, 1981; Schultz, 1990). As women have entered the workforce, the opportunity cost of having more children has become greater. The more educated the woman, the higher her salary and the more her market time is worth. Therefore, the wife's time away from work

due to time spent caring for children must be factored into the children's price, and as women make more money, the cost of children increases. Ben-Porath observes that the increased level of income resulting from the wife's salary might motivate couples to have more children due to an income effect. However, he shows that the income effect is generally overshadowed by the substitution effect and that data indicate that higher salaries among women are almost always associated with lower fertility rates. He concludes that income positively affects the number of children people have as well as how much they consume, but the substitution effect tilts preferences toward higher rates of labor force participation and lower fertility rates.

Using Ben-Porath's line of reasoning, I hypothesize that the more educated the couple, or the higher their income, the more likely they are to drop out of the adoption-seeking process due to their higher opportunity cost of time. In addition, depending on the reputation of the agency handling public adoptions, this tendency may translate to these prospective parents never pursuing foster care adoption in the first place. This may be especially true for single working parents (or would-be parents), as well as for couples who both work full time.

As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, the costs of adopting a child include not only the financial costs of adoption but also barriers to adoption, such as long waiting lists, agency requirements, and uncertainty about success in adopting the type of child desired (Bachrach et al., 1991). These factors can also be thought of in terms of the opportunity cost associated with them.

Transracial Adoption, Racial Disproportionality, and Barriers Related to Socioeconomic Status

The race or ethnicity of prospective parents and children in foster care also plays a significant role in the foster care adoption market. In this section, I discuss the recent history of racial dynamics in foster care adoption and then discuss how the adoption seekers' race coupled with their place of residence may influence their adoption process.

Transracial adoption occurs when children from one race are adopted by parents of a different race. During the Civil Rights Movement, transracial adoptions in the U.S. increased dramatically. This change drew criticism from groups such as the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW). In response to the growth in transracial adoptions, in 1972 the NABSW released an issue paper that equated transracial adoption to cultural genocide. The NABSW president made the following declaration:

> We are opposed to transracial adoption as a solution to permanent placement for black children. We have an ethical, moral, and professional obligation to oppose transracial adoption. We are therefore legally justified in our efforts to protect the rights of black children, black families,

and the black community. It is a blatant form of racial and cultural genocide. (Simon & Altstein, 1996)

Following the NASBW's declaration, the number of transracial adoptions plummeted. As problems of racial disproportionality[9] increased, and African American children spent more time in foster care without being placed in permanent homes, Congress became concerned that racial matching policies, as well as discrimination against African American prospective adoptive parents, needed to be addressed. In response to this concern, in 1994 Congress passed the Howard M. Metzenbaum Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA), followed by the 1996 amendment known as Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP). States have three mandates under MEPA-IEP.

- States and other entities that are involved in foster care or adoption placements and receive federal financial assistance under Title IV-E or Title IV-B of the Federal Social Security Act or any other federal program are prohibited from delaying or denying a child's foster care or adoptive placement on the basis of the child's or the prospective parent's race, color, or national origin.

- States and entities are prohibited from denying to any individual the opportunity to become a foster or adoptive parent on the basis of the prospective parent's or the child's race, color, or national origin.

- In order to remain eligible for federal assistance for their child welfare programs, states must diligently recruit foster and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the children in the state who need foster and adoptive homes (Hollinger & ABA Center on Children and the Law, 1998).

If a state is found in violation of these provisions, the federal government can withhold funds, and any aggrieved individual can seek relief in federal court. However, as noted by Hollinger (2004), "In many states, there is a subtle, yet pervasive, resistance to MEPA based on a belief that children do better in same race than transracial placements." Similarly, a 1998 GAO study found:

> While agency officials and caseworkers understand that [MEPA] prohibits them from delaying or denying placements on the basis of race, not all believe that eliminating race will result in placements that are in the best interests of children (GAO, 1998).

Studies continue to show that children in foster care are disproportionately African American and prospective adoptive parents are predominantly Caucasian

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[9] Disproportionality in child welfare is defined by comparing the percentage of a particular race of children within the child welfare system with their percentage of representation in the general population.

(Vandivere et al., 2009). African American children stay in foster care longer and are more likely than Caucasian children to experience multiple placements (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011; DeVooght et al., 2011). A seemingly simple solution would be to place African American children in Caucasian homes, but this solution is the topic of ongoing, heated debate.

Opponents of transracial adoption believe that when African American children are placed in Caucasian homes, they will lose their cultural and psychological identity and they will not be taught how to cope with living in a racist society. Just as it would be naïve to think that we live in a colorblind society, the argument goes; it is naïve to expect caseworkers to turn a blind eye to issues of race when considering how children should be placed.

Proponents of transracial adoption argue that a stable and loving home is more important than achieving racial concordance in adoptive placements. They cite empirical studies finding that children who were adopted transracially appear to be doing as well as or better than children in same-race placements (Burrow & Finley, 2004).

The work of Elizabeth Bartholet (1999) and Dorothy Roberts (2002) provide additional context to the debate. These two scholars often have opposing views on issues related to race, class, and children in foster care. In her book, *Nobody's Children,* Bartholet asserts that agency policies and practices discriminate against Caucasian middle- and upper-income prospective parents and that there is system-wide resistance to placing African American children with Caucasian parents. She explains that Caucasian middle- and upper-income prospective parents are disadvantaged by policies favoring placement of children near their homes of origin, generally in low-income areas. Additionally, most states have policies favoring kinship care, which serves as a proxy for race matching.[10] Bartholet's theories suggest that non-African American prospective parents who live in racially segregated (e.g., non-African American) suburbs will face more challenges when seeking to adopt children in foster care.

Indeed, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has in place the Family to Family initiative as well as various other initiatives that emphasize the need to place children in foster care in close geographic proximity to the homes from which they were removed. The foundation maintains that this allows children in foster care to maintain continuity with their communities as well as schools, churches, and other institutions. It also facilitates visits with siblings, parents, and extended families. However, since abuse and neglect is more likely to occur in neighborhoods that are poor, this policy may translate into keeping children in

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[10] Arguably, her view is supported by the data presented in Chapter 1, which shows that the number of nonkin adopters has remained steady while the share of kin adopters has been increasing over time.

foster care in poor neighborhoods with failing schools and a dearth of services (see, for instance, Berrick, 2006).

Dorothy Roberts' book *Shattered Bonds* is written in large part as a response to Bartholet's *Nobody's Children.* As a starting point, Bartholet argues that the problem of racial disproportionality among children in foster care stems from systematic targeting and surveillance of African American communities, especially in inner cities. As a result, too many African American children are removed from their homes in the first place. She then posits that current policies and practices discriminate against African American prospective parents, who are more likely to be low-income and unable to meet housing and income requirements. They may also have criminal records that disqualify them.[11] She argues that the solution to the problem of racial disproportionality is not to place more African American children in Caucasian homes, but rather to dismantle racist systems that result in a disproportionate number of African American children entering care (Roberts, 2002).

Bartholet (2009) responds to these arguments with the view that the disproportionate number of African American children in foster care can be attributed to the fact that African Americans are more likely to be poor and therefore to face the myriad problems associated with poverty, such as higher rates of substance abuse, food insecurity, domestic violence, single-parent households, and so forth. As a result, it should not be surprising that a disproportionate number of African American children enter foster care. She worries that focusing on an ideal—that fewer African American children should be entering foster care—rather than the current reality will result in more African American children being left at home in dangerous situations.

Coupling the theories put forward by both thinkers suggests that caseworkers consider geography—meaning both the physical distance between the placement and the family of origin and the degree of racial integration in the placement neighborhood—alongside the race of the prospective adopters when making placement decisions. This criterion of geography translates in turn to social class because the wealthier the neighborhood, the more likely it is to both be predominantly White and geographically far from racially mixed and Black neighborhoods. This situation also means that a Black child attending school in such a neighborhood would be a minority, possibly to such an extent that he or she might have no Black peers in the school, another factor that caseworkers consider when making a placement. In short, caseworkers seek to match

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[11] Roberts also presents the view that African American children are more likely to be removed from their homes due to racial prejudice and discrimination. Bartholet argues that the disproportionate removal rate for African American children can be explained by their heightened risk of abuse and neglect. I do not explore these arguments in detail here because they exceed the scope of my topic.

parents and children based on a mixture of social class and race (intersecting with the phenomenon of residential racial segregation).

If that is indeed what is occurring when placement decisions are made, how might we expect it to affect the experiences of prospective parents, and how do we reinterpret the puzzle that so many women want to adopt but so few adopt from foster care, even though there are so many children waiting? We might expect that African American children wait longer to be adopted and many non-African American prospective parents would wait longer to receive a potential placement or would never receive a potential placement at all. Examination of the proportional adoption rates by race conducted by DeVooght et al. (2011) confirms that, indeed, African American children continue to wait longer to be adopted than children of other races. Information about how long prospective parents wait by race is not available.

There may be many prospective parents willing to adopt in theory, but to the extent that caseworkers or agencies seek to match on a combination of race and neighborhood type, there might not be enough of the right kind of prospective parents (i.e., African American) and too many of another kind (Caucasian). In other words, there may be a mismatch between prospective adoptive parents' races and the races of waiting children. Transracial adoption and barriers related to race and class remain controversial issues for caseworkers in the field, researchers, and policymakers. My research seeks to explore these issues more systematically, within the limited scope of my study population.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Explanations for Attrition

In this chapter, I discuss various theoretical explanations for barriers in the foster care adoption process. Specifically, I discuss principal-agent theory and how it applies to agency and individual behavior. Next, I provide a schematic of the foster care adoption process and a discussion of the bureaucratic and legal barriers in each step. I also discuss how the characteristics of individual adoption seekers, such as their threshold for risk and their initial expectations, might predict their resilience in completing the process.

To adopt children from foster care, prospective parents as well as social service agencies must complete several steps. Possible outcomes for adoption seekers include: (1) completing all the steps of the recruitment, training, and home study process and being successfully matched with a child; (2) completing all the steps but never being matched with a child; or (3) not completing all the necessary steps of the process. Barriers can stem from a variety of sources, both on the agency side and on the adoption seekers' side. My inquiry focuses on both aspects of the adoption-seeking process, that is, actions determined by the agency and actions determined by the adoption seeker, with an emphasis on improvements that agencies and policymakers can make to minimize negative attrition.

Enforcing Standards and the Principal-Agent Problem

Public adoption agencies must follow policies governing the steps in the adoption process that are established at the federal, state, and county levels. These standards have been established in response to a variety of interests. In addition to the obvious interest in protecting children and promoting their well-being, other interests may include political, financial, and administrative concerns.

Policies are designed to screen out unqualified prospective parents without inadvertently deterring qualified prospective parents. Agencies wish to avoid false positives—accepting a home that would actually be harmful to a child—as well as false negatives—deterring couples and individuals who would be desirable adoptive parents. Agency officials maintain that they are short of homes, so it is important to investigate whether some of this shortage can be attributed to policies and standards that may create false negatives. In other words, might some of these standards be interfering with the goal of identifying quality adoptive homes?

One way of conceptualizing the agency's predicament is as a principal-agent problem. The principal-agent problem involves motivating a party (the agent) to act on behalf of another party (the principal) in a situation where there is information asymmetry. The principal-agent problem occurs when the agent is hired to carry out the goals of the principal who may have different interests from the agent, and the actions of the agent are difficult to observe. This becomes

problematic when it is difficult to find a good indicator of whether the agent is behaving as the principal would wish. This problem would be obviated if there were a straightforward means of gauging the agent's behavior. The diagram in Figure 3.1 illustrates this dynamic. In our case, the agency is the principal (P) and adoptive parents are the agents (A).

Figure 3.1: Principal-Agent Theory
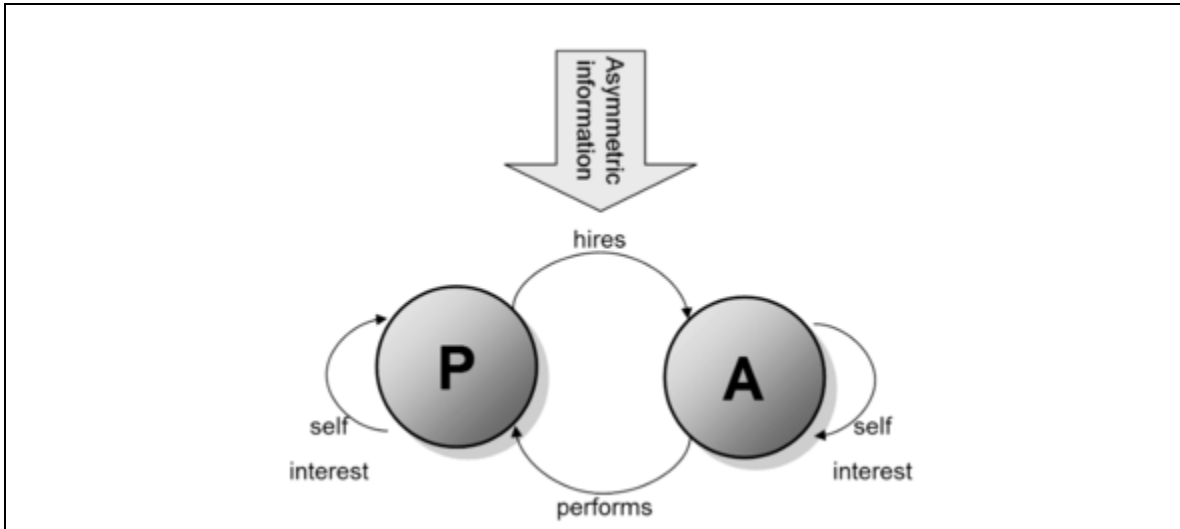
Basic Idea of Agency Theory (P: Principal, A: Agent) Source: Prendergast, 1999

Child welfare agencies (in this case the "principals") must overcome the problem of information asymmetry and the potential for divergent interests between themselves and prospective adoptive parents. Because constant monitoring of what goes on within the home is not possible, child welfare agencies must achieve compliance using other tools, including recruitment and retention strategies and their rules and guidelines for home licensure.

Three national goals for children in foster care have been established under ASFA: child safety, permanency, and well-being. Each goal is measured using data on indicators specific to that goal. To provide a few examples, safety is measured as the absence of recurrence of abuse or neglect, as well as timeliness of investigations. Permanency is measured by the number of placement moves a child experiences and the length of time the child spends in foster care prior to achieving permanency. Child well-being is measured by the regularity and appropriateness of needed services related to education and physical and mental health.

For child welfare agencies, child safety is the highest priority. Removing a child from an unsafe home and then placing the child with an unsafe foster or adoptive home is a highly negative outcome. Rules and guidelines for adoptive home licensure are means of ensuring child safety.

An example of a safety-related requirement for licensure involves the requirement that hot tubs must be fenced and the covers must be locked. This rule illustrates the "problem" aspect of the principal-agent problem: the principal often cannot find reliable indicators that the agent will keep the child safe. As a result, an agency institutes rules that are often irrelevant in practice (e.g., the prospective parent wishes only to adopt an infant who would be incapable of removing a hot tub cover); yet the agency uses compliance with the rules as indicators of good parenting. As a result, these measures may be misdirected and overly exclusionary. Thus, irrational and burdensome barriers to facilitating adoptions may be explained at least in part by principal-agent theory.

Perhaps one of the most powerful strategies for overcoming the principal-agent problem is to recruit prospective parents whose interests are in alignment with the agency's in the first place. For instance, as noted earlier, federal policies mandate reunification as the initial case goal for most children and timely adoption if reunification does not occur. As a result, agencies seek parents who are not only willing to facilitate reunification efforts but who are also willing to adopt if reunification is not successful. If the agency senses that the prospective parent may not support reunification efforts, it may dissuade the prospective parent from completing the process, or it may license the home but never provide a potential child placement.

In addition to recruiting prospective parents whose goals are in alignment with its own, the agency also devises rules that serve as a proxy for monitoring. These rules may be numerous and difficult to craft because the practical requirements are likely to vary based on the child's age. For instance, the rule that medications must be locked away may not be applicable to an infant who would be incapable of opening a bottle. Again, because the agency cannot continuously observe the placement provider and monitor what is happening in the home, the standards must provide a substitute. From the standpoint of prospective parents, these rules may come across as overly paternalistic and unreasonable, but from the standpoint of the agency, they are a key component of ensuring the agency's interests are protected. Thus, the reasons prospective parents give for dropping out may be the counterpoint to the policies enacted by the agency.

Another example to illustrate this point is the requirement that most agencies have regarding bedroom occupancy. In order for prospective parents to adopt, they must have a suitable bedroom for the child. This means the room may be shared only with another child of the same gender and within a certain age range of the foster or adoptive child. From the standpoint of adoptive parents, this requirement may be viewed as overly paternalistic or burdensome. However, from the standpoint of the agency, this policy reduces the risk of sexual abuse between siblings or other family members with whom the foster/adoptive child might otherwise be sharing a bedroom in the absence of such a policy.

We can also view income requirements for prospective parents in terms of principal agent theory. On the one hand, agencies expect parents to meet all the physical needs of the children in their care, including housing, clothing, and food (at a minimum). However, agencies are candid that the stipend provided to parents is not sufficient to reflect the cost of caring for the children, especially if they work full time and need child care. If we accept that the stipend is insufficient, requiring the agent to contribute his or her own resources to do the job well, we can predict theoretically that this will lead to attrition due to self-selection out as well as exclusion of low-income prospective parents.

Given the excessive caseloads carried by many caseworkers, it is not surprising that agencies have an interest in selecting prospective parents who will be compliant with agency rules and processes and who will not complain about them. With this in mind, agency barriers may be viewed both as tests of the parents' suitability (in terms of their support of agency policies) and as a mechanism to overcome the principal-agent problem.

The Role of Adoption Seekers' Expectations in the Adoption-Seeking Process

I turn now to various theories that might inform the decision-making processes of prospective adoptive parents.

The expectations that seekers have coming into the foster care adoption process can help us predict who is likely to drop out of the process and why. When initiating the process, seekers will vary in their expectations about the process of becoming adoptive parents, as well as about the characteristics of children in foster care. Prospective adopters will vary along a scale of expectations about adoption that range from low/pessimistic to high/optimistic. However, this one-dimensional measure is a composite of all the different kinds of expectations prospective adopters might hold about the difficulty of the process and the uncertainty and lack of control over the precise outcome.

Topics pertaining to the adoption process about which adoption seekers are likely to have expectations include the amount of time needed to complete an adoption, agency requirements of adoption seekers, and financial and follow-up support, if any, provided. Characteristics of children in foster care about which adoptions seekers are likely to have a set of expectations include the children's average age, personality, strengths, and limitations, as well as the degree of control the seekers have over the matching process.

We might imagine that adoption seekers believe they have a nonzero probability of completing a public adoption based on their prior beliefs. The probability must be sufficiently high to cover the opportunity cost of pursuing each subsequent step. The probability of dropping out will vary depending on where individuals fall

along a continuum from low to high expectations. Their expectations may be low/realistic, low/unduly pessimistic, high/realistic, or high/unduly optimistic.

Seekers with unduly low expectations of the adoption-seeking process prior to interacting with the agency might be less likely to drop out because, despite their low expectations, they still made an initial choice to explore the option. Those with unduly low expectations may anticipate facing lengthy bureaucratic processes or poor customer service from child welfare agencies. If they learn that the circumstances of public adoption will actually be better than they initially thought, they are likely to move forward. Those with unduly low expectations may have had a difficult experience with a social services agency in the past or know someone who has. Ideally, this population will come into the process with some misinformation that, in the course of being corrected, will cause them to be more motivated to continue with the process. However, another possible outcome is that they will experience confirmatory bias, that is, perceiving only the information that confirms the biases they had coming into the process. In this case, they may be more likely to drop out.

Those with unduly high expectations may be more likely to drop out depending on the reason for their expectations. If their expectations are high due to misinformation (such as believing foster care adoption is profitable or believing they will quickly be matched with a newborn baby who is legally free for adoption), they are more likely to drop out once they receive the correct information.

To summarize, those with unduly low expectations will be the least likely to drop out. Those with unduly high expectations will be the most likely to drop out. Similarly, we might expect individuals who had a more negative view of the process and who were pleasantly surprised by what they learned at the orientation to move forward. Seekers whose expectations were too high from the outset and who were very determined to adopt a foster child might also persist. However, seekers whose starting point was overly optimistic and whose desire to adopt a foster child was weak are likely to drop out.

Types of Attrition: Positive and Negative; Within and Beyond Agency Influence

An important component of this analysis from a policy perspective involves distinguishing between positive and negative attrition as well as between attrition that is within or beyond agency influence. I define negative attrition as the process by which qualified adoption seekers drop out due to some action or inaction on the part of the agency. By qualified adoption seekers, I mean adoption seekers who, if they persisted in the process, would be very likely to be matched with, and ultimately adopt, a child in foster care. I define positive attrition as the process by which adoption seekers who are not qualified, are not capable, or simply determine they do not wish to proceed (through no fault of the

agency) opt out of the adoption-seeking process. The attrition is "positive" because its results are consistent with the agency's goal of placing children with individuals and couples who have the needed resources, skills, and commitments to being successful adoptive parents.

It is useful to characterize attrition using the following four possible category combinations. I provide examples and an additional explanation beneath each category to illustrate.

1. *Positive attrition/within agency influence*

   A couple is interested in foster care adoption as a means of supplementing their income. Upon attending the orientation, they learn that the stipend will not cover the child's basic expenses.

2. *Positive attrition/beyond agency influence*

   A woman is interested in foster care adoption and becomes pregnant shortly after attending the orientation. She realizes she wants only one child, and she opts out of the process.

3. *Negative attrition/within agency influence*

   A single gay man suspects he cannot become an adoptive parent because he is single and gay, but he is not sure of this. He calls the agency to obtain more information and does not receive a call back. He attends an orientation but receives no encouragement to proceed. Although he submits an application, the agency is slow to follow up and his caseworker misses their first appointment. He drops out, believing he must be an undesirable candidate due to his marital status and sexual orientation.

4. *Negative attrition/beyond agency influence*

   A qualified couple drops out of the process because they want to adopt an infant who is already legally free for adoption. They learn from the agency that such opportunities arise only rarely, and there may be a long waiting period before this is possible.

The third classification category—negative attrition within agency influence—is the most important area to consider from a policy perspective. Factors generally leading to this type of attrition include poor customer service, poor program design, or discrimination, whether actual, anticipated, or perceived. Analysis of potential barriers in each step in the adoption-seeking process will help clarify the points at which negative attrition occurs as well as actions agencies may be able to take to reduce this attrition.

Steps in the Adoption-Seeking Process

Figure 3.2 below is a process map showing the main steps in the adoption-seeking process, as well as identifying whether the agency or the adoption seeker is the primary party responsible. For the sake of simplicity, the map does not show the interaction between the agency's and the adoption seeker's steps. However, steps with mutual dependencies are placed side by side so this interaction can be considered.

In my discussion of the steps, I also describe the average amount of time that each step is likely to take, based on information I obtained from county agencies. As discussed further in my findings section, the passage of time is an important consideration because, over time, circumstances change, and prospective parents may drop out of the process due to these changes. Thus, time is a crucial determinant of the outcome measure (dropping out). The longer the duration between prospective parents' first call to the agency and their being matched with a child, the greater the likelihood of attrition due to a change in personal circumstance. I discuss the average duration between steps and summarize this information in a table at the end of this section.

Figure 3.2: Steps in the Adoption-Seeking Process
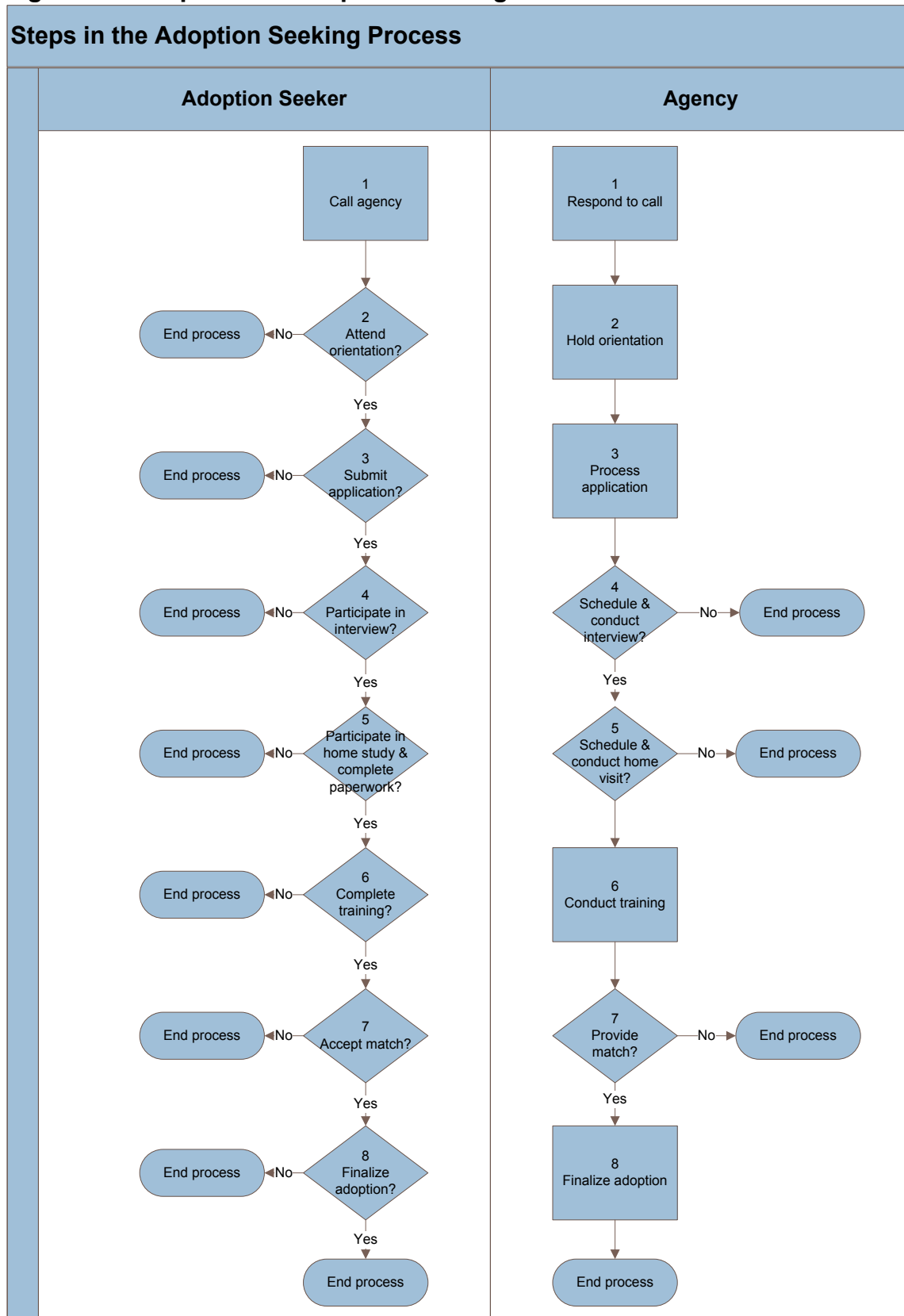
As the diagram shows, once an adoption seeker contacts a social service agency, the individual may stop the process before completing each of the subsequent steps, including attending an orientation, submitting an application, participating in an interview, participating in a home study and completing the necessary paperwork, completing training, accepting a match, and finalizing an adoption. Although the agency's actions or inactions affect all of these steps, the adoption seeker primarily determines whether the steps in the left column are completed, whereas the agency primarily determines whether the steps in the right column are completed.

Many individuals who have the desire to adopt a foster child never take a positive action to do so. My study will not explore this latent demand because the prospective parents I interviewed took a positive step toward adoption. However, reasons for attrition among adoption seekers may provide insight into why some individuals who have considered adopting children in foster care never take action to do so. Below I describe each of the steps in the adoption seeking process and factors that may influence whether or not the adoption seeker completes the subsequent step.

Step 1: Contacting the agency. The first step adoption seekers generally take in the adoption seeking process is to call the agency to make an initial inquiry. Another possible scenario is that the adoption seeker obtains the necessary information about attending an orientation via the agency's website. Whether or not an individual completes this first step is determined primarily by the individual. However, agencies can influence whether or not this step occurs in the first place, depending on their reputation in the community, use of television or radio advertisements, recruitment events, and so on.

Agency factors that influence whether or not the adoption seeker proceeds past this step include the following: If the adoption seeker sought information about the orientation via the Internet, was the information easy to obtain and conveyed in a clear and professional manner? If the adoption seeker contacted the agency via phone, was the call answered by an agency representative or a machine? If an agency representative answered the call, was he or she warm and interested or curt and suspicious? Did the agency representative relate the necessary information about attending an orientation? Did he or she express enthusiasm about the adoption seeker's interest?

All of these factors are determined by the agency and will influence whether or not the adoption seeker takes the next step. If individuals drop out due to a negative experience with their first agency contact, then negative attrition is occurring.

Personal reasons for which seekers do not proceed to the next step include the adoption seeker changing his or her mind after contacting the agency or simply not finding time to attend the orientation. Some adoption seekers may use the

first telephone contact as a means of identifying which agency they might like to work with (public or private, county or FFA). They may make their decision on whether or not to move forward with the county agency based on whether or not they feel the agency is a good fit for them. Similarly, agencies may use this initial contact as a screening mechanism. Prospective callers may reveal information in the course of the contact that might cause agencies to discourage them from pursuing a foster care adoption.

Step 2: Attending an orientation. The orientation is a pivotal step in the adoption seeking process. It is the avenue through which adoption seekers learn the fundamentals of what to expect from the foster care adoption process. In the counties I studied, orientations are held on a monthly or bimonthly basis. Thus, we could reasonably conclude that the average duration between an inquiring parents' initial point of contact and attending an orientation is 1 month.

Examples of positive reasons why seekers may drop out after attending an orientation include realizing they do not meet the standards of the agency, realizing they are not a good fit for adopting children in foster care, or realizing that the stipend is not sufficient to cover the child's expenses and they do not have the financial means to care for the child. Note that all of these examples involve some insight gained as a result of attending the orientation; an inaccurate expectation about what the process would entail is corrected by something learned at the orientation. Arguably, attrition that stems from the agency setting accurate expectations about the process is desirable. However if the agency's information delivery results in an overly pessimistic set of expectations, some of the attrition will be negative.

Prior studies have found that, in conducting orientations, caseworkers must walk a fine line in creating realistic expectations about adopting children in foster care (Geen et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2005). If they come across as overly cautionary and pessimistic about what the experience will be like, they may deter otherwise interested and qualified adoption seekers. On the other hand, if caseworkers do not discuss some of the difficult aspects of foster care adoption, they run the risk of keeping prospective parents engaged who may have unrealistic views of the foster care adoption process that will cause challenges down the line.

Step 3: Submitting an application. For adoption seekers who attend the orientation, the next step is completing and submitting an application. As is the case in deciding whether or not to attend an orientation, personal reasons will impact whether or not the adoption seeker completes this next step. Additionally, the information conveyed by the agency during the orientation session, as well as the way the orientation is conducted, will influence whether or not the adoption seeker completes an application.

I estimate that, on average, prospective parents who decide to move forward will submit their applications within 2 months of attending the orientation. Once the

application is submitted, the responsibility for the subsequent steps, with the exception of attending training and accepting a match, shifts to the agency.

Steps 4, 5, and 6: Interview, home study, and training. The order of these steps varies from agency to agency and even from worker to worker within agencies. Efficiency, professionalism, and clarity about the agency's processes seem critical to keeping seekers engaged during these steps.

Prior studies highlight the vulnerable emotional state of many adoption seekers throughout the adoption-seeking process (Geen et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2005). This may be especially true during the home study and interview phases since seekers may be highly sensitive to feelings of real or perceived judgment or rejection. Some seekers will be disqualified during these steps, and as long as the reasons for disqualification are congruent with agency policies and procedures, this type of attrition is positive. Reasons for attrition which some may consider negative include real or perceived discrimination due to religion, race/ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation, or age; inefficiencies or lack of clarity about the steps needed to complete the process; and a lack of professionalism among agency personnel.

The same issues involving realistic expectation-setting during the orientation are applicable to adoptive parent training. There may be less variability between counties and states on the training front, though, since most agencies use a standard parent training curriculum, such as Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE). Other factors influenced by the agency that could affect attrition include the attitude and skill of the instructor, the time and location of classes, and flexibility in providing alternative arrangements for missed classes.

Much of the variation in the total length of an adoption process is due to differences in time spent scheduling and conducting interviews, background checks, and home studies. Depending on staffing levels and backlogs, prospective parents may wait several weeks for the agency to schedule and complete these steps. If changes to the home are required in order for the home study to be completed, the time elapsed can be much longer; however, on average, I estimate these steps will be completed within 2 months.

In the counties I studied, PRIDE training includes nine 3-hour sessions and is offered at least three times each year. Based on this information, we can assume the average time needed to complete the PRIDE training is about 4 additional months beyond the time spent on interviews and the home study.

Step 7: Accepting a match. Accepting a match is the penultimate step in the adoption-seeking process. Reasons for which adoption seekers might drop out at this point include the personal and agency-related reasons described above, compounded by the actual experience of having a child with specific

characteristics presented. For example, seekers may reject matches because they are holding out for a child with particular characteristics, such as an infant or a sibling group. If a seeker rejects multiple matches, the agency may stop offering potential matches.

The amount of time an adoption seeker must wait to receive a match has a great deal of variability, based on factors such as the characteristics they are willing to accept as well as agency/caseworker perceptions of the prospective parents. I estimate that this process takes about 6 months.

Step 8: Finalizing adoption. The last step in the process is the legal finalization of the adoption, which typically takes an estimated 12 months to complete. Ideally, the adoption is finalized and the parent and child develop a lifelong relationship. In some cases, despite all the training and due diligence completed by both the agency and the prospective parent, the adoption is not completed. It may be that the parent underestimated the extent of the problems the child exhibits, or the parent may have overestimated his or her capacity to respond appropriately to the child's needs. In some cases, too, the child's issues are not transparent at the time of the placement and manifest themselves later. In these situations, the parent may contact the agency and voluntarily surrender the child. Another reason an adoption might not be finalized is that the prospective adoptive parent commits an act of abuse or neglect that warrants a home removal. In this scenario, the agency may not have accurately assessed the character of the prospective adoptive parent.[12]

As discussed in my findings section, the time required to finalize adoptions often greatly exceeds the timeline requirements set forth by ASFA. Table 3.1 below summarizes my estimates of the amount of time that is likely to elapse at each step in the process for the two counties in my study. My estimates are based on actual data provided by respondents as well as data for some (but not all) of the specified steps provided by one of the counties in my study.

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[12] Once the adoption is finalized, prior studies have found that a relatively small percentage of completed adoptions dissolve—probably between 6% and 11% (Coakley and Berrick, 2008).

Table 3.1: Estimated Time Between Steps in the Adoption-Seeking Process

Steps in the Adoption Process	Time Elapsed Between Steps
Contact the agency	--
Attend orientation	1 month
Submit application	2 months
Initial interview	1 month
Home visit	1 month
Complete training	4 months
Receive match	6 months
Finalize adoption	12 months
Total duration between initial contact and adoption finalization	2 years and 3 months

As shown in the chart above, I estimate that the average time between an initial call being placed and an adoption being finalized is more than 2 years.

The more time that elapses between a prospective parent's initial inquiry and the finalization of the adoption, the greater the likelihood that the parent will drop out. Two years is a long enough duration that any number of events could intervene to deter the adoption seeker. Agency personnel may view this duration simply as the amount of time needed to conduct due diligence and make sure all requirements are met. However, adoption seekers experience this as 2 years in their life course and a period of time in which any number of intervening circumstances can thwart their initial intentions. In sum, the less time there is for a sufficiently difficult event or change to arise that would dissuade a seeker, the less attrition will occur. That being said, some attrition due to changes in personal circumstance may be seen as positive or neutral, particularly if the change would have resulted in unstable placement. (Examples may include eviction from place of residence, extreme financial instability, or rapid deterioration of the caregiver's health.)

Below is a summary of the reasons adoption seekers may drop out, categorized as reasons that are positive or neutral and outside of the agency's influence and reasons that are negative and within the agency's influence.

Positive or neutral reasons for attrition include the following:

- inaccurate expectations about agency requirements that are subsequently corrected by the agency;
- inaccurate expectations about the characteristics of children in foster care;
- inaccurate expectations about legal aspects of adopting children in foster care;
- change of personal circumstances;
- insufficient income; and

- inability to meet housing requirements.

Negative reasons for attrition that are within the influence of agencies include:

- real or perceived discrimination by agency for reasons that are not congruent with agency policy (e.g., discrimination based on age, gender, sexual orientation, income, or religion);
- confusion about the steps in the process;
- prolonged agency delays or lack of agency responsiveness;
- poor reputation of agency;
- inaccurate (overly negative) information conveyed by agency; and
- unnecessarily burdensome or intrusive agency requirements.

Other Barriers in Adopting Children in Foster Care

Foster care adoption seekers might also drop out of the process due to factors associated with public foster care agencies, including concurrent case-planning, risk and uncertainty, open adoptions, and other bureaucratic challenges. Some of these barriers cannot be avoided. Others could be mitigated with policy changes.

Adoption Timeline

Under ASFA requirements, states must file a petition to terminate parental rights and concurrently, identify, recruit, and approve a qualified adoptive family on behalf of any child who has been in foster care for 15 out of the most recent 22 months. The date of foster care entry is either the date of the first judicial finding of abuse or neglect or 60 days after the child is removed from the home, whichever comes first. A permanency planning hearing for children in care must occur within 12 months of a child's entry into care. At the hearing, there must be a determination of whether and when a child will be returned home; placed for adoption, with a termination of parental rights (TPR) petition filed; referred for legal guardianship; or placed in another planned permanent living arrangement if the other options are not appropriate.

Despite the timeline established by this legislation, agencies and courts routinely exceed it. In an analysis I conducted for the Children's Bureau examining findings from stakeholder interviews conducted during the Child and Family Service Reviews, I found that courts' reluctance to order a TPR contributed to a rating of "area needing improvement" in 46% of all states across three related performance items. In some states, stakeholders identified a general reluctance on the part of courts to order TPR, citing a concern for parents' rights and judges who "do not believe in termination of parental rights," among other reasons.

I also found that courts allowing parents extra time to comply with orders was an area needing improvement for the majority (56%) of states. Regarding this issue, many stakeholders noted that—despite years of failed efforts by parents, substantial violation of state and federal permanency timelines, and agencies' vehement advocacy to the contrary—judges often allowed parents a great deal of extra time to comply with court orders. Stakeholders also noted that this problem is exacerbated when there are concerns about parental substance abuse because courts give parents even more time to comply with case plans in these cases. This prolonged timeline can be a deterrent for foster care adoption seekers.

Concurrent Case-Planning

As discussed in more detail above, under ASFA regulations, caseworkers are required to implement concurrent case plans. As a result, most adoption seekers serve as foster parents or "resource parents" prior to adopting in what is sometimes called a "fost-adopt" or a concurrent planning placement.[13]

For general applicants who are primarily interested in adoption, supporting the goal of reunification may be challenging. For instance, foster-adoptive parents often must facilitate visits with birth parents, even though such visits strengthen the birth parent's case for reuniting with the children, thus undermining the chances that the foster parents can adopt the children. The knowledge that they might face this type of circumstance may deter prospective parents from foster care adoption in the first place.

Additionally, concurrent case-planning may deter couples and individuals who seek a risk-free adoption and are not interested in fostering a child who they are unable to adopt, much less becoming involved with that child's siblings and parents. Agencies ask prospective parents to be willing to make these relationships permanent through adoption and yet be willing to relinquish the child if reunification efforts succeed. Emotionally, this can be challenging for prospective adoptive parents as well as for children already living in the foster home. Thus, prospective adoptive parents who know they will have difficulty accepting an outcome of reunification may drop out early in the process.

Risk and Uncertainty in Foster Care Adoption

Foster care adoption involves a number of risks and uncertainties that are not present in other family-building strategies. Some risks and uncertainties are reduced through foster care adoption, while others are heightened.

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[13] The term "resource parent" serves as a catchall phrase for foster, preadoptive, concurrent planning, and adoptive family placements.

A factor that sets adoption apart from building one's family through birth is the absence of biological relatedness between the parent and child. Bachrach explains the significance of this factor as follows:

> Biological relatedness carries with it the certainty of similarity of background and the likelihood of similarity of genetically transmitted characteristics; it also confers upon the child an unequivocal basis for integration into the family, an integration that must be achieved through other means in the adoptive family. (Bachrach et al., 1991)

This absence of relatedness creates uncertainty about the characteristics the adopted child will have. Upon learning more about the backgrounds and characteristics of children in foster care, some adoption seekers may be deterred by the information they learn.

From the standpoint of *reducing* risk and uncertainty, foster care adoption can enable seekers to select certain child characteristics, such as gender, age, and even personality type. Additionally, adoption seekers who serve as foster parents are able to observe the child's characteristics and the child's interaction with the family before finalizing the adoption. Thus, prospective adoptive parents may make the decision about whether or not to accept the placement after they have already met the child. Once the child is placed with them, prospective adoptive parents may choose to terminate the placement. This contrasts with private and international adoption, as well as biological parenting.

On the other hand, as discussed above, increasing numbers of prospective adoptive parents find themselves caring for children who are not legally free for adoption, and there is a risk that the placement will be disrupted. This can occur for any number of reasons, including child reunification with biological or stepparents or a caseworker's decision that a different placement (such as with kin) is in the child's best interests. This instability will deter individuals unwilling to accept this type of risk. Some seekers who have a history of unsuccessful efforts at family building may not want to risk becoming attached to a child who is then removed. Other seekers may be deterred out of concern about how such instability would affect the children they already have.

On balance, I believe that this risky aspect of foster care adoption will outweigh the risk-reducing aspects of it, and the net result will be that those who are unwilling or unable to accept risk in family building will be more likely to drop out of the process. This risk aversion may be more likely among older childless couples and individuals, especially those with histories of unsuccessful family-building efforts. On the other hand, couples and individuals who are in this situation might be especially determined to form families (because they feel they are approaching the end of the period when adoption or child-bearing is possible) and therefore more persistent and willing to tolerate the risk. Those who came into the process underestimating the degree of risk involved in adopting children

in foster care will be more likely to drop out if and when they gain a more realistic view of the risks.

Open Adoption

Concern about open adoption may increase the chances of attrition among prospective parents. Open adoptions entail identity disclosure for both sets of parents (biological and adoptive) to all parties involved. Contact between the biological parents and children is generally maintained and facilitated by the adoptive parents. Statistics on the percentage of foster care adoptions that are open are not available. However, with the emphasis on concurrent planning, most prospective adoptive parents should expect to have some contact with the birth parents, especially if reunification efforts are still in progress.

In her review of the literature, Berrick (2008) finds that, while most adoptive parents are satisfied with open adoption arrangements, it appears that contact between birth parents and adoptees diminishes over time (at the birth parents' instigation). Some prospective adoptive parents may not want to participate in open adoptions because they wish to make a permanent separation from the child's difficult past. They also may not want to become involved in the complexities of the birth parents' lives. Thus, even though the literature suggests that most adoptive parents are satisfied with open adoptions, I believe that many prospective foster adoptive parents are likely to view the possibility of mandatory ongoing contact as a deterrent.

Summary of Hypotheses

Table 2.2 below summarizes the characteristics of adoption seekers and the ways these characteristics impact the likelihood that they will drop out of the foster care adoption-seeking process.

Table 3.2: Characteristics of Adoption Seekers and Dropout Factors

Characteristic of Adoption Seeker	Mediating Factors	Increased Likelihood of Dropping Out?
High socioeconomic status	• High opportunity cost of time (possibly resulting in a lower threshold for bureaucratic red tape) • Able to pursue alternatives such as *in vitro* fertilization and private adoption	Yes
Low socioeconomic status	• Less likely to meet housing requirements • Less likely to pass background checks • Finds stipend insufficient • Concerned about cost of raising children	Yes
Highly altruistic	• Highly motivated to care for children in need of parents	No
Unable to have children	• More motivated to adopt in the absence of a biological alternative	No
Highly informed about foster care adoption	• Less likely to drop out due to misinformation about foster care adoption	No
Risk-averse	• Fearful of policies that may result in the child's reunification with biological parents • Concern that children in foster care are damaged and may have unforeseeable problems in the future	Yes
Not African American and living in a neighborhood with few or no African Americans	• Wait longer to receive a match (compared to African American prospective parents or prospective parents who live in racially mixed neighborhoods) due to agency to concerns about lack of racial concordance as well as minority status of children in schools	Yes
Prospective parent is a different race/ethnicity from that of the children in foster care	• Wait longer to receive a match (compared to prospective parents who are of the same race/ethnicity of available children), maybe due to the desire of the prospective parent or of the agency to achieve racial concordance	Yes

Examples of factors within the influence of agencies that could impact attrition include:

- agency-specific policies (e.g., paperwork and training, general requirements),
- quality of orientation and training,

- race matching policies that discriminate against otherwise qualified parents,
- quality of caseworkers, and
- quality of agency customer service.

Examples of factors that are beyond the influence of agencies include:

- federal and state policies that may have a deterring effect (such as concurrent planning, open adoptions, the level of adoption subsidy, paperwork, and training requirements);
- preferences of prospective parents for certain child characteristics, such as a specific gender or race/ethnicity;
- changes in personal circumstances among prospective parents (e.g., change in status of fertility, employment, partnership, residence, health, or support network);
- disagreement between spouses about whether or not to adopt; and
- insufficient income or housing on the part of prospective parents.

A factor that may fit into both categories is characteristics of children in foster care pertaining to age and psychological well-being. For example, if the agency is slow to terminate parental rights or slow to find concurrent planning placements, the available children will be older on average. Similarly, if the agency does not promote long-term, stable placements for children while they are in foster care, the children may be more likely to have attachment disorder.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Respondent Demographics

My research approach was qualitative and involved conducting open-ended semistructured interviews with respondents about the adoption-seeking process. Qualitative methods, such as case studies, focus groups, and interviews, are often the best method for gaining an understanding of an area where little is known or where previously offered understanding is inadequate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative methods are particularly useful if the objective is to "make sense of complex situations, multi-context data and changing and shifting phenomena," or "to learn from participants in a setting or a process the way they experience it, [including] the meanings they put on it" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Prior research on the reasons why prospective adoptive parents do not complete the process of adopting children in foster care has primarily consisted of two methods: (1) surveys administered online or through phone calls, and (2) open-ended questions asked in focus groups. Although these methodologies have their strengths, in-depth, in-person interviews with open-ended questions are often more informative, especially when collecting information about feelings, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and motives (Richardson, Dohrenwend, & Klein,1965). This approach enabled me to delve deeply into personal stories about the adoption-seeking process as well as controversial topics, such as respondent views on transracial adoption, the involvement of birth parents, and how socioeconomic status factors into attrition.

My research questions include the following:

- What initially motivated prospective adoptive parents to contact the agency to serve as adoptive parents?
- Why didn't they complete the process?
- Do their reasons for dropping out represent positive or negative attrition?
- Is this attrition within or beyond agency influence?
- Did they experience anything in the process of interacting with the agency that dissuaded them from adopting?
- What, if anything, could the agency have done better or differently to keep them engaged in the process?
- Are they still interested in serving as adoptive parents for children in foster care?
- Is their status in the process ultimately in the best interest of agencies and/or the children in foster care they serve?
- What is the role of race, class, and the characteristics of children in foster care in the attrition of prospective parents?

Description of Interview Respondents and Sampling Technique

I conducted a total of 64 interviews with couples and individuals within the following groups:

- *nonadopting applicants:* couples and individuals who contacted a social services agency to inquire about adoption who were not already serving as foster or adoptive parents and whom county agencies identified as having dropped out of the adoption-seeking process;
- *adopting applicants:* couples and individuals who had adopted a foster child; and
- *agency personnel:* agency caseworkers who were involved in adoptive parent recruitment, training, and licensing as well as the child/parent matching process.

Table 4.1 below shows the categories of interview respondents and the number of respondents I interviewed in each category.

Table 4.1: Categories of Interview Respondents

Respondent Category	Number Interviewed
Nonadopting general applicants	41
Adopting general applicants	10
Agency personnel	13
Total	**64**

The focus of my research was on the perspectives of couples and individuals who did not complete the foster care adoption process. Thus, the majority of my interview subjects (41 of the 64) consisted of couples and individuals who contacted foster care adoption agencies and who did not complete the adoption process.[14] My interview respondents were primarily from two California counties which I will refer to as "Mitchell" and "Whitman" counties.[15] In accordance with my research design, these respondents were general applicant prospective parents,

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[14] I did not interview couples and individuals whom the agency disqualified for reasons such as failure to pass criminal background checks and prior Child Protective Services (CPS) histories because the agencies did not release the contact information of applicants who were disqualified for these reasons.

[15] County names were changed to protect the identities of agency personnel. I also interviewed three respondents from outside areas (one from Multnomah County, Oregon, and two from Sonoma County, California). These three respondents are not included in the counts above or in charts containing demographic information about respondents because I wanted to limit my quantitative analyses to the two primary counties. However, when comments made by these respondents were particularly relevant to specific topics, such as open adoption or concurrent planning, I include excerpts from these interviews. My findings from these interviews were consistent with my findings from respondents from the two primary counties.

meaning they were not already serving as foster parents for children they hoped to adopt, nor did they seek to adopt the children of relatives. Additionally, I limited my sample to individuals who specified an interest in adoption or expressed a willingness to be "foster-adopt" or "concurrent" parents. Although I conducted some interviews with both members of a couple, I count these interviews as "one," and thus the counts above reflect a total count of households as opposed to individuals.

Respondents can be categorized into six groups, including individuals who

- called the agency to obtain information about serving as adoptive parents but did not attend an orientation,
- attended an orientation session but did not complete the application,
- completed the application during or after the orientation but did not complete a home study,
- completed the home study but did not attend training,
- completed the training, or
- adopted a foster child or children.

Figure 4.1 shows a breakdown of the percentage of respondents that fall into each of these categories, based on the last of six major steps in the adoption process that they completed. The distribution was roughly equivalent in the two counties with the exception of respondents who completed adoptions, all of whom were from Whitman County.

Figure 4.1: Respondents' Last Step Completed in the Adoption Process
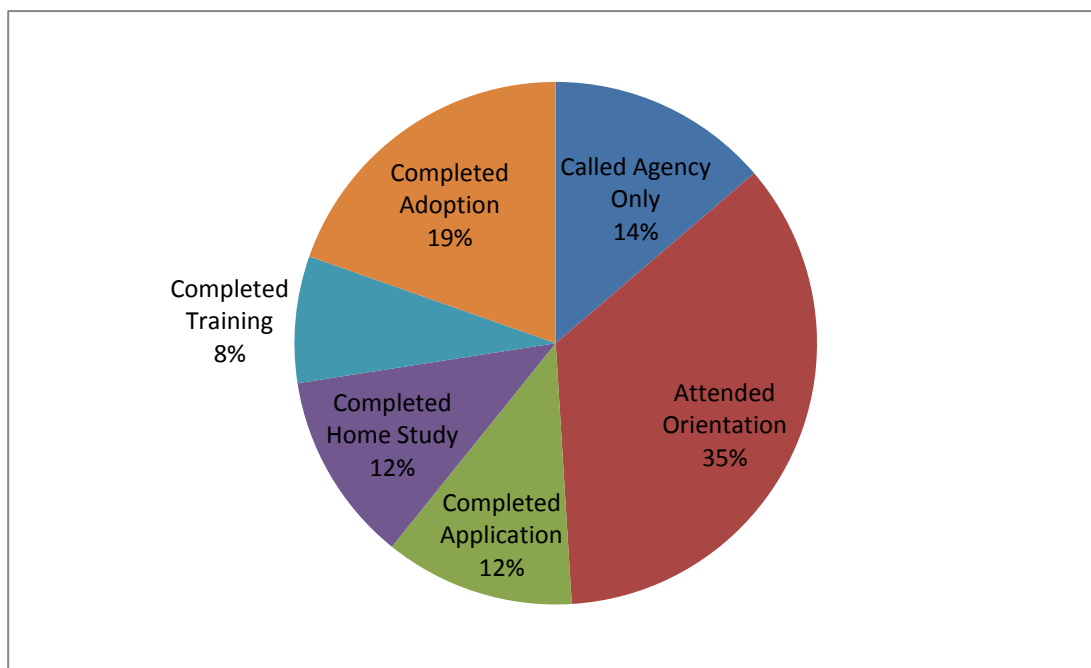
Sampling from two different counties enabled me to explore how different local-level policies and procedures impact the opinions and experiences of respondents. My sampling technique differed between the two counties due to differences in the county-level data collection techniques and data availability.

In Mitchell County, the agency tracks information on who calls and attends the orientation sessions in hard copy files. In July of 2007, the agency provided me with the contact information for couples and individuals who contacted the agency during the months of May and August 2006 and who did not attend an orientation, withdrew their applications, or did not complete some aspect of the process. I requested these months because I wanted to target a time period sufficiently distant that it seemed likely that these couples and individuals would not follow through, yet recent enough that the phone numbers and contact information would be current.

Out of the 133 couples and individuals who contacted Mitchell County to inquire about serving as adoptive or foster parents during these 2 months, 40 specifically indicated an interest in adoption. I called these candidates four to five times. Sixteen couples and individuals were willing to participate. Two of the household representatives I spoke with indicated that they did not wish to participate. The remainder did not answer the phone and did not call back (10) or had disconnected numbers (12). Mitchell County did not grant me access to couples or individuals who had adopted children in foster care for confidentiality reasons, so I was unable to interview any couples or individuals from this county who had adopted a foster child.

Whitman County tracks all prospective foster and adoptive parent inquiries via an electronic tracking system. A recruiter accepts and returns calls and tracks whether callers are interested in serving as foster-adoptive parents or foster parents only. In December 2008, the county provided me with a random sample of all couples and individuals who contacted the agency between January 1, 2007, and December 31, 2007, and had not become adoptive parents by April 2008, when I began seeking interviews. Twenty-five couples and individuals were willing to participate out of the 147 I contacted. Three of the household representatives indicated that they did not wish to participate. The remainder did not answer the phone and did not call me back (67) or had disconnected phone numbers (52).

I attribute the lower response rate in Whitman County, compared to Mitchell County, to the fact that more time had elapsed between the point of initial agency contact and the point in time when I sought my interviews. As a result, there were more disconnected numbers and possibly more couples and individuals who were simply no longer interested in discussing their prior interest in foster care adoption. Table 4.2 below summarizes the comparison of the two counties' response rates for those who did not adopt.

Table 4.2: Response Rate for Households Who Did Not Adopt

	No Response	Phone Disconnected	Refusals	Participants	Total
Mitchell	10	12	2	16	40
Whitman	67	52	3	25	147
Total	**77**	**64**	**5**	**41**	**187**
Percent	**41%**	**34%**	**<1%**	**22%**	**—**

In order to have a comparison group to draw upon, I also interviewed 10 couples and individuals who had already adopted a foster child. This population was not randomly selected. These couples and individuals were identified by the Whitman County recruiter because they were actively involved with adoptive parent support groups and training and recruiting activities. As shown in Table 4.3 below, the response rate among these 15 couples and individuals was 67%.

Given the selection process for the group of adoptive parents, one might expect this group to be biased in a positive direction about the foster care adoption process. However, as discussed in my findings section, while these individuals had many positive things to say about the foster care adoption process, they also had many insights into how it could be improved, and many shared hardships they experienced throughout the process. Table 4.3 summarizes the response rate for parents who had adopted a foster child.

Table 4.3: Response Rate for Adoptive Parents

	No Response	Disconnected	Refusals	Participants	Total
Whitman	4	0	1	10	15
Percent	**27%**	**0%**	**<1%**	**67%**	**—**

I also interviewed 13 agency staff—caseworkers, supervisors, and an agency director—about the adoptive parent recruitment process and issues related to attrition. This process enabled me to triangulate findings from interviews with adopting and nonadopting respondents and observe ways in which written federal, state, and local policy differs from practices described by the agency workers.

I conducted most of these interviews with Whitman employees due to the director's interest in participating in this research. In Whitman County, I was able to interview all personnel within the home-finding division, including the division supervisor, manager, recruiter, and caseworkers.

Although my access to Mitchell County staff was more limited, I was able to interview the agency director, the director of resource parent recruitment, and a

caseworker responsible for foster and adoptive home licensing. Table 4.4 below provides a breakdown of the categories of interviews I conducted with agency employees in each county.

Table 4.4: Interviews Conducted With Agency Personnel

Title	Whitman County	Mitchell County
Agency Executive Director	0	1
Division Manager	1	0
Recruitment Manager	1	1
Caseworker Supervisor	1	0
Caseworker	5	1
Foster Parent Liaison	1	0
Foster Parent Recruitment Volunteer	1	0
Total	**10**	**3**

Interview Methodology

My interview methodology was semistructured, meaning I asked almost the same set of questions of each interviewee within a given interview group, and unscheduled, meaning I changed the order in which I asked questions, depending on the flow of the interview. The longest interview took 4 hours, and the shortest took 30 minutes. The mean interview time was 2 hours. I conducted three interviews with both members of a couple. For the other interviews, either I spoke only with one member of the couple or the prospective parent was single. For consistency, I count the interviews with couples as one respondent.

Among adopting and nonadopting respondents, I conducted the majority of the interviews in person, at the homes of the respondents. I conducted the others by phone. I determined the interview locations based on the preferences and availability of the respondents. Among respondents who were agency personnel, I conducted most interviews at the county office headquarters in a private conference room or in the private office of the respondent. I informed respondents that I would not identify them by name but that I might quote them directly. Some respondents with unusual circumstances understood that they would likely be identified by their quotes and situations, and they consented to this disclosure.

Qualitative Analytic Methodology

I taped and transcribed interviews with the respondents' consent and input their responses into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Qualitative data analysis software allows researchers to be systematic in entering, structuring, coding, and retrieving data. This method of analysis reduces dependence on memory, which is biased toward storing recent, interesting, exciting, or disturbing

information, and instead gives researchers the capacity to examine broader patterns through coding and search functions (Abramson, 2009; Abramson, 2011; Dohan & Sánchez-Jankowski, 1998).

Upon entering all interview data into NVivo, I analyzed each interview and coded for themes using a method known as free coding. This method involves creating and coding for themes as they arise, rather than coding for a preconceived list of themes. Examples of themes I observed and coded for included "dissatisfaction with agency" or "fear of legal risk placements" or "concern about characteristics of foster children." Upon creating the codes, I used NVivo to quantify them in order to determine which among them were the most common.

In addition to free coding, I also coded a specific set of case characteristics for each respondent. They included demographic data, such as age, gender, and educational status, as well as other readily quantifiable information, such as motivation for pursuing foster care adoption or the last step completed in the adoption process. Reporting tools provided by NVivo enabled me to explore patterns in viewpoints expressed in interviews based on various demographic characteristics, such as reason for dropping out by race and level of income.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study is limited by the validity, generalizability, and reliability of my results. In terms of validity, my interpretations and conclusions are subject to my judgment and are therefore susceptible to bias. Although my methodology and the use of qualitative analytic software safeguards against this to some extent, it is impossible to completely eliminate the subjectivity and potential for bias that is endemic to this type of research.

Another limitation involves the issue of whether these results can be generalized to other populations. Due to the small sample size and variations across agencies and counties in how foster care adoptions are conducted throughout the state of California and the country, it is difficult to extrapolate findings to other populations or form far-reaching conclusions from this study.

Qualitative research also presents problems involving reliability, i.e., the ability to reproduce the study with consistent results. Another researcher might ask interview questions a different way and receive different responses to questions and may ultimately draw different conclusions.

Additionally, my findings provide a snapshot of what was occurring in two counties at a particular point in time. Over time, practices and staffing patterns change and are therefore subject to improvement or further challenges. For instance, in the year after I conducted interviews in Whitman County, 36 percent of the workforce was cut due to state and county budget reductions. Such a

change would have likely skewed results in various directions had I conducted my interviews with respondents who contacted the agency at a later point in time.

Another limitation of this study is that males are underrepresented. Only four of the 51 primary respondents were male (two who adopted and two who did not). As discussed further in the findings section, some primary respondents indicated that they did not complete the process because their (male) spouse did not support the idea of foster care adoption. This may be an area worth examining further with a larger sample or a targeted sample.

I obtained demographic data reported here in the course of my interviews and not through any information provided to me by the agencies. As a result, I am unable to compare the demographics of these respondents to those who did not respond.

Respondent Demographics

It is worth spending some time considering the demographics of my sample population for a few reasons. This information may be informative about who is likely to consider adoption in these counties and can lead to more targeted recruitment strategies. From a policy perspective, it is useful to investigate whether there are relationships between various demographics, such as race or income levels, and dropout reasons, as well as how income relates to who is drawn to becoming an adoptive parent and why.

As mentioned above, the pool of adopting respondents in Whitman County was not randomly selected, whereas the pool of nonadopting respondents I contacted in both counties were randomly selected. Actual respondents were not a random sample, but selected based on their willingness to participate in the research. That being said, in the year preceding my research in Whitman County, a volunteer from this county had been successfully recruiting prospective parents at her church in a wealthy suburban community within this county. Her efforts may have resulted in a higher-than-usual number of affluent candidates, as shown in the data below.

I collected demographic information on respondent age, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, income level, employment status, level of education, religious affiliation, and number of children in the home. As mentioned above, for consistency, I report my interviews with couples in terms of one potential placement (i.e., a household) and therefore combine the information for couples as follows: For education, I report the higher-educated value. For income, I combine the income of both members of the couple. For gender, age, race/ethnicity, employment status, and gender, I report the characteristics of the respondent who was my primary point of contact in scheduling the interview.

Age

The average age of adopting respondents was 49, and the average age of nonadopting respondents was 45. Figure 4.2 below shows the age distribution of nonadopting respondents.[16]

Figure 4.2: Age of Nonadopting Respondents
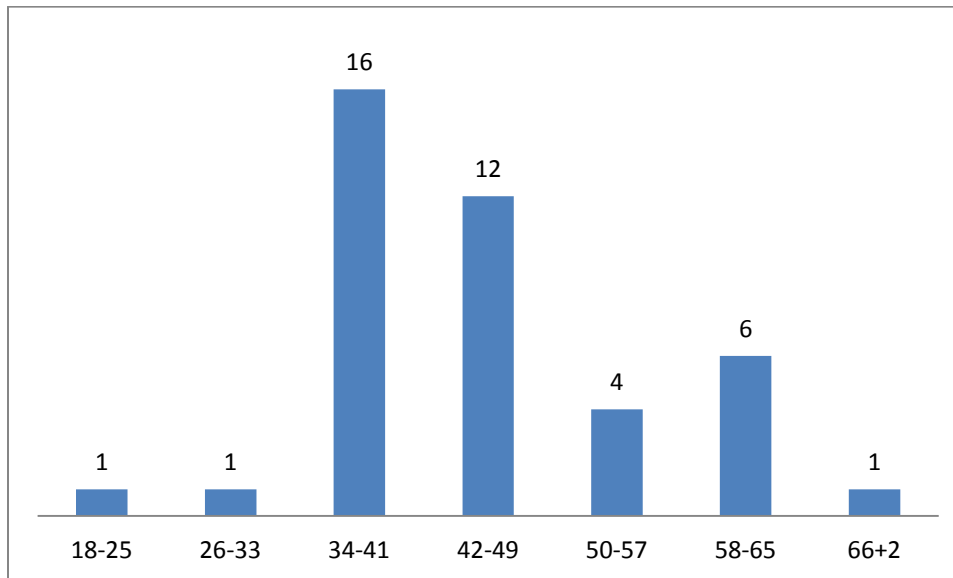
Income and Employment Status

The median self-reported household income for nonadopting respondents in Mitchell County was $55,000. This figure is lower than the county median of $70,217. The median self-reported household income for nonadopting respondents in Whitman County was $87,000. This level is higher than the county median of $78,469. The median household income for nonadopting respondents in both counties was $70,000. Figure 4.3 below shows the income distribution of nonadopting respondents for both counties.

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[16] For all demographic information reported, I show charts and tables only for nonadopting respondents due to the small sample size of adopting respondents.

Figure 4.3: Income Level of Nonadopting Respondents
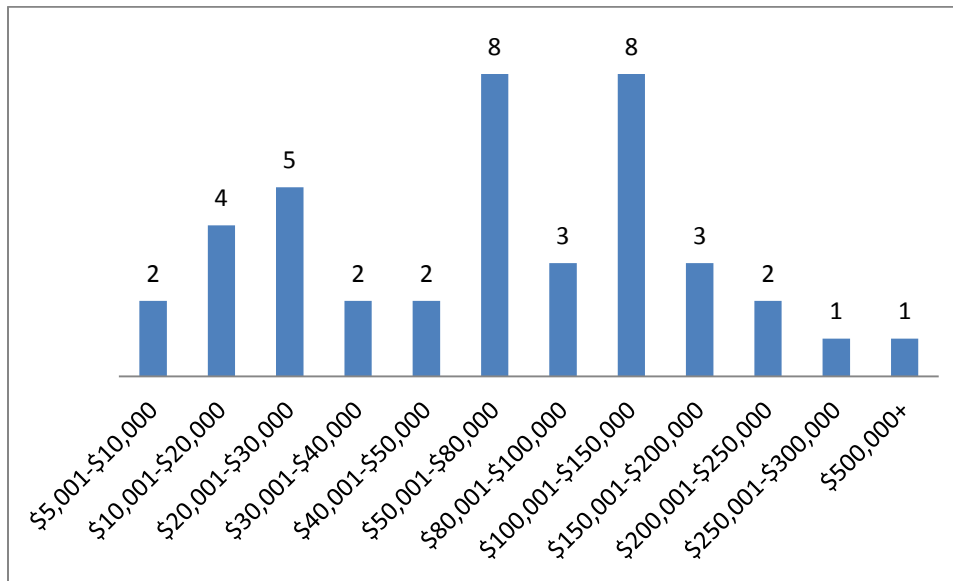
The median income of adopting respondents was $100,000. This level is higher than the median income of nonadopting respondents.

Figure 4.4 below shows the employment status of nonadopting respondents. Most were employed full time, with some being employed part time, retired, unemployed, or homemakers.

Figure 4.4: Employment Status of Nonadopting Respondents
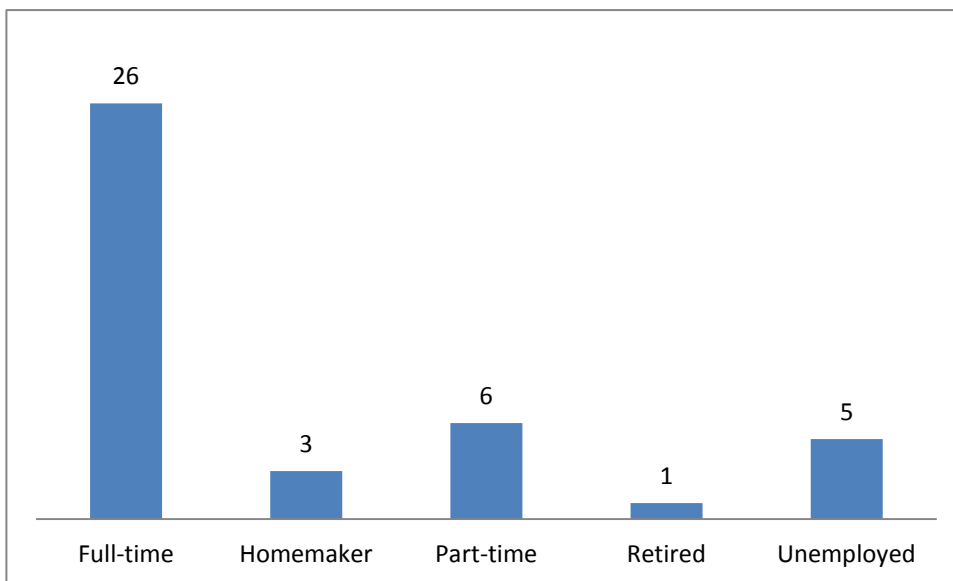
The employment status of adopting respondents was similar to that of those who did not adopt except that none was unemployed and there were proportionally more homemakers in relationships with partners who worked full time.

Education Level

Figure 4.5 below shows the education level of nonadopting respondents. Compared to the average educational level in both counties, the population of nonadopting respondents is slightly more educated.

Figure 4.5: Education Level of Nonadopting Respondents
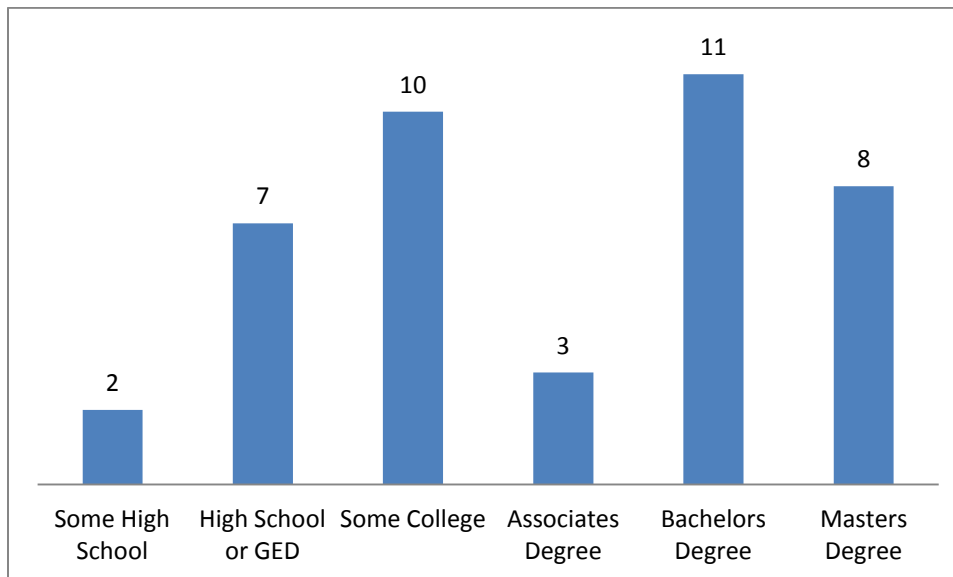
Adopting respondents were more educated than nonadopting respondents, with the entire former group having received at least some college-level education.

Race/Ethnicity

Figure 4.6 below shows the race/ethnicity of nonadopting respondents. Compared to the population for both counties, African Americans are overrepresented. The overrepresentation may be attributed to targeted recruiting of African American prospective adoptive parents in their communities and churches. If this is the case, it would indicate that the component of MEPA-IEP that requires enhanced recruitment efforts among minority populations is working effectively in these counties. Whether they complete the adoption process or not is another question, explored in more detail in the subsequent sections.

Figure 4.6: Race or Ethnicity of Nonadopting Respondents
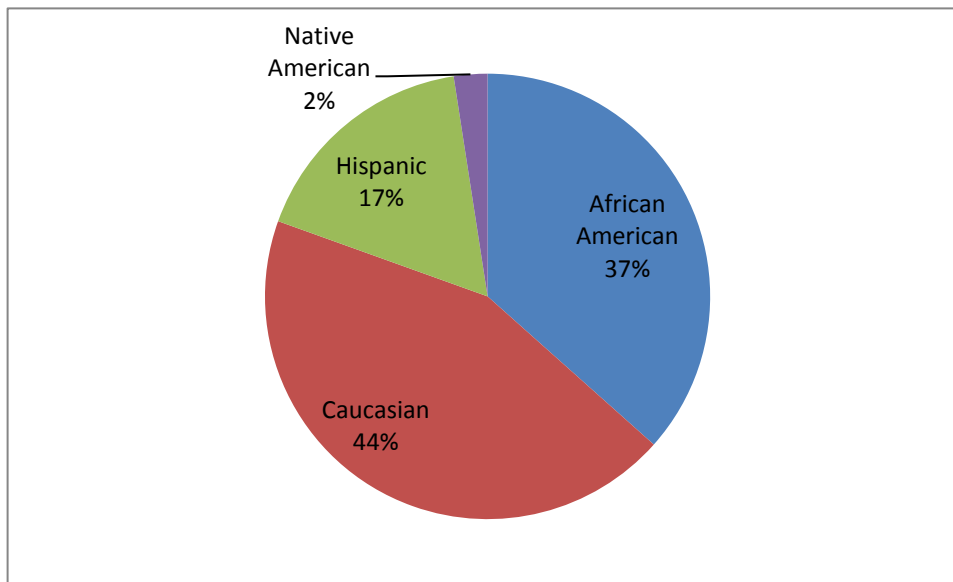
Relationship Between Race/Ethnicity and Income

Figure 4.7 below shows the various income levels of respondents by racial category. This level of analysis is important because I hypothesize that respondents are likely to have different reasons for dropping out based on issues of race and class and provide a discussion of findings using these categories.

I grouped the income levels as follows:

- Low: $8,000-$37,000
- Medium: $37,001-$100,000
- High: $100,001+

As shown in the chart below, proportionally more African American respondents were low income while proportionally more Caucasian and Hispanic respondents were in the medium and high-income categories.

Figure 4.7: Income Level by Race of Nonadopting Respondents
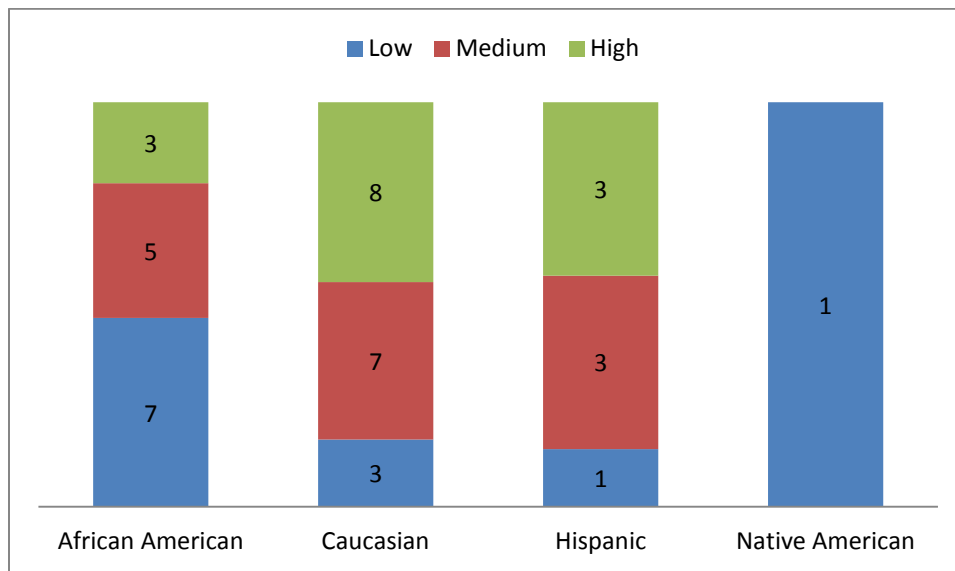
Religion

Respondents were evenly split among those who identified themselves as religious and those who did not. Given that many respondents were recruited through their churches, I would have expected a higher percentage to identify as religious, but this was not the case.

Number of Children Respondents Ever Had and Number of Children Living in the Home

I asked respondents how many children they had ever had as well as how many children they had living in the home with them at the time of the interview. Figure 4.8 below shows the number of children respondents had ever had as well as the number of children living in the home with them at the time I conducted the interview. The largest proportion of respondents fit into the category of never having had children and having no children in the home with them. However, nine respondents with no children living in their homes had had at least one child.

Figure 4.8: Number of Children Respondents Ever Had Grouped by Number of Children Living in the Home
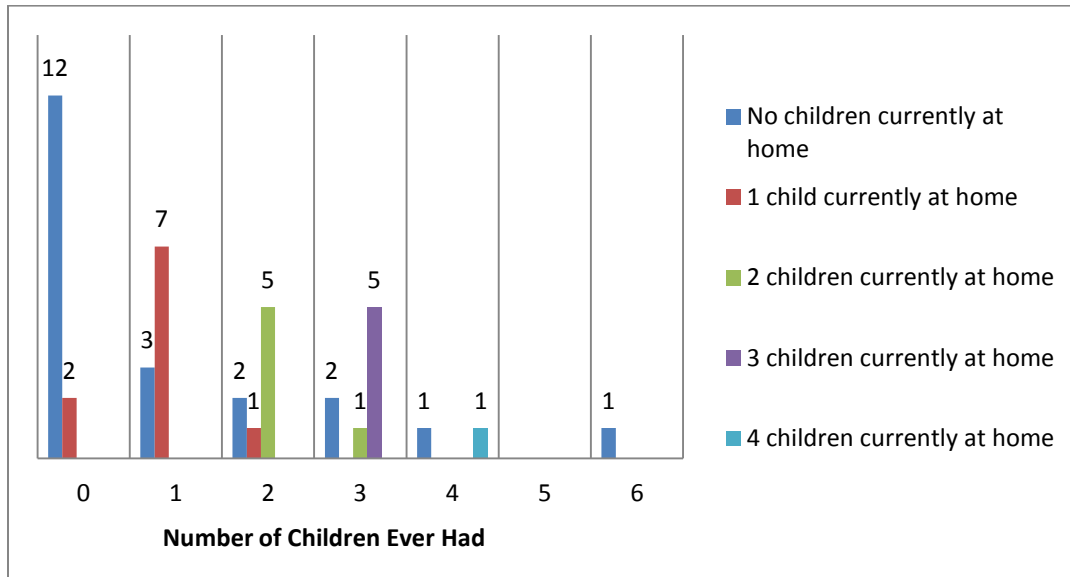
Marital Status and Sexual Orientation

As shown in Figure 4.9 below, most nonadopting respondents were married. The next-highest category was single, followed by partnered, widowed, and divorced. This distribution was similar among adopting respondents.

Figure 4.9: Marital Status of Nonadopting Parents
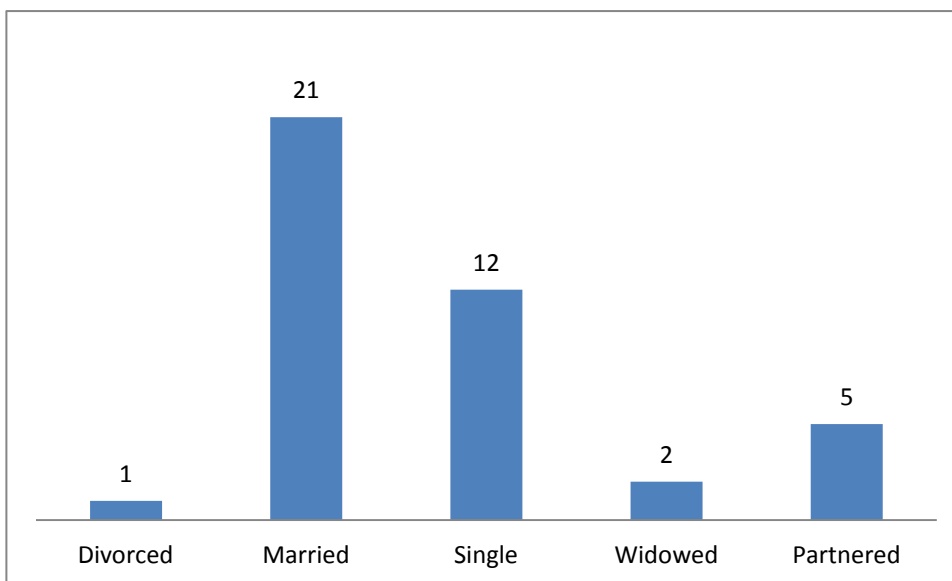
In terms of sexual orientation, 36 of the nonadopting respondents identified as heterosexual, and five identified as gay or lesbian. Among adopting respondents, nine identified as heterosexual and one identified as gay or lesbian.

Summary of Respondent Demographics

Table 4.5 below provides details of respondent demographics including nonadopting and adopting respondents. Overall, this population sample was quite diverse, thus enabling me to explore the perspectives of respondents across a wide spectrum of ages, income, and education levels, as well as a diversity of races and ethnicities. Nonetheless, as mentioned in the limitations section, males are underrepresented in this study. Only four of the primary respondents were male, although males were present during interviews with couples in which the primary respondent was a female, so the gender of the respondents in the "couple" interviews are coded as "female."

Table 4.5: Demographics of Nonadopting and Adopting Respondents

Variable	Nonadopting Respondents	Adopting Respondents
Gender (primary respondent)		
Female	39	8
Male	2	2
Age Range (primary respondent)		
18-25	1	0
26-33	2	0
34-41	14	3
42-49	13	3
50-57	4	3
58-65	6	0
66+	1	1
Race/Ethnicity (primary respondent)		
African American	15	0
Caucasian	18	9
Hispanic	7	1
Native American	1	0
Highest Level of Education Received (household)		
No high school or GED	2	0
High school or GED	7	0
Some college, no bachelor's degree	13	1
Bachelor's degree	11	6
Master's degree or higher	8	3
Employment Status (primary respondent)		
Full-time	26	9

Homemaker	3	0
Part-time	6	0
Unemployed	5	0
Retired	1	1
Household Income		
Under $20,000	6	0
$20,001-$30,000	6	0
$30,001-$40,000	2	0
$40,001-$50,000	2	2
$50,001-$80,000	8	2
$80,001-$100,000	2	3
$100,001-$150,000	8	3
$150,001-$200,000	3	0
$200,001+	4	0
Marital Status		
Married	22	8
Partnered	4	1
Divorced	1	0
Single (never married)	12	0
Widowed	2	1
Sexual Orientation (primary respondent)		
Heterosexual	36	9
Gay or lesbian	5	1

Demographics of Agency Personnel

Below is a summary of the demographics of the agency personnel I interviewed:

- *Gender:* 10 female, 3 male
- *Race/ethnicity:* 8 White, 2 African American, 2 Hispanic,1 Filipina
- *Average age:* 53
- *Average number of years practicing social work*: 18
- *Educational attainment*: 11 Masters in Social Work, 1 Registered Nurse, 1 Marriage and Family Therapist, 1 Masters in Public Administration

Chapter 5: Findings on Respondent Perspectives

In this chapter, I describe findings from interviews with respondents, including adopting and nonadopting prospective parents as well as caseworkers involved in the adoption process. I describe the motivation nonadopting respondents had for pursuing foster care adoption coupled with caseworkers' perspectives on their motivation. I then describe respondent feedback on each step of the adoption seeking process. I conclude with a summary of reasons given by nonadopting respondents for dropping out. Additionally, I provide a demographic analysis of nonadopting respondent data.

Motivation for Pursuing Foster Care Adoption

Understanding what motivated nonadopting respondents to pursue a foster care adoption can provide insights into improving recruitment and retention practice as well as inform us about whether this attrition is positive. For instance, the attrition of nonadopting respondents who were primarily motivated by financial incentives might be seen as positive because the amount of the stipend is low relative to the costs of caring for a child. Additionally, more altruistic reasons, such as the desire to help children in foster care or build one's family, might be more predictive of adoption success.

Below is a summary of the primary and secondary motivations nonadopting respondents had for pursuing foster care adoption. As shown in Figure 5.1 below, the most common motivation was the desire to help children in foster care, followed by the desire to build a family. Additional reasons included the inability to have children, the recommendation of a friend, and the financial incentive. Note that these reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As I discuss in more detail below, respondents often described the desire to help children in foster care in tandem with other reasons.

Figure 5.1: Primary and Secondary Motivations for Pursuing Foster Care Adoption
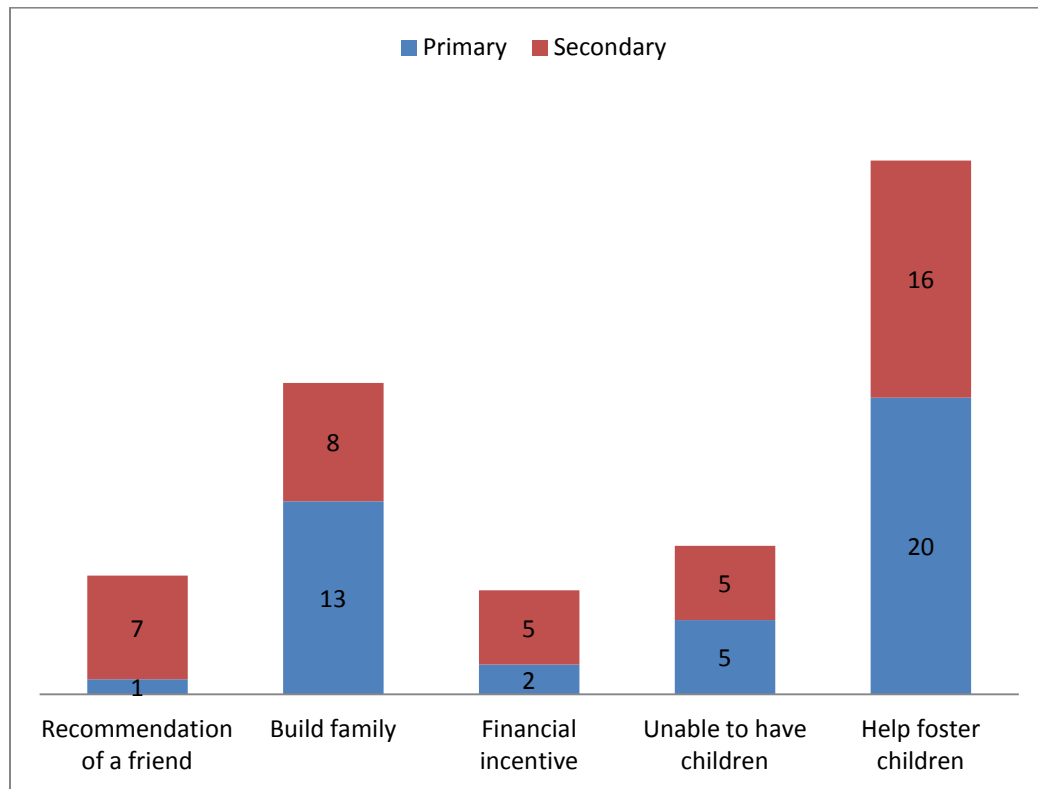
Caseworker perspectives on what motivates prospective parents to inquire about adoption were consistent with what respondents said about their own motivations, with some exceptions.

One caseworker summarized the different types of applicants as follows:

> We have two kinds of adoptive applicants. We have community-minded people who want to do something really nice for the community and want to give back. They've been successful parents, they have had a wakeup call, and something has inspired them to open their hearts and homes to a stranger and let them in. Then we have another group of people who want to build a family. This includes what I call "replacement baby people" [meaning people who want another baby] as well as the people who couldn't produce their own children.

Indeed, this caseworker's perspective is consistent with the two most common reasons given for pursuing foster care adoption, as shown in Figure 5.1 above, the most common reason being helping children in foster care and the second most common reason being family building (which may or may not be related to the reason given of being unable to have children). However, these motivations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Below I discuss the various motivations

in detail in order of their frequency. Unless otherwise specified, my findings are based on the perspectives of respondents who did not complete the process (nonadopting respondents). Where applicable, I include the perspectives of adopting respondents as well as caseworkers to supplement the perspectives of nonadopting respondents.

Desire to Help Children in Foster Care

Most nonadopting respondents had multiple reasons for wanting to become adoptive parents, but the desire to help children in foster care was a component of most responses. Many made statements about "all the children in need of homes" and their desire to make a difference in the life of a child. I describe responses that fit within this broad category in more detail below.

- *Desire to "give back" to the community:* Respondents spoke about the desire to contribute to society by adopting a foster child. For instance, one respondent said, "I just wanted to share with others like I did with my own kids.…I felt blessed. I just wanted to give back." Along these lines, a caseworker said:

  > We tend to have people that have big hearts. They say, "Everyone else wants those little White healthy babies, but we want the children who would be left behind." Those are lovely families. Many are specifically are looking for older children or siblings groups. So their reasons are altruistic.

  Some respondents spoke about the benefits they had enjoyed living in an upper-or middle-class community and wanting to share their good fortune.

- *Desire to alleviate the suffering of children without families:* Several respondents expressed the belief that children in foster care are suffering, and they wanted to help alleviate this suffering. One respondent stated, "I know there's a lot of kids out there who don't have families, and that's why I want to do it. I know the state does the best that they can, but they need families to help those kids."

- *Personal experiences with children in foster care:* Personal experiences with children motivated several respondents to inquire with the agency. One woman was a police officer who heard from a co-worker about an abused infant who was failing to thrive. The officer began visiting the child, and she quickly became attached to him:

  > I went to see him at Children's Hospital. They said, "He's very hard to console. He cries and cries and cries." I said, "Oh, have you tried that mom trick where you rock back and forth?" I tried it and he stopped crying. I essentially became attached to this baby. I

62

had a day off and I spent 10 hours with him. The nurses were very grateful because they said, "We have so many children on the ward, and we need someone to hold him during feedings so he'll keep his food down." I was visiting him for a month and a half at the hospital, pretty much every day. It became a thing where I was, like, "Gosh, you know, I'm really getting attached to him."

This respondent contacted the agency because she was interested in adopting this particular child. Another couple became interested in serving as adoptive parents when their son told them about a baby he met while working for the county:

> [My son] got a job as a security guard at a children's place, like a hospital; there's a lot of rooms and a lot of beds and a place where the kids play. One day they brought in a little Black girl who was 3 months old. He said that he was on break, and the baby just caught his eye, and he said, "Can I take a peek at her?" And he went over and looked at her, and she stopped crying. The nurse let him hold her. He came home and he said, "Mom, you should try to adopt a child from this place." It turned out to be a county agency. So we called them.

In addition to being touched by the life of a specific foster child, it appears that adopting a baby in particular sparked the interest of these two respondents. It is also possible that the act of holding a seemingly parentless baby or hearing about a parentless baby sparked their interest.

- *Personal experiences with the foster care or adoption system:* Some respondents were motivated to adopt due to personal experience with the adoption or foster care system. Two respondents were former foster youth, one respondent was adopted, and another was raised by her grandmother who also cared for children in foster care. One respondent said, "I was a foster child, so all my life it's been easy for me to understand what the needs are of a kid that wants a family, that wants to be loved, regardless of where they started." Another said, "I was adopted, so I wanted to help another child that would need a happy family."

- *Difficult childhoods*: Some respondents were motivated by their own difficult childhood experiences. One respondent said:

> I was raised up pretty tough…. I never had a great life when I was coming up…so I said, "These kids didn't have to be [in foster care]. They deserve something better than I had." I been through a lot when I was young.... The things that have happened to me—my mother don't know—I never told her because it would break her heart. So that's why, with children, I want to help them.

- *Population control and helping the children who are already born:* Many respondents referred to population control, with one respondent saying, "There are so many children out there who need a home; instead of bringing in another child in the world, help out a child that's already here."

Build Family

Many respondents expressed a general desire to build their family through foster care adoption. These included the following groups:

- *Couples in a second marriage:* Several couples had adult children or stepchildren and were in their second marriages. These couples wanted to raise a child together but did not wish to (or were unable to) have additional children biologically. One respondent said, "We wanted to create a family as a married couple. Even though we both already have fully grown children, we are a new couple, and we wanted a child that would be ours."

- *Empty nesters (or soon-to-be empty nesters):* Others felt sad about their children growing up and leaving the home. A few had teenagers who were about to move out. For example, one respondent said, "When my child moves on, I'll probably want to get another child. Because I don't go out a lot; I'm a homebody. I had my children young. I'm 41, so when they move out, I'll be ready for another child."

- *General family builders:* Some respondents simply described wanting to build their families and take care of additional children. One respondent said, "I had three kids, but I had always wanted four." She went on to say that she preferred not to have a fourth child biologically because she wanted to help children in need.

Infertility

Many respondents described issues related to infertility as the reason they were motivated to adopt. For example, one respondent said:

We had decided we would probably have children, but we waited. We started trying when I was 36. We went through six pregnancies. One was full term. He died when he was 11 days old. We tried three surgeries, but the miscarriages kept happening, so I finally threw in the towel on that.

Even when respondents gave infertility as a motivating factor, the specific desire to help children in foster care was also a consideration:

I am not able to have kids unless I do *in vitro* fertilization [IVF]. I went to a meeting to get some information about IVF. My husband went to a meeting on foster care on the same day I went to the IVF meeting. He came back from his meeting excited, saying, "This is the way to go." I came back from my IVF meeting with the opposite reaction. IVF costs a lot of money, it can be painful, and there are no guarantees. Adoption seemed like a much more reasonable and worthy route to take. It seemed more selfish to say, "I could only love a child if I made it myself."

Caseworkers expressed particular concern about individuals motivated by infertility issues because, in the words of one caseworker, "a lot of them are still grieving their inability to have a child biologically, and they are not emotionally ready to adopt a foster child yet." Another said:

Parents who've suffered from a lot of loss, especially miscarriage, have a heightened need for control. They have a hard time dealing with court hearings and crazy rulings from judges. They just can't tolerate the uncertainty. Our parents with infertility issues don't have strength. They've been wounded in battle.

Although this was a commonly held perspective among the caseworkers I interviewed, it did not seem applicable to the respondents who were motivated by infertility issues, with some exceptions. Two respondents I interviewed were frank about their emotional vulnerability after being unable to conceive children biologically, and these two respondents opted for private adoptions to reduce the risk and uncertainty involved in foster care adoption.

Recommended by Friends

Many respondents spoke about an inspirational friend, coworker, or speaker at church as a factor that motivated them to pursue foster care adoption. For instance, one respondent said:

There's a woman who works for the agency named Linda.[17] She goes to church [with us], and she has given talks at our church. I've seen a lot of successes in this community with people who have adopted. The fact that she's getting the word out in her own community has inspired more people here to adopt. I've known two or three families who have adopted [in my community].

Some respondents had also attended a volunteer fair sponsored by their church that was encouraging foster care adoption.

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[17] All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the respondents and the individuals they describe.

A few respondents attended an orientation simply to accompany and support a friend who was interested in foster care adoption.

Financial Motivation

Some respondents were interested in foster care adoption because they had heard about the stipend for fostering. Although they were not necessarily interested in adoption per se, they said they wanted to increase their chances of having a child placed with them by showing a willingness to be a concurrent planning placement.

Very few respondents spoke freely about being motivated by the stipend itself; most talked about wanting to help children in foster care but at the same time believing that caring for them would bring in extra income. Many of the respondents who expressed this need were unemployed, on public assistance, or on disability insurance and had subsidized housing such as Section 8.[18] One respondent said, "I was already taking care of everyone else's children for free, so I thought, why not do something for myself? Why not get paid?"

According to caseworkers, applicants who are primarily motivated by the stipend are likely to be more interested in fostering than adopting. One caseworker said, "I think people who come because of money are either poor and they want to increase their income or because Section 8 told them they could have a bigger house if they become a foster parent." Caseworkers expressed concern about this as a sole motivating factor because, as one caseworker stated, "it's pretty hard to make any money off of fostering unless you are seriously cutting corners meeting the needs of the kids."

Precipitating Factors for Taking the First Step in the Adoption Process

In addition to understanding what motivated prospective parents to pursue foster care adoption, I was also interested in learning whether there was a precipitating factor that moved a prospective parent from thinking about foster care adoption to actually inquiring with an agency or attending an orientation. Many respondents said they had thought about foster care adoption for a very long time, but there was a precipitating factor that caused them to call the agency for the first time.

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[18]Section 8 of the Housing Act of 1937 (42 U.S.C. § 1437f), often simply known as "Section 8," authorizes the payment of rental housing assistance to private landlords on behalf of low-income households.

Several respondents said that a television or radio advertisement motivated them to take the first step. Comments on this included:

- "This TV show gave us a phone number, and I called them, and they said, 'We don't know who those children are. You need to contact your county, and then the county will call them.' I wanted to adopt those specific children. I was disappointed and frustrated because I had my heart set on those kids. But the county redirected me to consider other children."

- "We kept seeing the children on television, and that's why I decided to do it. Because at that time they had a lot of children shown that they needed homes, and we love little toddlers."

- "My son and I were watching TV, and we saw a commercial for if you're interested in being an adoptive parent. So I called the phone number."

- "I heard about the agency and obtained the number from a radio advertisement that was on a Spanish radio station."

- "We had just moved, and I was missing my grandchild. And then my husband and I saw this program on TV about adopting foster children, and I knew I wanted to do that."

Many respondents also said that someone close to them, such as a coworker or a friend, had recently adopted, and that made them feel motivated to do the same.

Others described reading media accounts of children in foster care as being a precipitating factor. For example, one respondent said she was motivated by the book, *A Child Called It*, saying, "I was probably depressed for 2 weeks after reading that book. I wanted to find that man and just take care of him."

Perspectives on Steps in the Adoption-Seeking Process and Reasons Given for Dropping Out

In this section, I describe my findings from respondent descriptions of the adoption-seeking process. I include respondent feedback on what is working well and what needs improvement in the process. Where applicable, I include the perspectives of adopting respondents as well as caseworkers to supplement the perspectives of nonadopting respondents. Upon analyzing the data from the interviews, I was able to identify themes and form categories of reasons given for dropping out.

I asked the respondents about any reservations they had had *before* they contacted the agency, since I was interested in any preconceived ideas they had held prior to attending the orientation or training and how these ideas changed afterward. However, among respondents who had attended orientation or classes, it was difficult to distinguish between their perspectives before versus after the orientation. As a result, I was unable to determine whether new information obtained at the orientation caused them to delay or terminate the process or whether reservations they had had from the outset would have deterred them regardless of what they learned in the orientation. Due to my inability to make this distinction, I discuss respondent reservations about becoming adoptive parents and reasons for dropping out of the process within the same context.

Initial Contact With Agency

Based on my review of the literature, I expected to find that one of the reasons prospective parents dropped out of the adoption process was that their initial contact with the agency was problematic. Prior studies have found that problems included an inability to reach a person rather than a machine, slow response time, lack of clarity about the correct number to call, and unfriendly workers (Geen et al., 2005; Wilson, et al., 2005).

At both agencies, the responsibility for the front-end work of fielding calls from prospective applicants and sending information packets rests with a single caseworker. The exception to this is that service to the Spanish-speaking population is handled by a caseworker who also manages the home licensing process for Spanish-speakers.

I found that, while some respondents were frustrated with this aspect of the process, only one respondent gave this as a reason for dropping out of the process altogether. Respondent feedback on this first step was mixed and somewhat polarized, with some respondents in both counties either having very positive feedback and or being very critical of the agencies at this first step.

Respondents who were pleased with their initial agency contact spoke about the personalized service they received and the responsiveness of the agencies. Examples of positive comments included:

- "The director of recruitment answered when I called. She kept saying how glad she was that I was interested."

- "I called and I spoke to [a caseworker]. She gave me a lot of hope that I could adopt. She was very friendly and very professional."

- "I reached a machine. I left a message, and then she left a message, and then I called back. I spoke with [a caseworker]. She walked me through the classes and what to expect."

- "It was simple and straightforward."

- "Someone called me back right away."

- "I had to leave a message, but then they were really good about getting back to you."

All but one respondent received information packets shortly after contacting the agency.

Among respondents who felt this aspect of recruitment and retention was lacking, a few indicated that the agencies should have been more responsive during the initial contact. One woman noted, "Since at first no one called me back, I felt like I wasn't needed." Another respondent stated, "We live in a fast-paced society. If you don't get a response, you might go look somewhere else. People might get the message that the agency doesn't need me that bad or they'd call me back." Another respondent said:

> I feel like I *really* wanted to be an adoptive parent, and I will once we're more stable. But initially, I wondered: Do they need people? Do they want people? Am I even calling the right place? I'm not getting a phone call back. When they did call me back, all they did was take down my information, and I got a packet from them. There was no encouragement from them.

One respondent indicated that the lack of response caused her to look elsewhere (specifically at an FFA). A few noted that a more personalized response would have made the difference, with one respondent saying, "I think if the agency would have called me and said, 'We're saving a seat for you,' I would have been there. Feeling they're expecting me would have made me come." Another said, "It would be good for them to have people on the phone who at least pretended they cared rather than just taking our information and sending us a packet." An adoptive parent said:

> I didn't have any difficulties finding the number because my husband had the contact of the woman from work who had just adopted siblings. She was full of praise for the process and the support and all that, so I think she was probably the one who said, "Hey, there's an orientation. Do you want to go? I'll go with you." She was right there to support him. I think if it wasn't for her, we might not have known who to contact or where to go.

As noted above, despite the frustration expressed by these respondents, only one said that her initial contact with the agency (or lack of contact) discouraged her from taking the next step. A few couples speculated that perhaps the agency was slow to respond because it did not have enough staff.

Caseworkers involved in this aspect of the process confirmed that, indeed, they are resource-constrained, and they felt this affected their ability to provide the level of customer service and "hand-holding" they wished they could offer. A caseworker responsible for recruitment and licensing said she was unable to follow up with parents as quickly as she wished she could.

The polarized nature of the opinions on the first step may be due to a few different factors. One factor could simply be timing; those respondents who felt the agency was responsive might have contacted the agencies at a time when the caseworkers were less overwhelmed and therefore were able to respond quickly. In contrast, those respondents who felt that agency follow-up was lacking might have contacted the agencies at a time when workloads were heavier, thus causing shortcomings in customer service. Because Spanish-speaking respondents were more likely to express frustration with this step, another possible explanation is that the Spanish-speaking caseworkers involved with this process are overburdened.

Feedback on Accessing the Agency

In order for adoptive parent retention to be effective, it is important that prospective parents can easily access the information about the process they need to move forward. Table 5.1 below is a summary of how the respondents reached the agency and whether they said obtaining the correct information was easy or difficult.

Table 5.1: How Respondents Reached the Agency and Level of Difficulty

How Number Obtained	# of Respondents Using This Method	Described Level of Difficulty
Internet search	20	Difficult
Church outreach	8	Easy
Referral from another agency	5	Easy
Radio advertisement	4	Easy
Used old number from a prior adoption	1	Difficult (numbers changed)
Caseworker for specific child	1	Easy
Housing Authority	2	Easy

Among respondents who did not have a personal connection to the agencies, many had difficulties finding the correct number to call, especially in Mitchell

County. One respondent who used the phone book was unsuccessful in finding the correct number because she did not think it was listed in an intuitive way. She said:

> It was hard finding the number to call them in the first place. Even looking it up in the phone book, I couldn't find it. It wasn't under a name I would look it up under. Everybody calls it Social Services, but it's not under that. So you have to guess at what the government would call itself. I couldn't figure it out, so I had to use the Internet.

Internet users also had concerns about the accessibility of information, once they found the correct website. One respondent said:

> On the website, I thought the copy was good, but the links were broken. They better make sure their sites work and that they're doing search engine optimization to ensure their website is coming up. Some of the other links sent you in circles; there were no dates in the training session. Another had fliers that were January through July [months in the past]— why was that even up? That should be taken off and leave the one that goes through the end of the year. It could be that they're understaffed, but those things make an impression.

One respondent indicated that she did a Google search on "Bay Area adoption" and received information about adopting puppies from the Humane Society more easily than receiving information about adopting children from Mitchell County. She said, "What does that say about our priorities as a society? Agencies that place dogs are savvier at using the Internet to recruit homes than agencies that place children."

At the time I conducted my research, common search engines such as Google were more likely to display websites of private agencies than the county social service agencies' websites. Internet users also commented that, once they found the county websites, the information for prospective adoptive and foster parents was difficult to find, and the information provided was minimal. Based on this feedback, agencies may have room for improvement in listing parent recruitment information in the phone book and on their websites in a way that prospective parents can more easily access. If this information is difficult to find, prospective parents may be deterred or look elsewhere.

Orientation

For the most part, adopting and nonadopting parent respondents had positive things to say about how the agencies conducted orientations. Respondents were more positive about this step than about any other, with 13 respondents describing the orientation as "excellent" or using other similarly positive terms. Examples of such comments included:

- "The speakers…were very informative. I can't think of anything that they could have done differently. They had plenty of information and resources. If you did have questions they gave you other people you could talk to. They made it very comfortable so you could talk to foster parents. It was a pretty good atmosphere."

- "Frankly, the orientation was really well done. They answered questions very well, including what I considered to be some very difficult questions."

- "I thought the woman who did the orientation was great. She was a woman with three teenagers. She said she just loved babies. She didn't want to adopt. She was very experienced and articulate, and she did a great job."

- "The representative told us what type of children went into foster care and what types of parents they're recruiting. They told us, if you want an infant, that will take longer. There was a lady at the orientation that has been a foster parent for a long time, and she told us about her experience and showed us some photos of adopted children who have come through. They opened it up for questions and took our information. They were very clear and informative. We left with a really good understanding of what next steps would be."

A few respondents said that the orientation struck a good balance in terms of preparing applicants for the sometimes-challenging realties of foster care adoption. One respondent said, "The orientation was very realistic. They didn't try to cover anything up, and I think that is important." Another said:

> They did a good job scaring people. It was a little intimidating. They told you about all the things that could go wrong. There are a lot of responsibilities taking charge of a kid. It was kind of a rude awakening for those of us who showed up just to get a little more information. We really made sure that's what we wanted to do before we moved forward.

Respondents also had ideas for how the orientation could be improved. Several respondents felt that more details were needed about the steps involved in the adoption process and the typical timeline for adoption. Respondents said the agency should "be more honest" about the adoption timeline and how long it can take. Some respondents thought the tone of the orientation was overly negative. One respondent said:

> At the orientation, they prepare you for the worst. They really drive home that you may have this child for 2 or 3 years in your home and then, poof, they'll be gone. I understand it's a big emotional investment, so I can understand why they talk about that. But their whole discussion about

how important reunification is, when it's clear that in some cases you can't possibly think that that's the best thing for a lot of these children,…I think they should be clear that there are some cases in which reunification is realistic and some cases where it's not going to happen. If the child that you're looking at specifically is one of those that it's not appropriate to do reunification, they should go softer on that at the orientation so they don't scare everyone away.

Along these lines, various respondents had the following feedback:

- "They make everything sound like you can't get what you want—yet I've seen these people in Moraga get something perfect."

- "My advice to the agency is that they should give a little hope instead of all those scare stories."

- "If there are any kids who aren't drug-addicted, they could talk about those kids in the orientation. They could be more positive about the characteristics of the kids in foster care."

The orientation did not deter many respondents, and those who were deterred may have been exhibiting positive attrition since they learned new information that they did not know before and decided foster care adoption might not be a good fit for them. Again, overall, most respondents felt that the agencies did well in the orientation.

Completing the Adoptive Parent Application

Respondents commented on problems related to completing paperwork, including the adoptive parent application. Some felt that there was too much paperwork to complete. A few respondents said they wished that the agency would provide them with more help in completing the paperwork. Some respondents did not understand the content of the forms or how to complete them correctly. From the perspective of the caseworkers, one stated, "If the parents need that much hand-holding in filling out the paperwork, they are probably not the type of parent we are looking for. Adopting a foster child is going to be a lot more challenging than correctly filling out some forms." Another said:

Some people just don't have the time to do the application process.… We tell people: "This is just the beginning." It is a preview of what is to come. To me it's a good indicator; if they're not able to manage this, they're not going to be able to manage multiple calls from caseworkers, birth parents, and everyone else involved, especially in a concurrent planning case.

Another caseworker said:

We've gone through several ideas about whether we should help them more with the paperwork or give them money to do medical exams. My bias is, if they can't fill out forms for a home study and understand those types of forms, which are relatively simple, I don't think they can manage the rest.

These comments may be examples of agencies trying to create positive attrition—driving away inappropriate applicants with a paperwork hurdle. However, another caseworker said, "If I had more time, I would probably be able to help people more and follow up more."

Background Check

Once a prospective parent completes the adoptive parent application, a next step is completing the background check. For the home to be approved, all members of the household must show no convictions for certain crimes or records of substantiated child abuse or neglect. California code specifies that "approval of the application shall be denied if the applicant has convictions that would make his or her home unfit as a foster family home or a certified family home (Health and Safety Code § 1522)." The code specifies a list of crimes for which exemptions cannot be granted (see Appendix D).

As discussed in Chapter 2, some critics have expressed the view that a "clean" background check on every member of the household is an overly stringent requirement that results in discrimination against minority families, particularly African Americans. This group faces greater odds of becoming involved with the criminal justice system due, at least in part, to factors such as racial profiling and a higher police presence in their communities. Nevertheless, respondents did not raise this particular concern, perhaps because the counties excluded applicants who did not pass the criminal background check from my sample.

Interview Process

Caseworkers conduct interviews with prospective parents at both counties as an early step in the application process. According to a division director, the objective of the interview is to "get to know" the prospective parents and to determine their suitability as prospective parents. At the most basic level, this entails making sure that children are likely to be safe, stable, and well cared for.

Many respondents said they felt uncomfortable and scrutinized by the interview process. For example, one respondent said:

If you smoke some pot, do you want to tell them about that? Nobody has a spotless life. They ask you some strange questions. Like, they ask you about your first sexual experience. If you think you had a normal

experience, you start to think, "Wow, what are they going to think about this or that?"

Another applicant said, "Anyone can go out and have a baby, but, if you want to adopt, they shine a flashlight in every corner of your life. I understand why they have to do that, but it's awful when you're going through it." While respondents acknowledged that in some ways this level of scrutiny was unavoidable, they also pointed out ways in which caseworkers could make the process more comfortable for applicants. More specifically, one respondent said it would be helpful if the agency could alert respondents about what to expect from the interviews beforehand:

> You don't know those conversations are going to take place until you have them. If you could tell somebody, "Look there's going to be some uncomfortable questions. It's gonna be ugly. But if you have nothing to hide, don't worry about it."

Home Visit

Agency representatives conduct onsite home visits "to assess the suitability of the home to accommodate the needs of all family members, including the foster children. The condition of the home is evaluated to determine whether it is clean, safe, comfortable, and in conformance with agency regulations" (www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/homestudyreqs.cfm). Respondents found this a sensitive aspect of the licensure process, and many noted room for agency improvement.

In one county in particular, the biggest hurdle in the home visit process was with agency scheduling the home inspection and keeping the appointment. Many respondents shared accounts of the agency not following through at this step. Others did not understand the steps they needed to complete the process (and this step in particular), and they were unable to receive clarification from the agency, a finding that is consistent with experiences described by respondents in prior research (Geen et al., 2005). Examples from respondents who had difficulties with this step include the following:

> The agency said they would call us back on Monday, and we waited all day, but they never called and they never came. This happened 5 months ago. They said they would come to the house. We called them, and they didn't call us back, and they never came, so we feel the agency is not interested in us. I have no idea why this happened.

On the same topic, another respondent said:

> If there's so much need, why haven't they contacted me yet? But they haven't done anything, and I'm just curious. I mean, I've had banks

contact me faster when I wanted to buy a home. Yeah, the banks were making money off me, but finding homes for children is just as important.

A few respondents described their own scheduling challenges in coordinating the home visit:

> I'm a single parent, and I'm the only source of income. I had been laid off my job the year prior, and so I have been working in contract positions. In order for me to meet the home inspector, I had to leave work early. I'm on a budget, and I'm not getting paid for those hours, and that puts a financial strain on me. I try to make it as late as possible so I don't have to miss too much work…. It would be good if they could offer more flexible hours for the home inspection.

Among those respondents who underwent a home visit, many objected to the rules pertaining to home safety. Some respondents felt that these rules seemed to be an attempt to replace good judgment and parenting skills. One respondent said:

> I think the agency's rules are geared toward the lowest common denominator. I grew up with an open fireplace, and I never in my wildest dreams thought, "Hey, why don't I stick my hand in the fire?" And the reason I didn't think about it is because *my mother was there making sure I didn't do that.* It's the lowest common denominator stuff that irritates me…like you have to bolt a screen onto a fireplace. I'm not going to ruin a [historic] 1923 fireplace for such an inane thing. They give you a whole packet, and it describes all the things you have to do to your house to satisfy their rules. A lot of them were stupid, just really stupid.

> It almost suggests that all the person would have to do is fix up their home the right way, and it wouldn't matter whether they are loving, capable parents with good judgment. But they did stick a piece of plywood over their fireplace so now they're a great parent. I was telling my friends, "Now listen to this one" about the rules, and I can't even remember half of them, but I'm just, like, "I'm not doing that." Putting your knives out of sight—that was the one I found outrageous. First of all, let's assume for the moment that I'm going to get M. He's 6 months old. My knives are on a magnetic strip by the stove at my eye level. Now, how is a 6-month-old able to get access to that? And by the time he can get access to that, he will have already learned because I will have taught him, "Don't touch!" I was, like, "You are out of your mind with all this stuff." It was crazy. It makes you feel like, "Wow, maybe I am too smart for this." Who are they asking to raise children that they have to impose all these rules?

Another respondent had a very similar critique:

They have some ridiculous rules. We have a hot tub, and we had paid to have a wrought iron gate put in with a lock. Even though it was impossible for the child to climb over the gate, they made us put locks on the hot tub itself. We have a very safe house. We obviously have a healthy child; our recommendations were glowing; I've always done a lot of volunteer work in the community; it just seemed silly that we couldn't become adoptive parents until we got a lock on our hot tub. There were some laws on the books that I'm afraid to say are old. There were a lot of hurdles. After we got the lock, then we had to get the caseworker to come back and review the house again, and that was a feat in itself. It wasn't enough to send pictures. That was the most frustrating part because, you know, the agency's caseworkers are spread too thin. It seems silly that they have to spend all this time coming back to look at a lock. It took us about a year to be approved because of everything we had to do.

This type of feedback was common among middle- and upper-income respondents. Lower-income respondents did not complain about these rules or even mention them. This might be attributed in part to inherent differences between homeowners who are more likely to be middle or upper class and are more likely to have homes with features like hot tubs or historic fireplaces, whereas lower-income prospective parents are more likely to rent houses or apartments with fewer liabilities.

Among lower-income prospective parents, the most common issue in not passing the home inspection process was insufficient space in their homes to meet the agency's bedroom requirements. One respondent said:

My house where I'm staying is very small. I have a child, and the room is just big enough for her. But I am looking to move at this point. I'm not packing, but I am looking. And I was thinking, if the timing is right, and I could get a child when I move, I could get a room for the child if at all possible. But everything ain't working like that.

One Hispanic woman said that, in her culture, children sleep together in the same bed. She understood the agency's need to separate children, particularly of different genders, but she said it required an adjustment in her thinking. Another respondent indicated that she and her partner live in a loft, so the child would not have his or her own four walls even though her loft was spacious. In addition, she said, "We wanted to do communal sleeping, and the agency had a problem with that." Another respondent said:

With housing, it's a catch-22. You can't get an extra bedroom from Section 8 unless you already have the foster child. But you don't want the foster child until you have the right number of bedrooms. So you can't do it right with the timing.

Repeating the Home Licensing Process

Prospective parents who had already adopted children expressed frustration about needing to undergo the home licensing process each time they wanted to complete another adoption. One respondent said:

> We've adopted, and we've had foster children, but we still have to go through the home study again. It's like, "Wait a minute, you're entrusting all these children to us. We've already been licensed for four children, but yet you're going to waste all these thousands of dollars on conducting another home study on us?"

Along the same lines, another respondent said, "I don't understand why they didn't take into account that I had gone through the process previously and why I would have to start at the beginning." Still another said, "I strongly feel that if you have a day care, if you've gone through the background check, if you've adopted a child, I don't see how you should be expected to do another background check." Yet another applicant said, "When I saw all the duplicate information being requested, I decided I didn't want to do it again."

Training

Both counties utilize the PRIDE training curriculum. The training consists of nine 3-hour sessions on topics relevant to successfully parenting children and youth who are in out-of-home placement. Among those applicants who attended PRIDE, many were positive about the experience, saying the training was effective and they learned a great deal. One respondent said:

> In PRIDE, they keep it real. They let you know, if you think you're in this for the money, you're an idiot. As a parent, I wish I had a PRIDE class because there were very good concepts taught in that class about rearing children and discipline techniques.

Among applicants who completed only a few classes or none at all, most attributed this to a lack of time or a lack of flexibility class scheduling, as described in more detail in the section below.

Not Enough Time

In keeping with the opportunity cost of time theory discussed in Chapter 2, many respondents spoke about not having enough time to complete the requirements, particularly the training, which is the most time-consuming aspect of the adoption process. Again, in keeping with this theory, middle- and upper-income respondents more often described this issue. One respondent said, "I am a full-time, stay-at-home mom, but between managing our kitchen remodel, soccer, and all the activities my kids participate in, I could not find the time to attend the

training." Another respondent said, "I decided not to move forward because I didn't have time to go to the training. They require both parties to show up. It would have been better if one of us had had to go instead of both of us." She went on to explain that her husband often travels for work and could not attend the training with her. Another said:

> We were going to go through the county agency, and then we just decided to do it privately and use a lawyer. They wanted us to go through training, and we didn't have the time. If it wasn't made so difficult, we would reconsider again.

Other respondents spoke about scheduling concerns:

> It's a little tough in terms of the scheduling. They're not really flexible. I'm not a parent that can stay home, and I have work. It's kind of tough because the training is one every 4 or 6 weeks. I had a conflict with a class for work that conflicted with PRIDE training. I had to wait another 6 weeks…. I left a message [to discuss this, and the caseworker] didn't call me back, and I didn't know about the orientation that just started. So now I have to wait.

One respondent's husband was an emergency room doctor who was on call during the weekends and could not complete the weekend training. This applicant felt that the training should not be required for both members of a couple or that an online or remote option should be available for those with challenging work schedules.

Caseworkers were sympathetic to the view that the process is cumbersome, but they saw it as a useful filtering mechanism, creating positive attrition of inappropriate applicants. They felt that respondents who were willing to "jump through the hoops" were demonstrating a high commitment to adopting and would be more likely to be successful parents. One caseworker said:

> I think the hardest part is completing the paperwork, the interviews, and the fingerprinting because everyone is so busy. You have to put your life on hold to complete those steps. I think those families that were on the fence, that just wanted to help their communities, get filtered out. You juggle your priorities. Some families aren't able to do that, and then they drop out. So completing the requirements is a big reason why people drop out. When this happens, I feel it's probably not a good time for them. This is a commitment. This is just one little piece of the bigger picture. As an ongoing fost-adopt parent, there's going to be ongoing commitments and requirements that you're going to need to juggle with your own life. People usually agree that it's not the right time.

Another caseworker said:

I think some people might be turned off by the amount of paperwork. I think in recent years we've cut down on that. Getting fingerprinted, getting medicals on all the adults in the home. Getting CPR first-aid training. Attending the 21-hour training course. Getting school reports on their own children. Getting various legal documents to us such as marriage certificates, birth certificates. I think that may be a reason people drop out.

In sum, from the prospective parents' perspective, it would be helpful for adoption agencies to have more flexibility and require fewer steps to complete an adoption. From the perspective of some agency personnel, if the prospective parents do not have the time and flexibility to complete the steps, they may not be a good fit, so the process may serve as a useful filtering mechanism. However, based on my observations, I believe the agencies' willingness to accept cumbersome processes as a means of creating positive attrition appears misguided, and they in fact lose what appear to be safe and loving prospective homes.

This approach may be explained by principal-agent theory, which tells us that principals sometimes select poor measures to assess whether the agent will perform well. In other words, the measure of whether or not the agent (the prospective parent) is willing to "jump through all the hoops" may not be a good measure of the agent's viability as a prospective parent. As demonstrated by the comments made by caseworkers, it appears that they themselves disagree about whether the cumbersome nature of the process is a beneficial filtering mechanism.

A clearer understanding on the agencies' part about those who *do not* adopt might right the balance. Agency data are skewed in the direction of those who *do* adopt—e.g., those who met the requirements. They do not systematically assess the fitness of those who drop out.

Matching Process

Once applicants have completed the requirements, they are eligible to be matched with a child. In both counties, the process of matching children and applicants is conducted during the course of meetings in which the profiles of children and applicants are discussed alongside each other. Caseworkers who represent particular applicants may advocate for children to be placed in those particular homes. As discussed in further detail in subsequent sections, the matching process is highly subjective and influenced by the views of the caseworker with regard to what might make a good match.

Characteristics of Children in Foster Care That Applicants Are Unwilling to Accept

Applicants have the opportunity to indicate the characteristics of children they are and are not willing to accept when they complete their adoption applications. They are also able to state their preferences during the course of interviews with caseworkers.

There is a logical link between an agency's beliefs about what a prospective parent would accept and the likelihood of that applicant getting a child placed with him or her. The more selective a parent is, the more likely that parent will decline a placement. The more selective the agency perceives a parent to be, the longer that parent waits for a placement. This in turn affects the likelihood that the prospective parent will persist in trying to adopt. Both events lengthen the time before adoption can occur and both precipitate psychological events— e.g., the thought "they don't really need me"—that can lead to attrition.

I asked nonadopting interview respondents whether there were any characteristics of children in foster care they were unwilling to accept. Figure 5.2 below shows the details of their responses. Twenty-six respondents described characteristics they were unwilling to accept. Fifteen respondents said they were willing to accept all characteristics.

Figure 5.2: Characteristics of Children in Foster Care Who Applicants Are Unwilling to Accept
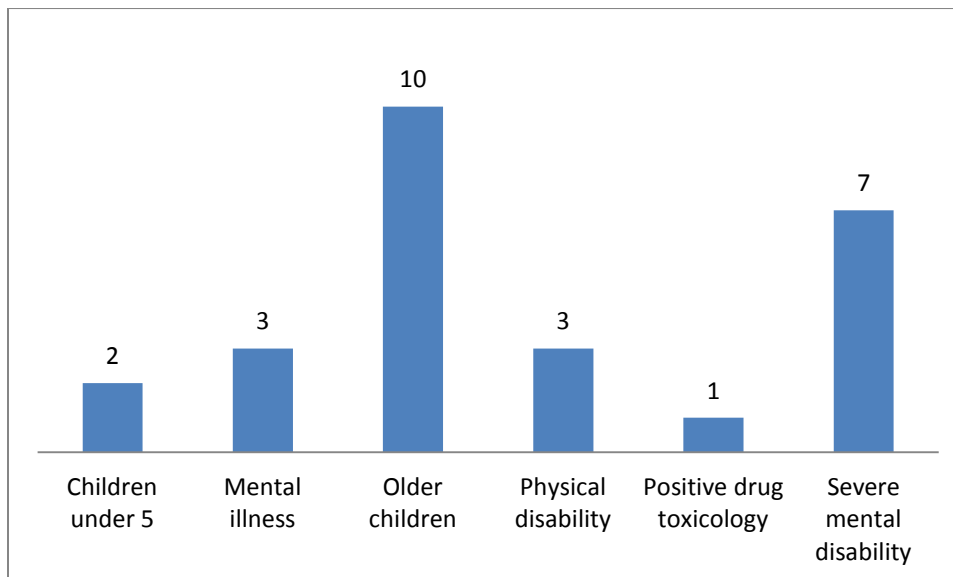
Although respondents readily identified characteristics of children in foster care they were concerned about or were unwilling to accept, this was not a common

reason given for not completing the process. Only three respondents gave this as a primary or secondary reason for dropping out.

My findings were consistent with prior studies indicating that prospective parents prefer to adopt younger children (Avery, 1999; Brooks & Barth, 2002; Bachrach, 1991). Because children in foster care are often older, applicants who prefer younger children may be deterred, especially when caseworkers emphasize the unlikelihood that respondents will be matched with a younger child or infant. As shown in Figure 5.2 above, 10 respondents said they were unwilling to accept older children.[19] For example, one applicant stated:

> I do have a specific interest in a younger child because, in my opinion, the cake is out of the oven by age 5. You've pretty much formed most of your personality, and then just different parts of it are going to change as you mature. I can't imagine just getting some random child from CPS. I don't want some 3-year-old who's coming out of [a tough inner city] who's M.F.-ing [using profanities with] everyone all around him.

Another applicant expressed a similar concern:

> The biggest worry that I had was that I don't want them to hand me somebody's problem child. I was so strict with my children, and I don't think I would have that patience for a grown child. So if you get a teenager, he's already picked up a lot of bad habits along the way. I think they would stereotype my [Hispanic] family. It wouldn't be fair to him or to me. I want age 5 or below, but if he had an older sibling I would take him.

Caseworkers involved in the matching process corroborated this view. One caseworker said, "Children who are 4 and above are harder to find adoptive homes for. It's that old story; everyone wants the puppy, but nobody wants the dog. Very rarely do we get people who come to us who want older children." Another caseworker said, "Most families are looking for that beautiful bouncing baby. We're teaching people that, instead of asking only for a newborn, if they ask for from newborn to age 3, they will speed up the process of getting a child."

At least one couple was specifically interested in older children, with one respondent saying he had already had the experience of raising infants, was "done with diapers," and wanted the company of an older child in the house.

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[19] My findings here are based on responses to the open-ended question: "Are there any characteristics specific to children in foster care that made you decide you did not want to adopt a foster child? If so, what were they?" As a result, when respondents spoke about "older children," there is no set age parameter given. However, as revealed by some of the quotes included here, for most, "older children" meant children older than 4 or 5 years old.

Nine respondents were unwilling to accept children with severe mental disabilities. Many of these respondents said they did not think they had the parenting skills necessary to meet the needs of this population. A few were concerned that having a child with severe mental disabilities would make it difficult to care for their other children.

Several respondents expressed particular concern about adopting children with mental illness. One respondent said:

> The one factor that scared me in general was emotional illness. I was afraid of getting a bipolar or schizophrenic child. I know a woman who adopted, and her child has numerous behavioral problems and learning disabilities, and that was something I hoped to avoid.

Another said:

> I looked up fostering online and the first thing that popped up was this terrible story about a foster mom who went to sleep and, when she woke up, her foster kid was standing over her with scissors, ready to kill her. And then I read that if you take in sexually abused kids, they'll probably sexually abuse your own kids. My kids were 14, 12, and 6 at that time. I didn't think that would be a good idea. That stopped the process.

Several applicants said they could not accept a child with severe physical limitations due to their families' active lifestyle or due to the lack of wheelchair accessibility of their homes.

A director at one county said she felt there is an inconsistency between what prospective parents say they are willing to accept and what they are actually willing to accept. In other words, they may try to present themselves as more flexible than they actually are in order to increase their odds of receiving potential matches, but when particular children are presented, they decline the match. The director felt there was a bottleneck at the matching phase of the process.

In my interviews with applicants, I found that they were very candid about the characteristics that they were and were not willing to accept. It is possible that they were more open with me about this than they were with the agencies because they were not afraid that admitting an unwillingness to adopt children with certain characteristics would diminish their chances of being presented with possible matches.

Issues Related to Transracial Placement

The topic of matching applicants and children based on race was highly provocative for caseworkers as well as adopting and nonadopting respondents.

This issue is important because, as discussed above, the literature identifies it as a possibly significant deterrent, especially for prospective parents who fear a negative response from those who oppose transracial placement (including caseworkers and the community at large). Some Hispanic and Caucasian couples and individuals may erroneously believe that policies prohibit them from adopting African American children. Others may prefer a same-race placement but believe there are no available children that match their race.

I asked respondents, "What are your thoughts on how a child's race should be factored in to making a placement?" Some applicants were receptive to transracial placements; others were tentative about it. Several adopting parents gave first- and second-hand accounts of the deleterious effects of caseworkers using race as a criterion for disrupting placements. Others gave accounts of children in transracial placements who appeared to be "losing their culture." Most responses contemplated non-African American families adopting African American children, though some also spoke about the specific needs of Hispanic children and families.

I asked caseworkers whether MEPA had impacted how they carried out their work, if at all. Most caseworkers thought that the MEPA guidelines were too extreme and unrealistic. However, most caseworkers thought transracial placement was acceptable in some situations.

Most applicants were aware that children in foster care are disproportionately African American, because agency representatives discuss this topic in depth in the orientation. It also appeared to be common knowledge to many adoption seekers from the outset. One Caucasian applicant spoke about how agency representatives discussed the topic in orientation:

> The trainers talked a lot about all the African American children in foster care and about their needs. They gave us a flyer that talked about a tradition in Africa about asking "How are the children?" as a common greeting instead of "How are you?" The trainers said you can't just take their culture out of them. Some of these children are already big, and they've seen a lot. It made me think "Wow, should we take on an African American child?" I'm, like, "Why not?" But it would be hard for him to lose his culture.

My interpretation of the comment above is that this applicant came to the orientation feeling open toward transracial adoption but gained information in the course of the orientation that made her rethink her initial inclination. A Hispanic applicant mentioned the same flyer that agency representatives provided in the orientation and said she found it to be "Afrocentric," adding that the emphasis at the orientation should be on finding safe and loving homes rather than on preserving African American heritage. A Hispanic applicant who wanted a Hispanic child to be placed with her found the emphasis on the disproportionate

number of African American children in need of homes at the orientation to be "off-putting":

> My husband and I went [to the orientation] together. One of the things that hit me when I went…was I was one of the few non-African American people in that room. I'm Hispanic. So, right off the bat, I wondered if there would be any non-African American children available. I knew I wanted a Hispanic child. If they want to attract more middle-class families, which is more likely to be Caucasian or Asian, you need to make them feel there might be a child like that available.

This applicant's view is consistent with speculations in the literature that because some respondents prefer to adopt children of the same race as themselves, the pool of prospective parents for African American children is limited. However, this applicant was the only one who shared this particular perspective. On the one hand, this may suggest that prospective parents' unwillingness to accept African American children is less of a factor than the research suggests. However, this cannot be concluded too strongly since respondents might self-censor such a point of view due to stigmas against expressing an unwillingness to adopt African American children.

Some adopting and nonadopting parent respondents expressed concern about transracial adoption generally, with one respondent saying, "I'm not fully convinced that transracial placement is always a good idea. In certain circumstances we don't have the understanding of the heritage to be able to share that with the child."

Some non-English-speaking Hispanic couples were concerned that it could be difficult to blend the two cultures. In the case of one couple, while this possibility did not deter them, they worried that if they adopted a non-Hispanic child, he or she might not be comfortable with the family's commitment to maintaining their Mexican heritage, which included speaking Spanish in their home and visiting a rural part of Mexico every year for family reunions. Another Hispanic woman stated, "I am Latina, and my color is not white. I am morena (dark). It has nothing to do with color; it has to do with culture. It would be difficult to change my family to the food and the culture of an African American child." One African American nonadopting respondent said:

> [I know] a couple that's both Black and White—two males—and they have a Black child and a mixed-race child. But, you know, the mixed-race child is African American. And the White member of the couple is trying to make the child a White person.

The comment above reflects the "drop of blood" notion, a predominant view in the United States that a person with a drop of African American blood is perceived as African American even if his or her background is mostly other

ethnicities. Under this line of thinking, even a child who is half-Caucasian is actually viewed as African American and should maintain connections to African American culture. A similar viewpoint was shared by an African American adoptive parent who described her experience adopting a child with a Black father and a White mother:

> Because he was biracial, the caseworker said she felt he needed to be in a home with African American parents. He was telling people he was White because his mother was White and her friends were White. He had an identity problem. The caseworker was African American, like us, and she felt he should be with a Black family.

Caseworkers as well as adopting and nonadopting respondents spoke at length about their concern that Caucasian parents would not be able to manage the hygiene and grooming of African American children. A central concern pertained to the hair care of African American children, especially girls. One African American adoptive parent said: "I get mad when I see White people with Black kids and their hair is always a mess. Why don't they just take them to a Black hair shop?" However, another prospective parent said, "I think the 'care' thing should be more important than the 'hair' thing," meaning how well adoptive parents take care of children should be prioritized more highly than how well they take care of the children's hair.

One African American applicant who is a lesbian in a biracial relationship said she felt the caseworker conducting the preliminary home study asked inappropriate questions about whether her Caucasian partner would be able to comb and cornrow an African American child's hair. This respondent felt that the agency was overly concerned about the race of the foster child vis-à-vis her partner:

> Why would you even assume that, just because the child is Black, she'll want to have her hair braided? Just because you're African American doesn't mean you braid your hair. Plus, if my partner didn't know how to cornrow, she could learn if the situation called for it. That should not be an important factor.

For this respondent, the caseworker's concern about race was a significant factor in her decision to drop out of the process.

Many caseworkers and respondents felt that, ideally, adoptive children and parents should look alike so no one will know the child is adopted. One caseworker said:

> With the matching process, you always think there's a higher power making this happen, because you look at the pictures of the family a year after the adoption was finalized, and you would never know the kid was

adopted. The family resemblance is important. Our kids have already have struggled enough and have enough obstacles on their plate with the emotional issues, and that makes it a little easier.

Another caseworker said, "Transracial adoption creates a double whammy because everyone knows they're adopted."

A few caseworkers spoke about what they perceived as the naïveté of Caucasian prospective parents interested in African American children. One caseworker said, "I had one lady, she was White, but she said she wanted Black kids. I was, like, 'You're so White, and you're single.'" Another caseworker shared her views on Caucasians seeking African American children:

> What do they know about African Americans? You have to hear what they're saying. Are they desperate? Or are they looking at what the child's needs are? They say, "My family is very open minded, and they've always encouraged us to be open minded." Are we looking at helping a child, or are we looking at the adult's need? They think, "I will pretend they're not Black or they're not different."

However, several adopting and nonadopting respondents felt that a safe and loving home for children, regardless of race or ethnicity, should be the agency's highest priority. These applicants felt the agency was remiss for overly emphasizing race. One adoptive parent said, "I think, if the child is the main concern, getting the child into a home that loves them is the most important goal. We know that placing the child with people of like race will not necessarily equate to a safe and loving home."

Some respondents had strong feelings in opposition to agency practices of race matching. A Caucasian foster and adoptive parent said:

> There are some caseworkers that are clearly against [transracial placement.] They will do their darnedest to make sure a child of color does not end up with a White family. I've seen it. And it's very hurtful to everybody. I think they've come a long way with that because there are a lot of African American families that just don't want to adopt. So what are they supposed to do with the African American babies if no people of color step forward to adopt them? Warehouse them in orphanages? No, if there are loving people who aren't of color, of course they should be placed with them. Still, there are a few caseworkers who have a long way to go on understanding that finding a permanent home is more important than finding a Black family for a Black child.

Some respondents were under the misperception that the county had an explicit policy to match based on race. One respondent said:

I'm not sure I agree with Whitman County's policy of "half Caucasian." Here in Whitman County, if you are whatever race you are, the child you get has to be half your race. They will let you foster an African American child but they won't let you adopt. That's what I heard. A couple of my friends that adopted, they wouldn't care what race they got. But they ended up getting half- or Caucasian children. For those people, they didn't care. Another family might have cared; let them have the White baby. I have a friend who wanted an African American baby who she had fostered, and she wanted to adopt him, but the county said "no" because our community is "too White," and they were worried about him going to school here where there are only a few Black kids in the school.

Several Caucasian prospective parents gave accounts of placements disrupting due to racial difference between themselves and their children in foster care. One respondent described the following situation:

Our first placement was an African American girl, and we absolutely fell in love with her. Because we expressed interest and we were eligible for adoption, an adoption caseworker came out to meet with us. When she first showed up, very callously she said, "There's no way. You live in a very White area. There's no way I'm letting you adopt an African American child." You put a lot of emotion into your [foster] kids. You love them so much, and the way she said that was a slap in the face.

Several applicants had heard accounts of placements being disrupted, seemingly due to caseworker resistance to transracial placement, and decided to opt out of the foster care adoption seeking process because the stories they heard were too "heart-wrenching," and they did not think they could handle losing a child.

The perspectives of caseworkers I interviewed were consistent with research described in Chapter 3 in that many caseworkers find MEPA requirements to be overly restrictive, feeling that it is unrealistic to think they should not consider race when making placements. Some caseworkers felt that it is in the best interest of foster children to delay placements in order to achieve a racial match.

Views about race matching and the importance of preserving African American culture were held as strongly by Caucasian caseworkers as by African American caseworkers. However, those who had been in practice prior to MEPA's implementation felt that the "old way" in which they needed to obtain written permission prior to making transracial placements was also too extreme. They described policy involving transracial placements as a pendulum that had swung too far from one direction to the other.

Caseworkers gave various reasons for resenting and resisting MEPA requirements. One caseworker said, "I call MEPA the White people's revenge. I think Caucasians were so enraged that anybody would put any limit on them and

who they could adopt that they enacted MEPA." When asked about her thoughts on MEPA, another caseworker said:

> I think it's a pile of poop. Their language has gone so far as to say you cannot use race as a consideration. Well, that's stupid. Of course you will use race. Oh, give me a break. When I went to MEPA training, I had White knuckles. I had to tell my co-worker to kick me because this is going to kill me.

Another caseworker said:

> I think it's nuts. I think it is chaotic and ridiculous that I can read a 15-page court report and not tell you about the ethnicity of that child. All of a sudden we've all become this colorless society. Let's face it: if I placed an African American with a White family, they're going to face unique issues because of how the child looks. My White applicants come back to me and say, "My neighbor is Black," like that means they can adopt a Black child. I'm, like, "Well, that's nice" because you know the foster child is going to a school where he is only one of three Black children. And if he comes home from school and says, "Somebody called me X," well, how is the family going to deal with that? We can't say we all are the same. Our race, ethnicity, and culture is not all the same. You might guess by their name when you read the court report, which I think is a terrible way to guess a child's ethnicity. And if you ask the ethnicity of a child, you hear, "That's not supposed to be an issue." I think it's gone the extreme.

Another caseworker said that MEPA has "made us go underground as far as matching children." Another said, "We have ethnic matches for our Black children 75% of the time, which I think is good. It would be nice if we had more Black families for children." Another caseworker said "I may not put a Black family for a White child because I want to save them for the Black child."

Even workers who were sympathetic to MEPA felt that at times it was in the child's best interest to delay a placement until a racial or cultural match could be obtained:

> I understand MEPA and why there's a need for it. I totally support it in spirit. But let's be realistic. I think a child does need that permanent home regardless. But they're not going to grow up in their little home in a vacuum. I think our hands are tied on the surface, but at the same time we're caseworkers. We're going to do what's best for the child, so I don't think we're going to restrict ourselves to MEPA. We have a lot of families, bless their hearts, who want to raise a family of another race. But then they're clueless. So I'd rather see the child wait a little longer, if they're in a stable foster family, if that means they will end up with a family who can meet their ethnic or cultural needs. The clueless people say, "Oh, they

just need love." Are they willing to learn about hair and skin care? Some families don't see the importance of having other identity and role models in the child's life. You get an idea that they don't take it seriously.

From the caseworkers' perspective, as mentioned above, many spoke about the importance of maintaining children's cultural heritage. Most caseworkers felt that, while some Caucasian families might be able to meet the needs of African American children, the majority did not know what they were getting into, live in neighborhoods that are "too White," or are generally "too naïve" to be able to handle the issues associated with adopting African American children. With this perspective in mind, the accounts given by adoptive parents of feeling discriminated against on the basis of race are not surprising.

Caseworkers also spoke about the MEPA requirement that agencies recruit foster and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the children in need of homes. They described various efforts to recruit more African American prospective parents. Caseworkers felt they had been successful on this front but also spoke about ideas for additional recruitment and retention efforts, such as holding more recruitment fairs in historically Black neighborhoods.

My findings here largely confirm the theories put forth by Bartholet and others that there is a lingering stigma associated with non-African American couples and individuals adopting African American children in foster care. In addition to the stigma, there is also the reality that placements continue to be delayed, denied, or disrupted due to caseworkers wanting to match the race of children and adoptive parents. My findings also confirm theories put forth by Hollinger and others that race matching has "gone underground" due to MEPA-IEP. Whether or not this is in the best interest of children depends in large part on whether we believe that race matching is important enough to warrant these delays and disruptions. I provide a more in-depth discussion of this topic in the Conclusion and Policy Implications section.

Perspectives on the Process Overall

In this section, I discuss respondent feedback on the foster care adoption process that does not fall under my discussion of the various steps in the process.

Feedback on Customer Service Provided by Caseworkers

The quality of customer service provided by caseworkers is an important component of success in the foster care adoption process. Respondents who served as adoptive parents had more time to develop personal relationships with caseworkers and therefore had more to share on this topic.

Adoptive parents had mixed perspectives on their caseworkers. Many had positive experiences but shared anecdotes about negative experiences of other adoptive parents in their social network. One adoptive parent who had been working with the agency for an extended period speculated, "I think people drop out due to lack of emotional support, lousy caseworkers, and extremely aloof caseworkers. We've had some losers, and we've had some absolutely fabulous ones too, but the bad ones really wear you down." Another adoptive parent said:

> I was lucky because we had two good caseworkers. Other people don't have caseworkers who feel any urgency. We had one who was a substitute when ours went on vacation. The substitute caseworker was just not bright, and I had to walk her through everything. If she had been our caseworker, that would have been terrible. I think [the agency has] a hard time retaining good caseworkers. I don't know how they can keep the good ones for very long. They seem to have a range of those who are either very young or those who have survived the hump and stuck around. The biggest deterrent, I would say, is bad caseworkers. My friend who did it had a bad caseworker. She was very stressed. I told her to be very organized and make their job really easy. It might be that some people get frustrated in their interactions with caseworkers and so they drop out.

Many respondents spoke about the budget cuts being faced by public agencies and felt sympathy for the caseworkers who are "probably being overworked." One respondent said, "I really did get the impression that there were not enough people at the agency to help us, and those who were there needed to do too many things. They're probably overworked and have limited funding." Despite this sentiment being expressed by many respondents, none gave it as a reason for shifting to an FFA.

Delays Related to Paperwork

Adoptive parent respondents described various paperwork-related delays. Delays were caused by agencies incorrectly completing paperwork or not completing it at all. One respondent said:

> There was a 3-month delay because one of the workers forgot to file a piece of paper with the courts. Only because I kept calling, they would go, "Oh, you know, I can't find that paperwork." There were these delays that were really unfortunate, even though [our child] was low legal risk.

Another respondent said:

> When the child was taken from his mom at the hospital, the birth father was listed as the alleged parent, but he should have been listed as the presumed parent. The caseworker didn't know the difference, so she checked the wrong box. This was a serious error because presumed

parents receive services whereas alleged parents do not. He was listed as one who would not get services, but he should have been getting them. At the hearing, his lawyer found this mistake, and she said he should have been getting services.

Respondents felt these paperwork-related mistakes stemmed from there being too much paperwork in general and from incompetent or overworked caseworkers.

Communication Delays and General Agency Slowness

Communication delays were evident at every step in the process, from home licensing to adoption finalization. Respondents who completed adoptions also described communication delays. A respondent who had already adopted one child from the agency and was considering adopting a second said:

> They called me at 10:30 on a Friday night and said, "We have this boy who needs a home for the weekend, but don't worry, he'll return home on Monday." I told our caseworker "No more," but then I couldn't say no. Then we had [him] for a year until they found him an adoptive home.

This respondent went on to say she received almost no communication from the agency during this period. A respondent who was serving as a foster-adoptive parent said:

> The baby I have now, I had for a whole month before I ever heard from anyone, and the agency said I would just have him for the weekend. A caseworker called and said she would come; 2 weeks later I still hadn't heard from her. To me, it's an insult to the children. Part of it is, "Okay, there's Joanne [the respondent], and she's an old hand" [meaning because she's so experienced, we know the children are safe with her]. But I just feel like, who's minding the store?

Many caseworkers spoke about resource constraints on the agency side as a reason that they were not as responsive and communicative with parents as they wished they could be. One caseworker said:

> Our caseloads are too high. We just have too much. Sometimes I think counties wait a long time to follow up with parents so the spark that initially motivated them has died. We have so many cases, and I just can't get to them. The caseload size is where my headaches and heartaches are mostly. You can't do best practice because you have to deal with quantity rather than quality.

As mentioned earlier, both counties had one bilingual caseworker who was responsible for recruitment, licensure, and the matching process for Spanish-

speaking families. This is in contrast to services for the English-speaking population, for which one caseworker is responsible for managing the recruitment process while other caseworkers are responsible for the licensure and matching processes. In both counties, there appeared to be a bottleneck within the Spanish-speaking populations, perhaps because this single resource was overcommitted.

Another respondent who had already adopted said:

> Cut the red tape. Cut these ridiculous redoing of home studies. In two of our three adoptions, we've had parents that wanted their children to be adopted, but it didn't make any difference legally. We still had to go through all the appeals. It seems ridiculous that here we are [with a child the couple wanted to adopt], a year and a half later [after initial placement]. We wasted all that time of caseworkers, courts, and money, when everything ended up the way the parents and we wanted it to in the first place. With two of the parents, the mothers wanted us to adopt them. But once they're in foster care, they have to go through all the legal complications that take so long to resolve.

Legal Processes

In Chapter 3, I hypothesized that challenges related to concurrent planning, open adoption, and other legal aspects of foster care adoption might be a cause of attrition and/or a reason why many do not pursue foster care adoption in the first place. As discussed in more detail below, I found that, indeed, legal aspects of foster care adoption were a major challenge among those who did adopt and were a contributing factor to attrition more generally.

For those who persist, the experience is stressful because they cannot be sure they will achieve their desired outcome of adoption. So for this group, while it is not a reason for dropping out, it is a hardship. For some, a single experience of losing a foster child caused them to drop out. For others, learning through the orientation or through personal networks about the legal risks that come with serving as concurrent planning placements dissuaded them from moving forward. The anxiety about disruption and/or about interacting with birth parents caused these respondents to drop out.

Timeline for Terminating Parental Rights

As described in Chapter 1, ASFA requires that parental rights be terminated, thus enabling the child to be adopted, if the child has been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months. Exceptions to this rule are made if the child is under the care of a relative or if the state has documented "a compelling reason for determining that filing such a petition would not be in the best interests of the child" (42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(E)). However, in practice, this timeline is often extended, and

this was a common source of frustration. Among respondents who did not adopt, this was described as a generalized fear of losing their child after they became attached. Among respondents who did adopt, many gave accounts of the timeline for terminating parental rights taking longer than it should:

> They said the process would be a year, and it was 3½ years. And that's very common. I think that's one of the biggest issues with them losing people is the fact that they lie about the process. They say it will be 1 year, and you struggle through 3 years, and you don't ever want to do it again.

Another respondent spoke about the emotional difficulty of having children in legal limbo as well as the challenges involved with concurrent planning:

> David was a very drug-exposed child. His mother's first child had already been taken away from her due to neglect. When David was taken away, his goal was reunification. We went through four or five visits with the birth mom. It was heartbreaking because we were very bonded to him, and it was scary to think that he might leave us. There were moments when we were very nervous that he was going to go back to her. The process took longer than we anticipated. Parental rights were not terminated for about 15 months.

Both adoptive parent respondents and caseworkers spoke about the degree to which the decision-making power on timelines resides with the courts. One adoptive parent described the adoption timeline getting "pushed out" in court:

> With our first child we were frustrated when we went to court, and then there was a continuation and a change in lawyer with no explanation of why. So it was put off another 2 months for the lawyer to get up to speed. It was frustrating how long it was taking. We were told in PRIDE it would take about a year once the child was on the adoption track. We were frustrated because it was taking so much longer than that. We got him when he was 6 months old and the adoption was finalized when he was 2 years old.

Another respondent who felt the courts "slow the process down" said the following:

> I saw that the slowness was just the court system, and that's how it works. I could kind of see where they're coming from, with giving moms so many chances. But on our end it's frustrating when you know they're not going to clean up their act, and yet they are given so many chances to do so.

Several of the accounts given by foster adoptive parents illustrate the importance of agencies giving foster adoptive parents realistic expectations in terms of

timeframes. However, as described in Chapter 1, caseworkers must strike a delicate balance between painting an overly optimistic or pessimistic picture of what to expect from the foster adoption process.

Caseworkers unanimously thought that ASFA timelines were helpful. Those who had been working for the county pre- and post-ASFA felt that ASFA has brought about improvements in helping children achieve permanency in a timely manner. In terms of timelines being extended, they expressed sympathy both for the foster-adoptive parents wanting to finalize adoptions and for biological parents who need more time to get their lives in order, particularly for those parents who are substance abusers. One caseworker said:

> Addiction is a horrible disease. There were a few cases where people tried, but they would relapse. I know families do try. If you look at it, we ask so much of them. And they're barely functioning. Twelve to 18 months is still not enough sometimes.

Caseworkers also spoke about how, at times, the child's caseworker is not sympathetic to how timelines affect prospective adoptive parents:

> We lose families when caseworkers don't understand the pain these resource parents have gone through and that you're dropping an atom bomb into their homes when you tell them the court is giving the [biological] mom more time. The workers don't understand that these concurrent homes are really just adoptive families in disguise.

However much sympathy the caseworkers may have had for biological or foster-adoptive parents, they felt that most of the decision-making on timelines resides in the hands of the courts.

Concurrent Planning

Most caseworkers spoke about concurrent planning and legal risk placements in terms of transferring the burden of the risk and uncertainty from the children to the resource parents. A caseworker explained that, before concurrent planning, children were placed in temporary foster homes until it became certain that parental rights would be terminated. Only then would the child be placed with preadoptive or adoptive parents. Under the old paradigm, preadoptive and adoptive parents did not face the same uncertainty and anxiety that the child could be reunified with his or her parents. This caseworker described her viewpoint on the shift in practice:

> It takes so long to free a child; I think the way we do it now is better. In the old days, there was less anxiety for the adults. You knew the way the court was going to rule. The adults were in good shape. So we didn't have to call and say, "Guess what the court just did?" But the people who

suffered were the children. Why should the children carry the anxiety so the adults can be relaxed? Now the children are placed much earlier. We used to do this, but not openly. We used to have the families run and get an adoption license. The court was saying, "How can you say you're reunifying if you already have adoptive home?" I think it's a tradeoff, and it's best for the resource parents to take the risk.

A nonadopting respondent described her understanding of concurrent planning based on how it was explained in the orientation and in training:

The county did a great job of explaining how you have to be stronger and take on the disappointments of losing the child rather than the child being disappointed by leaving a home before they are placed with an adoptive family. They place the children who are most likely going to be adoptable with foster-adoptive homes.... [The agency] wants the child to bond with you instead of a temporary foster parent, and I think that makes sense. I think a lot of people left because they were afraid of the risk of losing the children. Even people who stayed were really scared that someone was going to come and take the child back.

This respondent's account also touches on how the fear of losing a child is a significant deterrent for some, as discussed in more detail below.

Although caseworkers were broadly supportive of concurrent planning, they could also empathize with the hardships involved for the resource parents. One caseworker said:

We ask a lot of our resource parents. It's a tall order to ask them to be loving to the children but also supportive of the reunification efforts. Sometimes I don't think it's realistic for us to expect them to do both at the same time. But yet, I can't think of another way of accomplishing stability for the children while we try to help the parents sort out their lives.

While many adopting and nonadopting respondents supported the idea of concurrent planning in theory, they raised concerns about it in practice. Nonadopting respondents shared their fears of becoming attached to a child who would ultimately be reunified with a biological parent. Adopting respondents spoke about how this emotional conflict played out for them during the adoption process. One adopting respondent said:

I see people who are concurrent, and I think it's a tough spot to be in. I'm not a robot. I have a heart, and she's in it, and that's how it should be. So when people that really want a family take in a child, with the hopes and dreams that this child will be theirs, it's gut-wrenching to see them lose the child. The caseworkers try to do the fast track for the children if it looks like the parents aren't going to get their act together, but there's still a risk

that the foster parents will have their hearts broken. And then you always hope the relatives won't come out of the woodwork. I mean, where were they when the child was in foster care for 6 months?

Several accounts given by adopting and nonadopting respondents raised the importance of agencies doing due diligence on relative foster placements before placing a child in a nonrelative home. This is important because kinship placements have priority over nonkin placements, and if kin "come out of the woodwork" after a child is placed in a nonkin home, the placement could be disrupted, even if the child has already bonded with the nonkin home and even if the child has little or no prior relationship with the relatives. Such moves are bound to cause emotional upset for both the prospective adoptive parents and the child; so, again, a diligent search for relative placements up front is critically important to preventing such disruptions.

A criticism of concurrent planning is that it is confusing for caseworkers and for families. Along these lines, one adoptive parent said:

> [Concurrent planning is] hard because, as a prospective adoptive parent, that's really putting yourself in an emotionally vulnerable spot. If both of those [goals] are being worked on at once, it's like, who wins, you or them? You're putting your energy into hoping it will work out. I don't really understand how that can't be confusing for the kid. And what's the message there—it doesn't matter, as long as you have somewhere to go? One or the other isn't better for you? Sure, the kid doesn't have as many places they've been to, but the child is still in emotional limbo. They don't know who to try to connect with. I would imagine that, if I was that kid, I wouldn't want to get too comfortable where I was. Especially without a definitive end. Thinking it could just linger and go beyond the timelines, it seems it could open up space for agencies to do as they please and not consider the kids and the foster parents.

Several respondents expressed concern that they would have difficulty supporting a concurrent plan, "knowing that their home with their original families is a worse place for them to be."

Fear of Losing Child

While adoptive respondents spoke about the emotional challenges of actually losing children, nonadoptive respondents spoke about their fears of losing them as a barrier in moving forward with the process. A respondent who went on to conduct a private adoption said, "We decided not to do a foster care adoption because our perception was, we wait 3 years and the birth mother could change her mind. You hear these horror stories, and you think, "Oh my gosh, I can't deal with that." Another respondent shared a similar sentiment:

That was our biggest fear—getting attached to a baby and having it taken away. I thought that would just destroy me. I'd wanted a child for so long. My first husband left me right when we were supposed to have children. I thought, "I am so emotional about this, I can't take it if someone takes the baby away from me." And that was the biggest factor that pushed us over to private adoption. I would have done it without the legal risk.

There are many tensions and even contradictions in what the agency seeks from prospective parents. On the one hand, they want parents who are willing to relinquish a child if reunification efforts succeed, and on the other hand, they want parents to love the child with the single-minded passion that parents should have for their children. Parenting requires autonomy and authority, but working for the agency requires subservience to rules.

Involvement of Birth Parents

As discussed in Chapter 3, some researchers have speculated that a deterrent for prospective adoptive parents is that they do not want to be involved with birth parents of children in foster care. As mentioned above, when children have a primary goal of reunification and a secondary goal of adoption, agencies expect resource parents to support visits between children and parents as well as reunification efforts in general. If children are adopted, there is the possibility that the adoption will be an open adoption, thus requiring ongoing contact with birth parents. For many prospective parents, this type of ongoing interaction is negative. One caseworker said:

> There's this fear base about knowing the birth families. It's that struggle for me about trying to educate [prospective parents] about having a meeting with the birth family. I try to educate them that it's going to be a gift to the child. My job in the beginning, if I see that they are afraid, is to get them to see that maybe coming to the county is not right for you. We're here trying to reunify, and we don't know where the child's going to end up, and here you don't want to have any contact, whether it's by the telephone or whatever, but that's really what it means to be a concurrent family.

My findings from interviews with adopting and nonadopting respondents on this topic were somewhat variable, although almost all described involvement with birth parents as a source of concern and even fear. Some nonadopting respondents confirmed that, indeed, involvement with birth parents was a deterrent for them. Among those respondents who were not deterred by this factor unto itself, some discussed their specific anxieties about being involved with birth parents and shared accounts given by others about this issue. For some adoptive parents, it was an issue that posed many challenges in the adoption process. One nonadopting parent said:

The majority of the [people in the PRIDE training] class, including me, did not want to have any contact with the birth parents at all. In the last class, they talked about how the birth parents can't come take your kids away. They had to have visitation rights. Even people who stayed, they were really scared that someone was going to come and take the child back.

Another nonadopting respondent said, "One major reservation I had is about violence. I would be afraid if their parents were still in the picture in any way that could be threatening to my family." Another said, "I think a lot of people in my neighborhood do overseas adoptions because they are afraid of having to deal with the parents of the child they adopt. They don't want to deal with the parents. People are afraid of the parents."

Adoptive parents spoke about some of the hardships they experienced in interacting with birth parents before their children were adopted. One adoptive parent said:

Timothy was taken away [from his birth mother] when he was 6 days old. He was an alcohol syndrome baby, and I think his mother knew he was damaged, and she didn't want him. When she got her first son back, [whom this resource parent had fostered,] she stopped coming over. She did show up one day, and she was drunk as a skunk and staggering all over the front yard. Timothy opened the door with me and he said, "Mom!" and she was laughing and crying and making a big scene. I was naïve then, and I didn't know what to do. Looking back, I should have called the police. It was confusing for [my son]. Eventually [his birth mom] just stopped coming around.

Another adoptive parent described the following difficult situation with her adoptive child's birth parent:

His birth mom would call, and she would be high. She would say she was going to take a gun and hurt somebody. I'm calling the caseworker, saying, "Over my dead body are you giving this child back to mom." Luckily, I had an amazing caseworker. She probably knew from the get-go that Matthew would not reunify with his mom. His birth mom would call me at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, demanding to talk to her son. She made a CPS call, saying I was choking her son and that I had buried him in the garden. The sad thing is, she has schizophrenia, so I think she really believed that. It was so outlandish that CPS knew it was a bogus call. And then they would say, "Okay, now you need to let mom have a visit." It was like "Okay, mom smells like alcohol, and she's high, and you still want me to facilitate visits with her?"

Although the situation described above may be extreme, in terms of the level of adversity experienced by this adoptive parent, one might imagine that if a

prospective parent were to hear a story such as this one, he or she might be concerned about the implications of becoming involved with birth parents. Another adoptive parent described the visits she facilitated between her adoptive daughters and their mother while the birth mother was in jail:

> The kids felt more comfortable if I went with them too. Their mom was in jail, and I sat in the waiting room. The girls would go visit her through the glass and everything. I saw her once; it must have been during the TPR hearing. It was a scary notion [that the children could be reunited with her]. Seeing the stepfather who they thought was their father, that's who I would have gone up and choked. The mom was just a weak person and didn't hang around with the right people. She wrote us a note that said, "Thanks for taking care of my kids." I wrote her a note and said, "When you get out, we can set up some meetings." But nothing ever happened, and now I don't know where the mom and aunt are. My youngest daughter doesn't even know her birth mom except from stories. I knew everything would turn out fine, but those other parents from my class were really stressed. They thought any minute this person would come and take their child. I remember being really afraid and always keeping the windows of my house locked.

The account above is in many ways a positive one for a prospective parent who hopes to adopt with minimal involvement from the birth parents. Most of the adoptive parents I interviewed gave accounts of birth mothers who were involved inconsistently at the beginning of their placements and eventually faded into having no contact with their children, even though the adoptive parents were supportive of ongoing contact after adoption. This perspective corroborates the finding put forth in Berrick's summary of the literature, that "open adoption arrangements often change over time and that possibly half of the arrangements that initially include frequent contact evolve and, at the birth parents' instigation, result in less contact over time" (2009).

To summarize, the reluctance of many potential adoptive parents to engage in concurrent planning and interact with birth parents was due in part to a fear of losing foster children. But there was also a fear of needing to interact with a birth parent who might be viewed as very different or "other" from the prospective adoptive family. In the words of one family who decided to pursue a private adoption, "A lot of birth parents are just crazy, violent, and hard to work with. Obviously this is the case since it came to the point of their children being removed. Do I want to work with people like that to help them get their kids back? Heck no."

Open Adoptions

As discussed in Chapter 3, some researchers have speculated that some prospective adoptive parents might be deterred due to reservations about having

an open adoption. Unlike with some types of private adoptions, concurrent planning families are likely to meet and possibly maintain contact with birth parents.

For the most part, adopting and nonadopting respondents supported the concept of open adoptions. However, those who had already adopted spoke about difficult interactions with the birth parents as described above. For the majority of adoptive parents, the birth parents did not remain in contact with them or the children, even though they had been given the option of doing so. For this reason, it was not a significant source of difficulty among the adoptive parents I interviewed. Among respondents who had not yet adopted, they supported the idea in theory but acknowledged that in practice it would probably be challenging.

One adoptive parent who had an open adoption speculated about the concerns open adoption might pose for others and described some of the problems he faced with his own situation:

> I think more people do international rather than domestic adoption because they are afraid of open adoption. It's a whole other ball of wax. You're committing to a relationship with the birth parents. It's all this graduating scale. If you get into fostering, you're in the middle of social services work. Now there's another family you're involved with. The closer you get to the fost-adopt concept, the more complex the open relationship is. I can tell you from my own experience, the relationship with birth parents is not a walk in the park.

In short, this couple viewed the concept of open adoption as yet another complicating factor in the adoption of their son. However, they could also see the benefits that open adoption could bring about for their son.

While interaction with birth parents generally was a deterrent and source of concern for respondents, open adoption was a less worrisome idea for prospective parents than being involved with birth parents to support reunification efforts. The agency personnel I interviewed were supportive of the concept of open adoption, while acknowledging that prospective parents often have fears about working with birth families.

Follow-up Support

Many respondents spoke about the need for increased agency support throughout the adoption seeking process, from the time a prospective parent calls to inquire about an orientation to the period after adoption finalization. Specific suggestions included the following:

- Create a buddy system whereby an adoptive parent is coupled with a prospective parent to help guide them through the process.

- Increase encouragement from the agency for prospective parents to attend an orientation and complete the various steps thereafter.
- Engage more parents in support groups.
- Provide more information to parents about follow-up support and services they are eligible to receive after adoption finalization.

Along these lines, one respondent who had adopted said:

> I would love to see the agency reach out to foster or adoptive parents. I think it should be mandatory that foster parents continue to come to training. Whenever you go to foster and adoptive parent functions, it's the same set of parents who show up. There's a whole bunch of people out there who are on their own. Parenting can be overwhelming at times. If you feel you are so isolated and you don't have support, I can see why preadoptive placements don't work out, not to mention adoptions that fall apart.

Another said:

> I think there is a misconception among people that, after they adopt, they will not have any support…. I think parents need to know that, once they have adopted, they still have help. I think they need to let parents know that and advertise that because I think parents think, "Once I sign on the dotted line, the support will go away." I think people are afraid that, once the child starts acting out, they will be on their own.

Issues Related to Socioeconomic Status

Caseworkers had strong opinions about the role of socioeconomic status among adoption seekers. Most caseworkers said they found it more challenging to work with middle- and upper-class respondents, describing them as "demanding" and "entitled." Perhaps not surprisingly, middle- and upper-class respondents were more likely to express dissatisfaction with the agencies.

A few caseworkers felt that applicants who are highly successful in their careers often believe that the agency should cater to their needs and wishes without understanding the child-focused nature of the agency. For instance, one caseworker said:

> We select out the prima donnas, the ones who expect you to cater to them. Every once in a while we get the ones who think they are entitled. Our very worst clients are single professional women in their mid-40s and 50s. They've controlled their worlds, and they couldn't control finding the right partner or their fertility. So now they want to control having their first child through adoption, and everything doesn't go exactly the way they wanted it to. I don't want to work with real entitled folks. But not all our

educated people are like that. We beat it out of them if they actually find their way here.

Along the same lines, another caseworker expressed her preference for working-class families, saying, "I'd rather work with lower- and middle-class families because I see the attitudes of the upper class—looking down on county programs, but they'd rather not spend the money on private adoptions."

Another caseworker felt that highly educated applicants have unrealistically high expectations about how well their adopted children should perform academically, saying:

> The families that don't expect their kids to go to Harvard or win the Nobel Prize often do better…. Educated families sometimes have too high of expectations for the kids. When you have a combination of highly educated, entitled, and slightly narcissist resource parents, our children suffer from them.

Another caseworker said:

> Some of our more wealthy families have high expectations of the children, and then, if the child may not be the brightest in the class or the fastest at meeting major milestones, they start freaking out. They just have unrealistic expectations; they think they have all these resources, and they'll give so much to the child that the child should just succeed in every way.

One caseworker spoke about how prospective parents with more resources do not necessarily make better parents. Conversely, low-income prospective parents can provide good placements. She said:

> Some people think, "Oh, if we found a rich family in [a wealthy suburb], that would be best for the child," but we've found that isn't necessarily true. Just because they have more, that doesn't mean anything to me. It's more important to see what they do with their money. I have a very poor grandma [in my caseload], and you can see she gives everything to her children in terms of sports and experiences. I think it's more important what you do with your resources, not just that you have them. To gain access to a lot of our programs, you have to be resourceful.

Caseworkers spoke about ways in which working-class or poor families might be a better fit for children in foster care. One caseworker said:

> For us it's another matching issue. Our blue-collar people who are not into higher education do better with our kids. It's not a problem to them if the kids are drug and alcohol exposed and they may not go to college,

whereas the executives expect their kids to go to college, and they expect, when they're 4 years old, they can write their names. A lot of times, the families who are relaxed and not so concerned about performance do better with our families. I sometimes have a much harder time with my entitled high-functioning families than I do with my "high-school-diploma" and "I-drive-a-truck" families.

One caseworker said, "There are some great caretakers, like grandmothers, who aren't educated at all, but they have a lot of life experience."

Although the majority of the caseworkers I interviewed had concerns about upper-income respondents, at least one caseworker shared a different perspective: "If you have a higher income, of course you can give more support. If you have a higher income, many times you have a higher level of education around child development."

A few caseworkers spoke about how upper-income adoption seekers might not be interested in foster care adoption for reasons of their own. One caseworker said:

> We don't get too many wealthy people here. Maybe they're busy traveling the world. They go independent or international. I think it's a class issue. Our birth families tend to be people on welfare or homeless. Our other building wasn't that great. It feels a little down at the heels for them. They're going to call the best attorney in the area and connect up with him or her [to arrange a private adoption].

Another caseworker said:

> Higher-income groups are more likely to drop out. I see those groups coming in to adopt, and it's not immediate gratification, so they lose patience and drop out. Lower socioeconomic classes tend to keep going with the flow. They tend to be the ones that stay engaged. We do have some who are in it for the paycheck, but they turn out to be loving homes anyway.

However, caseworkers expressed concern about prospective parents who appeared to be motivated purely by financial gain. One caseworker said, "It bothers me when I go to a house, all they're worried about is when they're going to get a check." Caseworkers also spoke about some of the limitations involved when working with lower-income resource parents: "A lot of our parents don't have money for extracurricular [activities]. Many of our kids have never been out of [a low-income urban city]. It's really sad."

Caseworkers and respondents spoke about lack of income as a barrier for various reasons. A recurring theme was that the cost of child care makes it

impossible for working-class families to afford to adopt younger children. One caseworker said:

> The income level of our parents limits the age they can take because child care is so expensive. We don't make it any easier. The stipend we give them plus child care would open our doors for a lot of families. Most of our families work. They are single-parent homes or two-parent family homes, and they both work, and they can't afford child care.

Multiple nonadopting respondents mentioned that they were concerned that the agency does not reimburse for day care or more actively assist with finding appropriate day care for children. One nonadopting respondent stated, "Day care is really scary. That can just take all your money. Day care, that's my number one concern."

Some respondents were unaware that there is a monthly stipend (about $400 to $500, depending on the child's age, at the time this research was conducted) for adoptive parents. When informed of the rates, most of the respondents felt that the amount would not cover all of the child's expenses. One nonadopting respondent stated:

> The subsidy would help out with clothes, but that's about it. You know, clothing and feeding and everything, it's expensive. It would be great to get $1,000 a month for a child, but I know that money's not out there. If I do this, I'm not going to just go to the Goodwill to clothe them and the Dollar Store to feed them. I'm going to make sure they live a good life, and that's very expensive. I know many parents do it for the money and just cut corners and keep the money for themselves, but I'm not going to do that.

Another nonadopting respondent said:

> My husband is a graduate student and I'm a kindergarten teacher, so our income is not super high. We had some concerns about the financial aspect; they said it can take a while for the health coverage to start. If they come with no clothes, you have to buy them everything they need and wait to get reimbursed. Some of that was disconcerting because we don't have piles of money lying around.

In sum, respondents were concerned that the stipend would not cover their expenses, particularly when considering the cost of day care. Because of this, agencies are effectively asking for an investment of both time and money from their prospective parents. Some felt the agencies were asking too much of them and did not move forward.

A few respondents spoke about how agency recruitment strategies are not likely to reach middle-income families. One respondent said:

> If reunification is the [primary] goal, the counties will keep recruiting from the inner cities to facilitate visits and not branch out to families with more means who live further away from homes where children are being removed.

Another said:

> The name of "Social Services" is only spoken among poor neighborhoods where children are going to be taken away from the families. In middle- and upper-class neighborhoods it's not even mentioned; it's invisible. If they want to target people who are not in it for the money, they should advertise on classical radio stations and target people who are already financially stable. Not that I'm saying poor people don't make good foster parents. But they're the ones who already have access to the idea of social services, and they don't need more outreach. If you target the neighborhoods where the children came out of, you're targeting mainly poor neighborhoods. To me it would run the risk of putting them back into an environment like the one you just took them out of. Not that we're saying poor people make bad foster parents—we're certainly not rich ourselves—but I do think a certain amount of financial stability is important.

Just as some middle- and upper-income respondents were resistant to rules and regulations pertaining to home safety issues (as discussed above in the section on Home Visits), this demographic also expressed frustration about rules and screening processes in general. One nonadopting respondent said, "They have a lot of rules. I'm a good person and a good parent, and I feel all those rules are paternalistic." Another said:

> If they have a fever, you give them Tylenol; when your child is sick, you just take care of them. You're not going to call to get permission. If you make me do that, to me that's like saying you don't trust my judgment on the child. I guess there's got to be some of that because not all parents have good judgment, but then they shouldn't be foster parents.

Some middle- and upper-income prospective parents felt that they should be exempted from the screening process based on what they perceived to be obvious indicators of the likelihood that they would be successful parents. One respondent said:

> My husband and I were already married 20 years. We are a strong, stable couple. We have an older daughter in college; we had already proven ourselves to be good parents. We have a big enough house—we have a

106

pool, a trampoline—I would have thought we would have been able to get through this a lot faster. I would have thought we would have been a desirable couple. We were a known entity. We were already there.

Another said, "I want the process to be easier. I'm not someone who needs all the screening. I want someone to just give me a child. I would do it without all the screening."

In sum, with regard to class-based findings from my interviews, caseworkers theorized that upper-income prospective adopters are less likely to pursue public adoption in the first place. They also felt that those upper-income prospective parents who do find their way to a public adoption agency are not necessarily a good fit for children in foster care. Middle- and upper-income respondents expressed concern that their demographic was not being recruited well. They were also more likely to express frustration with agency rules and processes. Lower- and middle-income respondents were concerned that the stipend was too low to cover the costs of raising a child and they were unable to meet the housing requirements. I discuss reasons given for dropping out based on income level in more detail in the section below.

Summary of Reasons Prospective Parents Did Not Complete the Adoption Process

When asked, "What are some reasons you have not moved forward with becoming an adoptive parent?" respondents often described multiple reasons for dropping out that built upon each other. Despite the myriad explanations given, I was generally able to identify a clear primary and secondary reason for their attrition. Figure 5.3 below shows the frequency of the primary and secondary reasons given for dropping out.

Figure 5.3: Nonadopting Respondents' Primary and Secondary Reasons for Dropping Out of the Foster Care Adoption-Seeking Process
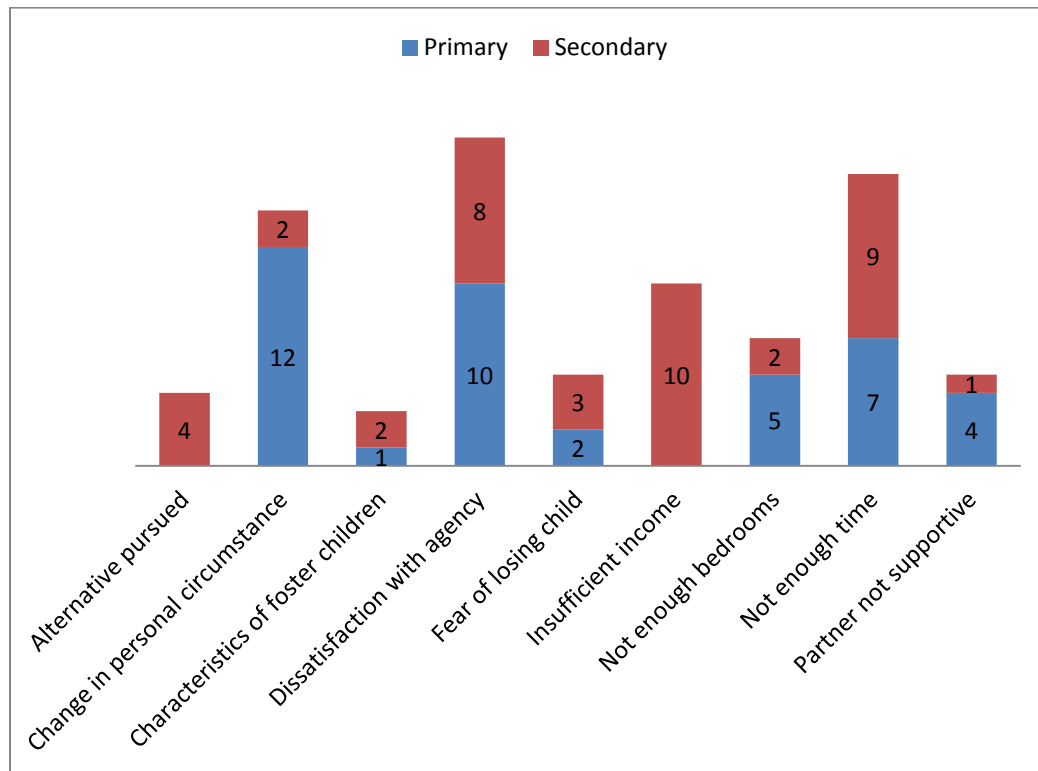
As shown in Figure 5.3 above, the three most common reasons for dropping out were change in personal circumstance, dissatisfaction with agency, and not enough time. However, combining the reasons of insufficient income and not enough bedrooms (two related reasons) makes this the second most common reason for dropping out. Below I provide additional information on reasons warranting additional explanation.

Pursued Other Options ("Alternative Pursued")

Eight couples and individuals pursued an alternative to foster care adoption; however, this was given as a primary or secondary reason for dropping out for only four of these eight. Alternatives pursued included conception (2), *in vitro* fertilization (1), international adoption (1), and private domestic adoption (4).

Change in Personal Circumstances

Among respondents who described changes in personal circumstances as their reason for dropping out, some had multiple changes in personal circumstance. Examples of scenarios include the following:

- After attending the orientation, the respondent allowed a runaway teen (who was not in foster care) to reside in her extra bedroom. At the same time, her job responsibilities increased, and she was worried that she might not have enough time to serve as a preadoptive parent.

- The respondent had been planning to be a stay-at-home parent (she was retired), but instead she re-entered the workforce when she and her partner separated.

- The respondent lost the section 8 housing voucher that had provided her with an extra bedroom when her grandson moved out of her house.

Figure 5.4 below summarizes respondents' changes in circumstances that led to a decision not to adopt. Some respondents had more than one change in personal circumstance that led to attrition.

**Figure 5.4: Changes in Circumstances Leading to Attrition**
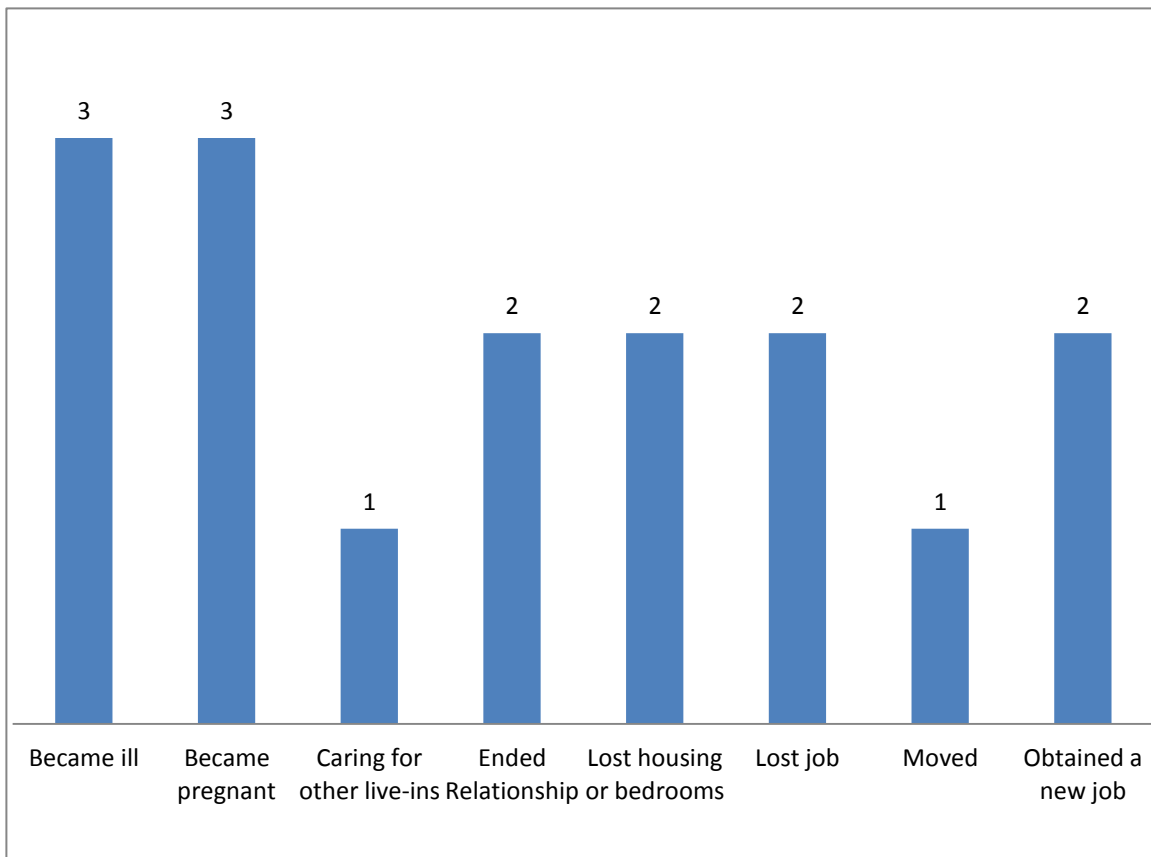
Couples or individuals with unstable relationships, housing, or job situations, or who enter a period of poor health, might be especially challenged by the stress of adopting a child in foster care under these circumstances. Arguably, these

reasons given for dropping out are not within the agencies' influence and may be viewed as positive or neutral reasons for dropping out. On the other hand, as discussed in Chapter 3, the shorter the window of time before a prospective parent is matched with a child, the less likely it is that a destabilizing event will occur. In some instances, it appears that the prospective parents still would have managed to provide a safe and loving home had the process been more efficient. For instance, one woman said that if she had already had a child living with her in before she became pregnant, she would have been likely to proceed with the adoption despite the change. Another said that if she had been able to adopt before she lost her job, she would have "found a way to make things work" by inviting her mother to come live with her. Although reasons given for dropping out related to changes in personal circumstance may appear to be beyond the influence of agencies, it seems clear that a more expedient process would decrease this cause of attrition.

Dissatisfaction With Agency

Figure 5.5 below shows the various reasons given for agency dissatisfaction among the 18 respondents for whom this was a primary or secondary reason for dropping out as well as respondents who were frustrated with the agency but did not give this as a primary or secondary reason for dropping out.

Figure 5.5: Reasons for Dissatisfaction With Agency
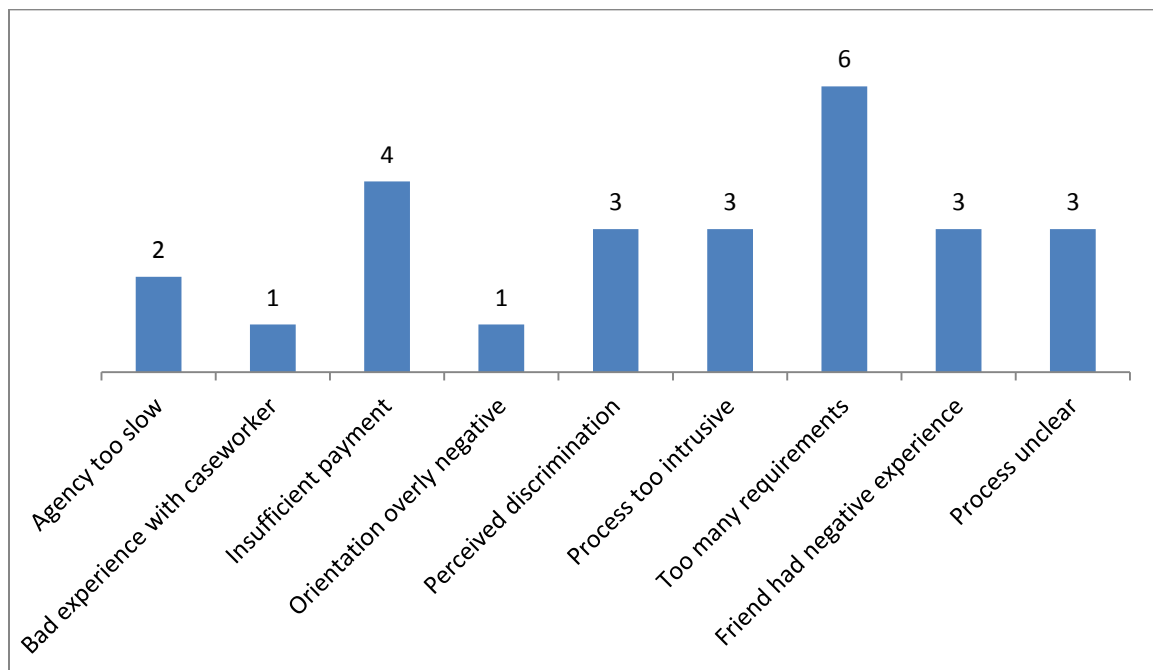
The two most common reasons were insufficient payment and the perception that there are too many requirements. In addition to the reasons categorized here, respondents also expressed dissatisfaction for reasons such as

caseworkers missing appointments, not returning phone calls, and misfiling paperwork, as discussed in the preceding section.

Findings Based on Demographics of Respondents

My theories about how respondent demographics might influence reasons for attrition were confirmed by my findings. Below I discuss the details of my findings by race/ethnicity and by income level.

Race/Ethnicity

Table 5.2 below shows differences in dropout reasons by race/ethnicity.

Table 5.2: Differences in Dropout Reasons by Race/Ethnicity Including Primary and Secondary Reasons Given

	African American	Caucasian	Hispanic	Native American	Total
Alternative pursued	2	1	1		4
Change in personal circumstance	8	3	2	1	14
Characteristics of foster children	0	3	0		3
Dissatisfaction with agency	5	8	5		18
Fear of losing child	0	5	0		5
Insufficient income	5	4	1		10
Not enough bedrooms	5	2	0		7
Not enough time	5	7	3	1	16
Partner not supportive	0	3	2		5
Total number of primary and secondary reasons given	**30**	**36**	**14**	**2**	**82**

Note: *Exactly two reasons are provided for each respondent.*

Figure 5.6 below shows differences in dropout reasons by race/ethnicity graphically.

Figure 5.6: Differences in Dropout Reasons by Race/Ethnicity Including Primary and Secondary Reasons Given
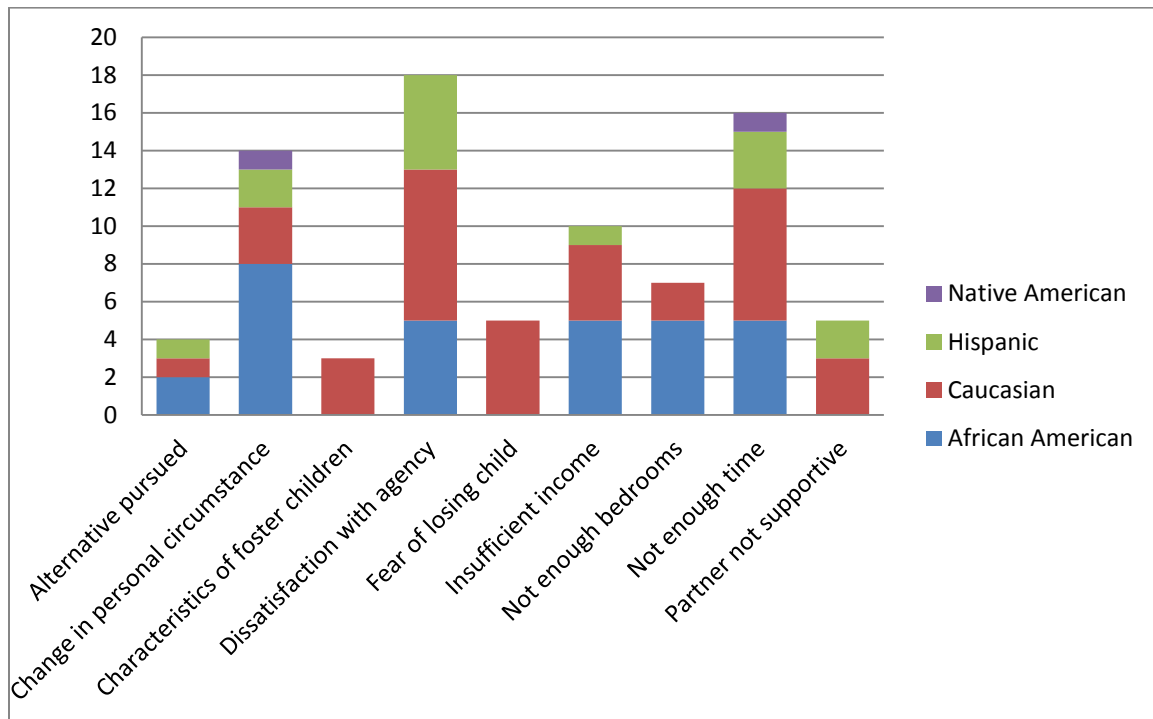
As shown in Table 5.2 and Figure 5.6 above, the reasons for dropping out given by Hispanics and African Americans concentrated on five areas common to both groups, whereas reasons given by Caucasians had more variability. Agency dissatisfaction is a common reason given by all three major racial/ethnic groups, but it is most frequently given by the Hispanic population, perhaps due to the shortage of available Spanish-speaking caseworkers.

The most common reasons for dropping out among African American respondents were changes in personal circumstance as well as insufficient bedrooms and income. Other common reasons included agency dissatisfaction and being too busy. Caucasian respondents most often dropped out due agency dissatisfaction and being too busy. These two reasons given may have been related for those who were too busy to complete agency requirements they felt were unnecessary or onerous, thus also causing them to be dissatisfied with the agency.

Caucasians were the only racial/ethnic group to name the characteristics of foster children as a reason for dropping out. As described above, many Caucasian interviewees described experiences with caseworkers who were resistant to transracial adoption and described this as a deterrent that was commonly mentioned with agency dissatisfaction. As discussed in Chapter 3, this finding corroborates my theory that at least some caseworkers are reluctant to place African American children with non-African American families—

especially those who live in predominantly upper-class neighborhoods with few African American families.

Figure 5.7 below shows differences in dropout reasons by income level. I grouped the income levels as follows:

- Low: $8,000-$37,000
- Medium: $37,001-$100,000
- High: $100,001+

Figure 5.7: Differences in Dropout Reasons by Income Level, Including Primary and Secondary Reasons Given
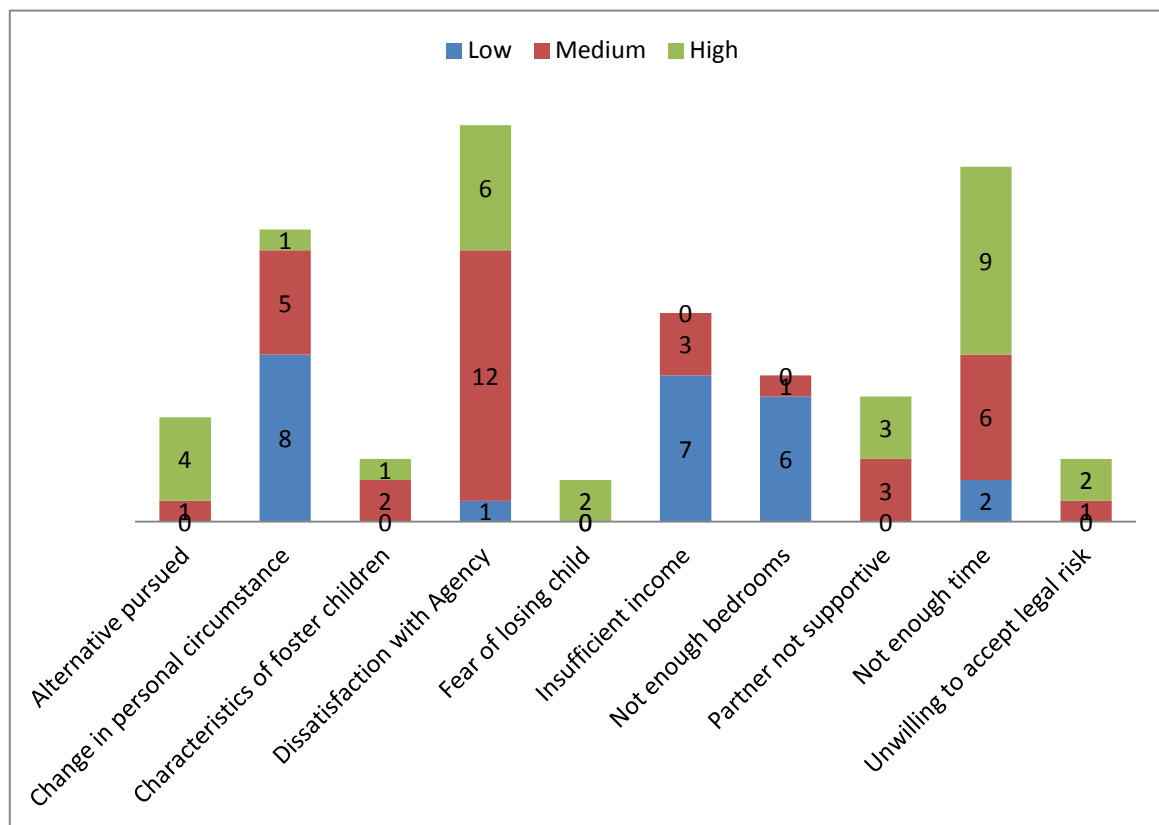
Income

Not surprisingly, I found that lower-income adoption seekers more often dropped out due to insufficient income or because they did not have enough bedrooms in their homes. They were also more likely to drop out due to changes in personal circumstance, such as losing a job or becoming ill. The top three reasons that medium-income applicants gave for dropping out were changes in personal circumstance, dissatisfaction with the agency, and not having enough time. Upper-income adoption seekers were more likely to drop out because they

pursued an alternative, they were dissatisfied with the agency, or they did not have enough time.

Again, these findings very closely reflect my hypotheses about the higher opportunity cost of time among middle- and upper-income adoption seekers. My theories about upper-income applicants being more likely to drop out due to child quality issues are also supported, though this finding is not as robust because reasons directly related to child quality were less commonly given. However, upper-income respondents more often gave reasons such as pursuing an alternative, fear of losing child, and unwillingness to accept legal risk—all reasons related to child quality.

As I hypothesized, frustration with agency rules and processes were most common among middle- and upper-income applicants. Some of this frustration may be correlated with home ownership; middle- and upper-income respondents were more likely to live in houses than apartments, and therefore they faced more scrutiny for safety concerns specific to their dwellings.

Figure 5.8 below shows the degree of satisfaction with the agency by the income of the respondent. Proportionally more medium- and high-income respondents were dissatisfied with their agency experiences. This group also appeared on the polar ends of the spectrum, with three being highly dissatisfied and four being highly satisfied. Out of the 12 low-income respondents, two were dissatisfied while 10 were satisfied with their experience with the agency.

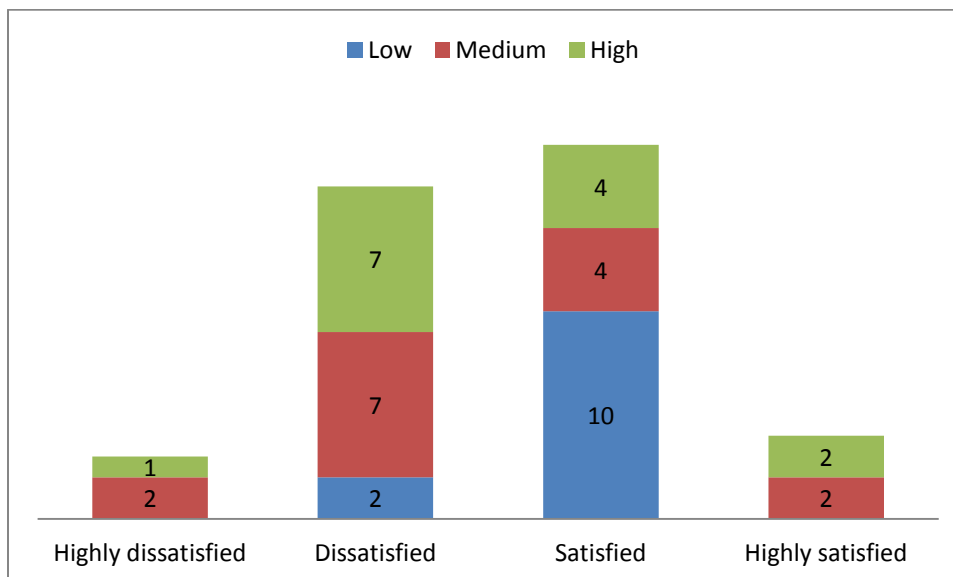**Figure 5.8: Degree of Satisfaction with Agency by Income of Respondent**

Figure 5.9 below shows respondents' views about ways to overcome barriers to adoption, by income level.

Figure 5.9 Suggested Ways to Address Adoption Barriers by Income Level
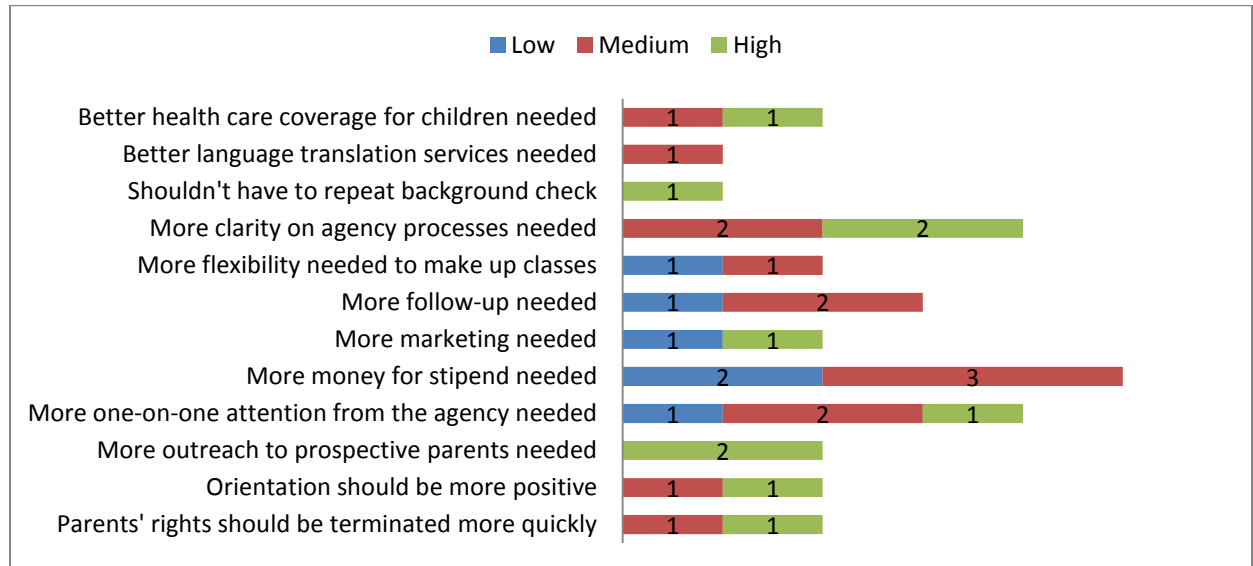
Suggestions did not necessarily show a pattern by income, most likely because these were responses to open-ended questions. To the extent that a pattern can be identified, low-income respondents more often felt that increased flexibility is needed to make up classes, more agency follow-up is needed, more marketing is needed, more money for the stipend is needed, and more one-on-one attention from the agency is needed. Middle-income respondents most often said that more clarity on agency processes is needed, more follow-up is needed, more money for the stipend is needed, more attention from the agency is needed, and parental rights should be terminated more quickly. Upper-income applicants made suggestions across a range of possibilities.

Discussion of Findings

As discussed in Chapter 3, it is useful to separate reasons respondents give for dropping out of the foster care adoption-seeking process into reasons representing positive versus negative attrition as well as reasons that are within or beyond agency influence. Table 5.3 below considers each reason for dropping out and provides a discussion of whether the reason represents positive or negative attrition.

Table 5.3: Dropout Reasons and Whether the Attrition is Positive

Dropout Reason	Positive Attrition?
Alternative pursued	*Depends* Many respondents pursued an alternative due at least in part to dissatisfaction with the agency, which is most often negative attrition. However, others learned about foster care adoption during orientation and decided they "couldn't handle the risk" of adopting a child from foster care or they preferred an adoption involving less complexity. Dropping out for the latter reason represents positive attrition.
Change in personal circumstance	*Depends* For some respondents, the change in personal circumstance would have made adoption untenable postplacement, so it is best that the change occurred during the adoption-seeking process. However, some respondents felt they could have handled the change postplacement. For example, a respondent who separated from her partner said she would have persisted in adopting a child in foster care if she had been further along in the process prior to her separation.
Characteristics of foster children	*Yes* Upon learning about the needs of a typical child in foster care, some respondents dropped out because they did not feel they had the capacity to meet these needs.
Dissatisfaction with agency	*Depends* Reasons for dissatisfaction such as the agency being too slow or negative interactions with caseworkers were examples of negative attrition. However, some caseworkers might believe that those who dropped out due to programmatic issues (too many requirements, process too invasive) might not have been a good fit anyway.
Fear of losing child	*Depends* Some respondents who left the process because they had an extremely low threshold for risk probably represent positive attrition, as a risk-free adoption is somewhat rare with public agencies. However, some respondents were willing to accept some risk and might have been amenable to a foster care adoption if less risky adoption options were available.
Insufficient income	*Yes* Respondents who spoke about being unable to meet their own basic needs for food, housing, and health care would likely be hard-pressed to meet the needs of an adoptive child.

Dropout Reason	Positive Attrition?
Not enough bedrooms	*Yes* Applicants whose housing does not have enough bedrooms to comply with foster-care policies will not be approved for adoption, and dropping out early is better than applying and being denied.
Partner not supportive	*Yes* If two parents are involved in the foster care adoption, it is important that both want to adopt.
Not enough time	*Depends* Within the context of demanding work schedules, families, and personal lives, some time and attendance requirements seem unnecessarily onerous to applicants and may have resulted in screening out couples and individuals who could not attend all events.

Table 5.4 considers dropout reasons and whether they represent attrition that is within or beyond agency influence.

Table 5.4: Dropout Reasons and Whether They Are Within Agency Influence

Dropout Reason	Within Agency Influence?
Alternative pursued	*Somewhat* By addressing reasons given for agency dissatisfaction, agencies can retain couples and individuals who pursue alternatives because they do not wish to interact with social service agencies. However, some of the complexity described by respondents may be inherent to foster care adoptions and would be difficult if not impossible for agencies to overcome (e.g., involvement of birth parents, legal risk adoption, etc.)
Change in personal circumstance	*Somewhat* A quicker adoption process minimizes the chances that a change in personal circumstance will lead to attrition.
Characteristics of foster children	*Somewhat* Characteristics such as attachment disorder or older age might result from prior agency decisions (such as a poor placement decision that went on too long) that are subject to agency improvement.
Dissatisfaction with agency	*Yes* Agencies can improve on customer service issues and

Dropout Reason	Within Agency Influence?
	make programmatic changes to address many of the reasons given for agency dissatisfaction.
Fear of losing child	*Somewhat* Agencies could work with courts to follow ASFA timelines and options for terminating parental rights.
Insufficient income	*Somewhat* Agencies could increase the amount of the stipend so that low-income prospective parents could adopt children in foster care. However, this could create a perverse incentive in terms of attracting prospective parents who are motivated by profit rather than genuinely wanting to adopt a child in foster care.
Not enough bedrooms	*Somewhat* Agencies could relax bedroom requirements or provide financial support to help respondents meet requirements. Again, this could create a perverse incentive.
Partner not supportive	*No* Respondents appreciated that agencies did not attempt to change the minds of prospective parents who decided against foster care adoption.
Not enough time	*Somewhat* Agencies could expedite the steps in the adoption process so that they are not so time-consuming. Agencies could grant increased flexibility to make up missed classes. However, some respondents might still be too busy to meet the requirements.

Upon considering whether reasons given for dropping out represent positive attrition and whether agencies can influence these factors, it seems that agencies do exert at least some influence over most reasons given for dropping out. The degree to which positive attrition is occurring is somewhat ambiguous depending on the given category. The ambiguity is best understood on a case-by-case basis for many of the categories.

The category "dissatisfaction with agency" seems the area in which the most unambiguously negative attrition occurs, however, and it is an area where agencies can and should make improvements to policy and caseworker management. In addition, although many reasons may seem to be beyond the influence of agencies, my findings suggest that if, by making the foster care adoption process more efficient, adoptions could be concluded more quickly, prospective parents would be less likely to drop out due to life-changing events or due to being too busy to complete the process.

Chapter 6: Policy Implications and Conclusion

Many of the barriers described by respondents are within the agencies' influence and are therefore subject to improvement. Having distinguished between positive and negative attrition, as well as between attrition within and beyond agency influence, I make recommendations for policy changes focusing on areas in which negative attrition within the agency's influence is occurring.

Practices that deter parents all exist for some reason, which might reflect an agency challenge or constraint or might reflect an agency goal. The former includes insufficient funds, training, or staffing levels. The latter, however, might reflect what agencies may consider appropriate delays, for reasons such as an implicit desire on the part of the agency to achieve racial or cultural concordance in matching children with adoptive parents.

If taken by policymakers and agencies, these recommendations could decrease attrition among prospective adoptive parents. Some of these recommendations may compete with other goals for children in foster care; however, this analysis is limited to the problem of adoptive parent attrition. Many of these recommendations are contingent on sufficient agency funding, a topic I discuss but do not attempt to resolve here.

1. ***Ensure child welfare agencies are adequately funded.***

   In 2012, California's Child Welfare Services experienced a $133 million cut in state funds and federal matching grants—a loss of about 10% of its budget. Whitman County was especially hard-hit by losses of tax revenue stemming from the 2007-2009 recession. Shortly after I completed my interviews, the county cut its home-finding and adoption unit nearly in half due to budget reductions. Budget cutbacks must be reversed if concerns raised by respondents pertaining to customer service issues are to be addressed.

2. ***Reduce the duration of the adoption process overall.***

   Decreasing the amount of time between steps in the adoption process would decrease attrition due to changes in personal circumstances. The more time that passes between prospective parents' initial inquiry and the home approval and matching process, the more likely it is that the prospective parents' circumstances will change such that they are no longer interested in adopting a child in foster care. As one prospective parent observed, "If you already have a child and you lose your job, you manage to make things work. But if you don't have a child yet and you lose your job, you may decide the timing is no longer right."

   While the prolonged process can result in positive attrition—filtering out prospective parents who are fundamentally unstable and unable to maintain

circumstances suitable for becoming adoptive parents on a long-term basis—it results in negative attrition as well. Mechanisms such as the home study and interview process could achieve the same objective of filtering out unstable couples and individuals without the negative impacts of attrition due to the lengthy approval process.

If agencies are committed to expediting the process, they could do so by considering each step in the process and analyzing how long they think this step should take alongside data indicating how long the step actually takes. This recommendation leads to the one below.

3. **Track and analyze data in order to identify bottlenecks.**

Strategies for streamlining the home licensure process have been implemented in other states with great success. For example, in Washington D.C., the State Automated Child Welfare Information System tracks each step in the home licensing process. Through data analysis, managers are able to identify bottlenecks in the process and systematically address the particular issues that are delaying home licensure.

4. **Limit caseload size of home-finding caseworkers, and ensure that they uphold basic customer service standards.**

Caseloads should be manageable enough that caseworkers can keep appointments with prospective parents, return phone calls within 1 business day, and file paperwork accurately and on time. This would help address many of the problems respondents discussed pertaining to agency dissatisfaction and general bureaucratic inefficiency. In order to achieve this, agencies should follow best practices in assigning caseworkers an appropriate number of cases. The Council on Accreditation offers the following guidance on caseload standards (Council on Accreditation, 2006):

> Personnel are qualified and receive support to facilitate the development of permanent caring relationships between children and adoptive families. Adoption workers maintain a manageable workload, and cases are assigned according to a system that takes into consideration:
>
> a. the qualifications and competencies of the worker and the supervisor;
> b. the complexity and status of the case;
> c. services provided by other professionals or team members; and
> d. other agency responsibilities.
>
> Case complexity can take into account intensity of child and family needs and size of the family. *Generally, caseloads do not exceed 12-25 families*.

Many caseworkers I interviewed said that they wished they could provide better customer service and "more hand-holding" of prospective parents but could not due to high caseloads.

However, smaller caseloads alone will not address the customer service-related problems. Agency leadership must also make standards explicit and take actions to ensure standards are followed. If caseworkers quickly return phone calls, schedule appointments, and keep the appointments, this sends the message to prospective parents that they are needed and wanted. The benefits of this are well encapsulated by a respondent who said: "A little encouragement from the agency would have gone a long way in helping me complete the process."

5. ***Institute feedback mechanisms.***

Agencies should institute feedback mechanisms so that prospective parents can share suggestions for agency and caseworker improvement. Agencies could survey all prospective parents after they have reached various milestones, seeking their input about how the process could be improved and giving them the opportunity to describe any challenges they are experiencing.

6. ***Fully adhere to the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and the provisions of the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Act (IEP).***

MEPA-IEP prohibits federally funded foster care adoption agencies from delaying or denying a child's foster care or adoptive placement on the basis of the child's or the prospective parent's race, color, or national origin. Although this legislation is already in place, my research corroborates speculation in the literature that race matching has "gone underground." The pros and cons of race matching and the explicit use of race in considering placement options remain areas of controversy. However, federal legislators have determined that delaying and denying placements on the basis of race is not in the best interest of children and is not permissible. Compliance with MEPA-IEP would minimize adoptive placement disruptions and fear of disruption among prospective parents. It could also decrease the wait time prior to receiving a match among prospective parents who are willing to accept children of any race.

Whether or not the intention of the legislation (to prohibit delaying or denying placements on the basis of race) is in the best interest of children remains a topic of debate. However, in the view of this researcher, it appears that couples and individuals who would have otherwise provided safe, loving, and enriching environments dropped out of the foster care adoption process due to caseworker efforts to match the race of children and the prospective adoptive parents.

Despite the enactment of MEPA-IEP, it is difficult to monitor and almost impossible to enforce federally if a local agency or individual caseworkers do not want to implement it. However, additional audits, in the form of interviewing prospective adoptive parents including those who appear to have dropped out of the process, could provide insight on this problem. One way of accomplishing this type of audit would be to incorporate prospective adoptive and foster parents, including those who dropped out of the adoption seeking process, in stakeholder groups when conducting Child and Family Service Reviews. Specific questions pertaining to the subject of race, along the lines of the interview questions included in my questionnaire, may reveal the persistence of race-matching policies. Systematically identifying this occurrence would be a first step in creating a plan for enforcing or revising existing policies.

Some argue that the active resistance to MEPA-IEP is an indicator that the policy is fundamentally flawed. Under this line of thinking, as articulated by some of the caseworkers I interviewed, it is unrealistic to think that caseworkers will not use race as a factor when making placement decisions. If policymakers agree that this perspective is worth considering, the time seems ripe to revisit MEPA-IEP and modify it in ways that caseworkers find workable without sacrificing the primary objective of mitigating placement decisions that delay or deny placements on the basis of race.

7. ***Comply with timelines set forth in ASFA for terminating parental rights so that children may be adopted.***

Per ASFA requirements, the 12-month permanency hearing is the established timeline for terminating parental rights. However, in practice, agencies and courts routinely exceed this timeline. Respondents felt the legal process of terminating parental rights so children could be legally free for adoption was too lengthy. If courts and agencies more consistently follow the timelines set forth in ASFA, prospective parents would be more inclined to accept concurrent planning and legal risk placements. Additionally, more children whose parental rights have been terminated would be available for couples and individuals who are unwilling to accept any legal risk.

8. ***Conduct searches for kin placements upfront and prioritize initial placements if attachments have already formed.***

Agencies should conduct diligent searches for kin placements early in the home removal process and should make efforts to license these homes as quickly as possible, assuming they meet appropriate standards. Placing children in concurrent planning homes for prolonged periods prior to identifying and placing them with kin homes is detrimental to the children and to the prospective parents. Children are likely to experience difficulties

attaching to their subsequent kin placements, especially in situations where the children do not have a prior relationship with these kin caregivers.

Additionally, prospective parents are likely to experience hardship from placement moves that may cause them to remove themselves from the pool of resource parents altogether. Stories of incidents in which children are moved out of a concurrent planning placement in order to achieve a kinship placement after bonding between the initial prospective parent and child has occurred have strong ripple effects; many nonadopting respondents described these incidents happening within their communities and were concerned that the same thing could happen to them. Adopting respondents gave first-hand accounts of this happening to them. Agencies could obviate this hardship and at the same time improve the reputation of the foster care adoption process if they identified and licensed kin placements earlier in process.

If the child has been in a concurrent planning placement for more than 6 months and the child is doing well, preference should be given to this placement (assuming these parents wish to adopt and the child wishes to remain in the current placement). This recommendation is not supported by current policy providing preference to kinship placements; however, it seems, at least anecdotally, there are cases in which support for kin placements is valued above the child's needs and attachments. In these cases, agencies should reconsider the kinship placement preference.

9. *Facilitate support network among prospective and adoptive parents*

Many respondents spoke about the need for better support throughout the adoption-seeking process. Some interviewees suggested a buddy system whereby an adoptive parent who has already completed the process could be paired with a prospective parent to help guide them through each step. Respondents who had already completed adoptions spoke about the need for ongoing support after adoption finalization. Those who participated in parent support groups found them to be hugely beneficial and recommended that agencies provide more encouragement for adoptive parents to participate.

10. *Follow up with applicants who appear to have dropped out of the adoption seeking process.*

Almost half of the respondents stated that they are definitely still interested in becoming adoptive parents, and one third said they remain open to the possibility of adopting in the future. Many said that, once their circumstances change, they will re-engage with the process. This finding suggests that further follow-up with former adoption applicants could be fruitful.

11. *Improve availability of information about foster care adoption on the Internet.*

A few respondents spoke about the need to increase the website content that specifically targets prospective adoptive parents. Additional information about the steps in the process could be available online. Counties should use search engine optimization software so that their websites are more easily located through common keyword searches. Given the overlapping objectives of FFAs and public agencies, there may be opportunities for increased collaboration in recruiting and retaining interested parents as well as explaining the steps in the process and the differences between the various types of adoption.

Conclusion

Policymakers seeking to increase adoptions for children in foster care must determine why the vast majority of foster care adoption seekers do not complete the steps necessary to become adoptive parents. Agencies wish to avoid false positives—accepting a home that actually would be harmful to a child—as well as false negatives—deterring couples and individuals who would be desirable adoptive parents. My research indicates that agencies may be erring on the side of creating false negatives. In other words, some standards and processes are interfering with the goal of identifying quality adoptive homes.

My interviews do not point to one overarching reason for the high attrition rate among foster care adoption seekers, nor do they point to a single policy solution. Instead, it appears that many factors contribute to attrition, and, in the words of one respondent, the reasons "progressively stack on top of each other." Solving the problem of securing more adoptive homes for children in foster care will require the full range of policy responses described above.

Despite the high attrition rate among foster care adoption seekers, it is a very positive sign that almost half of my respondents stated they are still interested in becoming adoptive parents. Many said they may pursue foster care adoption again when their personal circumstances change. For child welfare agencies and policymakers, it is well worth addressing the challenges identified in this study to help find suitable homes for the more than 100,000 U.S. children in foster care awaiting adoption.

Appendix A: Interview Schedules

Questions for Nonadopting Parents

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, and how far you got in the adoption process?

2. What are some reasons you have not moved forward with becoming an adoptive parent?

3. What first made you interested in adopting a foster child?

4. What, if any, reservations did you have about becoming an adoptive parent for a foster child before you ever called the agency?

5. Are there any characteristics specific to children in foster care that made you decide you did not want to adopt a foster child? If so, what were they?

6. What made you decide to contact the agency? (For example, was there any precipitating event that caused you to take the first step?)

    What was your experience with finding the contact information to reach the agency?

7. Can you walk me through your experience when you called the agency to inquire about serving as an adoptive parent? Orientation? Training?

8. Is there anything you learned that was surprising to you or that you had not expected beforehand?

9. Do you have any thoughts on the concept of open adoption?

10. What are your thoughts on how a child's race should be factored in to making a placement?

11. Do you have any thoughts on concurrent case-planning, specifically reunification as the primary goal for most children in foster care?

12. Are you aware of the subsidy that is offered for adopting a foster child? If so, what are your thoughts on this level of payment?

13. What (if anything) could the agency have done differently to keep you engaged in the process?

14. Are you still open to the possibility of fostering or adopting a child from this agency?

15. Is there anything else you want to say?

16. Demographic information collected

- Marital status
- Employment status
- Age
- Education level
- Zip code of home address
- Annual gross income in 2007
- Number of children in home
- Number of children total

Questions for Parents Who Completed Foster Care Adoptions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, and your adoption experience?

2. What are some reasons you have not moved forward with becoming an adoptive parent?

3. What first made you interested in adopting a foster child?

4. What, if any, reservations did you have about becoming an adoptive parent for a foster child before you ever called the agency?

5. Were there characteristics specific to children in foster care that you did not want? If so, what were they?

6. What made you decide to contact the agency? (For example, was there any precipitating event that caused you to take the first step?)

7. Did you have any difficulties with finding the correct phone number?

8. Can you walk me through your experience when you called the agency to inquire about serving as an adoptive parent? Orientation? Training?

9. Is there anything you learned that was surprising to you or that you had not expected beforehand?

10. Do you have any thoughts on the concept of open adoptions?

11. Do you have any thoughts on using race as criteria for placing children?

12. Do you have any thoughts on concurrent case-planning, specifically reunification as the primary goal for most children in foster care?

13. Are you aware of the subsidy that is offered for adopting a foster child? If so, what are your thoughts on this level of payment?

14. What (if anything) do you think the agency could do differently to keep more people engaged in the process?

15. Why do you think so many people drop out?

16. Is there anything else you want to say?

17. Demographic information collected
    - Marital status
    - Employment status
    - Age
    - Education level
    - Zip code of home address
    - Annual gross income in 2007
    - Number of children in home
    - Number of children total

Interview Questions for Caseworkers

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself in terms of how you became a caseworker?

2. How long you have been in your current position?

3. What do you like least and most about your job?

4. How well do you think your agency is doing in terms of resource parent recruitment and retention?

5. At what stage of the process do you think prospective parents are most likely to drop out?

6. What do you think the reasons are that they drop out?

7. What, if anything, do you think the agency could do to improve the recruitment and retention process?

8. Can you describe the characteristics of the ideal prospective parent?

9. Do you think the right types of applicants are being recruited? If not, why not?

10. Would you describe the average applicant as being lower, middle, or upper income families?

11. Do you observe any trends in terms of the types of prospective parents who are more likely to drop out?

12. What difference do you think the income level of prospective parents makes in terms of their suitability as parents?

13. How do you feel about ASFA timelines in terms of terminating parental rights and helping children achieve permanence? Do you think the timelines are too aggressive, not aggressive enough, or just about right?

14. Are you familiar with the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA?) How has MEPA impacted the way you do your work (if at all?)

15. What are your thoughts on concurrent planning policies?

16. What type of feedback have you gotten from prospective parents on concurrent planning policies?

17. Do you have any general observations about how prospective parents feel about open adoptions?

18. What are your thoughts on the subsidy level for adoptive and foster homes?

19. Demographic information collected:
    - Highest level of education achieved
    - Date of degree
    - Position title
    - Age
    - Gender

Appendix B: Summary Statistics for Children Awaiting Adoption and Already Adopted Children in California During Time Period Preceding Interviews

ADOPTION INDICATORS:

	2002	2003	2004 Nation	2004
Children in foster care on September 30	100,451	97,261	517,000	--
Children whose parental rights have been terminated	994	1,038	65,000	--
Total number of children waiting to be adopted	6,335	5,472	118,000	4,903
Mean age of waiting children (in years)	6.8	6.7	8.8	--
Total number of children adopted	8,840	7,468	52,000	7,754
Within 24 months of latest removal (in percent)	21%	23%	--	--
Time between TPR and adoption less than 12 months (in percent)	44%	46%	52%	53%
Receiving a subsidy (in percent)	93%	85%	89%	91%
Mean age at finalization (in years)	6.5	6.4	6.9	6.2
Adopted by (in percent)				
Foster parent	48%	51%	59%	52%
Non-relative	6%	5%	16%	5%
Relative	47%	44%	24%	44%
Step-parent	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%

POST-ADOPTION SERVICES AND SUPPORTS:

DEFINITION OF SPECIAL NEEDS	Child has at least one of the following needs or circumstances that may be a barrier to placement or adoption without financial assistance: ▪ Three years of age or older ▪ Race, ethnicity, color, or language that is a barrier to adoption ▪ Member of a sibling group that should remain together ▪ Mental, physical, emotional, or medical disability certified by a licensed professional ▪ Parental background of a medical or behavioral nature that can be determined to adversely affect the development of the child		
BASIC SUBSIDY RATES, FY 2005	**Age 2** $425	**Age 9** $494	**Age 16** $597
REIMBURSEMENT FOR NON-RECURRING EXPENSES, FY 2005	$400		
FEDERAL ADOPTION ASSISTANCE EXPENDITURES UNDER TITLE IV-E, FY 2004	$268,393,869		
POST-ADOPTION SERVICES PROVIDED	Post-adoption services are administered by the Department of Social Services through the Post-adoption Services Project (PASP), parent groups, and contracted agencies. Post-adoption services include the following: ▪ Information, resource/referral ▪ Educational programs ▪ Support groups ▪ Respite ▪ Crisis intervention (licensed Social Workers) ▪ Educational materials ▪ Newsletter ▪ Reading room (resource library)		

Source: http://www.urban.org/

Appendix C: Duration of Steps in the Adoption-Seeking Process for Mitchell County

The table below shows the median and average time elapsed between the specified steps in the adoption seeking process for Mitchell County. I was unable to obtain these data for Whitman County.

Steps in the Adoption Process	Median Time Elapsed Between Initial Contact and Given Step	Average Time Elapsed Between Initial Contact and Given Step
Contact the agency	--	--
Attend orientation	2 days	29 days
Submit application	58 days	102 days
Complete training	94 days	119 days
Acquire license	205 days	225 days
Total duration between initial contact and home licensure	**359 days**	**475 days**

Appendix D: Grounds for Withholding Foster Home License Approval in California

Health and Safety Code § 1522; DSS Manual Tit. 22 § 89219

Approval of the application shall be denied if the applicant has convictions that would make his or her home unfit as a foster family home or a certified family home. No exemptions can be granted for any crime listed below:

- Gang-related extortion or intimidation of witnesses or victims
- Murder, attempted murder, or voluntary manslaughter
- Mayhem or felony torture
- Kidnapping
- Robbery, burglary, arson, or carjacking
- Assault with intent to commit mayhem, rape, or sodomy
- Rape or sexual battery
- Sexual exploitation of a minor
- Aggravated assault of a child
- Contributing to the delinquency of a minor
- Willfully inflicting any cruel or inhuman corporal punishment or injury on a child
- Incest, sodomy, or lewd or lascivious act upon a child under age 14
- Felony conviction for distributing lewd material to children
- Sexual abuse of a child
- All crimes for which one must register as a sex offender
- Distributing or possessing child pornography
- Poisoning or adulterating food, drink, medicine, pharmaceutical products, or water supplies
- Elder or dependent adult abuse
- Drawing, exhibiting, or using a loaded firearm
- Molestation of a child younger than age 18
- Any felony punishable by death or imprisonment in the State prison for life
- Any felony that inflicts great bodily injury
- Exploding, igniting, or attempting to explode or ignite any destructive device or explosive with intent to commit murder
- Felony sexual exploitation by a physician, psychotherapist, counselor, etc.

In regulation: An application shall be denied if the criminal record of any applicant discloses a conviction for any crime other than a minor traffic violation for which the fine was less than $300 and an exemption pursuant to § 89219.1(a) has not been granted
(www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/homestudyreqs.cfm.)

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