

MODERN FAMILIES: ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF ADOPTION IN AUSTRALIA

RESEARCH COMMISSIONED BY ADOPT CHANGE
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The number of children adopted in Australia is at an all-time low. With a 76% decline over the last 25 years, only 317 children from Australia and overseas were adopted in 2013/2014.

There are many reasons given for this decline – demographic changes, changes in the levels of support for at-risk and vulnerable families, and changes in societal attitudes toward single women that now ensure that single mothers can care for their children.

At the same time, there is a growing number of children in the out-of-home care system in Australia (AIHW, 2015). In 2014, over 50 000 children were in arrangements including kinship care, foster care, and guardianship.

‘In 2014, more than 18 000 children had been in the foster care system for more than two years.’

Productivity Commission, 2015

On average a child will experience 6 placements during their time in care (Women’s Forum Australia, 2014).

The level of awareness of these issues and how Australians think and feel about adoption has been not been researched or well understood. Further, there has been no data collected on how many people in Australia have had an experience of adoption in their family or friendship circle.

This is a significant information gap for a range of stakeholders whose work it is to ensure that vulnerable, at-risk children have permanent, loving families to grow up in. This list includes: government; policy makers; the judiciary; adoption, foster care and child protection case workers; and, importantly, families and adoptees.

With this in mind, Adopt Change commissioned Forward Scout to undertake the first research of its kind in Australia to understand:

- Community attitudes and perceptions toward adoption in Australia
- How many Australians have had an experience of adoption in their family or friendship circle

The research sample included:

	Stage 1: Qualitative	Stage 2: Quantitative*
Sample	8 Focus Groups 64 respondents	1014 respondents
Geography	Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth	National: All States and Territories Metropolitan 66%, Regional 34%
Gender	Evenly split Men & Women	Female 50.5%, Male 49.5%
Age	25-34 y/o pre-family 34-44 y/o actively considering having a family 45-54 y/o with family 55 y/o+	18-24=12% 25-34=18% 34-44=18% 45-54=18% 55-65=15% 65+=18%
Recruitment	4 Focus Groups: Families close to adoption either personally or via close family or friends 4 Focus Groups: Those not close to adoption	N/A

*Randomly selected

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

The research involved two stages: small focus groups to bring qualitative insight to the issue of adoption and to surface attitudes toward adoption and foster care, and; a nationally representative online survey of over 1000 Australians to quantify the Australian public’s attitude towards adoption.





KEY FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

DO MANY AUSTRALIANS KNOW ABOUT ADOPTION OR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE?

The focus groups surfaced that adoption and fostering are not front of mind for the community – both are recessive issues in the public’s consciousness. From the survey, 39% of respondents had heard about adoption either a lot or a little, and 37% had heard about fostering. It was felt adoption had more positive ‘airplay’ than fostering.

When people did hear about adoption in the media, it was generally in relation to celebrities adopting. For example, 76% of the respondents to the survey either strongly agreed or tended to agree with the statement: *If I hear about adoption these days it tends to be in relation to a celebrity adopting a child.*

HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE HAD AN EXPERIENCE OF ADOPTION OR FOSTER CARE IN THEIR FAMILY OR FRIENDSHIP CIRCLE?



Self identified as being adopted



Indicated they have close proximity to an adopted child

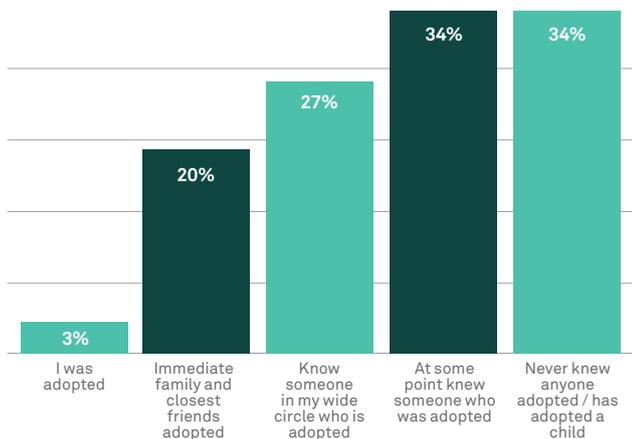


Self identified as having been a foster child

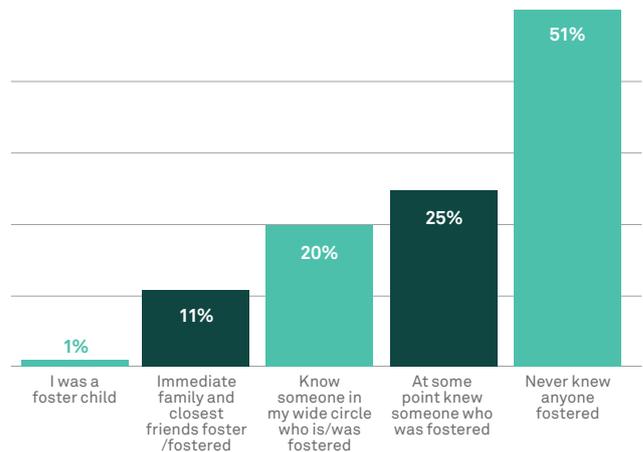


Indicated they have close proximity to a foster child

GRAPH 1 Proximity to an adoptive child



GRAPH 2 Proximity to a child in foster care





HOW MANY AUSTRALIANS HAVE ACTIVELY LOOKED AT ADOPTING OR FOSTERING A CHILD?

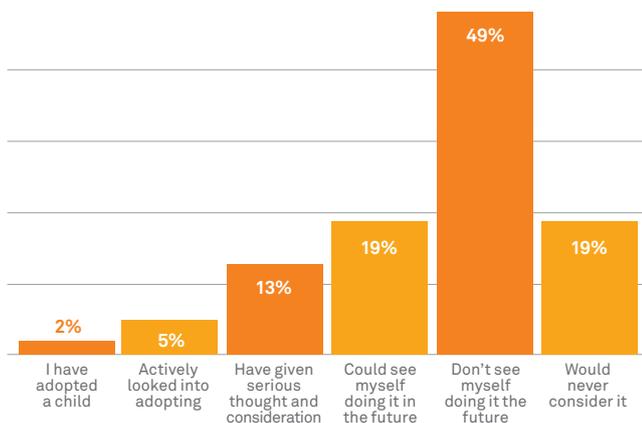
- **17%** of the respondents to the quantitative survey had actively looked into or given serious thought to adopting, however 87% of these people did not proceed with the adoption.
- The **13%** of people who tried to adopt a child represented 2% of the total sample.
- **Only 4%** of respondents have actively looked into fostering a child and 74% either do not see themselves fostering in the future or would never consider doing it. Some of the reasons for this are captured in the section on perceptions of foster care.

'It's an extremely positive thing. I think it's amazing what one human being can do for another human being to take them into their family.'

Melbourne, aged 55+

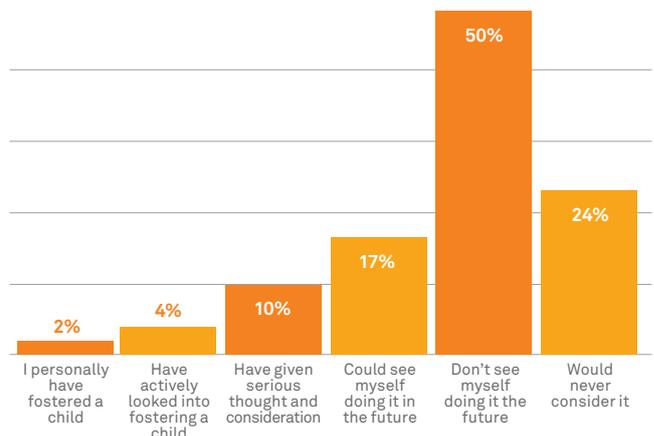
GRAPH 3

Actively looked at adopting



GRAPH 4

Actively looked at fostering a child





HOW DO AUSTRALIANS FEEL ABOUT ADOPTION?

Adoption is viewed in an overwhelmingly positive light. In fact, the research has shown that people feel that modern families can be formed in many different ways and adoption could play a bigger part in that. Of the 1014 people surveyed, the majority agreed that:

- Adoption gives a child an opportunity that they may not have had – **89%**
- Giving a child a family is an opportunity to a better life – **88%**
- Adopted children bring joy to a family – **86%**
- A family that adopts provides a loving home to a child by someone that wants them – **83%**

‘It’s providing a home for a child who might not necessarily have a great home for life. Or it’s providing an opportunity that they would miss.’

Perth, aged 45-54

There was also a strong sense that if a child is adopted, they should still have links to their birth family and culture: 83% agreed that children have a human right to know about their culture or where they came from.

‘These days you don’t have to give up your “real parents”. Someone can be your Mum but someone else your family.’

Survey respondent

Interestingly, proximity to adoption - whether the person was adopted or there was experience of someone who had been adopted in their circle - did not influence people’s attitudes toward it. Both groups were equally positive about adoption.

HOW DO AUSTRALIANS FEEL ABOUT INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION?

Intercountry adoption is viewed positively, albeit with some concerns about the process being open to corruption. The respondents to the survey either strongly agreed or tended to agree with the following statements:

- Adopting a child internationally can help them escape a life of poverty – **79%**
- Adopting a child internationally gives a child an opportunity in life they may not otherwise have had – **76%**

There were concerns about the process being open to corruption and a perception of negative consequences for the child:

- There is a risk a child being adopted internationally is being exploited or sold for financial gain – **46%**
- International adoption is more easily open to various kinds of abuse – **47%**
- Internationally adopted children risk losing their medical and genetic history – **35%**
- Adopting a child internationally is severing a child’s cultural heritage – **29%**

WHAT ASPECTS OF THE ADOPTION PROCESS ARE PERCEIVED TO BE BROKEN?

There is a level of awareness that the process of adoption is “broken” in Australia, with those closer to the issue, and older age groups (55+) more likely have a deeper understanding and opinion on this. The sense is that the system is designed to make people fail.

The perception is that the adoption process is **long and complicated**, involving many barriers:

‘The time involved and process was going to take too long – 5-7 years hence we did not [continue]’.

Survey respondent



LENGTH OF TIME



AGE



COST



DESIGNED TO FAIL

- 61% of respondents to the survey either strongly agreed or tended to agree that the adoption process in Australia takes longer than it should

People felt that the **age requirements** are barriers to adoption:

‘My husband and I desperately want to have children, we have tried for over 10 years. By the time we realised it wasn’t going to happen for us we were too old to adopt.’

I’m 42 and husband is 45

For those who were trying to have a family (and generally between 35-44 years of age) the **in-built negativity** of the adoption process was felt acutely:

‘It’s a time and bureaucracy issue. If you’re a couple and maybe decide at 33 you’re going to start trying to have kids, you try for a couple of years, then maybe IVF; by that time you’re 36/37. Then say we’d really still like to have kids, we’ve tried a lot of avenues now let’s try adoption. If you get stuck in the bureaucracy for five years then you’re out of the loop and now too old to be a parent because you’re viewed as an inappropriate candidate.’

Sydney, 35-44 years

The **cost of adoption**, especially with intercountry adoption, was also raised as a negative perception: 61% of the survey respondents either strongly agreed or tended to agree that international adoption can be expensive as you have to cover costs such as travel, accommodation and paperwork.

IS A PERSON’S AGE, GENDER OR PLACE WHERE THEY LIVE CORRELATED WITH A PARTICULAR PERCEPTION OF ADOPTION?

- Geography, gender, education and income levels were not drivers of the perception of adoption in Australia
- Age was a driver of perception – the older the person, the more positive they are about adoption

IS THERE A NEGATIVE ASSOCIATION WITH ADOPTION?

The majority of responses were not negative about adoption per se, but there was a linking of an unfortunate circumstance that then drove the need for adoption, and the adopted child is therefore worthy of our sympathy. 30% of the respondents either strongly agreed or tended to agree with the statement: *People feel sympathy for adopted children.*

“The outcome is a positive thing, but the lead up to it is challenging. Someone would go ‘I can’t be bothered going down that path, it’s all too hard.’. Negative, negative, negative”.

Brisbane, 35-44, affected by adoption

There were some concerns that adopted children could be disconnected from their cultural heritage (19% agreed with this) or that an adopted child will grow up with abandonment issues (17% agreed with this).



DID ANYONE DISAGREE WITH ADOPTION?

There was a small number of respondents to the survey (7%) who either strongly agreed or tended to agree with the statement: *I don't believe adoption is right.*

A similar number (10%) also agreed with the statement that: *Adopted children are worse off because they aren't brought up in a family they are born into.*

HAVE THE PRACTICES OF THE FORCED ADOPTIONS AFFECTED HOW PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT ADOPTION TODAY?

In the public's perception, the practices of the forced adoption era and the Stolen Generation do not affect their attitudes to open adoption today. In the focus groups, the Stolen Generation was associated with the abduction of children rather than adoption.

- **Only 15%** of the survey respondents either strongly agreed or tended to agree with the statement: *Australia's history with forced adoption tells us that adoption in this country should be avoided at all costs*

'We're probably a lot more enlightened today and you understand the issues that were around in those days. And again it was a different society in a lot of ways. The decisions were made, in many cases, for genuinely good interests but in hindsight they turned out to be absolutely shit. But we can look back now and put a filter or viewpoint on what was bad and what's the best way to go forward to address this issue today.'

45-54 years, Perth, affected by adoption

WHAT ARE THE ATTITUDES TO CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE?

The attitude toward children in foster care was favorable but there is a sense that the system fails children. Of those surveyed, 20% knew someone in their circle who is/was fostered. The survey respondents strongly or tended to agree with the following statements:

- Children in foster care are worthy of our care and understanding – **81%**
- Children in foster care are there through no fault of their own – **71%**
- Children in foster care are caught in a vicious cycle where they are bounced from home to home – **64%**

The perception of children and foster carers was complex and variable:

- The majority of respondents (**68%**) felt that people who take foster children into their home are generous people worthy of out admiration
- Just over half of the survey respondents (**55%**) agreed with the statement: *some foster carers abuse the system for their own financial benefit*

Other perceptions of children in the foster care system were:

- Fostering a child can be emotionally difficult as the child will inevitably go back to their natural parents – **49%**
- Children in foster care tend to be troubled and damaged kids – **43%**

'Mentally for the kids in foster homes, they're constantly in-between foster homes, they're like "no one cares about me, I'm going to go and run amok because sooner or later I'm going to be on to the next family and they're not going to care".'

35-44 years, Sydney



HOW CONCERNED ARE THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC ABOUT THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE AND THE LOW ADOPTION RATES?

When people were given the numbers of children who are currently in out of home care within Australia, they are concerned and motivated. The information that resonated with people was:

- There are over 18 000 children in Australia that have been removed for 2 years or more from their birth parents due to abuse and/or neglect. Only 204 were adopted within Australia last year.
- Almost half of all children who could be adopted in Australia experience six or more foster homes during their childhood.
- In Australia it takes people who want to adopt a child 5 years on average for it to happen. In the U.S. it is 18 months.

Over half of the respondents (54%), said they would sign a petition or lobby to support to change legislation towards adoption in Australia.

CONCLUSION

The research shows that adoption is not a front-of-mind issue. However, once the issue is raised, the Australian public are overwhelmingly positive about adoption and highly concerned about the large numbers of children in foster care. This research confirms how important it is to raise awareness of the issues facing vulnerable, at-risk children in Australia. It can also provide assurance and guidance to Government, policy makers and case workers that tackling the important issue of providing permanency for at-risk and vulnerable children is important to the majority of Australians.



ABOUT ADOPT CHANGE

ADOPT CHANGE BELIEVES THAT EVERY CHILD HAS A RIGHT TO GROW UP IN A PERMANENT, LOVING FAMILY, AND WE EMBRACE ADOPTION AS A POSITIVE AND IMPORTANT WAY OF FORMING THAT FAMILY.

ADOPT CHANGE'S MISSION IS: TO RAISE COMMUNITY AWARENESS, ENCOURAGE ETHICAL REFORM, AND EMPOWER ALL AUSTRALIANS TO ENGAGE WITH ISSUES AFFECTING ADOPTION.

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A digital copy of this research can also be found at:

www.adoptchange.org.au/research

Follow us on social media @AdoptChangeAU

THANK YOU

To the 1082 Australians who contributed to this research and to Forward Scout for conducting the independent research.

TO JOIN THE COMMUNITY OF THOSE WANTING TO CREATE CHANGE, PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE WWW.ADOPTCHANGE.ORG.AU AND SIGN OUR ONLINE PETITION. HERE YOU CAN ALSO DOWNLOAD A LETTER TO SEND TO YOUR LOCAL MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT.

WWW.ADOPTCHANGE.ORG.AU | [@ADOPTCHANGEAU](https://twitter.com/ADOPTCHANGEAU) | ENQUIRIES@ADOPTCHANGE.ORG.AU

References:

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015) *Child Protection Australia 2013-2014*, Canberra.

Productivity Commission (2015) 'Chapter 15: Child Protection' in *Report on Government Services (Volume F: Community Services)*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

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Adopt Change was founded by Deborra-lee Furness and is the overarching organisation now incorporating National Adoption Awareness Week, (9 – 15th November 2015). Adoption Awareness Limited trading as Adopt Change ABN 28133921614. Level 2, 68 Moncur Street, Woollahra, NSW 2025, Australia. Ph: + 61 2 9302 0213.