



Voices of Youth Adopted Through Wendy's Wonderful Kids®

Research Summary

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Children enter foster care through no fault of their own when child welfare agencies determine that their family is unable to care for them adequately. While children are in foster care, child welfare agencies work with families to help their children return home safely. When this is not possible, they seek adoptive families for children.

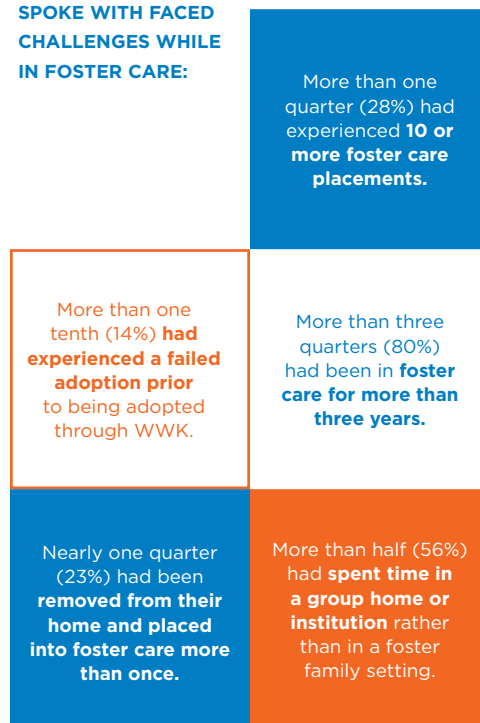
Every year, over 50,000 children exit foster care and are adopted.ⁱ Yet, little is known about how these children fare as they grow up. After custody of the child is shifted from child welfare agencies to the new parents, the cases close and agencies generally only update information necessary to provide subsidies to eligible children. One study that used agency administrative data found that 12% of children either returned to foster care or their parents' adoption subsidy ended prematurely, which suggests discontinuity of the adoption.ⁱⁱ Studies that have used other types of data, like survey information, have focused on private adoptions or infant adoptions, relied on information from adoptive parents, and/or focused only on childhood well-being rather than well-being in young adulthood. No study—until now—has examined how children adopted from foster care fare in young adulthood, from the perspective of the young people themselves.

The field has made progress in developing strategies to increase adoptions from foster care. A prime example is the Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) child-focused recruitment model.ⁱⁱⁱ The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (DTFA) developed the model and provides funding to adoption agencies for the hiring of WWK recruiters.

The WWK model requires recruiters to meet the children on their caseload at least once a month, carry out due diligence on extended family research, network with adults who know the children, and review agency records. Using their knowledge of the child's strengths, needs, and personality, recruiters search for adoptive parents who would be a good fit for each child. To date, nearly 500 WWK recruiters in the United States and Canada have facilitated nearly 10,000 adoptions.

To learn how some of those adoptees are faring, we spoke with 129 young people, ages 18 to 21, who had worked with a WWK recruiter and been adopted from foster care at age 8 or older.^{iv} (For more information on who these young people are, see [Appendix A—The Young People](#), for more on how we found them, see [Appendix G—More About the Study](#). Although no study participants reported a dissolved adoption, an important caveat is that adoption difficulties are likely more common among young people whom we could not reach in this study.)

MANY OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE WE SPOKE WITH FACED CHALLENGES WHILE IN FOSTER CARE:



These kinds of placement instability and long periods in foster care can make it difficult for children to develop a sense of belonging,^v exacerbate their mental health problems,^{vi} and hinder their educational success.^{vii}

We explore some of these findings in more detail below. For readers interested in specific topics, please see the appendices.

Most young people have strong relationships with their adoptive families.

While many of the young people experienced challenges following adoption (as described in the following section), all reported legal permanency—that is, all their adoptions remained legally intact. Further, most—around three-quarters or more—experienced strong relational permanency. Strong relational permanency is when adoptees feel connected to their adoptive parents and believe that the connection will last. More than half (54%) of these mostly 18- and 19-year-olds still live with their adoptive parents. They reported that they feel very or extremely close with at least one adoptive parent (80%) and agreed it was very or extremely true that they can turn to their parents for help (77%). Most also say that they are very or extremely likely to spend future holidays with their parents, and nearly three-quarters (72%) say that it is very or extremely true that they feel that they belong in their family.

Most of the young people also feel good about being adopted—83% reported feeling very or extremely glad to have been adopted by their family. None of the young people reported that being adopted affected their lives somewhat or very negatively. More than two-thirds of the young people believe that being adopted into their family affected their life very positively (66%). Read more in [Appendix D—Experiences with Instability and Permanency](#).

Adoptive families are diverse.

The young people's adoptive families are diverse in terms of family structure: More than two-thirds of the young people were adopted by two parents (67%); more than one-third had at least one parent of a different race, culture, or ethnicity than the young person (37%); and at least 10% were adopted by a gay/lesbian couple.^{viii} Thirteen percent of the young people were the “only child” in their adoptive family, while nearly half were in families with more than three children (49%). Siblings joined the young people's adoptive families in many ways; some were their adoptive parents' biological children, some were their own biological siblings, and some were other children their parents had adopted. In many cases, siblings joined their families in multiple ways.

The pre-adoptive parent-child relationship also varies among the young people. Half of the young people (50%) already knew the family that adopted them before their adoption. Nearly a quarter had adoptive parents who were previously their non-related foster parents (23%), and one in five of the young people were either biologically related or fictive kin (20%). Among 8- to 20-year-olds adopted from foster care nationwide in 2017, 60% were adopted by a non-related foster parent, and 37% were adopted by a relative.^{ix}

Families also vary in the parents' reasons for adoption. About half of the young people think their parents chose to adopt because they wanted to make a difference in a child's life (47%), and about a fifth think their parents chose to adopt because their parents had formed a bond with them (21%). Read more in [Appendix C—The Adoptive Families](#).

Prior connections with adoptive families can smooth the process.

About four in ten (39%) of the young people had concerns or worries about being adopted. Factors that helped them feel more comfortable include talking about their concerns and receiving reassurance, receiving additional information or explanation, and spending time with their adoptive families. Overall, most of the young people felt well-prepared for adoption (71%) and even more (87%) felt that their parents were well-prepared.

Young people who knew their parents prior to being matched for adoption felt more prepared for their adoption (84% versus 55%) and that their parents were more prepared (94% versus 78%). Those who already knew their parents were also less likely to feel isolated because of not having adopted friends or relatives, more likely to have talked with their parents about their feelings, and more likely to feel that the family is a very or extremely good fit for them. Read more in [Appendix C—The Adoptive Families](#).

Adoption can be difficult but supports like counseling or therapy can help.

Challenges with adjusting to adoption were common—eight out of ten of the young people (79%) experienced at least one of six challenges we asked about. The most common type of problem was getting used to a new lifestyle (54%). Many also reported problems with feeling anger or resentment (44%), trusting or connecting with their adoptive family (40%), managing relationships with birth family members (34%), getting along with siblings in their adoptive home (29%), and feeling isolated (20%).



Nearly all the young people who did experience adoption adjustment challenges received some type of post-adoption support or service to help address the problem (92%). Among those who received services, nearly all said they received counseling or therapy (97%). Less common was receipt of services such as a mentor; classes, conferences, or trainings; support groups (in person and online); and references for books, magazines, or blogs. Many young people also indicated that receiving therapy or counseling helped prevent problems from occurring. Young people usually felt these services were helpful, but not always. For example, 14% of young people who received therapy or counseling found it not at all helpful. [Appendix A—The Young People](#) includes their advice for children waiting for adoption.

Continued connection with birth families, especially siblings, is common.

Particularly for children adopted at older ages, many of whom spent years with their family of origin prior to entering foster care, continued connections with birth siblings can provide an important sense of continuity.^x In this study, 79% of the young people entered care at age 5 or older. All but one of the study participants have birth siblings.

Forty percent of the young people were adopted with one or more siblings, but 84% had at least one sibling with whom they were not adopted. Many young people maintain connections with members of their family of origin. More than half of the young people had contact with their birth mother in the past year (58%), half with their birth father (50%), three-quarters with a birth sibling (76%), and nearly all (96%) with some other family member. Further, many have frequent contact with their family of origin: about one in four is in contact with their birth mother at least several times a week (27%); for birth fathers, the figure is one in ten (9%). Connections to siblings are important for many of the young people; four in ten have contact at least several times a week with siblings with whom they do not live (41%), and six in ten wish they had more contact (61%). A quarter of the young people have stayed with members of their birth family while not living with their adoptive family at some time following the adoption; in some cases, but not all, this was due to problems in the adoptive family. Most of the young people say their adoptive parents have some degree of comfort with and support for contact with birth family members, especially for siblings and close relatives other than birth parents. For a more in-depth overview of findings read [Appendix E—Contact with Birth Families](#).

On many metrics, the young people who participated in the study are faring as well as their peers in the general population.

On indicators for a general population of young people, WWK participants tended to fare similarly!¹ WWK participants were similarly likely to young people in the general population to be in excellent or very good health,² to have health insurance,³ to be registered to vote,⁴ to have been pregnant,⁵ to use alcohol, marijuana, or cigarettes,⁶ and to be disconnected from school and work.⁷ Some of the risky behaviors we assessed seem to be slightly less common among adoptees than in the general population, and none is more common.⁸ WWK participants rated the importance of their religious faith similarly to young people in the general population⁹ and are equally likely to attend religious services at least weekly.¹⁰ On the other hand, diagnoses of mental health conditions are more common for WWK participants than for the general population.¹¹ One important caveat is that we do not know the well-being of young people who were eligible for the study but who did not participate. Difficulties with the transition to adulthood are likely more common among this group than among participants. The study's research brief compares our findings with studies of young people who aged out of foster care.

¹ These comparisons are based on findings published in other studies. Because the other studies typically did not report standard errors, we used an approach that is less rigorous than testing the statistical significance of differences. Specifically, we flagged the percentages in the comparison samples that fell outside of the 95% confidence interval for the WWK percentages.

² Comparison data are for 19-year-old respondents to the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) as reported in: Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Ruth, G., Keller, T., Havlicek, J., Bost, N. (2005). [Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19](#). Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

³ Comparison data are for 18- to 24-year-olds as reported in: U.S. Census Bureau. Selected characteristics of health insurance coverage in the United States. Survey/program: [American Community Survey](#). Product: 2016 ACS 1-year estimates subject tables. Table S2701.

⁴ Comparison data are for 18- to 24-year-olds as reported in: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2016. Table 5. Reported Voting and Registration by Age, Sex, and Educational Attainment: November 2016. Available online at https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/tables/p20/580/table05_2.xlsx.

⁵ Comparison data are for 19-year-old Add Health participants as reported by Courtney et al., 2005.

⁶ Comparison data are for twelfth-graders as reported in: Kann, L., McManus, T., Harris, W. A., Shanklin, S. L., Flint, K. H., Queen, B., Lowry, R., Chyen, D., Whittle, L., Thornton, J., Lim, C., Bradford, D., Yamakawa, Y., Leon, M., Brener, N., & Ethier, K.A. (2018). Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2017. *MMWR Surveillance Summaries*, 67(8), 1. Available online at <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/ss/ss6708a1.htm>.

⁷ Comparison data are for 19-year-old Add Health participants as reported by Courtney et al., 2005.

⁸ Comparison data are for 19-year-old Add Health participants as reported by Courtney et al., 2005.

⁹ Comparison data are for 21-year-old Add Health participants as reported in: Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, G.R., Havlicek, J., Perez, A., Keller, K. (2007). [Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21](#). Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

¹⁰ Comparison data are for 19-year-old Add Health participants as reported by Courtney et al., 2005.

¹¹ Findings for mental health among 17- and 18-year-olds in the general population are as reported in: Merikangas, K. R., He, J. P., Burstein, M., Swanson, S. A., Avenevoli, S., Cui, L., Benjet, C., Georgiadas, K., & Swendsen, J. (2010). Lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in US adolescents: results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication-Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49(10), 980-989.



Overall, a few of the young people in our study are disconnected from school and work (12%). Some have been involved with the juvenile justice or criminal justice system since their adoption, including having been arrested (15%), spending a night in jail (8%), or being convicted of a crime (4%). At the same time, most of the young people have a high school diploma or GED or are still in school (95%).

More than half of the young people agreed that they are very or extremely optimistic about the future (57%), and over three-quarters agreed that they are very or extremely happy with their current living arrangements. Read more in [Appendix B—Well-Being](#).

There are opportunities to strengthen services and supports.

Adoption adjustment challenges are so common among young people adopted at older ages that it may be appropriate to consider them normative. This finding, together with the trauma and turbulence that young people typically experience prior to adoption, speak to the importance of post-adoption support and preservation services. Fortunately, most young people who participated in this study feel they and their parents were well-prepared for adoption, and nearly all the young people in this study who experienced challenges did receive a post-adoption service at some time.

The availability of adoption preparation and supports for young people and their parents likely contributes to the fact that most young people experience relational permanency with their adoptive parents. Yet, a minority seemed to lack such permanence which suggests that preparation and supports may need to be strengthened. A small share (13%) of young people feel their parents were not well-prepared for adoption. Several participants said their parents were not prepared to deal with their mental health diagnosis or behavioral/emotional challenges. A few others said their parents did not receive enough information on the young person's background or experiences. Interestingly, more than a quarter of the young people say they have never talked with their adoptive parent(s) about adoption (28%).

To further support relational permanence, agencies might explore ways to support positive, ongoing dialogue about adoption between young people and their parents. Additionally, agencies can continue to strengthen adoptive parent preparation helping them understand the importance of connections with birth family members for many young adults. We found that before being adopted, some young people worried that contact with their family of origin would be cut off. And, while young people report their adoptive parents often support ongoing connections with birth family members, some young people wish they had more contact, especially with siblings.

As a result, it may be beneficial if agencies bolster preparation and ongoing support to help adoptive parents facilitate birth family relationships in ways that are healthy and positive for young people.

It is also critical to ensure that young people have access to appropriate mental health care. One measure¹² in the survey suggests that about one in four of the young people currently have symptoms that correspond with poor mental health (27%), and about a fifth rate their mental/emotional health as fair or poor (22%). At the same time, a slightly larger share of the young people has received counseling in the past 12 months (35%). About three-quarters of the young people have ever been diagnosed with any mental health condition (74%), and a comparable portion say they have received psychological or emotional counseling at some time (76%). Read more in [Appendix F—Adoption Preparation](#).

¹² Respondents reported how often (never, rarely, sometimes, very often, or extremely often) in the past month they "have been a very nervous person," "felt calm or peaceful," "felt downhearted or blue," "have been a happy person," and "felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer [them] up." This measure is adapted from a measure originally included in the National Survey of American Families (NSAF), as described in: Ehrle, J. & Moore, K.A. (1999). [1997 NSAF Benchmarking Measures of Child and Family Well-Being, Report No. 6](#). Assessing the New Federalism: An Urban Institute Program to Assess Changing Policies. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. The NSAF used a different set of response options, so findings from the present study are not directly comparable to findings from studies using the NSAF measure. However, we attempted to align the creation of the scale and setting of the cut-point for symptoms of poor mental health as closely as possible with the approach described by Ehrle and Moore.

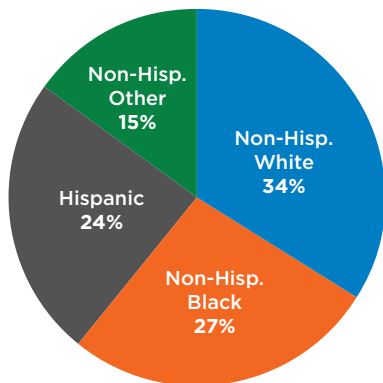
Appendix A

The Young People

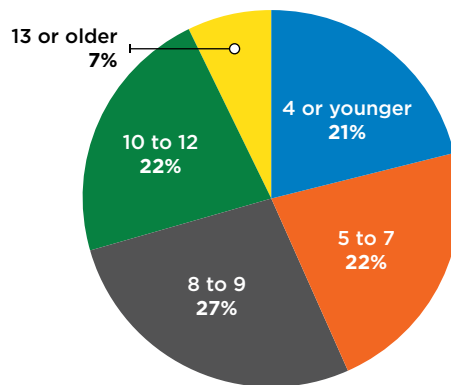
Who We Interviewed

We spoke with a diverse group of young people. When we interviewed them, most were 18 or 19, and they were equally divided by gender. They vary in race and Hispanic origin, age at entry into care, and age at adoption.

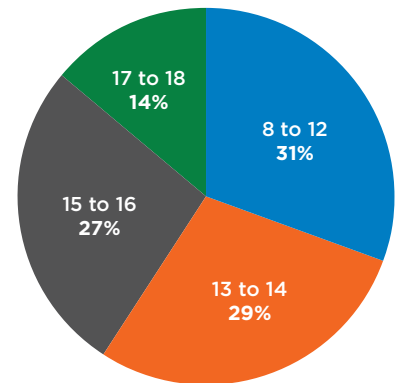
RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN



AGE AT FIRST FOSTER CARE ENTRY



AGE AT ADOPTION



Key Findings

- Most (83%) of the young people feel very or extremely glad to have been adopted by their family. Two-thirds believe that being adopted affected their life very positively (66%).
- Most (80%) of the young people feel very or extremely close with at least one adoptive parent and 77% say it's very or extremely likely they can turn to parents when they need help.
- Many of the young people maintain connections with birth family members, particularly siblings. About four in ten (41%) connected with siblings daily or several times a week. Many of the young people want more contact with their siblings.
- Most (79%) of the young people experienced adoption challenges such as anger, conflict with siblings, or managing relationships with birth families.

APPENDIX A
CONTINUED





Appendix A

The Young People, *continued*

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Advice for young people waiting for adoption:

“Be prepared for the **unexpected.**”

“**Understand that your future parents do not have the same experiences as you**, so they might not fully understand where you are coming from.”

“**It’s going to be okay** and you don’t need to change.”

“You are not being adopted to be fixed or experienced; but **to be loved and taken as you are.**”

“Think about the journey you will be going on with this family; you will have **new experiences that will help you evolve**, and you will have the **opportunity to grow that will change your life.**”

“The best thing for you is to **get to know yourself first.**”

“**Don’t catch an attitude;** be on your best behavior; pay attention and listen.”

“You are going to be okay and things will work out; **you are special and loved and wanted.**”

“Believe that **everything happens for a reason.**”

“It’s going to take a while, but **in the end, it’s worth it.**”

Appendix B

Well-Being

What We Learned

Across several measures, many of the young people reported feeling positive about life.

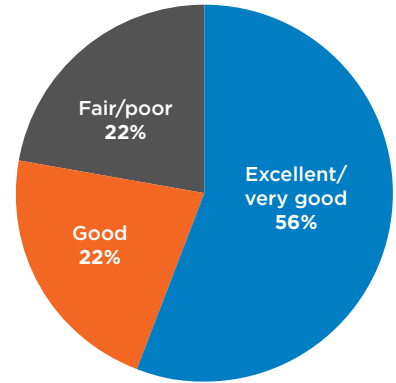
Three out of four reported excellent or very good physical health; a smaller share—about half—reported excellent or very good mental health.

Most of the young people are connected to school or work. Nearly all the young people are either still in school or have a high school diploma or general equivalency degree (GED) (95%). Nearly two in three are employed (63%). A small minority of the young people neither work nor are in school (12%). The majority (83%) of the young people have health insurance coverage.

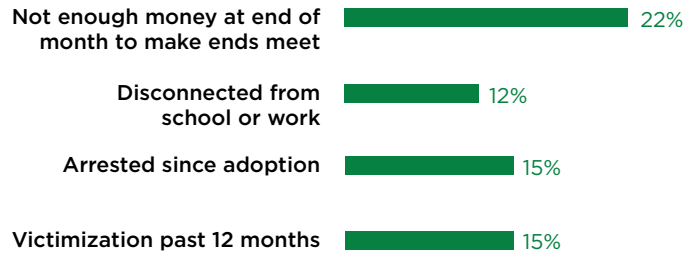
RATING OF PHYSICAL HEALTH



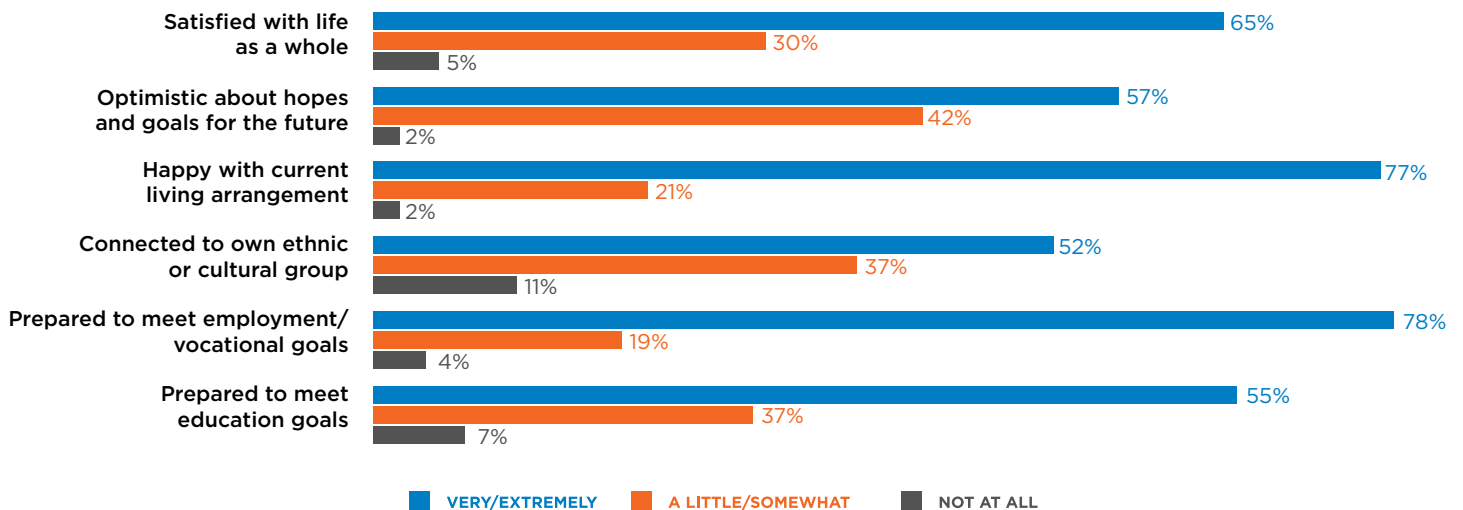
RATING OF MENTAL HEALTH



EXPERIENCE OF HARDSHIPS



HOW THE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE FEELING ABOUT LIFE



Appendix C

The Adoptive Families

What We Learned

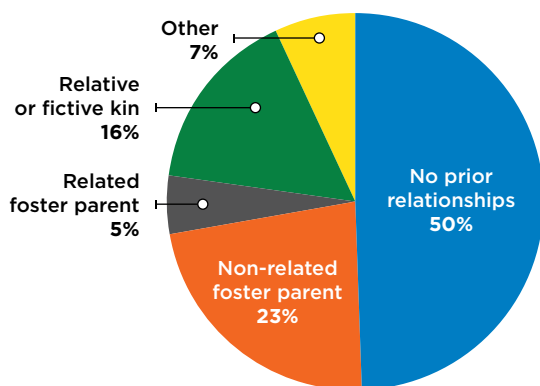
Study participants' adoptive families are diverse: Two-thirds of the young people had two adoptive parents (67%); more than one-third had at least one parent of a different race, culture, or ethnicity than the young person (37%); and at least 10% were adopted by a gay/lesbian couple.^{xi}

Thirteen percent of the young people were the "only child" in their adoptive family while nearly half were in families with more than three children (49%). Their families were formed in many ways; some siblings were their parents' biological children, some were other adopted siblings, and some were their own biological siblings; for others, siblings joined their families in multiple ways.

Half of the young people were adopted by someone they knew or with whom they had a connection before their adoptive match. Nearly a quarter have adoptive parents who were previously their foster parents (23%), and one in five (20%) was adopted by a relative (including a small share adopted by relatives who were foster parents, 5%).

When asked about their parents' reasons for adoption, about half of the young people said their parents chose to adopt because they wanted to make a difference in a child's life (47%), and about a fifth reported that their parents chose to adopt because they had formed a bond with them (21%). A minority of the young people reported that their parents chose to adopt because of infertility.

PRIOR RELATIONSHIP TO PARENT(S)



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

On their adoptive families:

"I had made so much progress. They didn't want to see me leave and I didn't want to leave."

"She's my grandma; always been there for me; and I love her to death."

"They adopted us to keep us from going to another foster family and keep us as a part of their family, to give us stability."

"My grandmother is very hung up on appearances and a part of me feels that she would have found it unseemly not to adopt me and on the other hand part of me reasons out that she adopted me because she loves me and it has led to some internal conflict in the past."

"They saw something in me that no one else did."

"She wanted the money."

"They're older, I think we just came and we were heart-broken from the failed adoption; we fell in love with each other as a family; we decided we wanted to stay; them too so they decided to adopt us."

Appendix D

Instability and Permanency

What We Learned

Most of the young people experience strong relational permanency; they feel connected to their adoptive parents and believe the connection will last. Specifically, they are close with at least one parent (80% feel very or extremely close), and they can turn to their adoptive parent(s) in times of need (77% say this is very or extremely true).

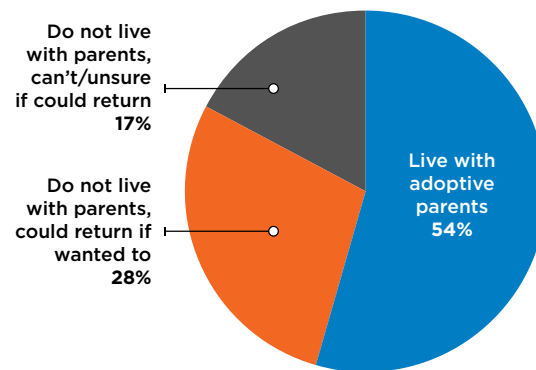
About three-quarters anticipate spending future holidays with their parents (very or extremely true for 77%) and feel they belong in their family (very or extremely true for 72%). Only 10% of the young people do not agree at all that they belong in the family.

At the same time, post-adoption turbulence or placement instability is not uncommon. Such experiences include ever spending at least one night away from home due to problems (31%), ever running away (23%), ever being thrown out by their parents (21%) or moving out of their adoptive parents' home before age 18 (16%). A small minority (7%) of the young people had thought about legally ending the adoption, but none did; the same number left home due to problems and did not. Overall, 12% had experienced homelessness since their adoption, though none was homeless at the time of the survey. For the most part, the young people reporting *any* of these problems is the same small group of respondents.¹³ For context, in a study of the general population, 5% of 18- to 25-year-olds say they were homeless, were kicked out of the home, or ran away at some point within a 12-month period.^{xii}

Among the young people who had left home due to problems—even temporarily—or who had thought about ending the adoption, half say the reason had to do with conflict with their parents. Others did not feel happy in their adoptive homes (10%), the adoptive family did not support the young person's needs (8%), or they had conflict with other adoptive family members (8%).

Post-adoption turbulence or instability does not mean the adoption failed. Seventy-seven percent of the young people who had left home due to problems returned home. Also, instability can occur for reasons not related to family functioning. Occasionally, the young people received treatment in a hospital or rehabilitation center. A few of the young people blamed themselves (e.g., they wanted to party or be on their own, or they were “young and dumb”) for adoption instability. Other reasons several young people mentioned include incarceration, “getting into trouble,” and not being able to maintain connections to birth family. Among young people who returned home, having someone they could talk to about their problems—either informally or through counseling—helped.

WHERE THEY ARE NOW



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

When the young people had trouble with their adoptive parents, the following actions by others helped them:

“They gave me a safe place when I needed to be away but still in the respects of my parents.”

“She let me better understand how I was feeling and that it was okay to feel upset or sad; she let me know the best way to resolve things is to talk them out and not get angry.”

“They gave me services and stuff like therapists and sessions and stuff like that.”

“They just explained to me... I had never lived in a family setting... I learned problems are normal.”

¹³ Looking across 15 indicators of relational permanency and instability, about half reported none of the problems, two in ten reported only one problem, and one in ten reported two problems. A minority—15%—reported three or more problems. These indicators include: (1) feel somewhat or very negatively about adoption, (2) not at all glad they were adopted by their family, (3) their family is not at all a good fit, (4) do not at all feel they belong in their family, (5) if they had to do it over again, not at all likely to choose to be adopted by their family, (6) not at all close with any adoptive parents, (7) parent never or rarely understands the young person, (8) not at all true that they can turn to their parents for help, (9) not at all likely to spend future holidays with their family, (10) parent is not at all a good listener, (11) not at all true that parent tries to answer their questions, (12) not at all true that they can discuss adoption or birth family with the parents, (13) left home due to problems and never returned, (14) thought about ending the adoption, and (15) ever homeless since the adoption.

Appendix E

Contact with Birth Families

What We Learned

Most prior research on “open adoption,” in which adoptive and birth family members maintain some form of contact, has been based on private infant adoption. When older children are adopted from foster care, the term “open adoption” may not even be relevant, since these children typically have ongoing relationships with birth family members.

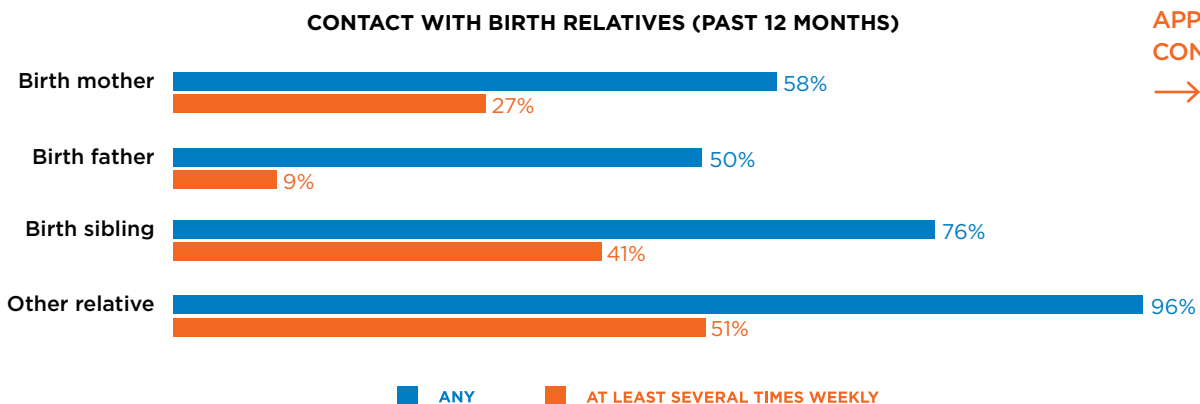
In our study, contact with birth family members is regular and frequent for many young people. Sometimes contact was not in person, but via phone, social media, or through written letters. And, a quarter of the young people had stayed with members of their birth family at some point after being adopted, which was sometimes, but not always, due to problems in the adoptive family.

Sometimes, connections with birth family members are maintained directly via adoption. Overall, 20% of young people we spoke with are related to their adoptive parent(s), and four out of ten were adopted together with at least one sibling (40%). However, 84% had at least one sibling with whom they were not adopted. One young person specifically recommended: “If possible, be adopted by family members that can be explicitly trusted.” Another said of her adoptive parent, “She’s my grandma; always been there for me; and I love her to death.” However, relative adoption may sometimes pose unique challenges. Another young person commented that they sometimes felt their grandparent adopted because it would have been “unseemly” not to, but other times felt the grandparent did it out of love.

More than one in five of the young people wish they had more contact with their birth parents (22% for birth mothers and 28% for birth fathers), but others wish they had less contact (12% for birth mothers and 21% for birth fathers). An even larger share of the young people wished for more contact with siblings (61%), and none wished for less sibling contact. Virtually, all the young people have at least one birth sibling; over half (55%) have four or more known birth siblings.

According to the young people, most have adoptive parents who have some degree of comfort with and support for their contact with birth family members, especially siblings and close relatives other than birth parents. Only a few (1%) of the young people have adoptive parents who are neither comfortable nor supportive with their contact with birth siblings.

Although nearly all of the young people said they were informed before their adoption about their ability to change or keep their original name (93%), fewer indicated that they were given information about whether they would have future contact with their family of origin (65%).



APPENDIX E
CONTINUED





Appendix E

Contact with Birth Families, *continued*

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Among the young people who had concerns or worries about adoption, about one in four cited their birth family as central to their concerns and worries. And among the young people who no longer live with their adoptive family or considered ending the adoption, a couple mentioned reasons related to their family of origin as central to their concerns and worries. **Young people described these concerns:**

“Having to **change my last name.**”

“**Being a closed adoption** and not being able to contact my biological parents again.”

“**Not knowing if I could ever see my mom again** or have a relationship with my family.”

“**Staying in contact with my brothers;** one of them was in a home that did not allow contact. I kept my brothers alive during those ten years.”

“**Never being able to see my siblings** or my mom again.”

“Never seeing or talking to **my biological parents** again.”

“**Seeing my biological brothers less;** not being in contact with my friends that I already had.”

“My mom **not letting me stay in contact** with my biological siblings.”

Appendix F

Adoption Preparation

What We Learned

Concerns or worries about being adopted included not knowing or getting along with the people who were adopting them, the relationship not working out or the parents giving up on them, and not being able to see birth family members after the adoption. Several of the young people expressed fear of being abused in the adoptive family or being taken advantage of in some way, being abandoned again, changing their last name, changing schools, starting their life over again, and/or living with people they did not know.

Among the young people not already living with their adoptive family at the time the adoptive match was made, many would have wanted more information about the new family before moving in with them. Young people who did not already know their adoptive family were more likely to want such information (57%) than those who already knew their adoptive parents (23%, e.g., through foster care or as kin).

The young people reported that their WWK adoption recruiter helped them by communicating and explaining things; facilitating the relationship with the adoptive parents; providing emotional encouragement and support; spending time with them, sometimes at events and outings; and listening to their opinions.

APPENDIX F
CONTINUED



ADOPTION PREPARATION



Appendix F

Adoption Preparation, *continued*

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Advice for future adoptive families and the workers supporting them:

“I would **give them proper emotional support**, as well as give them the peace of mind that adoption is a proper path to follow.”

“**Get physically, mentally, and emotionally prepared**; you’re starting a new life.”

“**Be patient**; family therapy with the adoptive family before the adoption is helpful.”

“**Prepare** the family.”

“**The transition period** worked well for me; it’s a good thing.”

Questions about the adoptive families, if they did not previously know them:

“Where do they work? How do things run in the house? **What do they expect?**”

“I would have liked to **meet more of the family.**”

“**What culture are they**; do they go to church or something?”

“**What are their personalities?** Have they ever had kids before?”

“**How is their temper?** How do they react when things get difficult between parents and children?”

“**How is the house and the sleep schedule** and stuff?”

“**Who are they?** Where are they from? What are their names? What are they like?”

What helped:

“**Open communication**; worker and lawyer were very open about the general process and how me wanting to be adopted would affect the case. Also, information about visits with my biological parents.”

“Tons of information and **tons of help and support.**”



Appendix G

More About the Study

All individuals ages 18 to 21 during our data collection period (October 2014 to January 2018) who were adopted at age 8 or older through WWK in 13 states were eligible for the study.¹⁴

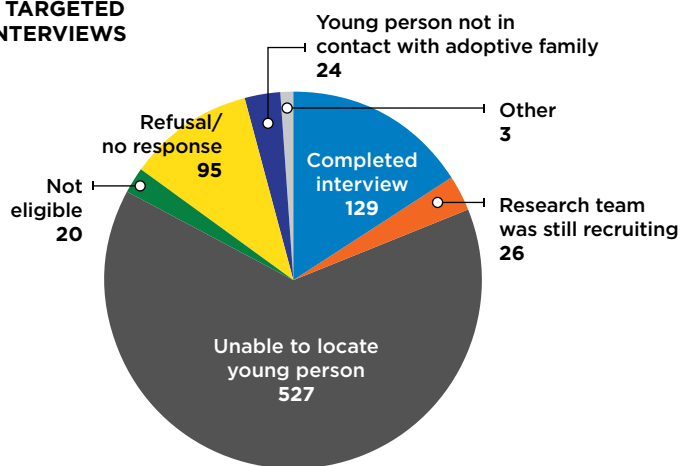
We focused on children who were adopted at these older ages for two reasons. First, we wanted to select a group of young people who were as similar as possible—with the exception of having been adopted—to those included in studies of young people who age out of care so that we could compare the well-being of the two groups in young adulthood. (These comparisons will be presented in a forthcoming research brief.) Prior research has indicated that, for children in foster care who are waiting for adoption, those age 8 and older become more likely to remain in foster care rather than be adopted.¹⁵ Thus, we suspected that individuals adopted at older ages would have been at high risk of aging out of care without permanency, in the absence of WWK. Second, the older age at the time of adoption meant that many of the young adults could recall and report on the adoption process and their experiences in foster care.

To enhance our ability to compare our findings with findings from studies of youth who aged out of care, we included questions from the survey instrument used previously in the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (i.e., Midwest Study).¹⁶ We also included—as did the Midwest Study—many questions used in the National Survey of Adolescent Health, to support our ability to compare study findings with a general population of young people.

A relatively small number (2%) of the targeted individuals were deemed ineligible due to incarceration or developmental disabilities. Because we are not able to contact all 824 targeted young adults, we do not know with certainty how many would have been ineligible. In total, 129 young adults participated in the in-person, 90-minute interviews carried out by staff from the University of Wisconsin Survey Center (UWSC). The young people received a \$50 stipend for their time, in addition to \$5 sent with the initial invitation to participate in the study.

Before UWSC could contact young people, we relied on child welfare agency staff to make the initial contact with young people. For 325 of the young people, agency staff had either not attempted to contact the young person or their parents, were not successful in reaching them, or did not update UWSC for some other reason.

824 YOUNG PEOPLE WERE TARGETED FOR INTERVIEWS



¹⁴ These states were: Arizona, California, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

¹⁵ Maza, Penelope. (2009). A new look at the role of ASFA and children's ages in adoption. *The Roundtable*, 23(1). As cited in: National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment at Adopt US Kids. (No date). Tip sheets on recruiting families for preteens. Available online at <https://adoptuskids.org/assets/files/tipsheets-on-recruiting-families-for-preteens.pdf>

¹⁶ Courtney, M.E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Conditions of Youth Preparing to Leave State Care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Ruth, G., Keller, T., Havlicek, J., & Bost, N. (2005). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19*. Chapin Hall Working Paper. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Cusick, G.R., Havlicek, J., Perez, A., & Keller, T. (2007). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21*. Chapin Hall Working Paper. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.



Appendix G

More About the Study, *continued*

For an additional 204 young people, neither agency nor UWSC staff could find accurate contact information. Overall, we could not locate 64% of the 824 young people.

Based on data from the WWK case management database, we did have some information on all 824 young people targeted for interviews. Therefore, to reduce non-response bias, we developed and applied a set of survey weights.

An important caveat to the findings on legal and relational permanency is that difficulties with the transition to adulthood are likely more common among survey non-respondents than respondents. Although none of the survey respondents reported that their adoptions legally ended, it is likely that some individuals who did not participate in the survey had their adoption end, either legally or relationally. For 24 of the young people who did not participate in the study, we received information from their parents or from the child welfare agency that the parents were not in contact with the young person. In some cases, the young person had run away from home, was homeless, or had re-entered foster care. It is also likely that some of the other difficulties and hardships we discussed in our study are more common among young people whom we could not reach. Even without knowing the outcomes of the individuals whom we could not contact, the frequency of challenges experienced by survey participants speaks to the importance of providing post-adoption supports for families who adopt youth from foster care. Indeed, many of the survey respondents themselves cited the importance and helpfulness of post-adoption supports such as therapy and counseling.

Notes

- ⁱ Exits to adoptions were lower than 50,000 prior to 2002. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (various years). Adoption and Foster Care Statistics. Available online at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>.
- ⁱⁱ Rolock, N. (2015). Post-permanency continuity: What happens after adoption and guardianship from foster care? *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 9(2), 153-173.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Malm, K., Vandivere, S., Zinn, A., Allen, T., & McKlinton, A. (2015). An experimental evaluation of a child-focused adoption recruitment program for children and youth in foster care. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*. Doi: 10.1080/15548732.2015.1008620.
- ^{iv} Interviews took place between October 2014 and January 2018 with individuals who had been adopted through WWK in 13 states: Arizona, California, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.
- ^v Steenbakkens, A., Van Der Steen, S., & Grietens, H. (2018). The Needs of Foster Children and How to Satisfy Them: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Clinical child and family psychology review*, 21(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-017-0246-1>.
- ^{vi} Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A.C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C.R., Wiggins, T., & Holmes, K. (2005). *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.
- ^{vii} Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A.C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C.R., Wiggins, T., & Holmes, K. (2005). *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.
- ^{viii} This question was only asked if two parents had adopted the young person.
- ^{ix} Authors' analysis of data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Adoption File 2017 (version 1).
- ^x Steenbakkens, A., Van Der Steen, S., & Grietens, H. (2018). The Needs of Foster Children and How to Satisfy Them: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Clinical child and family psychology review*, 21(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-017-0246-1>.
- ^{xi} This question was only asked if two parents had adopted the young person.
- ^{xii} (Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Available online at <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/VoYC-National-Estimates-Brief-Chapin-Hall-2017.pdf>).



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