



Adoption: who is going to look after the children?

Foster care is the most widely preferred form of alternative care in South Africa for children whose families have abandoned or relinquished them. Yet research shows that adoption is the best possible alternative for children. **ZITHA MOKOMANE** and **TAMSEN ROCHAT** looked into why people do not want to adopt children. Adoption is the least popular childcare choice, and there are indications that less and less people want to adopt, leaving children for whom there is no immediate alternative care within their extended family exceptionally vulnerable to the devastating long-term effects of putting them into an institution.

Against this background the Directorate of Adoptions and International Social Services at the national Department of Social Development (DSD) commissioned the HSRC to study the perceptions, understanding and beliefs of South Africans regarding adoption and the barriers that prevent or inhibit people from adopting children in need of alternative family care. We used different research methods for the study: a literature

review; an investigation into strategies that could be implemented to increase the uptake of adoption; and an analysis of data from the National Adoptions Register (NAR) to establish the levels and trends of adoption; a brief sociodemographic profile of adoptive parents and adopted children; and a qualitative survey undertaken in four provinces (Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo).

The survey entailed key informant inter-

views with adoption social workers in government, as well as private adoption agencies, child welfare agencies, and commissioners of child welfare. Focus group discussions were also held with adoptive and prospective adoptive parents, foster parents, parents with non-adopted children, and childless adults to gain insight into their views on the subject.



TRENDS AND LEVELS OF ADOPTION

Recent statistics show that 510 713 children were in foster care and were receiving the foster-care grant as of January 2010. In contrast, the number of adoptions has been hovering around 2 000 per year. There were considerably more national adoptions than inter-country adoptions in any given year. Key informant interviews further showed that while many social workers recognised that inter-country adoptions could be a noble and charitable act, as well as a source of better education and other material comforts for neglected children, many had reservations about the practice and were not eager to encourage it. Concerns about the loss of cultural roots and the ultimate welfare of the children in the receiving country were recurring themes in the interviews.

PATTERNS OF ADOPTION

Cross-cultural patterns

As in many western countries, current policy and practice in South Africa prioritises adoption of children within their own communities. This policy was reflected in the National Adoptions Register (NAR) data, which showed that the majority of national adoptions in the period under study took place within the same culture (i.e. where a child was adopted by a person of the same racial group). However, the pattern is in contrast to current evidence showing that most people in South Africa approve of trans-racial adoption.

Family type patterns

The NAR categorises national adoptions in South Africa into four groups: biological adoption (adoption of a child by his biological father when parents are not married); family adoption (adoption of a child by relatives such as uncles, aunts and grandparents); foster adoption (adoption of a child by a legal foster parent); and step adoption (adoption of a stepchild by a step-parent).

Based on this categorisation, data from the NAR shows that in recent years the most popular type of adoption was step adoption, followed by foster adoption. Family adoption has remained steady, while biological adoption has been the least popular.

The Foster Care Grant (FCG) may be playing a role in establishing and supporting the pattern of foster adoption. In essence, it has been widely argued that many children remain in foster care because their caregivers cannot afford to lose the FCG, which is inevitable if they proceed with adoption.

This hypothesis was supported by key informants in the survey, many of whom vigorously

advocated for the introduction of some form of adoption subsidy or assistance if adoption was to be encouraged, particularly given the context of poverty.

A further hypothesis is that the majority of foster caretakers are extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and older siblings, who see no particular value in engaging in the extensive administrative process of adoption.

WHO IS ADOPTED?

Research has shown that the uptake of adoption can be influenced by several individual characteristics of the child available for adoption, such as age, gender, legitimacy and race.

Age

The NAR does not collect data on the age of the child at the point at which they become eligible for adoption, but qualitative data from the key informant interviews revealed that the overwhelming majority of prospective adoptive parents prefer babies.

Gender

The NAR data did not reflect a clear gender preference. As an official in Gauteng said, 'Gender is not usually the deciding factor; as long as the baby is healthy they [the prospective parents] are often satisfied.'

Race

The NAR data showed that the pattern of national adoptions in South Africa heavily favours white children, with African, Indian and coloured children being less likely to be adopted. Given the generally positive attitude of South Africans towards transracial adoption revealed by the study, this finding is more likely a reflection of the generally very low adoption levels, and that when adoption takes place it is motivated by particular patterns of adoption illustrated by the data on cross-cultural and family type patterns in figure 1 on the following page.

It is noteworthy that the racial pattern was reversed when data for inter-country adoptions were analysed. Here African children made up the bulk of inter-country adoptions, followed by coloured, white and Indian children.

Legitimacy

The NAR revealed that the largest group of adopted children is in the 'born out of wedlock' category, while those who are abandoned make the smallest proportion. This is in line

with international evidence that children who are abandoned are less likely to be adopted, as prospective adoptive parents may feel uncomfortable with the absence of medical and family background and have concerns that children may have a history of abuse and neglect and would be more likely to present emotional and behavioural problems that may lead to disruption of the adoption.

WHO ADOPTS?

The NAR provided limited sociodemographic data on adoptive parent characteristics. Only two main variables: race and marital status, were available. Data on marital status showed that in recent years the majority of adopters have been single or unmarried. With regard to race, the register suggests that Africans were markedly under-represented in the adoption statistics, while whites made up the bulk of the adoptive parents.

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND ADOPTION

In part, the qualitative survey examined social work practices around adoption to identify obstacles or restrictions to adoption. The obstacles can be classified into the following: system- and knowledge-related barriers in the legal system, shortage of social work staff and resources, and social worker attitudes.

System- and knowledge-related barriers in the legal system

The findings showed that social workers felt there was a lack of consistency and uniformity in the interpretation and implementation of the adoption legislation. Public sector social workers acknowledged that they did not adequately understand the requirements and processes of the legislation regarding child adoption.

Shortage of social work staff and resources

Human resource shortages and the associated burdens and risks were highly salient in the key informant interviews, where they were repeatedly cited as one of the main barriers to successful implementation of all social work practices, including adoption.

SOCIAL WORKER ATTITUDES

Given that social workers act as gatekeepers in the adoption process, several social worker attitudes that may represent prejudice against particular groups of prospective adoptive parents – most commonly those who are not married, those with low income and those of same-sex orientation – were identified. These attitudes were most prevalent among

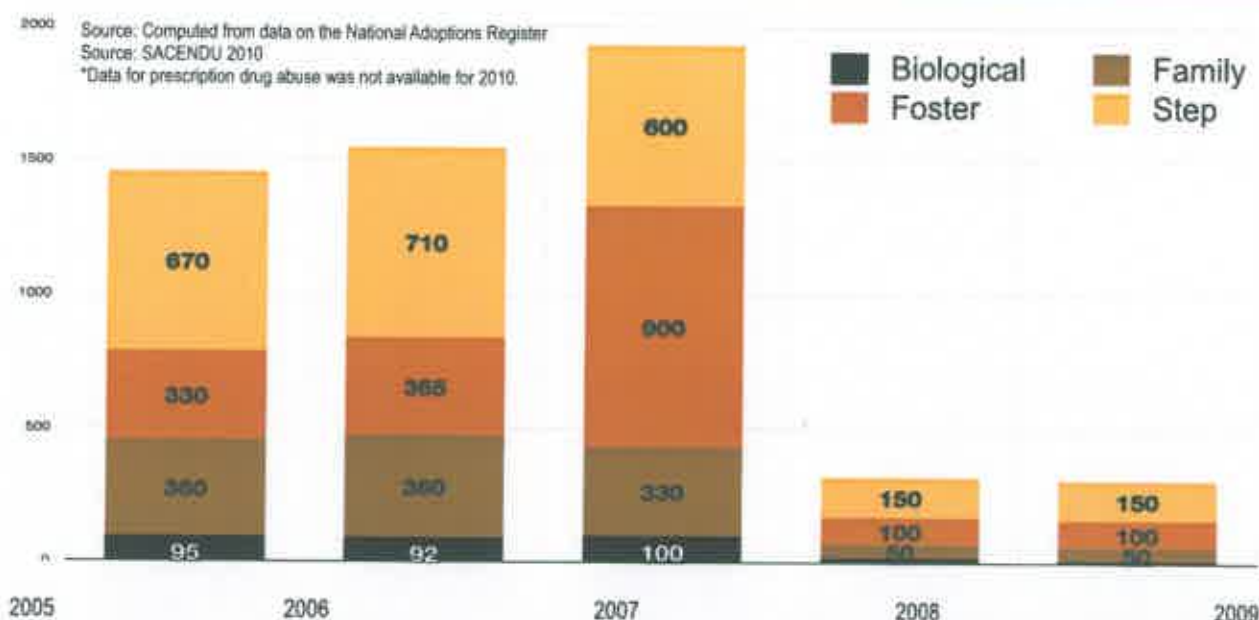


Figure 1: National adoptions by family type (April 2004 to March 2009)

the private sector, but also featured among public sector social workers.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Taking into account the limitation of the data available from the NAR, a major investment to improve the NAR system could result in a data tool that is insightful, accurate and robust, and which could allow for regular and adequate examination of the patterns of adoption to improve the cost-effectiveness of social welfare investments, resource allocation and to inform policy. Three specific recommendations were made in this regard:

→The need for greater inter-agency data sharing between directorates within the DSD to improve the depth and quality of data available for strategic decision-making.

→The need for greater investment in technology and technological expertise to ensure a comprehensive, user-friendly and automated interactive data system that ensures that data is well disseminated and easily accessible to social welfare practitioners to make the adoption process more efficient.

→The need for greater investment in the monitoring of statistics over time to enable reflective social welfare practices to drive improvement in adoption levels. ◀◀

This article is an extract from a paper, *Adoption in South Africa: trends and patterns in social work practice*, Mokomane, Z., Rochat, T.J. & The Directorate, (2011). *Child & Family Social Work: Onlinelibrary.wiley.com*

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PERIOD	NATIONAL ADOPTIONS	INTER-COUNTRY ADOPTIONS	TOTAL NUMBER
1/4/2004 – 31/3/2005	2 601	239	2 840
1/4/2005 – 31/3/2006	2 520	248	2 768
1/4/2006 – 31/3/2007	2 560	256	2 816
1/4/2007 – 31/3/2008	2 058	231	2 289
1/4/2008 – 31/3/2009	1 150	218	1 368
TOTAL	10 889	1 192	12 081



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To foster or to adopt?