



NATIONAL FOSTER CARE  
**ADOPTION  
ATTITUDES  
SURVEY**

**NOVEMBER 2007**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**DAVE THOMAS  
FOUNDATION  
FOR ADOPTION®**

Finding Forever Families for Children in Foster Care

 **HarrisInteractive**

NATIONAL FOSTER CARE  
**ADOPTION  
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Commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption  
Conducted by Harris Interactive



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FOUNDATION  
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November 1, 2007

Dear Friend,

Fifteen years ago, our founder, Dave Thomas, gave us his name, leveraged his business brand and placed us on the journey to do what's right for children — assuring a safe and loving adoptive home for *every* child in need.

As the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption continues to carry out Dave's promise, we remain committed to raising the national consciousness about the 114,000 children waiting to be adopted from foster care, dispelling myths and misperceptions about the foster care adoption process and challenging the very barriers that create unnecessary waiting periods for children in need.

Accomplishing these goals will take a clear understanding of current American attitudes and beliefs about foster care adoption. We are pleased to share with you the enclosed groundbreaking 2007 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey*, commissioned through Harris Interactive.

The findings show us that Americans overwhelmingly support the concept of adoption and in particular foster care adoption. And yet, foster care adoptions have not increased significantly over the past five years and 114,000 children, through no fault of their own, wait in temporary care for a permanent family.

The 2007 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey* is a clear call to action. We must aggressively disseminate the urgency and the scope of the issue to the American public to elevate foster care adoption as a critical community, state and national priority; educate the public, the media and policymakers about the realities of foster care adoption; advocate for and address the long-term support that families who adopt from foster care deserve; insure results-driven quality customer service for families, from initial phone call to post-adoption support; and promote the need for an elevated commitment to child-focused recruitment of adoptive families for the longest waiting children in the foster care system.

As Dave Thomas said, "These children are not someone else's responsibility. They are our responsibility." There is hope. Three in 10 Americans have considered adoption and of those, 71 percent, or roughly 48 million, have considered foster care adoption. Working together, we will assure that every child has a safe home and a loving family. It is not only our vision— it is our indefatigable responsibility.

Thank you for taking the time to review the 2007 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey*. If you need any further information, please contact us at 1-800-ASK-DTFA or [www.DaveThomasFoundationforAdoption.org](http://www.DaveThomasFoundationforAdoption.org). We look forward to hearing from you.

All good wishes,

Rita L. Soronen  
Executive Director



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 1.0 BACKGROUND

Every day in America, children are abused, neglected and abandoned. Thousands enter the foster care and juvenile justice system through no fault of their own and are subsequently permanently removed from their homes because their birth families are unable or unwilling to provide a safe environment for them.

Today, 114,000 children in the U.S. foster care system are available for adoption.<sup>1</sup> The average wait for a child is nearly four years in continuous care. These children may have moved multiple times and all too frequently grow up in the system (the average age of the waiting child is now 9 years old). More children are made available for adoption from foster care each year than are adopted and most compelling, more than 20,000 youths will turn 18 and exit the system without an adoptive family this year.<sup>2</sup>

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption views the urgency of this issue through the eyes of a child. We are dedicated to these critical core beliefs:

- Every child deserves a safe, permanent, loving family.
- No child is unadoptable.
- No child should linger in foster care or leave the system without a family.

In order to ensure that every child in foster care finds a forever family the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption commissioned Harris Interactive to conduct a landmark survey to better understand American attitudes toward foster care adoption.

## 1.1 SURVEY OBJECTIVES

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption commissioned Harris Interactive to understand Americans' attitudes about foster care adoption, their beliefs about the children waiting to be adopted, their perceptions of the system caring for these children and their attitudes toward what a healthy living environment is for a child. By highlighting perceptions, or misperceptions in these areas, we can work to more effectively move children from the temporary, yet too often long-term care of the state, into the permanent and nurturing care of a family.

The survey includes a section on the respondents who have participated in the foster care adoption process to find out more about what motivates people to take action and what causes them to complete or drop out of the adoption process.

The survey also includes a section on those who have been foster parents, in recognition of the large number of foster parents (60 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) who go on to adopt.

<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families Administration on Children; Interim Estimates for FY 2005

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, AFCARS Report (September 2006)

Among the specific objectives of the study were the following:

- Understand why Americans do or do not adopt from foster care.
- Learn about the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors that create barriers to foster care adoption.
- Understand what beliefs Americans have about foster care adoption, the children waiting to be adopted and the foster care system.
- Highlight American perceptions about who can, or should be, an adoptive parent.
- Provide research-based information about American perceptions to those charged with action on behalf of children – child advocates, adoption professionals and practitioners, policymakers and the media.

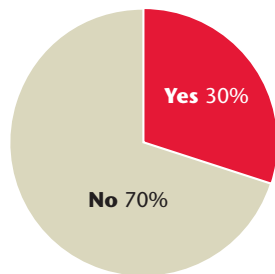
The 2007 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey* differs from the 2002 *National Adoption Attitudes Survey*, sponsored by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, in its methodology and focus. With an intensified lens on foster care adoption and the use of a state-of-the-art online survey to capture more detailed information, the 2007 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey* provides compelling and provocative information on what Americans think and believe.

Complete detailed findings from the 2007 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey* can be found at [www.DaveThomasFoundationforAdoption.org](http://www.DaveThomasFoundationforAdoption.org).

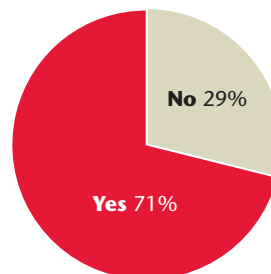
## 1.2 KEY FINDINGS

- **Three in 10 Americans** have or are considering adoption and **71 percent** of those have considered foster care adoption as their primary method for creating or expanding their family.
- When Americans are considering adoption, they now consider foster care adoption more often than any other type of adoption.

**Considered Adoption**<sup>Q445</sup>



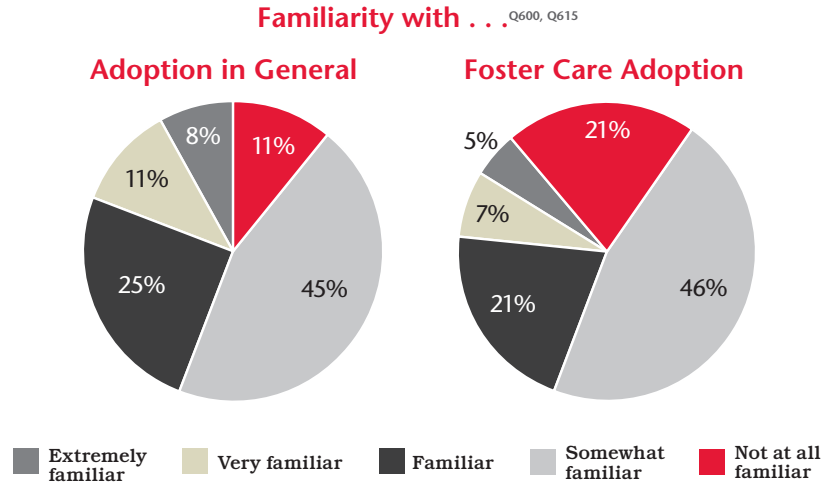
**Considered Foster Care Adoption**<sup>Q460</sup>



Q445. Are you or have you ever considered adopting a child? BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

Q460. Are you considering or have you considered adopting a child from the US foster care system? BASE: Respondents that are or have considered adopting (n=549)

- Although **89 percent** of Americans are familiar with adoption in general, **79 percent** of Americans are familiar with foster care adoption.



Q600. In general, how familiar would you say that you are with the topic of adoption?  
 Q615. In general, how familiar would you say that you are with the topic of foster care adoption?  
 BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

- Yet, given this large pool of potential adoptive parents who are both familiar with the issue and considering acting (48 million adults<sup>3</sup>), **114,000** children still wait to be adopted from the U.S. foster care system.
- Many Americans do not have an accurate understanding of the U.S. foster care system.

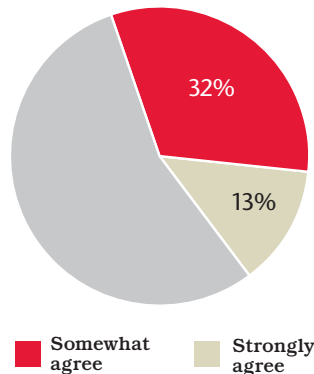
**Core misperceptions about Foster Care Adoption:**

**1. Americans do not have a clear picture of the 114,000 eligible children in the U.S. foster care system waiting for adoption.**

**FOR EXAMPLE,** 45 percent of Americans erroneously believe children enter foster care because of juvenile delinquency.<sup>Q795</sup>

**The Children Were Juvenile Delinquents**

Q795. There are a number of reasons why children might be placed in foster care in your community today. Please indicate your level of agreement with each reason. BASE: All respondents (n=1660)



<sup>3</sup> The number of Americans considering foster care adoption based upon 71 percent of three in 10 Americans according to U.S. Census Bureau U.S adult, population estimate of 225,662,922 million, July 1, 2006. <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2006/NC-EST2006-02.xls>

**2. Americans underestimate the diversity of individuals who are capable of adopting from foster care.**

**FOR EXAMPLE,** less than half of Americans believe that a single parent raising an adoptive child definitely can provide a healthy environment.<sup>Q510</sup>

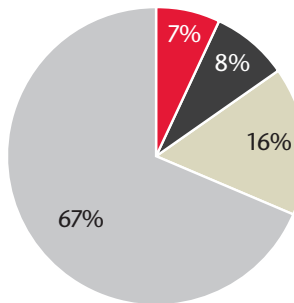
Q510. Do you believe that the following living arrangements can provide a healthy and loving environment for children? BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

**3. Americans do not fully understand the U.S. foster care adoption process.**

**FOR EXAMPLE,** two-thirds of those considering adoption fear the biological parent will take the child back.<sup>Q720</sup>

**Being Sure That the Birth Parents Could not Take the Child Back**

Q720. There are a number of concerns that people might have when considering adoption of foster children. For each statement listed below, please rate the level of your concern. BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

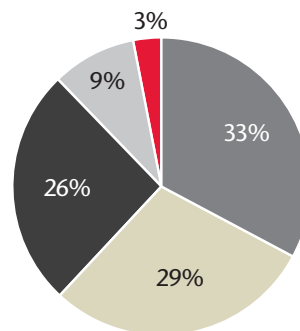


Major concern    Minor concern    No concern    Not sure

While 88 percent of Americans have overwhelmingly positive opinions of foster care adoption in principle, 37 percent have relatively negative opinions about the U.S. foster care system, while 26 percent are confused or unsure about the process and what it entails.<sup>Q605, Q710</sup>

**Opinion of Foster Care Adoption**

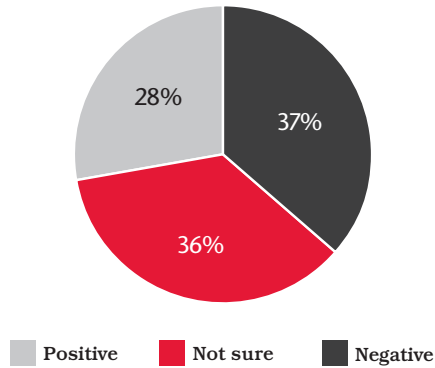
Q605. In general, what is your opinion of US infant adoption, adoption of a child from the foster care system, or international adoption?



Extremely favorable    Very favorable    Favorable    Somewhat favorable    Not at all favorable

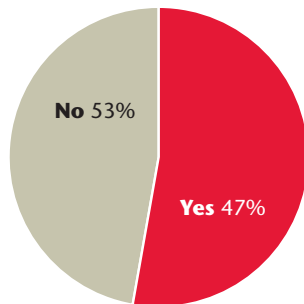
### Opinion of U.S Foster Care System

Q710. In general, would you say you have a positive or negative opinion of the foster care system? BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

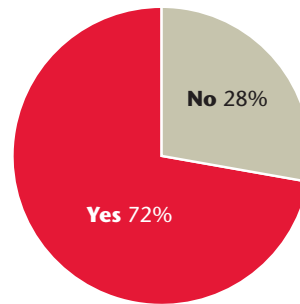


Almost half of Americans are touched by adoption (were adopted, did adopt, have family or friends who were adopted), 72 percent have a very favorable opinion of adoption and two-thirds believe we as a society should be doing more to encourage and support foster care adoption.

### Touched by Adoption



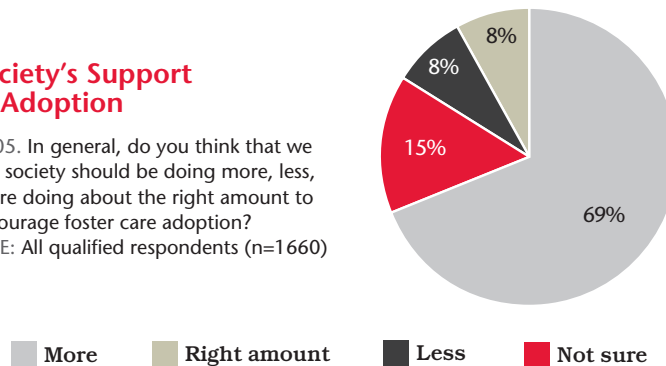
### Favorable of Adoption



Q405. Were you adopted as a child? Q425. Have you adopted a child?  
 Q485. Has anyone in your family or among your close friends ever been adopted?  
 Q605. In general what is your opinion of US infant adoption, adoption of a child from the foster care system, and international adoption? BASE: All qualified respondents (n=1660)

### Society's Support of Adoption

Q705. In general, do you think that we as a society should be doing more, less, or are doing about the right amount to encourage foster care adoption? BASE: All qualified respondents (n=1660)



The results of the study highlight what Americans do and do not understand about the waiting children and the foster care adoption process. While Americans do understand the age of waiting children (78 percent of respondents come close to estimating the actual average age of 9), they are clearly unaware of other important facts. The chart below highlights where major misperceptions about the children in foster care exist.

### BELIEFS VERSUS REALITY

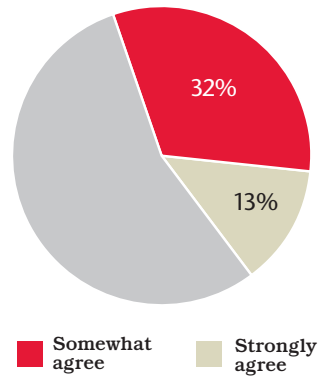
#### Children waiting in foster care to be adopted

**America's Belief: 45 percent** of Americans believe children enter foster care because of juvenile delinquency

**Reality:** Children enter the foster care system through no fault of their own, as victims of neglect, abandonment, or abuse

#### Believe Children in Foster Care are Juvenile Delinquents

Q795. There are a number of reasons why children might be placed in foster care in your community today. Please indicate your level of agreement with each reason.  
BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

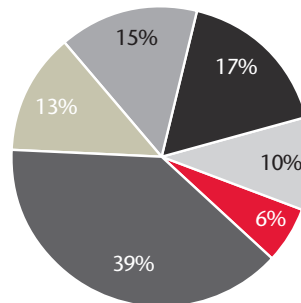


**America's Belief: 61 percent** of Americans underestimate how many children are waiting for adoptive families

**Reality: 114,000** children are available for adoption in U.S. foster care<sup>4</sup>

#### Belief about Number of Children in US Foster Care Available to be Adopted

Q635. Based on what you know of adoption, please select the answer that you think most closely estimates the number of children in foster care available to be adopted in the United States.  
BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

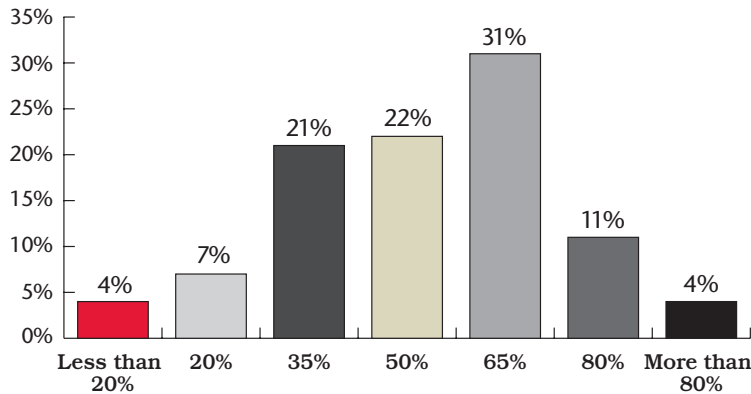


- Over 100,000
- About 100,000
- About 80,000
- About 60,000
- About 40,000
- About 20,000

<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families Administration on Children; Interim Estimates for FY 2005

**America's Belief: 68 percent** overestimate the percentage of African-American children in the system<sup>Q645</sup>

**Reality:** While African-American children are vastly overrepresented in this system, they account for **32 percent** of foster care children available for adoption

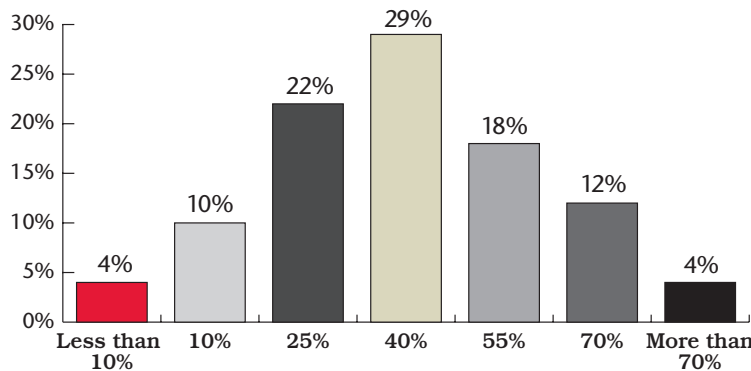


Q645. Based on what you know of adoption, please select the answer that you think most closely estimates the percentage of children in foster care in the United States that are available for adoption that are Black/African-American. BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

**America's Belief: 85 percent** overestimate the number of children in group or institutional care<sup>Q655</sup>

**Reality: 70 percent** of children available for adoption are placed in foster homes

**Belief about Percent of Children in Group or Institutional Care**

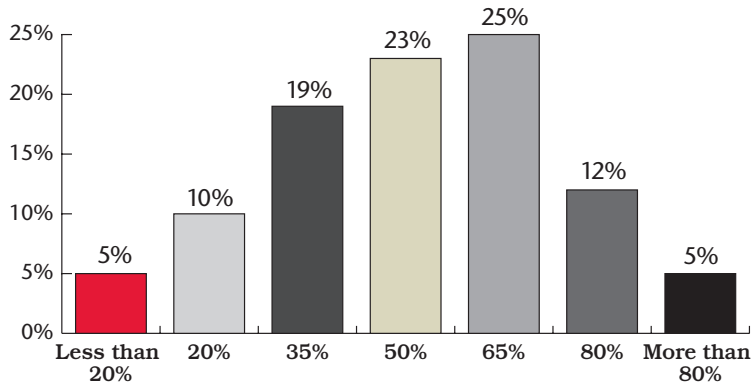


Q655. Based on what you know of adoption, please select the answer that you think most closely estimates the percentage of children in foster care in the United States that are available for adoption that are living in group homes or institutional care. BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

**America’s Belief: 85 percent** overestimate the number of children who “age out” of the system<sup>Q660</sup>

**Reality: 21 percent** of children in foster care turn 18 and leave the system without a family each year

**Belief about Percent of Children who “Age Out” of System**



Q660. What percent of children do you think turn 18 and leave the foster care system in the United States without being adopted? BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

**BELIEFS VERSUS REALITY**

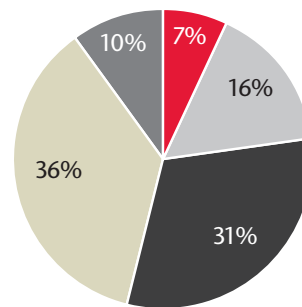
**Foster care adoption process**

**America’s Belief:** Most Americans correctly believe foster care adoption costs less than other types of adoption, but **46 percent** still incorrectly believe it is expensive<sup>Q680</sup>

**Reality:** Foster care adoption is affordable with little or no cost to adopt

**Perception of Expense**

Q680. How expensive would you say that each type of adoption is based on what you have read, heard or seen? BASE: All respondents (n=1660)



- Very expensive
- Somewhat expensive
- Neither expensive nor inexpensive
- Somewhat inexpensive
- Very inexpensive

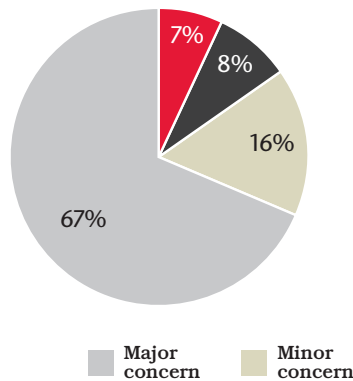
**America's Belief:** **Two-thirds** of those considering adoption fear the biological parent will take the child back and are not aware of the permanent termination of parental rights<sup>Q720</sup>

**Reality:** Once a child is adopted out of foster care, the birth parents cannot return to claim them or fight in court for their return

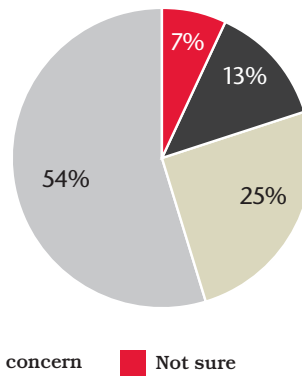
In addition to cost and finality, other major concerns expressed by respondents about adopting from foster care include the perceptions of medical, emotional and behavioral issues of the children and a fear of being unable to pay for the child's care and education.<sup>Q720</sup>

### Concerns about US Foster Care Adoption Process

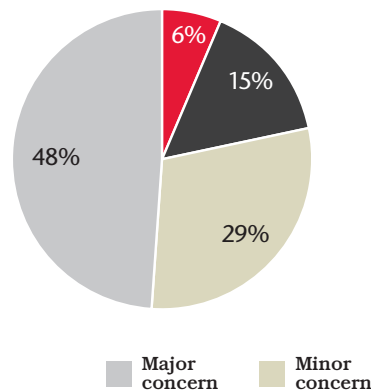
**Being Sure That the Birth Parents Could not Take the Child Back**



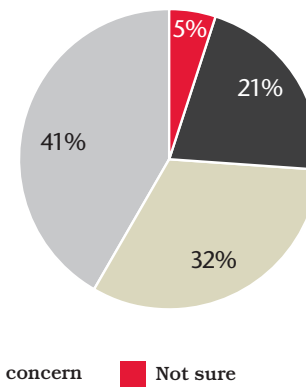
**Being Able to Pay for the Adoption**



**Having the Financial Resources Needed to Educate the Child**



**The Cost of Raising the Child to Adulthood**



Q720. There are a number of concerns that people might have when considering adoption of foster children. For each statement listed below, please rate the level of your concern. BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

## BELIEFS VERSUS REALITY

### *Living environments for children*

Interestingly, a barrier to adoption may be the views Americans have of healthy environments in which to raise an adopted child. Only four in 10 believe parents of a different religion than the child can definitely provide a healthy and loving environment, while less than half think single parents definitely can and a third believe same-sex parents definitely can.

Americans also appear conflicted about the subject of age. Although 56 percent believe that grandparents definitely can provide a healthy environment for a child, only 37 percent believe that a person over the age of 55 definitely can, while 20 percent believe that a person over the age of 65 definitely can.

**America's Belief:** **Less than half** of Americans believe that a single parent raising an adoptive child definitely can provide a healthy environment<sup>Q510</sup>

**Reality:** **32 percent** of children adopted from foster care in 2005 were adopted by single parents or unmarried couples

**America's Belief:** Only **37 percent** believe a person over the age of 55 can definitely provide a healthy environment<sup>Q510</sup>

**Reality:** **23 percent** of adopted children live with an adoptive parent 55 years or older (Child Trends analysis of 2005 AFCARS data)

**America's Belief:** Only **one-third** believe same-sex parents can definitely provide a healthy environment<sup>Q510</sup>

**Reality:** An estimated **65,000** children (four percent of adopted children) are living with a lesbian or gay adoptive parent (Urban Institute data from 3/27/07)

Q510. Do you believe that the following living arrangements can provide a healthy and loving environment for children? BASE: All respondents (n=1660)

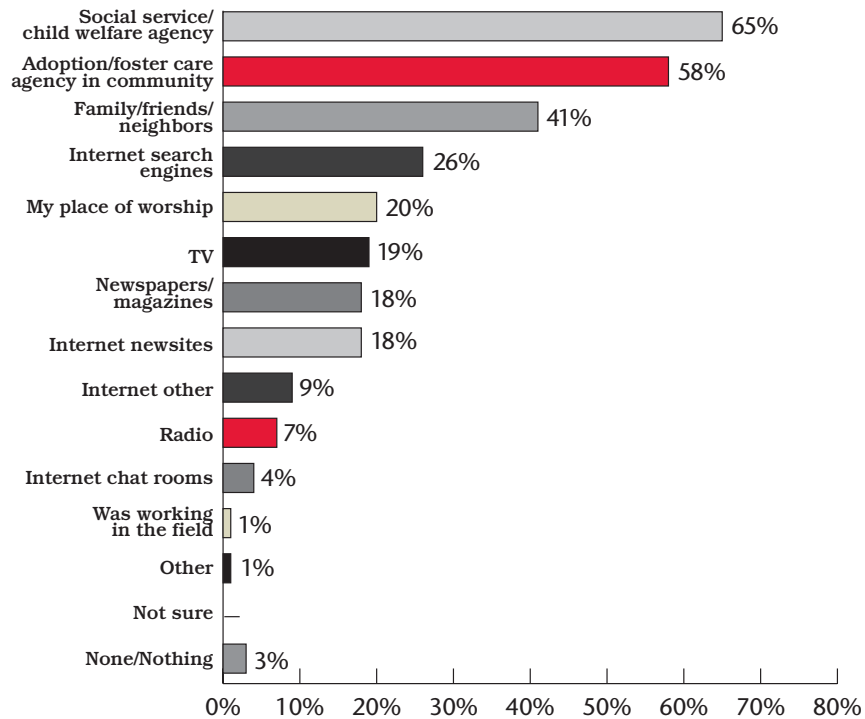
### **Beliefs among the foster care adoption subset**

In an effort to begin to understand why those who actually begin the foster care adoption process either move forward or stop, the survey drilled down with those participants who had experience in the foster care system. Of those most interested in foster care adoption, only **23 percent** completed the process and finalized the adoption of a child.

Additionally, **nearly half** of those interested in foster care adoption chose not to engage in the process after obtaining information by phone. **Twenty-two percent** began the process after a phone call, but subsequently decided not to continue.

The survey also highlighted information sources for individuals engaged in the process. **Two-thirds** of the foster care subset noted that they turned to the social service or a child welfare agency for information about foster care adoption.<sup>Q800</sup>

**Sources of Information Used by Foster Care Subset<sup>Q805</sup>**



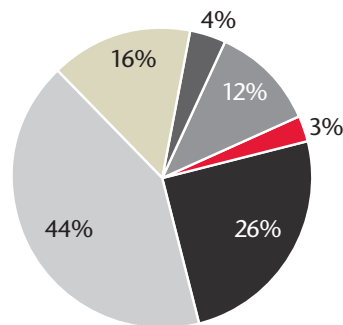
Q805. Where did you turn for information about foster care adoption? BASE: Respondents who have participated in foster care adoption (n=143)

**Foster Parent Concerns about Adoption<sup>Q915</sup>**

Survey results of those who have been foster parents shows foster parent concerns about adopting foster children are similar to the general public. The needs of the child, financial ability to support the child and custody issues relative to the child all surface as significant concerns.

**Breakdown of General (44%)**

- Interference of child’s biological parents (15 percent)
- None/nothing (13 percent)
- Other (10 percent)
- Financial Concerns (6 percent)
- Transitioning process (5 percent)
- Decline to answer (0 percent)
- Don’t know (0 percent)



Legend: General (light grey), Health (olive green), Child Details (dark grey), Process (medium grey), Inconvenience (red), Personal Reasons (black)

Q915. What were or are your biggest concerns about adopting a foster child? BASE: Respondents who have been foster parents (n=72)

## 1.3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is hope for children waiting in foster care for adoptive families. More Americans are considering foster care adoption and may complete the process to offer a child a permanent home if we can:

- Inform potential adoptive parents about the need, the affordability and the finality of foster care adoption,
- Broaden society's definition of who can be a successful parent so potential adoptive parents do not exclude themselves from the foster care adoption process because of age, religion, or marital status,
- Overcome concerns by providing adequate post-adoption counseling and support services,

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption will use these important findings to:

- Aggressively disseminate the urgency and scope of this issue to the American public to elevate foster care adoption as a critical community, state and national priority.
- Educate the public, media and policymakers about the realities of foster care adoption relative to its affordability, the finality of the adoptive parent's custody, the needs of the children involved and the diversity of individuals who can be successful parents.
- Advocate for federal and state policymakers to understand and address the long-term financial, educational, medical and mental health support needs of families who adopt from foster care to generate additional safety nets for adoptive families.
- Inform adoption agencies and practitioners about the critical nature of responding to initial contact from those interested in adopting and supporting their efforts to drive accountable and results-driven quality customer service, from initial phone call to post-adoption support.
- Promote the need for an elevated commitment to child-focused recruitment of adoptive families for the longest-waiting children in the foster care system.

## 1.4 METHODOLOGY

This *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey* was conducted online within the United States by Harris Interactive on behalf of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption between April 12, 2007 and May 1, 2007, among 1,660 adults (age 18 or older). Results were weighted as needed for demographic targets: age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100 percent response rates. These are only theoretical, because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the U.S. adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to be invited to participate in the Harris Interactive online research panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

On occasion the data in the charts may not total 100 percent. This is due to rounding issues.

This year, an online methodology was used rather than the phone methodology which was used in 2002. This was done to connect with a broader sample of U.S. consumers via the Harris Poll multimillion online consumer panel. This not only allows us to reach a broader sample, but also the most representative sample. Our panel members selected us by deciding to go online, join our panel, respond to our invitations and complete our surveys.

It is also important to understand that online surveys typically elicit information with greater depth and validity on sensitive topics than what could be achieved by any other methodology. In telephone interviewing, for example, it is not uncommon to see more positive scores on sensitive topics, due to difficulty in expressing unpopular opinions to a live interviewer. This difference in scoring between online and telephone methodology is called a "mode effect." Mode effect is less obvious in straight forward and factual questions; however, on questions that are more impacted by social desirability, we find more mode effect.

This makes it more difficult to determine whether small changes in scoring from the benchmark study in 2002 to the 2006 study are driven by actual changes in attitude/behavior or by mode effects. In addition, this study is much more focused on foster care adoption, specifically, than in previous waves. Therefore, the data from these two studies cannot be directly compared.

## About the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is a non-profit 501(c)3 public charity dedicated to dramatically increasing the adoptions of the more than 140,000 children in North America's foster care systems waiting to be adopted. Created by Wendy's founder, Dave Thomas, who was adopted as a child, the Foundation spearheads programs such as *Wendy's Wonderful Kids*, which puts adoption recruiters in 50 states and Canada to find permanent, loving families for children in the foster care system, and *Adoption-Friendly Workplace*, which encourages employers to offer adoption benefits to their employees. The Foundation also works with adoption advocates and officials to streamline the adoption process and make adoption more affordable for families. As the only foundation dedicated exclusively to foster care adoption, we are driven by Dave's simple value: Do what's best for the child. To learn more about the Foundation's work, please visit [www.DaveThomasFoundationforAdoption.org](http://www.DaveThomasFoundationforAdoption.org).

## About Harris Interactive

Harris Interactive is the 13th largest and one of the fastest-growing market research firms in the world. The company provides innovative research, insights and strategic advice to help its clients make more confident decisions which lead to measurable and enduring improvements in performance. Harris Interactive is widely known for The Harris Poll, one of the longest-running independent opinion polls and for pioneering online market research methods. The company has built what it believes to be the world's largest panel of survey respondents, the Harris Poll Online. Harris Interactive serves clients worldwide through its North American, European and Asian offices and through a global network of independent market research firms. More information about Harris Interactive may be obtained at [www.harrisinteractive.com](http://www.harrisinteractive.com).



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Finding Forever Families for Children in Foster Care

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1-800-275-3832

[www.DaveThomasFoundationforAdoption.org](http://www.DaveThomasFoundationforAdoption.org)