



Voluntary Relinquishment for Adoption

Voluntary placement of children for adoption is relatively rare in the United States. This paper examines some of the more recent statistics and trends regarding the relinquishment of children by birth mothers.

How Many Women Place Their Children for Adoption?

The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) is the only national source of data on voluntary relinquishment for adoption. According to the 1995 NSFG,¹ less than 1 percent of children born to never-married women were placed for adoption from 1989 to 1995 (Chandra, Abma, Maza, & Bachrach, 1999).

¹ The most recent NSFG includes data from a 1995 survey with a nationally representative sample of over 10,000 women. Data from 2002 (Cycle 6) have not yet been analyzed.



Who Are the Women Who Place Their Children for Adoption?

- The percentage is higher for White never-married women (1.7 percent) than for Black never-married women (near 0 percent).
- Relinquishment by married and formerly married women is rarer still, and percentages are not available.

About 1.4 million children were born to unmarried women in 2003, comprising 34.6 percent of total births (Hamilton, Martin, & Sutton, 2004). If the relinquishment rate measured by NSFG in 1995 for never-married women were applied to all unmarried women who gave birth in 2003, this would mean that fewer than 14,000 children were voluntarily relinquished in 2003.

Other than the NSFG data on mother's race, information about who relinquishes a child for adoption is limited, in part because relinquishment is rare and the numbers are so small.

Most research focuses on unmarried teens who relinquish a child. In addition to being disproportionately White, those who relinquish tend to have higher education and income levels, higher future career and educational aspirations, and a strong preference for adoption expressed by the teen's mother and/or the birth father (Miller & Coyl, 2000).

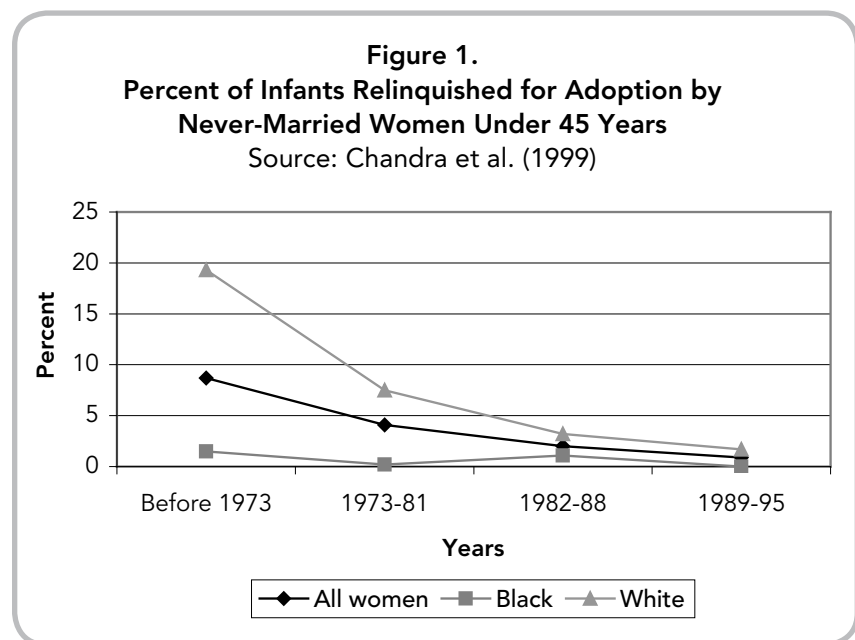
- Namerow, Kalmuss, and Cushman (1993) studied 592 unmarried pregnant women age 21 or younger. The sample was selected from maternity residences, clinics, and teen pregnancy programs or adoption agencies. Postbirth interviews with 527 of the teens showed that those who had personal experience with adoption or had spent time at a maternity residence were more likely to relinquish. The choice to relinquish was also heavily influenced by the preference of the teens' mothers and boyfriends.
- A study of 162 pregnant teens residing in a maternity home found that birth fathers' preference for adoption was the most powerful predictor of the mothers' consistency in their decision to relinquish (Dworkin, Harding, & Schreiber, 1993).
- One study at a residential facility for pregnant teens found that a disproportionate number of those who relinquished were from upper-middle-class families, living in the suburbs or small cities, and from intact families with highly educated parents (Moore & Davidson, 2002). The 178 teens studied

were heavily influenced in their decisions to relinquish by peers and siblings and by having personal experience with adoption (knowing someone who was adopted or being adopted themselves).

What Are Some Trends in Placing Children for Adoption?

Two trends stand out, as shown in Figure 1:

- A decrease in the percentage of children relinquished by never-married women
- A decrease in the difference between White and Black women in placement rates



Race	Before 1973	1973-1981	1982-1988	1989-1995
All Women	8.7%	4.1%	2%	0.9%
Black	1.5%	0.2%	1.1%	near 0
White	19.3%	7.5%	3.2%	1.7%

Since the mid-1970s, relinquishments have declined from nearly 9 percent to under 1 percent of births to never-married women. Among never-married women, relinquishment by Black women has remained very low—declining from 1.5 percent to nearly

0 percent, while relinquishment by White women has declined sharply—from nearly 20 percent to less than 2 percent.

Researchers offer various explanations for the dramatic decline in relinquishment. Some suggest that the increased social acceptance of single parenthood has led more unmarried women to keep their children (Miller & Coyl, 2000; Mosher & Bachrach, 1996). Also, a higher proportion of unmarried mothers are in their 20s rather than their teens, so the personal and financial stresses may not be as great as in the past (Freundlich, 1998). Several researchers agree that it is likely that relinquishment rates will not increase in the next several years (Miller & Coyl, 2000; Freundlich, 1998).

Chandra et al. (1999) hypothesize that informal adoptions are becoming more common. They suggest that transfer of custody from the birth mother to another person may be occurring increasingly in a variety of informal manners instead of through formal, permanent relinquishment of all parental rights and responsibilities. These authors cite Henshaw (1998) in suggesting that the decline in abortion rates shows that the decline in relinquishment is not a result of increasing selection of abortion over relinquishment.

The role of birth fathers in relinquishment decisions is unclear. Freundlich (1998) suggests that any increase in their role may be offset by other factors, such as court rulings that birth fathers have little right to veto relinquishment if they have not taken an active prenatal role and an active role immediately after the birth.

Future Research

The study of relinquishment is hampered by a number of limitations. Fisher (2003) notes several of these:

- The relatively small number who relinquish makes generalizations based on samples difficult.
- Many studies use biased samples of women who have self-selected by volunteering to report.
- Very little of the literature addresses the behavior and rights of fathers.

As the percentage of women who place their children has dropped, the opportunity to study this population has decreased, and it is increasingly difficult to generalize from the small numbers of individuals studied. Future research may concentrate on the characteristics of this group and the factors that influence their decision to place their children for adoption.

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