Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

NUMBERS AND TRENDS

June 2012

Adoption Disruption and Dissolution

Definitions

What is disruption?

The term *disruption* is used to describe an adoption process that ends after the child is placed in an adoptive home and **before** the adoption is legally finalized, resulting in the child's return to (or entry into) foster care or placement with new adoptive parents.

What is dissolution?

The term *dissolution* is generally used to describe an adoption in which the legal relationship between the adoptive parents and adoptive child is severed, either voluntarily or involuntarily, **after** the adoption is legally finalized. This results in the child's return to (or entry into) foster care or placement with new adoptive parents.

Use your smartphone to access these numbers and trends online.

Children's Bureau

Child Welfare Information Gateway
Children's Bureau/ACYF
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW
Eighth Floor
Washington, DC 20024
800.394.3366
Email: info@childwelfare.gov
https://www.childwelfare.gov

Disruptions

How many adoptions disrupt?

Individual studies of different populations throughout the United States consistently report disruption rates that range from about 10 to 25 percent—depending on the population studied, the duration of the study, and geographic or other factors (Goerge, Howard, Yu, & Radomsky, 1997; Festinger, 2002; Festinger, in press). A few examples are listed below:

- Festinger (in press) notes that the rates reported since the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, despite some variations, show a slight downward trend. Excluding studies that singled out small groups of older children, disruption rates have mostly varied from about 9 to 15 percent, although a summary of the research by Coakley and Berrick (2008) mentions a range of about 6 to 11 percent. Among older children, the reported rate has reached roughly 25 percent.
- Using administrative data from more than 15,000 children in Illinois who began adoptive placements between 1995 and 2000, Smith, Howard, Garnier, and Ryan (2006) found that approximately 9.5 percent of adoptions disrupted before being finalized.
- The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) surveyed public child welfare agencies and reported that about 5 percent of planned adoptions from foster care disrupted in 1999 and 2000 (U.S. GAO, 2003). Researchers have questioned the validity of this finding because a minority of States responded, and States had differing capacities to respond as well as potentially differing interpretations of the requested information.
- Barth, Gibbs, and Siebenaler (2001) reported in a literature review that studies show that between 10 and 16 percent of adoptions of children over age 3 disrupt; no comparable figures are available for children under age 3.
- Goerge et al. (1997) conducted a longitudinal study of disruptions and dissolutions in thousands of public agency adoptions in Illinois from 1976 through 1994 and found that slightly over 12 percent disrupted.
- Berry and Barth (1990) found a disruption and dissolution rate of 24 percent for children ages 12 to 17 for a sample of 99

adolescents. Barth and Berry (1988) also reported a disruption and dissolution rate of 10 percent for children older than 3 years in a group of more than 1,000 children adopted from the child welfare system in California.

Additionally, the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) collect data on the number of disruptions and dissolutions in cases where children are adopted from other countries.

- For Federal fiscal year (FY) 2011, the Bureau of Consular Affairs of the U.S. Department of State (2011) reported that six adoptive placements made in the United States from another country through the Hague Adoption Convention were disrupted. There were 9,320 completed intercountry adoptions that occurred through the Convention.
- For FY 2010, States reported to HHS that there were 33 cases of disruptions and dissolutions involving 41 children who were adopted from other countries and subsequently entered state custody (U.S. Department of State, 2011). These cases may be of children placed or adopted through the Hague Adoption Convention, through non-Hague countries, or before the Convention was ratified by the United States in 2008. (For more information about the Hague Convention, see the Information Gateway website at https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/types/intercountry/hague.cfm.)

Why do adoptions disrupt?

Most studies assessing the characteristics associated with disruption occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, with a few additional studies being conducted in the 2000s. The following are some of the primary factors that have been shown to be associated with higher risk of disruption:

Child Factors

- Older age (Festinger, 1986; Barth & Berry, 1988; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner, 1988; Coakley, 2005)
- Presence of emotional and behavioral issues (Barth, Berry, Yoshikami, Goodfield, & Carson, 1988; Rosenthal et al., 1988, Berry & Barth, 1990, Smith & Howard, 1991)

- Strong attachment to the birth mother (Smith & Howard, 1991)
- Being a victim of preadoptive child sexual abuse (Nalavany, Ryan, Howard, & Smith, 2008)

Adoptive Family Factors

- Being a new or matched parent rather than the child's foster parent (Festinger, 1986; Barth & Berry, 1988; Berry & Barth, 1990; Smith & Howard, 1991; Coakley, 2005)
- Lack of social support, particularly from relatives (Feigelman & Silverman, 1984; Barth & Berry, 1988)
- Unrealistic expectations (Barth & Berry, 1988; McRoy, 1999)
- Adoptive mothers with more education (Festinger, 1986; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Berry & Barth, 1990)

Agency Factors

- Inadequate or insufficient information on the child and his or her history (Nelson, 1985; Barth & Berry, 1988)
- Inadequate parental preparation, training, and support (Nelson, 1985; McRoy, 1999; Smith et al., 2006)
- Staff discontinuities (i.e., different workers responsible for preparing the child and family) (Festinger, 1990)
- Having more caseworkers involved with the case (Festinger, 1986; McRoy, 1999)
- Not having sufficient services provided (Goerge et al., 1997)

Additionally, a study by Smith et al. (2006) provides indepth, recent data about risk and protective factors for disruptions among children adopted from the Illinois public child welfare system, including:

Child Factors

- White children had lower disruption rates than African-American children.
- When two or three siblings were placed together, they had a higher risk of disruption; when four or more siblings were placed together, they had a lower risk of disruption.

- Children who had experienced sexual or emotional abuse had the highest rates of disruption.
- Children with physical disabilities and emotional or behavioral problems had a higher risk for disruption.
- Each additional year of age increased the likelihood of disruption by 6 percent.
- Children who entered the child welfare system due to lack of supervision or environmental neglect were more likely to experience adoption disruption.
- The longer time children spent in out-of-home care, the less likely were their chances for disruption.
- If children spent time in a residential or group home while in out-of-home care, they were less likely to experience a later disruption.

Family Factors

- Children placed with relatives had a lower risk of disruption.

Agency Factors

- Children placed through private agencies were less likely to experience a disruption.
- Children who had been placed in residential or group care were at lower risk for disruption.
- The chance of disruption decreased for every year of experience held by the case manager for the first adoption.

Dissolutions

How many adoptions dissolve?

Accurate data on dissolutions are more difficult to obtain because, at the time of legal adoption, a child's records may be closed, first and last names and Social Security numbers may be changed, and other identifying information may be modified. As highlighted in Festinger and Maza (2009), the Federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) can be utilized to determine the number of children in foster care whose previous adoptions were dissolved by reviewing three data elements: whether the child was ever

previously adopted, the age of the child when the previous adoption was legalized, and the dates of the termination of parental rights (if the child had previously been adopted). Those data, however, are reported only for children in public foster care and do not capture adoption dissolution if the children do not come to the attention of the public child welfare system. Also, some researchers have observed that these data are inconsistently reported by the States. It is important to recognize that only a subset of adopted children who reenter foster care experience legal dissolution of their adoptions—many of them eventually return to their adoptive families. (Some of the studies below report on re-entry into care and not legal dissolution of the adoption.) Studies consistently report that only a small percentage of completed adoptions dissolve—probably between 1 and 5 percent.

- In Festinger and Maza's (2009) analysis of data from AFCARS, they determined that, of all the children who entered foster care for the first time and who then exited the foster care system in FY 2005, 0.5 percent had previously dissolved adoptions.
- Festinger (2002) found that 4 years after adoption, about 3.3 percent of children adopted from public and voluntary agencies in New York City in 1996 were or had been in foster care since adoption. In most of these situations the adoptive parents reported an expectation that the child would return to their home again.
- A study of children adopted in Kansas City showed that 3 percent of adopted children were not living with their adoptive parents 18 to 24 months after adoption (McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001).
- In a longitudinal study of families in Iowa who were receiving adoption subsidies, Groze (1996) found that 8 percent of the children were placed out of the home after 4 years. However, in all cases the families did not dissolve the adoption and were considered to be connected to and invested in the adopted child.
- An Illinois study of child welfare adoptions found that 6.6 percent of children adopted between 1976 and 1987 had reentered foster care at some point (Goerge et al., 1997).

- The GAO reported that about 1 percent of the public agency adoptions finalized in fiscal years 1999 and 2000 later were legally dissolved. The report cautioned that the 1 percent figure represents only adoptions that failed relatively soon after being finalized, so the number of dissolutions could have increased with time (U.S. GAO, 2003).

Why do adoptions dissolve?

The factors associated with dissolution or the temporary placement of children back into the child welfare system have not been well examined. One study found that the rate of adopted children's return to the custody of the State increased with the age of the child at adoption and was more common for male or non-Hispanic children (Goerge et al., 1997). Festinger (2002) reported that although dissolution is rare, families who adopt children with special needs from foster care undergo enormous struggles and face serious barriers to obtaining needed services. The two barriers to successful adoption most often mentioned by adoptive families were lack of information about where to go for services and the cost of services (Festinger, 2002; Soderlund, Epstein, Quinn, Cumblad, & Petersen, 1995).

Trends

Are disruptions and dissolutions increasing?

Professionals have expressed concern that recent public and private initiatives to increase adoptions and decrease time to adoption might lead to inadequate selection and preparation of adoptive homes. Those concerns have often focused on the shortened legal timeframes to file for termination of parental rights unless there was some exception required by the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). In reviewing data in Illinois, however, Smith et al. (2006) noted that there was a 12 percent higher risk of disruption before the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 than after ASFA. Festinger (in press) concludes that reported disruption rates have decreased slightly since the 1980s and 1990s.

Future Research

What research still needs to be done?

No national studies on adoption disruptions or dissolutions have been conducted. Most of the research to date has focused on narrowly defined populations or adoptions from public agencies. A number of researchers have called for the establishment of uniform terminology and more complete and accurate outcome data (e.g., see Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2004; Groze, 1996; Goerge et al., 1997). Additional research on the cause of adoption disruptions or dissolutions could promote the design and delivery of more evidence-based pre- and postplacement preventive services to prevent disruption and dissolution.

Additional research is needed in several areas:

- Total numbers of disruption and dissolution for adoptions, regardless of type
- Risk and protective factors related to dissolution or disruption, including links between pre- and postadoption services and disruption and dissolution rates
- Incidence of voluntary disruptions or dissolutions as a means of obtaining needed services for a child

Resources

For additional information about adoption topics, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway at https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption. Information Gateway also has a compilation of adoption statistics, which can be found at https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/statistics/adoption.cfm. Other sources of adoption information include the National Resource Center for Adoption (http://www.nrcadoption.org) and the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/adoption.html).

References

Barth, R. P., & Berry, M. (1988). *Adoption and disruption: Rates, risks, and responses.* Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Barth, R. P., Berry, M., Yoshikami, R., Goodfield, R. K., & Carson, M. L. (1988). Predicting adoption disruption. *Social Work, 33,* 227–233.

Barth, R. P., Gibbs, D. A., & Siebenaler, K. (2001). *Assessing the field of post-adoption service: Family needs, program models, and evaluation issues (Contract No. 100-99-0006).* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Berry, M., & Barth, R. P. (1990). A study of disrupted adoptive placements of adolescents. *Child Welfare, 69*(3), 209–225.

Coakley, J. (2005). *Finalized adoption disruption: A family perspective.* Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

Coakley, J. F., & Berrick, J. D. (2008). Research review: In a rush to permanency: Preventing adoption disruption. *Child and Family Social Work, 13,* 101–112.

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. (2004). What's working for children: A policy study of adoption stability and termination. Retrieved from http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/Disruption_Report.pdf

Feigelman, W., & Silverman, A. R. (1984). The long-term effects of transracial adoption. *Social Service Review, 58,* 588–602.

Festinger, T. (1986). *Necessary risk: Study of adoptions and disrupted adoptive placements.* Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Festinger, T. (1990). Adoption disruption: Rates and correlates. In D. M. Brodzinsky & M. D. Schechter (Eds.), *The psychology of adoption* (pp. 201–218). New York: Oxford University Press.

Festinger, T. (2002). After adoption: Dissolution or permanence? *Child Welfare, 81*(3), 515–533.

Festinger, T. (in press). Adoption disruption: Rates, correlates, and service needs. In G. P. Mallon & P. M. Hess (Eds.), *Child welfare for the 21st century: A handbook of practices, policies, and programs (2nd ed.).* New York: Columbia University Press.

Festinger, T., & Maza, P. (2009). Displacement or post-adoption placement? A research note. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 3,* 275–286.

Goerge, R. M., Howard, E. C., Yu, D., & Radomsky, S. (1997). *Adoption, disruption, and displacement in the child welfare system, 1976-94.* Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.

Groze, V. (1996). *Successful adoptive families: A longitudinal study of special needs adoption.* Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

McDonald, T. P., Propp, J. R., & Murphy, K. C. (2001). The postadoption experience: Child, parent, and family predictors of family adjustment to adoption. *Child Welfare, 80*(1), 71-94.

McRoy, R. G. (1999). *Special needs adoptions: Practice Issues.* New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.

Nalavany, B. A., Ryan, S. D., Howard, J. A., & Smith, S. L. (2008). Preadoptive child sexual abuse as a predictor of moves in care, adoption disruptions, and inconsistent adoptive parent commitment. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 32,* 1084–1088.

Nelson, K. A. (1985). *On adoption's frontier: A study of special needs adoptive families.* New York: Child Welfare League of America.

Rosenthal, J. A., Schmidt, D., & Conner, J. (1988). Predictors of special needs adoption disruption: An exploratory study. *Children and Youth Services Review, 10,* 101–117.

Smith, S. L., & Howard, J. A. (1991). A comparative study of successful and disrupted adoptions. *Social Service Review, 65,* 248–261.

Smith, S. L., Howard, J. A., Garnier, P. C., & Ryan, S. D. (2006). Where are we now? A post-ASFA examination of disruption. *Adoption Quarterly, 9*(4), 19–44.

Soderlund, J., Epstein, M. H., Quinn, K. P., Cumblad, C., & Petersen, S. (1995). Parental perspectives on comprehensive services for children and youth with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders 20*(3), 157–170.

U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs. (2011). FY 2011 Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption. Retrieved January 6, 2012, from http://adoption.state.gov/content/pdf/fy2011_annual_report.pdf

U.S. General Accounting Office. (2003). *Foster care: States focusing on finding permanent homes for children, but long-standing barriers remain* (GAO-03-626T). Retrieved from http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03626t.pdf

Suggested Citation:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2012). *Adoption disruption and dissolution*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.