



DAVE THOMAS  
FOUNDATION  
FOR ADOPTION®

Finding Forever Families for Children in Foster Care

# NATIONAL FOSTER CARE ADOPTION ATTITUDES SURVEY



**2013 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## **2013 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

Conducted by Harris Interactive



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July 2013

Dear Friend,

It has been more than 20 years since Dave Thomas first charged us with finding forever families for children waiting in foster care. In those two decades, we've seen significant growth — of our programs, our footprint, our awareness initiatives, and most importantly, the number of finalized adoptions.

But even through this exponential growth, we find that the myths and misperceptions that are sometimes linked to adoption from foster care continue to linger in the minds of Americans.

We cannot rest. As our political, economic and technological environments change at rapid rates, we must ensure that the more than 100,000 children waiting in foster care do not slip through the cracks. We have to move even faster, be bolder. We have much more to say, and even more to do.

Accomplishing these goals will take a clear and very detailed understanding of current American attitudes and beliefs about foster care adoption. That's why every five years we commission a survey to find out what Americans think about foster care adoption, and how we should address those beliefs. The results are the *2013 National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey*, conducted by Harris Interactive.

So, what did the findings show, and has there been any positive movement since our last survey in 2007? Actually, not much. That's a problem. And an opportunity. What it means to us is that our work is far from winding down. It means that our mission — to find forever families for children in foster care — is more important than ever. We must continue to dispel the myths that surround the children who, through no fault of their own, and because of extreme abuse and neglect at the hands of their birth parents, are in the foster care system.

The survey is a clear call to action. We need to disseminate a steady stream of positive communication about adoption from foster care, and share the thousands of amazing success stories that we have collected over time. We need to talk more about the advocates that work on behalf of the longest-waiting children in care, and how their actions have proven that no child is unadoptable.

Thank you for taking the time to review the survey findings. If you need any further information, please contact us at 1-800-ASK-DTFA or [davethomasfoundation.org](http://davethomasfoundation.org). We look forward to hearing from you.

All good wishes,

Rita L. Soronen  
President and CEO

# Executive summary

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More than 100,000 children. That's the number of children in foster care currently available for adoption in the United States. These children wait for years — sometimes for their entire childhoods — until they age out of foster care and enter into an uncertain future.

Last year, nearly 30,000 children turned 18 and were emancipated from care, with nowhere to go, and no one to provide them with support and encouragement. The door to foster care was forever closed behind them, yet they had no families to call their own.

Instead of making changes, too often we make excuses — this child is too old; that child is better off not moving again; our budget has been slashed and we just cannot do any more. But when it comes to a child's life, there is no time for excuses. *Every* child deserves a home. *Every* child is adoptable.

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption views the urgency of this issue through the eyes of a child in foster care. We believe that everyone has a responsibility to be the voice of foster care adoption so that every child finds a family. The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption exists to find homes for children in North America who are waiting to be adopted from foster care.

In the process, the Foundation works to inform people who may have misperceptions about foster care adoption that keep them from getting involved. Through the money raised, the Foundation provides free educational resources, promotes awareness, assists policy makers and employers, and supports adoption professionals and agencies throughout the United States and Canada to ensure that every child finds a forever home.

The Foundation is dedicated to these critical core beliefs:

- Every child deserves to live in a safe, loving and permanent family.
- No child should linger in foster care or leave the system at age 18 or 21 without a permanent family of his or her own.
- Every child is adoptable.

In order to ensure that all children in foster care have families, the Foundation commissioned Harris Interactive to survey more than 1,400 American adults to determine their attitudes, behaviors and beliefs about adoption. The results of the 2013 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey*, a follow-up to the 2007 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey*, offer hope, opportunity and validation. But the results are also a clear indication that the Foundation's mission is essential, and the work is far from over.

With this in mind, the Foundation will continue to:

- Drive the notion that every child is adoptable and that unadoptable is unacceptable.
- Advocate for better adoption policies and practices, from government offices to the workplace, to make the process easier and more supportive to families formed through adoption.
- Continue to dispel myths and misperceptions about foster care adoption.
- Remind communities what Dave Thomas once said: "These children are not someone else's responsibility. They are our responsibility."

## **SURVEY OBJECTIVES**

The results of the Harris Interactive research help the Foundation better understand Americans' attitudes about foster care adoption, their beliefs about the children waiting to be adopted and their perceptions of the foster care system. By highlighting perceptions or misperceptions in these areas, the Foundation will more effectively move children from foster care to the permanent and nurturing families we promised them.



Survey objectives:

- Understand why Americans do or do not adopt from foster care.
- Learn about the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors that create barriers to foster care adoption.
- Understand the beliefs Americans have about foster care adoption, the children waiting to be adopted and the foster care system.
- Highlight Americans' perceptions about who can, or should be, an adoptive parent.
- Provide research-based information about Americans' perceptions to those charged with action on behalf of children — child advocates, adoption professionals and practitioners, policy makers and the media.

The 2013 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey* tracks the attitudes and beliefs uncovered in the 2007 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey*.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The 2013 *National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey* was conducted online within the United States by Harris Interactive on behalf of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption between July 9, 2012 and July 18, 2012, among 1,428 adults (ages 18 or older). Results were weighted as needed for demographic targets: age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error, which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words “margin of error” as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100 percent response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the U.S. adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to be invited to participate in the Harris Interactive online research panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

In some cases, the data in the charts may not total 100 percent. This is due to rounding issues. An online methodology was used rather than a phone methodology. This was done to connect with a broader sample of U.S. consumers via the Harris Poll multimillion online consumer panel. This allows us to reach a broader sample and the most representative sample. Our panel members selected us by deciding to go online, join our panel, respond to our invitations and complete our surveys.

It is also important to understand that online surveys typically elicit information with greater depth and validity on sensitive topics than what could be achieved by any other methodology. In telephone interviewing, for example, it is not uncommon to see more positive scores on sensitive topics, due to difficulty in expressing unpopular opinions to a live interviewer. This difference in scoring between online and telephone methodology is called a “mode effect.” Mode effect is less obvious in straightforward and factual questions; however, on questions that are more impacted by social desirability, we find more mode effect.

## **TYPES OF ADOPTION DISCUSSED**

The survey discusses three types of adoption:

- Private infant adoption — the adoption of a U.S. infant through a licensed adoption agency or adoption attorney.
- Foster care adoption — the adoption of a child in foster care who has been freed for adoption when the birth parents' rights were terminated.
- International adoption — the adoption of a child who is a citizen of one country by adoptive parents who are citizens of a different country.



## KEY FINDINGS

Within the data, three results emerged as particularly significant:

- Over the last five years, opinions of foster care adoption improved to be as good, if not better, than those of private domestic infant adoption or international adoption.
- More than half (51 percent) of respondents agree with the Foundation's belief that every child is adoptable.
- The percentage considering any form of adoption slightly decreased since 2007, from 28 percent to 24 percent. But, the percentage of foster care adoptions grew more than the percentage of international and private adoptions, which actually saw a decrease.

The reality behind these facts and figures is that adoptions from foster care have not increased enough over the past five years. More than 100,000 children, through no fault of their own, wait in temporary care for permanent families. More troubling is that negative perceptions of foster care adoption continue to persist, even among those who have considered foster care adoption.

## PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS CONSIDERING ADOPTION AND PERCEPTION OF FOSTER CARE ADOPTION

The survey results show a positive change in Americans' perceptions of foster care adoption. For the first time since 2002, Americans' opinion of foster care adoption is higher than international or private adoption.

There is a long-standing correlation between a high opinion of the foster care system and the consideration of adoption from foster care. The opposite is true as well. Those who are considering adoption, but who would not consider foster care adoption, state an emphatically negative opinion of the foster care system. This is a change from 2007, when the two groups had nearly identical positive-negative opinions of the foster care system.

This research indicates that sharing real-life stories of successful adoptions from foster care, such as the Foundation's awareness campaigns, are important to moving more children from foster care to forever homes. The survey found the main source of information about adoption for those considering adoption were family, friends and neighbors (54 percent), and Americans with friends or family who have been adopted have the most favorable opinion of foster care adoption.

## DECLINE IN PRIVATE ADOPTION, INCREASE IN FOSTER CARE ADOPTION

The percentage of Americans who have adopted from foster care increased from the 2007 survey, showing greater increases in foster care adoption than international or private adoption, which saw a 9 percent decrease.

The positive or negative view of the foster care system held by the prospective parent is important. While those who have considered foster care adoption and those who have not may have similar views — such as concerns about potential behavior issues with children and the difficulty of the adoption process — the majority of those who have considered foster care adoption are doing so for altruistic reasons.

These findings reinforce the need for the services provided by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. Its role as an advocate for families and children — before, during and after foster care adoption — and its educational mission to dispel the myriad of myths about foster care adoption are essential to increase the number of adoptions from U.S. foster care.

## RACE, AGE, GENDER AND MARITAL STATUS WITH PROPENSITY TO ADOPT

The survey also created a more defined demographic portrait of those who have considered adoption. The more the Foundation understands about its audiences, the more it can hone messages that are unique to each group.



Americans who have considered adoption are more likely to be:

- Women
- Minorities
- Ages 18-34
- College educated (with some college or a degree)
- Single (never married) or unmarried and living with a partner
- Making an income between \$25,000 and \$50,000

### **ADOPTABILITY MISPERCEPTIONS STILL EXIST**

Unfortunately, there are still concerning misperceptions about children in foster care and the adoption process. From bonding and behavioral issues to bureaucracy and expense, adoption myths persist, even among those who have considered it.

On a more positive note, perceptions have improved since 2007 and negative feelings are less intense about children in foster care. For example, in 2007, 59 percent of respondents thought children adopted from foster care were more likely to have problems with behavior and self-control. In 2013, the number fell 13 points to 46 percent.

Americans still believe that the foster care adoption process is overwhelming and expensive. In 2007, 44 percent said it was very difficult or extremely difficult to complete the steps involved in adopting a child from foster care, based on what the individuals may have read, heard or seen. In 2013, that number was essentially the same, at 43 percent.

As for costs, in 2007, 46 percent of Americans thought foster care adoption was somewhat or very expensive. That perception has seen some improvement — down seven points to 39 percent. In reality, adoption from foster care costs \$0-\$2,500, and most families adopting from foster care are eligible for state subsidy support. Additionally, they may qualify for a state or federal adoption tax credit, or receive adoption benefits offered by their employers.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

For more information, please contact the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption at 1-800-ASK-DTFA or [davethomasfoundation.org](http://davethomasfoundation.org).





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