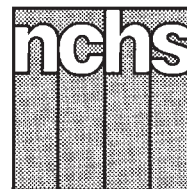


Advance Data



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Adoption, Adoption Seeking, and Relinquishment for Adoption in the United States

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Abstract

Objectives—This report presents national data on adoption and adoption-related behaviors among ever-married women 18–44 years of age in the United States, according to selected characteristics of the women. Trends are shown in the prevalence of adoption and relinquishment of children for adoption. For 1995, the report shows demand for adoption and women’s preferences for characteristics of the child.

Methods—Data are based on nationally representative samples of women 15–44 years of age from the 1973, 1982, 1988, and 1995 National Surveys of Family Growth (NSFG).

Results—The percent of ever-married women 18–44 years of age who have ever adopted a child declined from 2.1 percent in 1973 to 1.3 percent in 1995. Of the 9.9 million women who had ever considered adoption, 16 percent had taken steps toward adoption, and 31 percent of these had actually adopted a child. Older women, nulliparous women, women with fecundity impairment, and women who have used infertility services were more likely to have considered adoption, to have taken concrete steps toward adoption, and to have actually adopted a child. In response to the questions about preferred characteristics of an adopted child, women expressed strong preferences with respect to age, sex, race, and disability level of the child, but were willing to accept children with the less-desired traits. Between 1989 and 1995, about 1 percent of babies born to never-married women were relinquished for adoption, down from 9 percent among such babies born before 1979.

Conclusions—Federally supported adoption data collection sources corroborate the decline in adoption shown by the NSFG over the past 25 years. Demand for adoption in the United States varies, depending on whether demand is conceptualized liberally as “ever having considered adoption” or more narrowly, as “currently taking concrete steps toward adoption.” The narrow definition was fulfilled by 232,000 ever-married women in 1995.

Keywords: adoption • relinquishment • population characteristics

Introduction

Adoption has long served as a means of providing care for children whose birth parents could not raise them for economic or other reasons. It has also represented an alternative means of family formation for individuals unable to have their own children. The legalization of abortion in 1973 and the development of new reproductive technologies over the last two decades have presented further options to people facing unwanted pregnancy and infertility. Yet there remains a need to collect information on adoption trends, adoption demand, and characteristics of children waiting to be adopted or placed in permanent care arrangements. This information is crucial for formulating adoption and child welfare policies at the Federal, State, and local levels.

Despite the recognized importance of these issues, information on adoption in the United States is fairly limited (1,2). The primary focus of data collection has been on the collection of data on finalized adoptions (1,2). These efforts have included a federally managed system that was operational from the 1940’s through the early 1970’s (3). This enterprise was followed by a variety of federally supported data



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collection efforts that focused primarily on children being adopted from the public foster care system (4). In addition, one federally funded project (5–7) and a major advocacy group collected data on all types of adoptions (public, private, independent) (8,9). Almost all of these efforts involved the collection of aggregate data from State agencies on finalized adoptions. In most circumstances coverage was incomplete (not all adoptions were reported) and inconsistent (States reported adoptions using different definitions and criteria). Because the data were aggregated at the State level, they provided very limited information about the correlates of adoption at the individual level.

In 1986, Congress amended Title IV–E of the Social Security Act to establish a reporting system for foster care and adoption. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) became operational in Fiscal Year 1995. It mandates States to report case-specific information on all children in foster care and all children adopted from the public child welfare system. States may voluntarily report data on children adopted through private agencies or independently. Although the data collected through this system promise to be a substantial improvement over past efforts, they still only address narrow aspects of adoption.

Since 1973, the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) has filled many of the gaps in the available data on adoption by providing additional information on various aspects of the adoption triad, that is, the child, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents. These include the characteristics of adopted children (10), infant relinquishment for adoption (11,12), adoption demand and the relationship between infertility and adoption (13–15), and other aspects of adoption, including trends over time (16). Although the NSFG data are limited by small subgroup sizes due to the rare nature of adoption-related events, the survey has proved a valuable source of data for studying the individual-level determinants of adoption and adoptive relinquishment, and for documenting trends in aspects of adoption for which no other national data are available. The

NSFG Cycle 5, conducted in 1995, provides an opportunity to continue to enrich our understanding of adoption, particularly our knowledge about the characteristics of relinquishing and adopting women, adoption demand, and adoption preferences (17).

Methods

Using data from nationally representative samples of women 15–44 years of age, this report presents the proportions of ever-married women 18–44 years of age who have ever adopted a child as of 1973, 1982, 1988, and 1995. Demand for adoption and preferences for the characteristics of the adopted child are shown for 1995. This was the first survey year in which preferences for the characteristics of the child were collected. The report also presents time-trend data on relinquishment of births to never-married women. The estimates of relinquishment are limited to births to never-married women because this is the group most at risk of adverse consequences with respect to socioeconomic well-being of the child and parent. Relinquishment also occurs among the formerly married and the currently married, but it is very rare. Ever-married women, particularly currently married women, tend to have different (and better) social and economic circumstances than never-married women that render their decision-making process when faced with an unintended pregnancy distinct from that of never-married women. Furthermore, presenting estimates of relinquishment limited to never-married mothers will best parallel the numerous reports on premarital childbearing that have been published in recent years.

Data in this report are presented by key demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the woman at the time of the interview, such as age, income, education, and race and Hispanic origin. Because fertility problems have been found to be related to the pursuit of adoption (14,18), data are shown by fecundity status at time of interview, which describes the woman's physical capacity to conceive or bear a child. Data are also shown according to the

receipt of infertility services. With the exception of relatively unchanging attributes such as self-reported race and Hispanic origin, it is acknowledged that many of these characteristics may have been different at the time of the adoption or the adoption-seeking behavior being reported and that some of the associations noted in this report may be affected by using characteristics at the time of interview.

Data for 1973, 1982, 1988, and 1995 are from Cycles 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the NSFG, conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). Each cycle of the NSFG was based on multi-stage probability samples of the civilian, noninstitutionalized population of women in the United States, yielding estimates that are representative of the national population of women 15–44 years of age. Further details on the sample design and data collection procedures for these surveys can be found in several published reports (19–23).

The 1995 NSFG was based on personal, in-home interviews with a national sample of 10,847 women 15–44 years of age. Computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) were conducted between January and October 1995 with 1,553 Hispanic women, 6,483 non-Hispanic white women, 2,446 non-Hispanic black women, and 365 women of other races and ethnic origins. Earlier cycles of the NSFG were not conducted using CAPI, but still relied upon personal interviews in the women's homes: the 1988 NSFG included 8,450 women 15–44 years of age, the 1982 NSFG included 7,969 women 15–44 years of age, and the 1973 NSFG included 9,797 women 15–44 years of age.

The 1973 NSFG was targeted at women who were currently or formerly married (“ever-married”). The 1982 NSFG was the first in this series of surveys to include never-married women. In order to show adoption trends from 1973 to 1995, [table 1](#) is limited to women who were ever-married at time of interview. Because adoption is extremely rare and often not considered or allowed among never-married women and young women 15–17 years of age, this report focuses on adoption and adoption-seeking

Table 1. Number of ever-married women 18–44 years of age and percent who have ever adopted a child, according to selected characteristics: United States, 1973–95

Characteristic	Survey year				Ever-married women 18–44 years of age
	1973	1982	1988	1995	
	Number in thousands				
All women	30,701	34,632	36,689	37,448	9,662
	Percent who ever adopted				
Total ¹	2.1	2.2	1.6	1.3	4,623
Age at interview					
18–24 years	0.4	0.6	–	0.2	5,280
25–34 years	1.8	2.0	0.5	0.4	6,833
35–39 years	3.1	2.1	2.2	1.9	
40–44 years	4.0	4.3	4.3	2.5	
Parity					
0 births	5.9	6.6	3.8	3.6	
1 birth	2.7	2.2	1.5	0.8	
2 births	1.1	1.3	0.7	0.9	
3 or more births	0.8	0.6	1.3	0.5	
Marital status at interview					
Currently married	2.2	2.1	1.8	1.3	
Formerly married	1.5	2.4	0.9	1.2	
Fecundity status at interview ²					
Surgically sterile	3.3	2.1	2.1	1.3	
Impaired fecundity	5.7	9.2	6.1	4.1	
Fecund	0.8	0.8	0.2	0.5	
Ever used infertility services					
Yes	7.5	6.6	3.7	
No	1.0	0.6	0.6	
Education at interview ³					
No high school diploma or GED ⁴	1.8	1.7	1.8	0.8	
High school diploma or GED	2.4	2.4	1.5	1.2	
Some college, no bachelor's degree	1.6	2.2	1.2	1.4	
Bachelor's degree or higher	4.6	3.1	2.4	1.7	
Poverty level income at interview ³					
0–149 percent	1.4	1.8	0.7	0.5	
150–299 percent	2.0	2.5	1.9	1.0	
300 percent or higher	3.0	2.4	1.8	1.8	
Race and Hispanic origin					
Hispanic	1.2	0.7	0.8	0.6	
Non-Hispanic white	2.3	2.4	1.8	1.4	
Non-Hispanic black	1.6	1.5	1.6	1.9	

... Data not available.

– Quantity zero.

¹Total includes women with missing or inapplicable data on some variables. Also includes women of other race and ethnic origins, not shown separately.

²Fecundity status in 1973 was measured only as surgically sterile, subfecund, and fecund. In 1982, 1988, and 1995, fecundity status differentiated surgically sterile women based on contraceptive versus noncontraceptive reasons. Fecundity status also included three subcategories of impaired fecundity—nonsurgically sterile, subfecund, and long interval.

³Limited to women 22–44 years at interview.

⁴GED is general equivalency diploma. GED was explicitly asked about in only the 1988 and 1995 surveys.

among ever-married women 18–44 years of age. This focus results in the exclusion of very few cases from the analysis. For example, the number of never-married sample women who have ever adopted a child is often zero in many of the age groups shown in the

report, and the number of never-married women who have considered adoption is also too small in the NSFG to permit separate analysis. The following table shows the number of ever-married sample cases of women 18–44 years of age in each survey year.

In all four surveys, women were asked if they had ever adopted a child, either related or unrelated to them. However, the specific question series yielding this information varied across surveys. The greatest change in the question series occurred in the 1995 NSFG, in which adoption was asked about in the context of a series on nonbiological children (those to whom she did not give birth) that the woman ever raised. [Table 1](#) shows the percentages of ever-married women 18–44 years of age who have ever adopted a child, based on survey data from 1973–95. [Figure 1](#) shows the trend in adoption of related children (that is, related by blood or marriage) from 1982–95 among ever-married women who have adopted a child.

In this report, data are presented from the 1995 NSFG on the demand for adoption and preferences for the adopted child. Information on demand for adoption is garnered from three series of questions in the 1995 interview.

- Women may report that they have adopted or are trying to adopt a nonbiological child that they raised in the past or are currently raising at time of interview (series 1).
- Women may report that they are currently seeking to adopt a child, apart from any nonbiological child they have raised or are raising (series 2).
- And finally, women who are not *currently seeking* to adopt may report that they have *considered adoption in the past* (apart from any nonbiologic child they have raised or are raising) (series 3).

Compiling information from these three series of questions, [figures 2](#) and [3](#) and [tables 2](#) and [3](#) show *demand for adoption* among ever-married women 18–44 years of age in several ways:

Ever considered adoption—The proportion of ever-married women

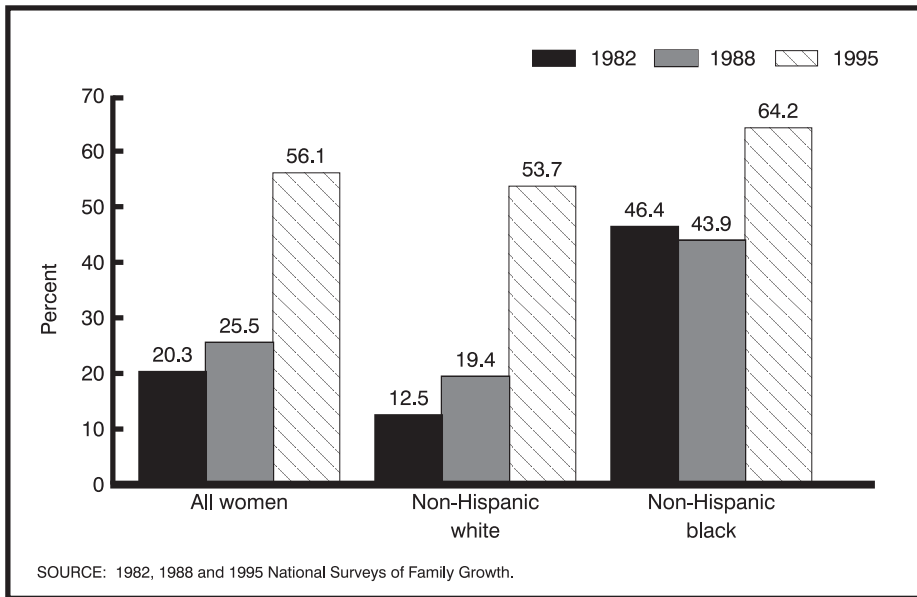


Figure 1. Percent who have adopted a related child among ever-married women 18–44 years of age who have ever adopted a child: United States, 1982–95

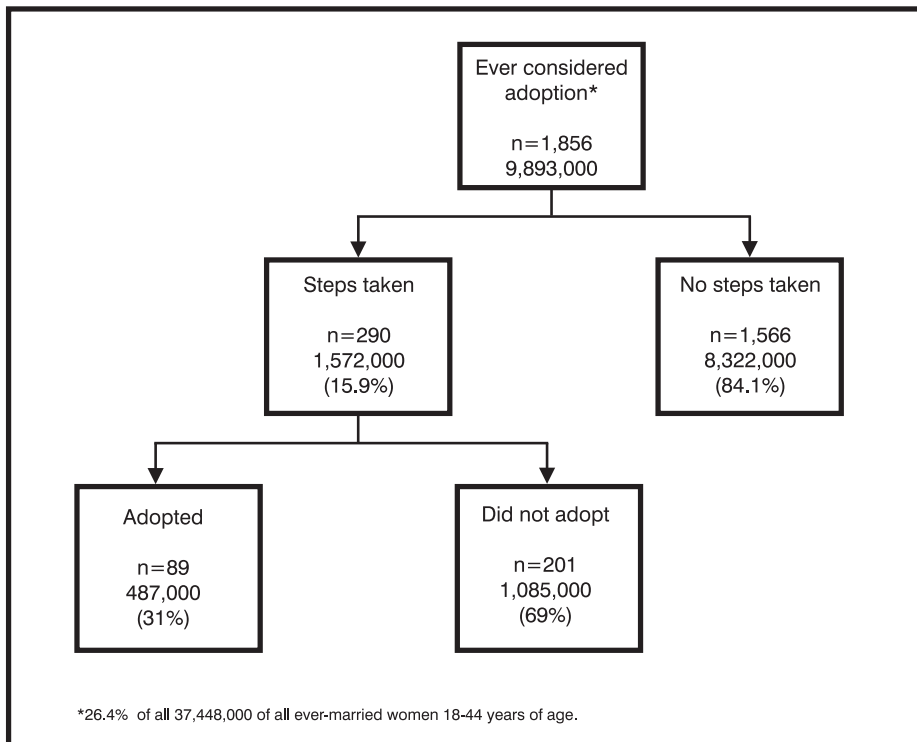


Figure 2. Outcome of considering adoption among ever-married women 18–44 years of age: United States, 1995

18–44 years of age who ever considered adoption includes those who have adopted or are trying to adopt a nonbiological child they have raised or are raising (series 1). It also includes women who have considered adoption in the past (series 3) and those who are

currently seeking to adopt a child (other than a previously mentioned nonbiological child) (series 2). Thus this is the broadest definition of adoption demand, based on past and current behavior and attitudes.

Ever took steps—Based on all women who ever considered adoption, tables 2 and 3 show the proportion who ever took steps toward adoption. Women who have adopted or are currently trying to adopt a nonbiological child they have raised or are raising (series 1) are counted as having “taken steps” toward adoption. Also included are women who reported taking any steps toward adoption elsewhere in the interview (series 2 or 3). Steps toward adoption included contacting an adoption agency or lawyer, placing a newspaper ad, and other actions indicating an interest in adoption beyond “just considering.” This group is a subset of the group who “ever considered adoption.”

Currently seeking or planning to adopt—Tables 2 and 3 show the proportion of women who are currently seeking or planning to adopt (a) a nonbiological child they are raising or (b) some other child. This group is a subset of the group who “ever considered adoption.”

Have taken steps (among current seekers/planners)—Among women who are currently seeking or planning to adopt, tables 2 and 3 show the proportions who have taken specific steps toward adoption, as defined above.

In the 1995 NSFG, a subset of women were asked for the first time in a national survey about their preferences for the adopted child. The characteristics that were asked about included sex, race, age, physical/mental disability, number of children (single child versus brothers and sisters), and religion. (Definitions of disability were not provided in the survey but left to the respondent’s own interpretation.) Among women currently seeking to adopt a child (series 2), those who did not indicate that they were seeking to adopt a particular child they already knew were asked to specify the characteristics they *would prefer* in an adopted child. Among women who previously considered adoption (but were not currently seeking), those who had taken steps toward adoption (as defined above) were asked to specify the characteristics they *would have preferred*. Only these subsets of women were asked about preferences because they were

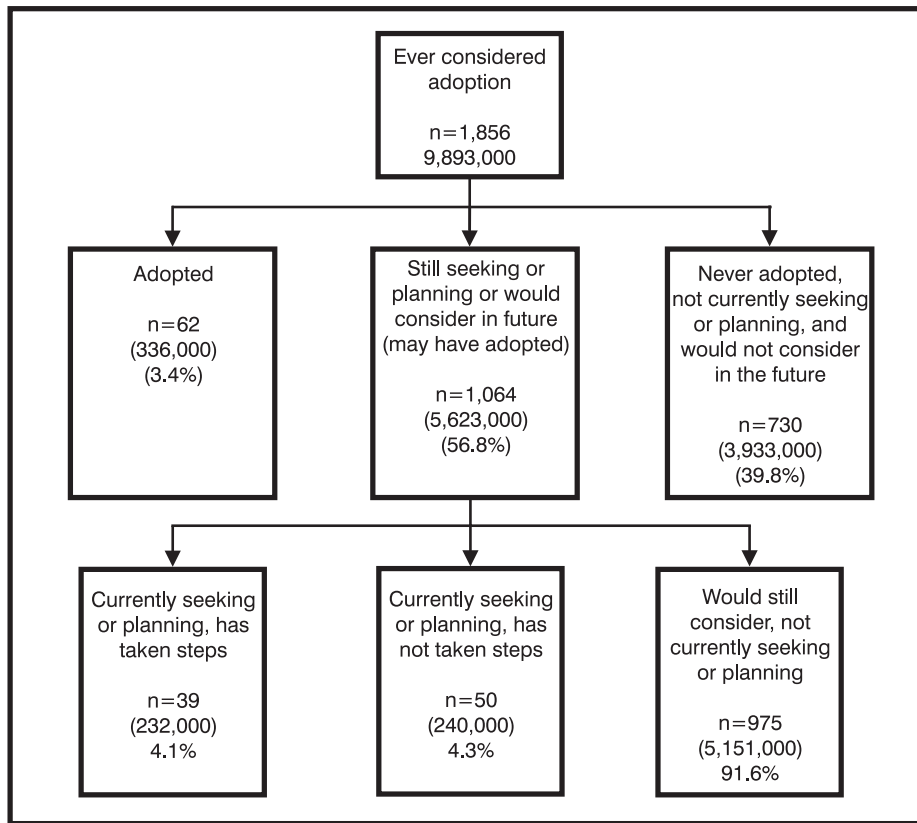


Figure 3. Current adoption demand among ever-married women 18–44 years of age, United States, 1995

she had ever placed a child for adoption. This method of obtaining relinquishment information differs slightly from previous years of the survey, which are also used to produce the trend data shown in table 5. In 1982 and 1988, relinquishment was obtained from women's reports of the status of each biological child who was not living in her household at the time of the interview. Children reported as living with adoptive parents were considered to have been relinquished.

Relinquishment may be underreported in a survey such as this, as acknowledged in previous studies (12). However, there is no reason to believe that underreporting would vary systematically by survey year due to the questions used to obtain the relinquishment information.

Underreporting would most likely occur at the point of enumeration of all pregnancies, rather than at the reporting of the status of already-identified pregnancies that resulted in live births. The method of ascertaining pregnancies was consistent across survey years. Despite probable underreporting, the NSFG remains an important and exclusive source of national level data that permits individual-level analysis of the determinants and consequences of relinquishment.

Results

Ever adopted a child

Table 1 shows the percent of ever-married women 18–44 years of age who have ever adopted a child, from 1973 to 1995. The data suggest that the percent who have ever adopted a child declined between these survey years, from 2.1 percent in 1973 to 1.3 percent in 1995. The factors associated with having adopted remain the same: adoption has been more common among nulliparous women, those with impaired fecundity, and those who have ever used infertility services. The prevalence of adoption increases with age, education, and income. Adoption by black women has remained relatively stable, but the data suggest that adoption by white women has declined.

considered to best represent the pool of adoptive parents for the vast majority of children waiting to be adopted, and they were deemed most likely to act according to their stated preferences. Also, these women were thought to have advanced far enough in the adoption process to have considered and formed preferences for what type of child they wished to adopt.

With all characteristics, women could indicate that they were indifferent—that is, they had no particular preference. If women expressed a preference for a given characteristic, they were then asked followup questions about each of the other characteristics to determine whether they “would accept” another child. For example, women who expressed a preference for adopting a boy were asked if they “would accept” a girl. Among those women who were asked the questions on preferences for an adopted child, table 4 shows the percentages who “would accept” a child with a given characteristic and who

“would prefer” a child with a given characteristic. The former group includes all those who expressed indifference about that characteristic, as well as those who expressed a preference but stated that they “would accept” another child. This broader classification gives an indication of the acceptability of characteristics that may not be generally preferred (for example, mild disability, older children).

Table 5 shows the percent of children born to never-married women under 45 years of age who were relinquished for adoption in several time periods. Information on children relinquished for adoption was obtained from two sources within the 1995 survey. The first source was the questionnaire series that asked for the baby's name for each of the woman's births; in response to this question, some women, usually those who never named their babies, volunteered that they had placed the baby for adoption. A second source was a question later in the interview asking the woman directly if

Table 2. Demand for adoption among ever-married women 18–44 years of age: United States, 1995

Characteristic	Ever consider adoption	Took steps (based on those who ever considered adoption)	Currently seeking or planning to adopt	Took steps (based on those currently seeking or planning to adopt)
Number in thousands				
All women in denominator (unweighted)	37,448 (6,833)	9,893 (1,856)	37,448 (6,833)	472 (89)
All women in numerator	9,893	1,573	472	232
Percent				
Total ¹	26.4	15.9	1.3	49.2
Age at interview				
18–24 years	18.4	7.6	0.5	62.8
25–34 years	24.5	9.6	0.9	40.7
35–39 years	28.7	16.7	1.6	33.9
40–44 years	30.0	25.3	1.8	69.5
Parity				
0 births	35.5	21.7	2.2	52.1
1 birth	27.8	13.9	1.4	58.6
2 births	23.8	13.4	0.6	27.7
3 or more births	21.9	14.7	0.4	49.0
Marital status at interview				
Currently married	26.7	16.2	1.3	53.9
Formerly married	25.5	14.5	1.1	27.7
Fecundity status at interview				
Surgically sterile	27.6	18.0	1.5	52.4
Impaired fecundity	44.9	23.2	2.7	54.8
Fecund	20.5	9.2	0.7	38.0
Ever used infertility services				
Yes	41.1	27.0	2.0	59.4
No	22.2	9.9	1.1	43.6
Education at interview ²				
No high school diploma or GED ³	21.6	21.0	2.7	55.2
High school diploma or GED	25.6	14.8	1.0	52.2
Some college, no bachelor's degree	31.0	16.2	1.2	53.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	26.5	16.4	1.3	34.7
Poverty level income at interview ²				
0–149 percent	22.2	12.0	1.3	54.1
150–299 percent	24.9	16.0	0.9	38.0
300 percent or higher	29.4	17.4	1.5	51.8
Race and Hispanic origin				
Hispanic	26.8	11.6	2.4	58.4
Non-Hispanic white	25.9	16.4	0.9	52.6
Non-Hispanic black	29.6	17.2	2.5	34.8

¹Total includes women with missing or inapplicable data on some variables. Also includes women of other race and ethnic origins, not shown separately.

²Limited to women 22–44 years at interview.

³GED is general equivalency diploma.

In the 1982, 1988, and 1995 surveys, questions were included to determine how each adopted child was related to the respondent *at the time when he or she first came to live with*

the respondent—for example, was the child a stepchild, a child of a sibling or other relative, or did the child have no prior relationship with the respondent. While the specific wording and response

choices varied across surveys, it is possible to define a comparable variable for each year to indicate whether the woman had ever adopted a related child. A “related” child is defined as any child with whom the respondent had a relationship before the child came to live with her. This relationship may be through blood (as with a sister’s child) or through marriage (as with a husband’s child); children of a cohabiting partner or boyfriend were also counted as “related” because they were likely to have had a relationship with the respondent at the time they began living with her. Figure 1 shows the percent who have adopted a related child among ever-married women 18–44 who have ever adopted a child, by race/origin and survey year. The prevalence of related adoption increased significantly between 1988 and 1995. For example, among all women, the prevalence more than doubled from 26 percent in 1988 to 56 percent in 1995; this rise was driven largely by the increase in related adoptions among non-Hispanic white women who ever adopted, from 19 percent in 1988 to 54 percent in 1995. In 1982 and 1988, related adoptions comprised a significantly larger percentage of adoptions for ever-married non-Hispanic black women than for their white counterparts who had adopted a child. By 1995, the prevalence of related adoptions was comparable among white and black women who ever adopted a child.

Demand for adoption

Figure 2 gives the number of ever-married women 18–44 in 1995 who have *ever considered* adoption (as defined above in the Methods section), and depicts the *outcome of considering* adoption based on whether or not they took steps toward adoption and whether or not they actually adopted a child. In 1995, 9.9 million women had ever considered adoption, representing over a quarter of all ever-married women in this age range. Of these women, 15.9 percent (1.6 million) had ever taken steps toward adoption. Of those who had taken steps, 31 percent (487,000) had adopted one or more children.

Table 3. Number of ever-married women 18–44 years of age and percent distribution by selected characteristics: United States, 1995

Characteristic	All ever-married women 18–44	Ever considered adoption	Ever considered adoption AND took steps	Currently seeking or planning to adopt
Number in thousands				
All women in denominator (unweighted)	37,448 (6,833)	9,893 (1,856)	1,572 (290)	472 (89)
Percent distribution				
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Age at interview				
18–24 years	9.2	*6.4	3.0	3.7
25–34 years	40.3	*37.4	*22.7	29.0
35–39 years	25.9	28.2	29.6	33.0
40–44 years	24.7	*28.1	*44.7	34.4
Parity				
0 births	19.0	*25.5	*34.9	33.2
1 birth	21.9	23.0	20.1	24.5
2 births	33.8	30.5	25.6	15.0
3 or more births	25.3	*21.0	19.4	27.3
Marital status at interview				
Currently married	79.0	79.8	81.6	82.2
Formerly married	21.0	20.2	18.4	17.8
Fecundity status at interview				
Surgically sterile	40.6	42.4	48.1	47.3
Impaired fecundity	12.3	*21.0	*30.7	26.1
Fecund	47.1	*36.6	*21.2	26.6
Ever used infertility services				
Yes	22.4	*34.9	*59.4	*35.3
No	77.6	65.1	40.6	64.7
Education at interview ¹				
No high school diploma or GED ²	11.5	9.3	12.1	24.0
High school diploma or GED	40.9	39.2	35.9	31.4
Some college, no bachelor's degree	24.8	*28.8	29.0	22.4
Bachelor's degree or higher	22.8	22.7	23.1	22.3
Poverty level income at interview ¹				
0–149 percent	18.7	*15.5	11.5	19.4
150–299 percent	31.6	29.5	29.2	22.2
300 percent or higher	49.8	*55.0	59.3	58.5
Race and Hispanic origin				
Hispanic	10.9	11.1	8.1	20.7
Non-Hispanic white	75.3	73.9	76.4	*52.7
Non-Hispanic black	9.4	10.6	11.5	19.1
Non-Hispanic other	4.3	4.4	4.0	7.5

* Percent is significantly different at the 5-percent level from the percent in column immediately to the left. That is, the 95-percent confidence intervals for the 2 percent values do not overlap.
 ^ Percent is significantly different at the 10-percent level from the percent in column immediately to the left. That is, the 90-percent confidence intervals for the 2 percent values do not overlap.
¹Limited to women 22–44 years at interview.
²GED is general equivalency diploma.

NOTES: Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding. For dichotomous variables (those with only 2 values), confidence intervals only needed to be evaluated for one set of values.

Figure 3 also starts with the number of women who ever considered adoption, but describes current demand for adoption. Over one-half (5.6 million)

of women who ever considered adoption are still seeking or planning to adopt or would consider adoption in the future, even if they may not be currently

seeking or planning to adopt. (Note: Some of these women may have adopted a child already.) Nearly 40 percent (3.9 million) of those who ever considered adoption have not adopted a child, are not currently seeking or planning to adopt, and would not consider adoption in the future. The remaining small group of women (3.4 percent; 336,000) are those who have adopted a child but would not consider adoption again. The bottom row of figure 3 breaks out the 5.6 million women who are still seeking or planning to adopt or would consider adoption at some point in the future. The vast majority of these women (5.2 million; 91.6 percent) are not currently seeking or planning to adopt but would consider adoption (again) in the future. The remaining women are currently seeking or planning to adopt; approximately one-half of these women (232,000; 4.1 percent) have taken steps, and the other one-half (240,000; 4.3 percent) have not taken steps toward adoption.

Information on adoption seeking was also collected in the 1988 NSFG, using a shorter sequence of questions on whether women had ever sought to adopt a child, steps they had taken toward adoption, and whether they were currently seeking to adopt. The 1988 estimate of the population of women currently seeking to adopt and who had taken some steps toward adoption was 204,000 (14). The 1995 estimate of 232,000 is not significantly different, suggesting that current demand for adoption has remained relatively stable. Success in adopting also appears to have remained stable: in 1988, 31 percent of women who had ever “sought to adopt” had adopted a child; in 1995, 31 percent of women who had ever “taken steps to adopt” had done so.

Table 2 shows the prevalence of adoption demand in various subgroups of ever-married women. The first column in the table is based on all ever-married women (6,833 unweighted cases representing 37.4 million women) and includes the percent who ever considered adoption. Column 2 shows the percent who took steps toward adoption, based on the 9.9 million women who ever considered adoption.

Table 4. Preferences for adoption among those asked: National Survey of Family Growth, 1995

	Currently seeking to adopt	Previously sought to adopt		
	Unweighted number			
All women	101		2,380	
Women asked about preferences ¹	88		150	
	Number in thousands			
All women	498		12,673	
Women asked about preferences	437		802	
	Percent who would—			
	Accept	Prefer	Have accepted	Have preferred
Sex of child				
Boy	95.4	21.2	97.0	12.8
Girl	98.0	33.3	96.5	37.4
Race of child				
Black	79.1	13.7	65.7	9.5
White	94.6	28.8	95.8	46.6
Other race	90.4	15.1	86.9	5.3
White women:				
Black child	72.5	1.8	59.2	2.1
White child	100.0	51.0	100.0	56.8
Other child	87.4	9.2	86.0	5.2
Black women:				
Black child	100.0	52.1	100.0	51.5
White child	86.4	—	71.3	—
Other child	89.1	11.7	88.5	4.5
Age of child				
Less than 2 years	96.9	57.5	95.2	63.8
2–5 years	85.5	28.1	76.8	22.6
6–12 years	56.4	6.8	40.1	4.5
13 years or older	36.6	0.5	18.0	—
Physical/mental disability of child				
None	100.0	54.2	99.4	69.5
Mild	83.0	24.8	81.1	18.6
Severe	33.1	5.5	15.9	11.2
Number of children				
Single child	98.8	64.7	100.0	62.9
2 or more siblings at once	66.1	26.3	70.7	15.2
Religion of child				
Same as respondent or H/P ²	100.0	17.1	100.0	22.8
Different from respondent or H/P ²	98.8	6.8	94.6	1.2
Protestant women:				
Same religion	100.0	18.7	100.0	23.3
Different religion	98.2	10.2	93.3	1.5
Catholic women:				
Same religion	100.0	14.1	100.0	29.2
Different religion	100.0	—	98.7	—

— Quantity zero.

¹Current adoption seekers were asked about preferences if they were not seeking to adopt a child they already knew. Previous adoption seekers were asked about preferences if they had taken any steps toward adoption and they were not seeking to adopt a child they already knew.²H/P is husband or partner.

Column 3 is again based on all ever-married women (37.4 million) and shows the percent who are *currently seeking or planning* to adopt. Column 4 shows the percent who have taken steps, based on the 472,000 women who are currently seeking or planning to adopt.

Over a quarter of all ever-married women 18–44 years of age (26.4 percent) have ever considered adoption, but few of these women (15.9 percent, or 4.2 percent of all ever-married women) have taken concrete steps toward adopting. Only 1.3 percent of the 37.4 million ever-married women are currently planning or seeking to adopt, but of these, nearly one-half (49.2 percent) have taken specific steps. In general, the factors related to having ever adopted (table 1) are also related in similar fashion to having considered adoption and having taken concrete steps. For example, having considered adoption is more common among older women, nulliparous women, those with current fecundity impairment, and those who have ever used infertility services. The same tends to be true for the percent currently seeking or planning to adopt, but the numbers are often too small to achieve statistical reliability. The numbers in column 4 provide a far less clearcut picture of who actually takes concrete steps among women currently seeking or planning to adopt. It appears that the factors most closely tied to taking steps among current seekers/planners are being currently married, having ever used infertility services, and being of a racial/ethnic group other than non-Hispanic black.

In contrast to table 2, which gives the prevalence of different levels of adoption demand among groups of ever-married women, table 3 compares the characteristics of four groups of ever-married women who differ with respect to their level of adoption demand—that is, their current and past adoption-seeking. As a baseline, the first column describes all ever-married women 18–44 years of age. Each subsequent column presents a progressively smaller subset of ever-married women in order to explore the selectivity associated with adoption-seeking. Column 2 shows

Table 5. Among children born to never-married women under 45 years of age, percent who were relinquished for adoption, by race, according to year of birth

Race	Before 1973	1973–81	1982–88 ¹	1989–95 (standard error)
All women ²	8.7	4.1	2	0.9 (.03)
Black	1.5	0.2	1.1	—
White	19.3	7.5	3.2	1.7 (0.55)

— Quantity zero.

¹Percentages for before 1973 through 1988 are based on combined data from the 1982 and 1988 NSFG (12).

²Includes women of other races, not shown separately.

NOTE: Categories "Black" and "White" include women of Hispanic origin.

ever-married women who ever considered adoption, column 3 shows column 2 women who took concrete steps toward adoption, and column 4 shows ever-married women who are currently seeking or planning to adopt, regardless of whether they have taken steps to adopt. The notations indicating significance testing represent statistically important differences between each column's figures with the figure immediately to its left. For example, women who ever considered adoption (column 2) are significantly more likely to be older and nulliparous than all ever-married women. They are also more likely to have current fecundity impairment, to have ever used infertility services, and to have higher incomes. Women who actually took concrete steps toward adoption (column 3) differ from the group who ever considered adoption (column 2) in that they tend to be older and more likely to be nulliparous, fecundity-impaired, and ever-users of infertility services. Women currently seeking or planning to adopt (column 4) do not differ very much from those women who ever considered adoption and took concrete steps (column 3). They show similar distributions with respect to age, parity, marital status, fecundity status, education, and income. However, current seekers/planners are significantly *less* likely to be white and to have used infertility services.

Preferences for the adopted child

As described in the Methods section, certain women who ever considered adoption were asked about their preferences for the characteristics of an adopted child. [Table 4](#) describes

these preferences among women currently seeking or planning to adopt and women who previously sought to adopt. In general, preferences are strong with regard to age of child, disability status of child, race of child, and number of children. Preferences are less strong for sex or religious affiliation of child. Although women would equally accept boys or girls, they tended to prefer to adopt girls, a finding supported by field observations. Even when preferences are strong, it is sometimes the case that women *would accept* a child with the less-preferred attribute. For example, among white women currently seeking or planning to adopt, 51 percent would prefer to adopt a white child, but 73 percent would accept a black child, and 89 percent would accept a child of another race. Similarly, 52 percent of black women currently seeking or planning to adopt would prefer to adopt a black child, and 86–89 percent would accept a white child or a child of another race. Among both current seekers/planners and previous seekers, nearly two-thirds preferred to adopt a single child, but roughly 70 percent were willing to accept two or more siblings at once.

With respect to age of child, there is less acceptance of older children. Nearly 60 percent of current seekers/planners would prefer to adopt a child under 2 years of age. While 86 percent would accept a child 2–5 years of age, only 37 percent would accept a child older than 12. Similarly, with regard to disability status, over one-half (54 percent) of current seekers/planners would prefer to adopt a nondisabled child, but only one-third (33 percent) would accept a severely disabled child. Among previous adoption seekers, the

acceptance of disability is far less: 70 percent would have preferred to adopt a nondisabled child and only 16 percent would have accepted a seriously disabled child. It should be noted that 83 percent of current seekers/planners and 81 percent of previous seekers would accept (or would have accepted) a mildly disabled child.

Relinquishment of children for adoption

[Table 5](#) shows the percent of children born to never-married women under 45 years of age who were relinquished for adoption, according to race of mother and year of birth. The placement of children for adoption has never been common, but over the past few decades it has grown increasingly rare. Between 1989 and 1995, just under 1 percent of babies born to never-married women were relinquished for adoption. Never-married black women have been consistently less likely than never-married white women to relinquish their babies for adoption, and this likelihood has remained very low over the decades. In contrast, the percent of babies born to never-married white women (that is, never-married at time of birth) who were placed for adoption has declined sharply. In the early 1970's, almost 20 percent of babies born to never-married white women were relinquished for adoption, compared with only 1.7 percent of such babies born in the first half of the 1990's.

Discussion

Prevalence of adoption

Data from the NSFG suggest a decline over time, particularly between the 1970's and the 1990's, in the percent of ever-married women who have ever adopted a child. As indicated by [figure 1](#), the decline in adoption is essentially a decline in unrelated adoptions, that is, adoptions in which there was no pre-existing blood or marital relationship between the children and the adopting parents (at the time when the child began living with them). The dramatic rise in the proportion of all adoptions that are related adoptions,

particularly among non-Hispanic white women, may reflect increases in the adoption of stepchildren over this period. While there were some minor wording changes in the adoption question series across survey years, it is unlikely that these changes are responsible for the apparent decline in overall adoption prevalence. It is possible that the composition of the ever-married population has changed over these survey years, especially with respect to age, given the patterns of delayed marriage in the past 2–3 decades. But these changes probably resulted in a greater proportion of ever-married people being those who are highly motivated for parenting, which would not translate to a decline in adoption prevalence. The decline in adoption reflects trends in the annual number of reported adoptions over the past four decades. This number peaked at 175,000 in 1970, and by 1986 had fallen to 104,000 (3, 5–7). Although estimates of annual adoptions for the periods since the mid-1970's are only intermittently available, the evidence suggests that the numbers have remained fairly low, varying within a narrow range, despite increases in the population of reproductive age. Women adopting during the years around 1970, when adoption rates were higher, have gradually aged out of the NSFG sample, leaving only women who have adopted during years when adoption was relatively less common.

Adoption demand

Although the prevalence of adoption has fallen significantly since the 1973 survey, NSFG data from 1988 and 1995 indicate that the demand for adoption, as measured by numbers and percentages of ever-married women seeking to adopt, has remained fairly stable since the late 1980's. In both survey years, there was stability in adoption success as well, with 31 percent of women who ever "sought to adopt" or "took steps to adopt" having actually adopted a child. This stability in adoption seeking and its ultimate success, along with the preferences expressed in the 1995 survey for younger children and for children with no or mild disabilities,

amplifies the challenge of finding adoptive homes for many of the children in the public foster care system. This information may help Federal, State, and local child welfare agencies in developing strategies to more efficiently identify appropriate prospective adoptive parents for the children in the public foster care system who are waiting for permanent homes.

Another key finding of this report, illustrated by the use of several definitions of adoption demand, is that the motivation to adopt is a continuum. With the broadest definition of adoption demand, the NSFG data indicate that over a quarter of ever-married women (9.9 million women) have ever considered adoption, but only 4 percent of ever-married women (1.6 million women) have taken concrete steps toward adopting. In 1995, roughly 232,000 ever-married women were currently seeking or planning to adopt a child and had taken concrete steps, representing about 2 percent of all who had ever considered adoption. This suggests that surveys including a single item to capture "interest in adopting" would do a poor job of measuring the potential of individuals to adopt. At the same time, the numbers of women actually seeking or planning to adopt may underestimate potential demand because real and perceived barriers may dissuade many from taking steps. Over 5 million women in 1995 were willing to consider adoption again in the future, but were not currently seeking or planning to adopt. Between the numbers "willing to consider" and the numbers "actually seeking" is a vast gulf; little is known about the readiness of these people to adopt.

The data also suggest that it would be incomplete and potentially misleading to assume that all or most of the demand for adoption arises from individuals who have experienced fertility problems. While there is some relationship between infertility and interest in adoption, this report and earlier analyses with the NSFG indicate that the relationship may be weakening (18). As documented in [tables 1 and 3](#), adoption and adoption demand is more prevalent among nulliparous women and fecundity-impaired women, but many

women considering or seeking adoption do not have these characteristics.

[Figure 1](#) indicates that a greater percentage of adopting women had adopted a related child as of 1995, compared with earlier survey years. This trend reflects increases in the adoption of stepchildren and children of relatives. "Related" adoptions are just one subgroup of what some researchers have labeled "preferential adoption," that is, adoption motivated by reasons other than infertility. The increasing prevalence of preferential adoption has been noted in other studies as well (24). It is also worth noting that the development and dissemination of new infertility treatments may delay or reduce demand for adoption. Thus there may be a much broader market for adoption than indicated by the market for infertility services.

Relinquishment

The downward trend in relinquishment of births occurring to never-married women that was seen in the 1980's continued through the mid-1990's. This decline has paralleled a steady increase in the rate of nonmarital births (that is, births to unmarried women, of which never-married women are a subset) during the same period (25). Careful study is warranted to determine the reasons that an increasingly large pool of never-married mothers continue to be less likely to make the decision to relinquish their babies for adoption, but recent declines in abortion rates suggest that the choice of abortion over relinquishment is not a significant factor in lower prevalence of relinquishment in recent years (26).

Variations in the questions across cycles of the survey may have an effect on the comparability of the relinquishment estimates across time. In earlier rounds of the survey, relinquishment was determined indirectly from a question in the pregnancy history asking where each of a woman's biological children was currently living, if not listed in the respondent's household roster; those who were reported as living with adoptive parents were considered to

have been relinquished. The 1995 NSFG did not ascertain the living situation of each biological child not listed in the household, but still relied upon respondents to volunteer in the baby name question (in the pregnancy history) that they had relinquished a baby. As mentioned earlier, the 1995 NSFG also included, for the first time, a direct question asking whether the woman had ever placed a child for adoption in hopes of alleviating the potential underreporting associated with relying on respondents to volunteer relinquishment information in the pregnancy history. Despite this additional directness in the survey, reported relinquishments of premarital births declined through 1995 and remained a rare phenomenon. A supplementary analysis (figures not shown) was conducted that lends credibility to the estimates produced in the 1995 NSFG. Using only the 1995 NSFG, estimates of relinquishment among never-married women were reproduced for time periods comparable to those shown in analyses of earlier cycles of the NSFG (12), and the estimates were very similar.

Although there is little time trend data to support this hypothesis, another factor to consider is that informal adoption (that is, relative care or other child care arrangements) is occurring in place of formal relinquishment for adoption (27). The 1995 NSFG data suggest that adopted children account for only a small proportion of the nonbiological children cared for by women 18–44 years of age. Eleven percent of women in this age range had ever lived with and cared for a child to whom they had not given birth. While 3 percent were responsible for a stepchild, and nearly 6 percent were responsible for a child of a relative, friend, or partner, less than 1 percent actually adopted the child (28). The phenomenon of transferring custody of a child from the birth mother to another person or persons can take different forms, and is far from limited to permanent relinquishment of parental rights and responsibilities and legal adoption of the child by strangers. Transfer of custody can vary along several dimensions such as formal

versus informal, related versus nonrelated, and temporary versus permanent (27). It can also vary in terms of the degree of agreement of the birth mother. Thus, survey questions should be designed to capture more explicitly the variations on child placement that cannot be classified as formal, permanent relinquishment, including, for example, the temporary transfer of caretaking responsibilities to relatives, and the court-ordered removal (short or long term) of a child into foster care. This approach may not result in the identification of more children available for adoption because many of these children will never appear in the adoption pool. However, this will increase our knowledge about the prevalence of the transfer of caretaking responsibility from the biological parent(s), and the expanding array of child care and custody arrangements that are used.

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Technical notes

Definitions of terms

Currently seeking or planning to adopt—For definition of term, see the Methods section.

Ever considered adoption—For definition of term, see the Methods section.

Ever relinquished a child—Relinquishment is compiled from two sources in the 1995 NSFG:

1. Each woman who had a live birth was asked, for each of her live births, what she named the baby. If she reported that the baby (usually unnamed) had been placed for adoption, this was recorded by the interviewer.
2. Unless the adoption status of each of the live births had already been ascertained from the source asking for the baby's name, women were asked "(Not including the baby(ies) that you already told me about,) have you ever placed a(nother) child born to you for adoption?" She was then asked to identify which baby had been placed for adoption, so relinquishment status could be linked to a specific live birth.

A baby is considered to have been relinquished if identified as placed for adoption in either of the two sources.

Fecundity status at time of interview—Each woman is classified according to her physical capacity to conceive or bear a child at time of interview. The six categories of fecundity status are grouped in this report as follows:

- "surgically sterile"—whether for "noncontraceptive" or "contraceptive" reasons
- "impaired fecundity"—includes "nonsurgically sterile," "subfecund," and "long interval without conception"
- "fecund"—includes all women not classified as "surgically sterile" or "impaired fecundity."

Ever used infertility services—Infertility services are defined as any form of medical help to become

pregnant or to prevent miscarriage. Women were asked about receipt of infertility services at any point in their lives, therefore this measure does not indicate *when* these services were received.

Preferences for the adopted child—For definition of term, see the Methods section.

Selected demographic terms—

Age at interview is based on the woman's age (as of her last birthday) at the midpoint of the interviewing period for each survey year. This date was used to determine whether each respondent was in the eligible age range for the survey.

Education at interview is based on the woman's educational attainment at the time of interview. College graduates are those with a bachelor's degree or higher; they have completed an undergraduate degree program that normally takes 4 years to complete, regardless of how long they actually took to finish the degree. Women with an associate's degree, which typically requires 2 years to complete, are classified as having "some college." Results shown by education in this report are limited to women 22–44 years of age, in order to allow all women to report college attendance.

Marital status at interview indicates the woman's formal (legal) marital status at time of interview. In this report, women who were widowed, divorced, or separated are grouped together as "formerly married."

Parity is defined as the total number of live births ever had by the woman. This number is to be distinguished from gravidity, which is the total number of times she has been pregnant. Nulliparous women are those who have had no live births, and parous women are those who have given birth to at least one baby. This term is used in this report instead of "childless women" because (a) women may be "childless" even though they have given birth (for example, they relinquished their babies for adoption or their children died), and (b) women may have children though they have never given birth (for example, nulliparous women who adopted a child).

Poverty level income at interview is based on the poverty index ratio calculated for each survey year. Poverty status, measured in this way, adjusts the total family income for the number of persons in the family and accounts for the poverty income levels defined by the U.S. Census Bureau for any given year.

Race and Hispanic origin can be defined in all of the NSFG surveys (1973–95). Women who reported any Hispanic or Spanish ancestry were classified as Hispanic. Then all other women were classified according to race, yielding groups for "non-Hispanic white," "non-Hispanic black," and "non-Hispanic other" women.

Further details on most of these terms have been published elsewhere (28).

Source and description of the data

Data for 1973, 1982, 1988, and 1995 are from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). The NSFG is a periodic survey of the civilian, noninstitutionalized population of women 15–44 years of age in the United States. The 1988 and 1995 surveys drew their samples from the National Health Interview Survey, an ongoing household survey also conducted by NCHS, in collaboration with the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The 1995 NSFG was the first in the series to be conducted with computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), which significantly improved the quality and timeliness of the data. Recent cycles of the NSFG have been jointly planned and funded by NCHS, the Office of Population Affairs (OPA), and the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), with additional support from the Administration for Children and Families.

The main purpose of the NSFG is to collect data on factors affecting pregnancy and women's health in the United States. The NSFG supplements and complements the data from the National Vital Statistics System on births, marriage and divorce, fetal death, and infant mortality (for example, see

reference 25). The NSFG is also a significant part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's public health surveillance for women, infants, and children—particularly on contraception, infertility, unintended pregnancy and childbearing, teenage pregnancy, and breastfeeding.

Sampling errors

Because the statistics presented in this report are based on sample surveys, they may differ from the statistics that would have resulted if all the millions of women represented by the surveys had been interviewed. The standard error of an estimate is a measure of such differences.

Most of the statistics presented in this report are based on the 1995 NSFG, for which SUDAAN software was used to estimate standard errors and to determine statistical significance. It was not possible (at the time of this writing) to use the same statistical software and techniques to estimate standard errors across all survey years from 1973 to 1995. For further details on the techniques used, consult Appendix II, reference number 29.

In this report, terms such as "higher," "lower," "increase," and "decrease" indicate that the observed differences were statistically significant at the 5-percent level. Statements using phrases such as "the data suggest" indicate that the difference was significant at the 10-percent level. Lack of comment about any two statistics does not mean that statistical significance of the difference was ruled out; the significance of all possible pairs of statistics was not tested.

Statistics in this report may also be subject to nonsampling error, that is, errors or omissions in responding to the interview, recording answers, and processing data. The NSFG data for each survey year have been adjusted for nonresponse by adjustment to the sample weights assigned to each case. Other types of nonsampling error were minimized by a series of quality control measures that have been described elsewhere (19–23).

Availability of data and related data sources

Public-use data files containing data from all surveys used in this report are available from the National Technical Information Service. Ordering information for data and selected reports based on the data can be found on the NCHS homepage at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchswww/>. Paper copies of all NCHS reports based on the NSFG can be ordered by contacting the Data Dissemination Branch at 301–436-8500 or the U.S. Government Printing Office at 202–512-1800.

The **Voluntary Cooperative Information System (VCIS)** begun in 1982 is the primary source of national aggregate data on adoption and foster care in the United States. Roughly 60 percent of the States and Puerto Rico responded to this voluntary survey in fiscal year 1994, and the data are incomplete and somewhat inconsistently reported among those responding. Despite these limitations, the VCIS data provide the most complete picture of the circumstances of foster care children and children adopted from the foster care system for the period 1982 through 1994.

The **Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)** was established by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in 1990 as a mandatory system for collecting data on all children covered by the protections of Title IV-B of the Social Security Act (Section 427). States are *required* to collect data on all children in foster care (for whom the State child welfare agency has responsibility) and on all adopted children who were placed by either the State child welfare agency or private agencies under contract with the State child welfare agency. States are *encouraged* but not required to collect data on all other adoptions finalized in the State. All information is relayed to DHHS twice a year, approximately 2 months after the end of each 6-month reporting period; the first reporting period was October 1, 1994–March 31, 1995.

In addition to the NSFG, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and selected Supplements of the National Health Interview Survey also provide information on adopted children and prospective adoptive parents or caregivers. For further details on these data sources, please see the summary by Bachrach and colleagues (17).

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