

Profiles in Adoption

# *BIRTH PARENT EXPERIENCES*

*A joint research project by*





# Profiles in Adoption

## BIRTH PARENT EXPERIENCES

Profiles in Adoption: Birth Parent Experiences ©

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# Profiles in Adoption

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## Introduction

Private domestic adoption practices have changed considerably in the United States over the past few decades. The role of birth parents has changed more than any other aspect of adoption practice. Historically, birth parents had little or no say in choosing the adoptive parents, deciding aspects of pre-birth, hospital and other placement experiences, or the level of openness after the placement. Now, they either determine or have significant influence over most of those decisions.

Despite the changes in practice and more empowerment for birth parents, there is still much to be learned by those who serve and support individuals considering adoption during their pregnancy, referred to in this report as expectant parents, as well as individuals who decide to place a child for adoption after birth/parenting, referred to in this report as birth parents. Making an adoption plan remains a difficult decision—often interlaced with mixed emotions of grief, happiness, fear, and love.

The purpose of this study was to better understand birth parents: Who they are, their pre- and post-adoption experiences, the factors that led toward satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their adoption decisions, and more. While the findings in this report give a broad overview of these topics, it is important to remember that – like everyone – these are individuals with unique, complex experiences. Our findings underscore the heterogeneous nature of this group. Broad generalizations or simplistic descriptions are not a sufficient means of defining or understanding this population.

## Birth Parent Survey

### Survey Report Highlights

1. There is significant diversity among the demography, experiences, and perspectives of birth parents.
2. Birth parents' satisfaction with their decision to place a child for adoption is impacted by multiple factors. The factors that contributed the most to greater satisfaction for birth parents in this study were receiving accurate information and decision-making free of coercion.
3. Birth mothers who placed their child for adoption in 2010 or later were much more likely to report satisfaction with their decision than birth mothers who placed their child before or during the 1970s. Birth mothers' levels of satisfaction with their adoption decision increased each decade since the 1970s.
4. Birth mothers describe their decision as being made in the child's best interest. They report receiving support for their decision from some people in their life, and bias/negativity from others.

The vast majority of birth mothers report experiencing stigma associated with their status as a birth parent. In fact, the percentage of birth mothers who experience some level of stigma about their decision to place their child for adoption has *risen* by 20% since 1970.

5. Birth mothers want connection with other birth mothers, as well as their child and the adoptive family, after the placement.

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### Methodology

An online survey was conducted with birth mothers and birth fathers in September and October 2022. Only birth parents who made a private domestic adoption placement were eligible. Participants were recruited using a network of NCFA and BraveLove contacts. The two organizations asked their partnering professionals and organizations to share a flyer and email invitation with birth parents, both birth mothers and birth fathers, with whom they have worked. The flyer and email invitation contained a link to the online survey.

When interested participants clicked the link to the survey, detailed information of the study was first presented that included the purpose and procedures of the study, discomforts and risks involved in the study participation, methods to ensure confidentiality, and participants' rights. After the review of the study information, interested participants would determine whether to participate in the study or not. Those who had decided to participate in the study were asked to proceed with the survey, and those who had decided not to participate were asked to close the browser window. The survey included items about participants' adoption and post-adoption experiences as well as their demography. The survey also asked participants about the degree of openness in their adoption, and their levels of satisfaction with adoption and the adoption process. Of those who completed the survey, 50 participants were randomly selected and given a \$25 gift card.

A total of 2,164 individuals partially or fully completed the online survey. Given the fact that the average time to complete the survey was estimated to be 15 minutes, data for 267 participants were excluded from further analyses because they completed the survey in less than five minutes. Another 104 cases were excluded due to a significant amount of missing data. The report further excluded 376 cases as their responses indicated that they were not birth parents, or their response appeared to be a duplicate of another response. Of these 1,417 respondents, 18 did not provide information on whether they were birth mothers or birth fathers and thus were excluded from the final sample of the study. **As a result, this report is based on the responses of 1,160 birth mothers and 239 birth fathers.** It should be noted that the total number of participants may vary for each survey item as not all participants answered each question.

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### Overview of Birth Parent Sample

#### Birth Mothers

- Average age at time of survey response: 40.6 years (SD=12.77), ranging from 18 to 83 years.
- Average time since placement: 15.2 years (SD=15.25), ranging from zero to 62 years.
- Marital status at time of survey response:
  - 61% were married or in a relationship.
  - 22% were single.
  - 17% marked other categories, including separated, divorced, and widowed.

#### Birth Fathers

- Average age at time of survey response: 31.0 years (SD=7.37), ranging from 18 to 77 years.
- Average time since placement: 7.4 years (SD=8.29), ranging from zero to 52 years.
- Marital status at time of survey response:
  - 44% were married or in a relationship.
  - 29.3% were single.
  - 27% marked other categories, including separated, divorced, and widowed.

### Characteristics of Birth Parent Participants

Birth parents were asked common demographic questions to help illuminate their characteristics. Similarities emerged between birth mothers and birth fathers in our sample regarding the birth parents' age at time of adoption.

The average age of birth mothers at the time of adoption was 26.1 (SD=8.66) ranging from 10 to 49 years. The average age of birth fathers at the time of adoption was 25.6 (SD=6.64) ranging from 12 to 49 years.

Significant differences between race/ethnicity of birth mothers and birth fathers were present in our sample. Birth mothers were 70.4% White compared to 39.1% for birth fathers. In every other race/ethnicity category, except "multiracial", birth fathers had a larger percentage of respondents compared to birth mothers.



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## BIRTH PARENT EXPERIENCES

Table 1. Demographic Information About Birth Parents

	Birth Mothers	Birth Fathers
Age at Time of Adoption	(n=944)	(n=75)
Mean	26.1 years	25.6 years
Median	23.5 years	24.0 years
Race/Ethnicity	(n=1,154)	(n=238)
American Indian/Alaskan Native	4.0%	18.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.5%	6.7%
Black (non-Hispanic)	12.1%	20.6%
Hispanic and/or Latino(a)	4.8%	11.8%
Multiracial	3.9%	2.5%
White (non-Hispanic)	70.4%	39.1%
Other	0.3%	0.9%
Education	(n=1,151)	(n=231)
Did not complete High School	5.1%	15.6%
High School or GED	11.6%	19.9%
Associate degree or some college	39.1%	27.7%
Bachelor's degree	24.2%	22.5%
Graduate degree	20.0%	14.3%
Religion	(n=1,155)	(n=238)
Catholic/Christianity	32.2%	41.6%
Protestant/Christianity	33.2%	18.9%
Other*	14.3%	25.2%
No religious affiliation	20.3%	14.3%

\*For birth mothers, this consisted of Buddhism (2.2%), Hinduism (1.5%), Islam (1.7%), Judaism (1.5%), and Other (7.4%).

For birth fathers, it consisted of Buddhism (6.7%), Hinduism (9.7%), Islam (5.5%), Judaism (2.9%), and Other (0.4%).

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## BIRTH PARENT EXPERIENCES

Table 1. Demographic Information About Birth Parents (cont'd)

		Birth Mothers (n=1,152)	Birth Fathers (n=237)
<b>Military Service (Current or Past)</b>			
	Yes	9.8%	43.0%
	No	90.2%	57.0%
<b>LGBTQ</b>		(n=1,156)	(n=238)
	Yes	10.7%	19.7%
	No	84.9%	70.2%
	Prefer not to answer	4.3%	10.1%
<b>Disability Status<sup>1</sup></b>		(n=1,151)	(n=234)
	Yes	16%	31.2%
	No	84%	68.8%

### Number of Children Placed for Adoption

#### Survey Question:

How many children have you placed for adoption?

Participants could choose one response from three options.

**Results:** Eleven percent of birth mother respondents and nearly 19% of birth father respondents have placed two or more children for adoption.

Table 2. Total Number of Children Placed for Adoption

Number of Adoption Placements	Birth Mothers (n=1,133)	Birth Fathers (n=223)
1	89.1%	81.2%
2	7.9%	13.0%
3+	3.1%	5.8%

<sup>1</sup>When asked if they had a disability, respondents were given the following definition: "The Americans with Disabilities Act defines a person with a disability as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment."

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## BIRTH PARENT EXPERIENCES

### Related to Adoptive Parents Before Placement

#### Survey Question:

*Were you related to adoptive parent(s) prior to the adoptive placement?*

Participants could choose yes or no.

*Results:* Interestingly, the percentage of birth fathers who indicated being related to the adoptive parents prior to the placement is much higher than that of birth mothers, suggesting either a difference in placement preferences by birth parents, and/or a distinction of this sample, with more representation of birth fathers who made a placement with a relative.

Table 3. Related to Adoptive Parents Prior to Placement

	Birth Mothers (n= 1,125)	Birth Fathers (n= 222)
Yes	10.2%	37.8%
No	89.8%	62.2%

### Same or Different Race

#### Survey Question:

*Is your child's race/ethnicity different than adoptive parents?*

Table 4. Child's Race/Ethnicity Different Than Adoptive Parents

	Birth Mothers (n= 1,128)	Birth Fathers (n= 222)
<b>Child Different Race/Ethnicity than Adoptive Parents</b>		
Yes	25.9%	58.6%
No	70.8%	37.4%
Unknown	3.3%	4.1%

## Decision-Making

### Persons Providing Support for Decision

**Survey Question:**

*At the time you began thinking about making an adoptive placement, who provided support for your decision? Please check all that apply.*

Many respondents indicated multiple sources of support, most frequently adoption professionals and the parents of the birth parent. Of the birth mother respondents to this question, **11.9% indicated they had no one to provide support for their decision-making.**

Compared to birth mothers, birth fathers indicated fewer supports in each category except “other birth parent” and substantially fewer birth fathers received support from their parents or adoption professionals in the decision-making process.

*Table 5. Person Providing Support to Birth Parents' Adoption Decision-Making*

Support Provider	Birth Mother (n=1,090)	Birth Father (n=196)
Parent(s)	42.3%	26.5%
Other relative(s)	21.8%	19.4%
Friend(s)	33.9%	33.7%
Child's other birth parent	19.6%	24.0%
Health care worker(s)	17.6%	15.3%
Adoption professional(s)	43.9%	16.3%
Religious clergy/leadership	12.2%	12.8%
No one	11.9%	4.6%
Other	8.0%	1.5%

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## BIRTH PARENT EXPERIENCES

### Choosing Adoptive Parents

#### Survey Question:

*Did you play an active role in choosing who the adoptive parents would be?*

*Results:* Answers were similar between birth mothers and birth fathers.

*Table 6. Choosing Adoptive Parents*

	Birth Mothers (n=1,093)	Birth Fathers (n=209)
<b>Active Role in Choosing Adoptive Parents</b>		
Yes	80.9%	79.4%
No	19.1%	20.6%

### Factors about Adoptive Parents

#### Survey Question:

*Which factors were important to you when choosing adoptive parents? Please mark all that apply.*

*Results:* Findings demonstrate that multiple factors are often important considerations in making this decision, and over half of birth mothers indicated the adoptive parents' views on openness in adoption was important. Adoptive parents' views toward openness was the most important factor for birth fathers, as it was for birth mothers.

However, the second most important factor was closely tied between number of children in the home and adoptive parents' race for birth fathers, while it was adoptive parents' political, social, and/or religious views followed by the number of children in the home for birth mothers.

*See table on the following page.*

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Table 7. Important Factors in Choosing Adoptive Parents	Birth Mother (n=1,048)	Birth Father (n=208)
Adoptive parents' age	26.2%	30.3%
Adoptive parents' race	27.4%	38.0%
Number of children already in the home	40.6%	39.9%
Adoptive parents' views on openness in adoption	54.4%	48.6%
Adoptive parents' political, social, and/or religious views	44.8%	36.5%
Other	22.6%	0.5%

Examples of "other" replies from birth mothers included adoptive parents' activities and interests, financial stability, and health.

## Concerns About an Adoptive Placement

### Survey Question:

*There are a number of concerns that people might have when they consider making an adoptive placement. For each statement below, please rate the level of concern you experienced related to making an adoptive placement.*

**Results:** The number of responses for birth mothers ranged from 999 to 1,063 in these six questions, while the number of responses from birth fathers ranged from 195 to 205 for these same questions.

The primary concern noted by birth parents was that they would miss their child, followed by the concern of not knowing what will happen in their child's life.

Aside from the concern of disappointing the child's other birth parent, birth mothers experienced stronger concern than birth fathers in every other category. The majority of birth fathers' responses were rated at the moderate or minor level of concern.

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Table 8. Birth Mothers' Levels of Concern

	Major Concern	Moderate Concern	Minor Concern	No Concern
I will miss my child too much.	48.7%	24.2%	15.5%	11.6%
Not knowing what will happen in my child's life.	48.1%	23.6%	17.1%	11.2%
My child will be angry with me in future.	40.6%	27.5%	18.4%	13.6%
Disappointing family and/or friends.	29%	20.5%	23.6%	26.9%
Disappointing the child's other birth parent.	15.1%	16.5%	20.1%	48.3%
Adoptive parents will cut off an open relationship.	36.1%	19.3%	21.4%	23.1%

Table 9. Birth Fathers' Levels of Concern

	Major Concern	Moderate Concern	Minor Concern	No Concern
I will miss my child too much.	35.5%	41.6%	14.7%	8.1%
Not knowing what will happen in my child's life.	26.2%	42.6%	25.2%	5.9%
My child will be angry with me in future.	27.7%	37.4%	26.2%	8.7%
Disappointing family and/or friends.	19.5%	35%	28.5%	17%
Disappointing the child's other birth parent.	20.5%	45.4%	22.4%	11.7%
Adoptive parents will cut off an open relationship.	20.6%	42.2%	25.5%	11.8%

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### Reflection on Decision to Place for Adoption

#### Survey Question:

Birth parents were asked to reflect upon their adoption decision with a survey question that asked them to rate the extent to which they agreed with the following statement, “An adoptive placement was the right decision for me.”

**Results:** While a substantial majority agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, birth mothers were more likely to either strongly disagree or strongly agree in comparison to birth fathers.

Table 10. Birth Parents’ Reflection on Adoption Decision

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>Birth Mothers’ belief adoption was right decision for her. (n=1,085)</b>	11.8%	9.8%	17.3%	23.2%	37.9%
<b>Birth Fathers’ belief adoption was right decision for him. (n=206)</b>	2.4%	5.8%	22.8%	46.1%	22.8%



### Post-Adoption Experiences

An adoption is both an event in time, when parental rights and responsibilities are legally changed, as well as a sustained experience with lifelong implications for those involved. We asked birth parents about post-adoption to better understand this aspect of their experiences.

### Post-Adoption Services Needed and Received

#### Survey Question:

*Birth parents were asked to identify both the post-adoption services they needed and the services they actually received.*

*Results:* There were differences between birth mother and birth father responses, with a larger percentage of birth mothers indicating a need for therapy/counseling after the placement, but many not actually receiving that service.

Table 11. Birth Mothers' Post-Adoption Service Experiences

Post-Adoption Services	Needed (n=1,064)	Actually Received (n=955)
Therapy/counseling for self	64.9%	38.6%
Contact/relationship mediation with adoptive family	41.5%	28.5%
Medical care/assistance	31.4%	26.6%
Birth parent support group(s)	51.2%	31.0%
Other	7.5%	19.1%

Table 12. Birth Fathers' Post-Adoption Service Experiences

Post-Adoption Services	Needed (n=205)	Actually Received (n=201)
Therapy/counseling for self	41.5%	36.3%
Contact/relationship mediation with adoptive family	59.5%	51.7%
Medical care/assistance	39.5%	44.8%
Birth parent support group(s)	26.3%	29.9%
Other	0.5%	1.0%

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### Current Contact with Child

*Survey Question:*

*Currently, do you have any contact with your child?*

*Table 13. Birth Parents' Current Contact With Child*

Current Contact With Child?	Birth Mothers (n=1,084)	Birth Fathers (n=210)
Yes	78.0%	73.8%
No	22.0%	26.2%

### Satisfaction with Extent of Contact

*Survey Question:*

*Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: "I am satisfied with the extent of contact I have with my child."*

*Table 14. Birth Parents' Satisfaction with Extent of Current Contact*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>Birth Mothers' Satisfaction with Extent of Current Contact (n=1,071)</b>	13.9%	8.9%	17.5%	26.6%	33.1%
<b>Birth Fathers' Satisfaction with Extent of Current Contact (n=213)</b>	4.2%	8.9%	19.7%	38.5%	28.6%

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### Satisfaction with Current Life Circumstances

Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

Table 15. Birth Mothers' Satisfaction in Education, Career, Relationships

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
All in all, I am satisfied with my education. (n=832)	3.4%	12.9%	17.7%	31.0%	35.1%
All in all, I am satisfied with my career. (n=830)	4.5%	13.0%	18.0%	31.1%	33.5%
All in all, I am satisfied with my current marital status/family. (n=830)	4.7%	11.8%	16.3%	28.4%	38.8%

Table 16. Birth Fathers' Satisfaction in Education, Career, Relationships

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
All in all, I am satisfied with my education. (n=151)	3.3%	13.2%	27.2%	39.7%	16.6%
All in all, I am satisfied with my career. (n=149)	2.7%	20.1%	26.2%	33.6%	17.4%
All in all, I am satisfied with my current marital status/family. (n=149)	4.7%	14.1%	31.5%	34.2%	15.4%

### Adoption Satisfaction

One of the primary aims of this research was to better understand the factors that impact birth parents' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their adoption decision.

*Survey Question/Prompt: Overall, I am satisfied with the decision to place my child for adoption.*

**Results:** Nearly two-thirds of birth mothers agreed or strongly agreed, indicating satisfaction with their decision. Similarly, almost 70% of birth fathers indicated being satisfied with their decision.

Table 17. Birth Parents' Satisfaction With Adoption Decision

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>Birth Mothers' Overall satisfaction with adoption decision. (n=1,089)</b>	12.2%	9.8%	14.7%	28.1%	35.2%
<b>Birth Fathers' Overall satisfaction with adoption decision. (n=210)</b>	4.8%	3.8%	22.9%	39.5%	29.0%

We examined many factors to determine if they had a statistically significant relationship with levels of adoption satisfaction. Shaded boxes in Table 18 indicate statistically significant findings.

Table 18. Summary of Findings on Factors Associated with Adoption Satisfaction

Variable Examined	Birth Mothers	Birth Fathers
<b>Time period of adoption</b>	Statistically significant (n=966)	Statistically non-significant (n=127)
<b>Prior relationship with adoptive parents</b>	Statistically non-significant (n=1,077)	Statistically non-significant (n=206)
<b>Child same race as adoptive parents</b>	Statistically non-significant (n=1,074)	Statistically non-significant (n=207)
<b>Receipt of accurate information</b>	Statistically significant (n=1,082)	Statistically significant (n=198)
<b>Free, non-coerced decision-making</b>	Statistically significant (n=1,073)	Statistically significant (n=198)

## Profiles in Adoption

### BIRTH PARENT EXPERIENCES

Active role in choosing adoptive parents	Statistically significant (n=1,071)	Statistically significant (n=201)
Current contact with child	Statistically significant (n=1,076)	Statistically significant (n=204)
Satisfaction with education	Statistically significant (n=830)	Statistically significant (n=148)
Satisfaction with career	Statistically significant (n=828)	Statistically significant (n=146)
Satisfaction with marital status/family	Statistically non-significant (n=828)	Statistically significant (n=146)

### Time Period of Adoption Placement is Associated with Birth Mothers' Adoption Satisfaction

When examining birth mothers' adoption satisfaction by time period, statistically significant differences were observed between the 1970s vs. 2000s ( $p<.05$ ) as well as between 1970s vs. 2010s or after ( $p<.001$ ).<sup>2,3</sup>

Table 19. Birth Mothers' Adoption Satisfaction by Time Period of Adoption Placement

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1970s or before (n=80)	2.9	1.69
1980s (n=82)	3.3	1.62
1990s (n=104)	3.5	1.59
2000s (n=113)	3.5	1.51
2010s or after (n=587)	3.9	1.18
Total (n=966)	3.7	1.39

Due to the smaller sample of birth fathers, especially in prior time periods, only two time periods were compared. When birth fathers' responses were analyzed, the two groups were similar, with birth fathers who placed for adoption in 2010 or later (n=108) having a mean adoption satisfaction score of 4.1 (SD=0.92) and those who placed prior (n=19) having a mean adoption satisfaction score of 3.9 (SD=0.99).

<sup>2</sup> The Welch test was conducted due to the violation of homogeneity assumption.

<sup>3</sup> Satisfaction scores range from 1 to 5, and higher scores imply higher levels of satisfaction.

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#### Accurate Information and Non-Coerced Decision-Making Correlate with Birth Parent Adoption Satisfaction

The findings of the correlation analysis showed that birth parents' receipt of accurate information was significantly associated with adoption satisfaction for both birth mothers and birth fathers. Those who indicated that they had received accurate information reported higher levels of satisfaction, with stronger relationship observed for birth mothers ( $r = .57$ ) than for birth fathers ( $r = .36$ ).

It was also observed that birth parents' view on whether or not they made a non-coerced decision was significantly related to their adoption satisfaction for both birth mothers and birth fathers. Birth parents who believed they had made a non-coerced decision had higher levels of adoption satisfaction, with a much stronger relationship reported for birth mothers ( $r = .65$ ) than for birth fathers ( $r = .25$ ).

Table 20. Receipt of Accurate Info/Non-Coerced Decision-Making and Adoption Satisfaction

	Birth Mothers			Birth Fathers		
	n	Correlation coefficient	p-value	n	Correlation coefficient	p-value
Receipt of Accurate Info	1,082	.565	.000	198	.356	.000
Non-Coerced Decision-Making	1,073	.646	.000	198	.253	.000

#### Active Role in Choosing Adoptive Parents is Associated with Adoption Satisfaction

Birth parents who played an active role in choosing the adoptive parents had significantly higher mean adoption satisfaction scores than those who indicated not having an active role, for both birth mothers ( $p < .001$ ) and birth fathers ( $p < .01$ ).

Table 21. Active Role in Choosing Adoptive Parents and Adoption Satisfaction

Active Role in Choosing Adoptive Parents	Mean Adoption Satisfaction Score Birth Mothers (n=1,071)	Mean Adoption Satisfaction Score Birth Fathers (n=201)
Yes	3.8 (SD=1.27)	3.9 (SD=1.02)
No	2.9 (SD=1.52)	3.4 (SD=1.08)

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### Current Contact with Child is Associated with Birth Parent Adoption Satisfaction

Birth parents' levels of adoption satisfaction significantly differed between those who currently did and did not have contact with their child. The satisfaction scores were significantly higher for birth parents with current contact, in comparison to those without current contact. The findings were consistent for both birth mothers ( $p < .001$ ) and birth fathers ( $p < .05$ ).

Table 22. Current Contact with Child and Adoption Satisfaction

Current Contact With Child	Mean Adoption Satisfaction Score Birth Mothers (n=1,076)	Mean Adoption Satisfaction Score Birth Fathers (n=204)
Yes	3.7 (SD=1.31)	3.9 (SD=1.00)
No	3.3 (SD=1.50)	3.6 (SD=1.16)

### Satisfaction with Education, Career, and Marital Status/Family is Correlated with Adoption Satisfaction

For both birth mothers and birth fathers, their levels of satisfaction with education and career were significantly correlated with their adoption satisfaction. The higher their levels of satisfaction with education and career were, the more satisfied they were with their adoption experience, with stronger association observed for birth fathers than for birth mothers.

The results of the correlation analysis on birth parents' levels of satisfaction with their marital status/family and adoption satisfaction were statistically significant only for birth fathers ( $p < .01$ ). Higher levels of marital status/family satisfaction were significantly associated with higher levels of adoption satisfaction for birth fathers. The results for birth mothers approached the threshold for statistical significance with  $p = 0.057$ , but the strength of this correlation was very weak ( $r = .07$ ).

Table 23. Satisfaction With Education, Career, Marriage/Family Status and Adoption Satisfaction

Satisfaction with:	Birth Mothers			Birth Fathers		
	n	Correlation coefficient	p-value	n	Correlation coefficient	p-value
Education	830	.137	.000	148	.304	.000
Career	828	.093	.007	146	.332	.000
Marital status /Family	828	.066	.057	146	.219	.008



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#### Regression Analysis on Adoption Satisfaction

Regression analyses were conducted to further examine which factor had a more significant influence on birth parents' levels of adoption satisfaction. Based on the findings of bivariate analyses, three variables (receipt of accurate information; non-coerced decision-making; current contact with child) were included in the analytic model, which were found to be strongly associated with levels of adoption satisfaction and which were of special interest. Separate regression analyses were completed for birth mothers (n=1,061) and birth fathers (n=194).

The findings on birth mothers showed that both non-coerced decision-making and receipt of accurate information were significant predictors of adoption satisfaction levels ( $p < .001$  for both variables) even after the effects of the other variables were ruled out. Non-coerced decision-making was found to be the strongest predictor with its beta value of 0.48. However, the variable of current contact with child was found to be statistically insignificant ( $p = 0.78$ ) when the effects of the other variables were ruled out. The overall model was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), explaining 45% of the variance of adoption satisfaction levels.

Table 24. Regression Analysis on Birth Mothers' Adoption Satisfaction

Variable	b	$\beta$	SE	p	95% CI
Receipt of accurate information	.245	.250	.030	.000	[.187, .305]
Non-coerced decision-making	.475	.480	.030	.000	[.415, .534]
Current contact with child	-.021	-.006	.076	.783	[-.170, .128]

Note. CI = confidence interval; adjusted  $R^2$  for the overall model was .45 ( $p < .001$ )



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The results of the regression analysis on birth fathers were somewhat different from those on birth mothers. The only variable that was found to be a significant predictor while controlling for the effects of the other variables was the receipt of accurate information ( $p < .001$ ). The effects of the variables of non-coerced decision-making and current contact with child were found to be insignificant ( $p = .08$  and  $.89$ , respectively). The overall model was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), explaining 14% of the variance of adoption satisfaction levels.

Table 25. Regression Analysis on Birth Fathers' Adoption Satisfaction

Variable	b	$\beta$	SE	p	95% CI
Receipt of accurate information	.329	.313	.080	.000	[.170, .488]
Non-coerced decision-making	.130	.128	.074	.080	[-.016, .276]
Current contact with child	.025	.010	.176	.887	[-.323, .373]

Note. CI = confidence interval; adjusted R<sup>2</sup> for the overall model was .14 ( $p < .001$ )

## Stigma

*“a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.”<sup>4</sup>*

### Sources of Perceived Stigma

We asked birth parents to identify all individuals from whom they perceived stigma regarding their decision to make an adoptive placement. For both birth mothers and birth fathers, stigma was most frequently perceived from relatives other than parents.

Table 26. Individuals From Whom Birth Parents Perceive Stigma

Source of Stigma	Birth Mothers (n=808)	Birth Fathers (n=146)
Parent(s)	34.0%	16.4%
Other relative(s)	36.4%	29.5%
Friend(s)	33.9%	19.2%
Other birth parent	28.1%	24.0%
Health care worker(s)	31.7%	15.8%
Adoption professional(s)	17.3%	13.7%
Religious clergy/leadership	17.1%	8.9%
Other	12.7%	0.7%
None	13.9%	19.9%

Examples of “other” from birth mothers include acquaintances, coworkers, adoptive parents, adoptive parents’ family and friends, and “anyone who knows I am a birth parent.”

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<sup>4</sup> Oxford Reference definition of “stigma”. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://www.oxfordreference.com>.

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To better understand the scope of stigmatization, we examined results by the number of options selected by birth mothers. In identifying individuals or groups from whom they felt perceived stigma:

- 29% of birth mothers selected three or more options
- 31% selected two of the options
- 26% selected one option
- 14% of birth mothers selected “none” indicating no perceived stigma from others

### Perceived Stigma by Time Period of Adoption Placement

To further examine stigma, we analyzed stigma perception by time period of adoption. The statistically significant differences are denoted within the tables below. Of special note, is the data which indicates the percentage of birth mothers who experience some level of stigma about their decision to place their child for adoption has *risen* by 20% since 1970.

Birth fathers’ perception of stigma has also changed over time, with an increase from 14% to 19% of those who experience no stigma between the two time periods examined (2000s or before vs. 2010s or after), though this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 27. Birth Mothers’ Perception of Stigma by Time Period of Adoption Placement (n=747)

	1970s or before (n=53)	1980s (n=64)	1990s (n=75)	2000s (n=90)	2010 or after (n=465)
Parent	30.2%	46.9%	34.7%	35.6%	33.1%
Other relative	24.5%	45.3%	41.3%	42.2%	37.6%
Friend	22.6%	34.4%	38.7%	41.1%	34.0%
Birth parent*	11.3%	15.6%	22.7%	27.8%	32.0%
Health care worker	22.6%	23.4%	38.7%	36.7%	31.8%
Adoption professional	18.9%	10.9%	14.7%	14.4%	18.1%
Religious clergy/leader*	20.8%	26.6%	24.0%	24.4%	13.1%
None**	30.2%	25.0%	16.0%	13.3%	9.5%

\* p<.01, \*\* p<.001

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Figure 1. Birth Mothers Reporting No Perceived Stigma

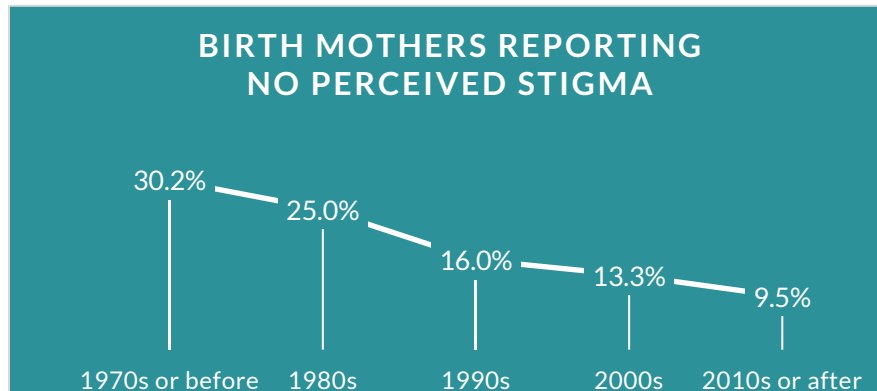


Table 28. Birth Fathers' Perception of Stigma by Time Period of Adoption Placement

	2009 or before (n=14)	2010 or after (n=75)
Parent	21.4%	17.3%
Other relative*	7.1%	38.7%
Friend	28.6%	17.3%
Birth parent	21.4%	26.7%
Health care worker	7.1%	14.7%
Adoption professional	7.1%	12.0%
Religious clergy/leader	14.3%	9.3%
None	14.3%	18.7%

\* p<.05

### Perceived Stigma by Race/Ethnicity

Next, we examined whether birth parents' levels of perceived stigma were different based on their race/ethnicity. No statistically significant differences among racial/ethnic groups were observed for birth fathers. There were significant differences across racial groups in a few categories for birth mothers, including religious clergy/leaders, health care workers, and other relatives.

White birth mothers often reported the highest percentage of perceived stigma *within specific categories* when compared to Black and Hispanic birth mothers. However, the

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percentage of White birth mothers who reported zero perceived stigma was also higher compared to Black or Hispanic birth mothers.

Table 29. Birth Mothers' Perceived Stigma by Race (n=807)

	Non-Hispanic White (n=574)	Non-Hispanic Black (n=105)	Hispanic (n=36)	Other (n=92)
Parent	34.3%	26.7%	44.4%	37.0%
Other relative*	39.7%	29.5%	27.8%	27.2%
Friend	35.9%	29.5%	30.6%	28.3%
Birth parent	27.2%	30.5%	38.9%	27.2%
Health care worker*	34.1%	18.1%	33.3%	30.4%
Adoption professional	18.3%	18.1%	22.2%	8.7%
Religious clergy/leader*	19.5%	9.5%	13.9%	12.0%
None	15.0%	6.7%	13.9%	15.2%

Note. \* p<.05

No statistically significant results arose across racial groups for birth fathers, but the percentage of White birth fathers who reported zero perceived stigma was higher compared to other racial/ethnic groups.

Table 30: Birth Fathers' Perceived Stigma by Race (n=146)

	Non-Hispanic White (n=45)	Non-Hispanic Black (n=35)	Hispanic (n=20)	Other (n=46)
Parent	15.6%	11.4%	25.0%	17.4%
Other relative	24.4%	45.7%	20.0%	26.1%
Friend	20.0%	17.1%	10.0%	23.9%
Birth parent	28.9%	25.7%	30.0%	15.2%
Health care worker	22.2%	14.3%	10.0%	13.0%
Adoption professional	11.1%	8.6%	10.0%	21.7%
Religious clergy/leader	15.6%	2.9%	5.0%	8.7%
None	28.9%	11.4%	15.0%	19.6%

### Birth Parents' Perspectives

We asked birth parents to tell us their views on general issues pertaining to adoption.

#### Adoption in Best Interest of Parties Involved

The majority of birth parents believe that adoption can work in the best interest of children, in the best interest of birth parents, and in the best interest of adoptive parents.

Amongst the three groups, birth mothers were more likely to agree or strongly agree that adoption can work in adoptive parents' best interests, while birth fathers most frequently agreed or strongly agreed that adoption can work in children's best interests.

Table 31. Birth Mothers' Views on Adoption in Interest of Parties Involved

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Adoption can work in children's best interest (n=837)	6.1%	10.9%	13.7%	26.9%	42.4%
Adoption can work in birth parents' best interest (n=831)	9.5%	10.1%	13.6%	27.4%	39.4%
Adoption can work in adoptive parents' best interest (n=831)	3.2%	6.5%	12.6%	30.4%	47.2%

Table 32. Birth Fathers' Views on Adoption in Interest of Parties Involved

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Adoption can work in children's best interest (n=151)	4.0%	9.3%	18.5%	49.0%	19.2%
Adoption can work in birth parents' best interest (n=150)	3.3%	7.3%	29.3%	40.0%	20.0%
Adoption can work in adoptive parents' best interest (n=150)	4.0%	8.7%	23.3%	44.0%	20.0%

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### Preferred Terminology

#### Survey Question:

When discussing your status in an adoptive relationship, do you have a preference for what terminology is used?

Throughout this report, we have used the terms “birth parent(s),” “birth mother(s)” and “birth father(s)”. We recognize that there are different language preferences among this population and chose this because it is what this population selected most frequently for self-identification.

Table 33. Birth Parents' Preferred Terminology

	Birth Mother (n=832)	Birth Father (n=150)
First Mother / First Father	10.9%	16.0%
Biological Mother / Father	13.1%	22.0%
Mother / Father	10.7%	14.7%
Birth Mother / Birth Father	43.3%	22.0%
Other	4.2%	-
No opinion/preference	17.8%	25.3%

For consistency/clarity, we chose to use this terminology throughout the report. In practice, adoption professionals and adoptive families are encouraged to use the preferred terminology of the parents they are working or in relationship with.<sup>5</sup>

### Adoptee Access to Birth Records

#### Survey Question:

In recent years, many states have changed their laws on adoptees accessing original birth records. Which of the following best describes your view on this?

**Results:** The views of birth mothers and birth fathers were not uniform. The most frequently chosen option (46.3%) by birth mothers was for adoptees to have full access to their birth records. For birth fathers, the most frequently chosen option (35.5%) was for confidentiality promises to remain in place for birth parents.

<sup>5</sup> For an adoption being considered before a child is born, professionals and others would typically refer to the parents considering making an adoptive placement as “expectant parents” rather than birth parents, because it is both descriptively more accurate and because it recognizes the non-finality of the decision-making process at that stage.

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**Table 34. Birth Parents' Views on Adoptee Access to Birth Records**

	<b>Birth Mother (n=1,072)</b>	<b>Birth Father (n=214)</b>
I have no opinion on the matter.	14.8%	22.9%
Any promise made for confidentiality to a birth parent should remain in place.	16.9%	35.5%
Adoptees should be entitled to full access of their original birth records, regardless of what was previously told to birth parents.	46.3%	28.0%
Adoptees should only be allowed access to their original birth records if birth parents have explicitly given consent.	16.7%	13.1%
Other	5.3%	0.5%



## Birth Mother Focus Groups

### Overview of Methods and Description of Participants

Three focus groups were conducted with birth mothers in July 2022. Two researchers facilitated these focus groups using semi-structured guiding questions that explored birth mothers' experience pre- and post-adoption. Participants of focus groups were recruited using a network of adoption and legal professionals known to NCFA and BraveLove. The two organizations asked their partnering professionals and organizations to share a flyer and email invitation with birth mothers. Interested birth mothers were asked to directly reach out to the two researchers. A total of 235 birth mothers contacted the researchers and provided information on their availability to participate.

Initially, two focus groups were planned. Thirty birth mothers (15 per focus group) were randomly selected from the 235 birth mothers and were invited to participate in the focus groups. For the first focus group, two additional birth mothers were randomly selected and invited due to the unavailability of two who had been previously invited. Out of the 32 birth mothers who were invited, 20 participated in the first two focus groups. It should be noted that out of the 20 participants, one was found to be an adoptive mother and not a birth mother during the focus group, and she then left without fully participating in the focus group.

From the two focus groups, the facilitators observed that birth mothers of racial/ethnic minorities were not as vocal as birth mothers who were White. As a result, a third focus group was conducted that purposely only included Black birth mothers. Six Black birth mothers were invited, and they all participated in the third focus group. Thematic findings from the third focus group did not differ from the prior groups and therefore the results are combined below.

Prior to beginning the focus groups, participants completed an online demographic questionnaire. **In total, 26 participants' demographic information was obtained, with 25 birth mothers participating in the three focus groups.** The focus groups were conducted via Zoom and recorded.

Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 43 years, with a mean age of 29 years ( $SD=4.81$ ). Of the 26 participants, 17 (65.4%) indicated birth father involvement with the adoption placement. Fourteen of the 26 participants (53.8%) indicated the placement was made with a non-relative, and the remaining 12 (46.2%) indicated the adoptive parents were relatives. Additional demographic information is provided in the following table.

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Table 35. Demographic Information of Participants

	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Race</b>		
White (Non-Hispanic)	7	26.9%
Black (Non-Hispanic) / African American	14	53.8%
Hispanic	3	11.5%
American Indian / Alaskan Native	2	7.7%
<b>Educational Attainment</b>		
GED or high school diploma	3	11.5%
Trade / technical / vocational training	1	3.8%
Associate degree	4	15.4%
Bachelor's degree	12	46.2%
Master's degree	6	23.1%
<b>Current Marital Status</b>		
Unmarried	6	23.1%
Married	16	61.5%
Separated	1	3.8%
Divorced	2	7.7%
Widowed	1	3.8%

The questionnaire also asked the participants to indicate the number of children they had given birth to and the number of children they placed for adoption.

Table 36. Number of Births and Number of Adoptive Placements Made

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
How many children in total have you given birth to?	1	4	1.9	0.89
How many children in total have you placed for adoption?	1	3	1.4	0.56

The focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed via thematic analysis following steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006),<sup>6</sup> which allow for an iterative process of rigorous and systematic method of inquiry. Two researchers first read transcripts and became familiar with the focus group data. They then generated initial codes independently, and

<sup>6</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

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discussed these codes until they reached a consensus. They developed, refined, and organized themes from these codes. A qualitative data analytic software, NVivo, was utilized to organize and analyze the focus groups' data.

### Findings

Four major themes were identified from the focus groups. Birth mothers expressed that:

1. placing a child for adoption was a **decision they “had to make”**
2. it was important to have **someone they could trust and rely on** during the adoption process
3. they have experienced **bias against birth parents and adoption**
4. their **journey of healing is an ongoing process**

### “Decision I Had to Make”

Birth mothers shared the circumstances in which they had placed a child for adoption, and two closely related sub-themes emerged. They were: 1) I placed a child for adoption **out of love for the child**, and 2) **given my circumstances**, I had to place a child for adoption.

Birth mothers from the focus groups emphasized that they made a decision to place a child for adoption out of their love for the child, which was illustrated in this statement: “I do feel confident in saying 99 percent of the time, (birth mothers) make the decision out of love.” They believed it was in the best interest of the child as an adoptive family would be able to provide a better environment and care for their child.

*I would say the thing that had an influence [on my decision to place a child for adoption] was just the desire to care for and love my child in the way I wanted her to be loved and cared for. And like I mentioned, I was young at the time, but I really didn't have a job and I was in college. And I, you know, I feel like when you're that age, you don't think about things like rent and groceries and baby formula and clothes and taking time off if your child is sick. And once I weighed all of those things, I realized that I, I wasn't able to provide what I wanted my child to have, which was a family stability. And um, I just had this life for her in my head pictured, and I wanted her to have that life and I knew*

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*I couldn't give it to her. So, I found a family who could. And I didn't want my circumstances to limit her in any way.*

Birth mothers noted that adoption was the best option given their circumstances as they did not have adequate resources and capacities to raise a child at the time of the adoption.

*I lost my husband during the pandemic through COVID. I also lost my job and things were very hard for me. And when I lost him, I was only two months pregnant, so it was very hard for me. Again... I have no job and am still mourning my husband. And yes, my family is there for me, but I was not in a position to raise the child alone because as much as you get support from your family, you need to somehow be stable yourself. So that was one of the biggest factors that influenced my position.*

Another mother stated,

*I can't imagine how things would be. [Things were] hard for me, [and I was] struggling emotionally and financially. And now I have the baby, which is another responsibility, and I feel that adoption really saved me.*

The interconnectedness of the two sub-themes is well illustrated in the following statements, from different participants:

*If love were enough, that would be awesome. I think many of us would probably still have our children and be parenting them with love [if love] were enough. But it's not. You need resources.*

*Besides providing love to the kid, we also needed resources which include finances to raise them.*

## “Having Someone I Can Trust and Rely On”

In the focus groups, birth mothers highlighted the important role of significant others in their adoption process. Two sub-themes were based on two distinctive groups of these support systems, including 1) **family and friends**, and 2) **adoption professionals and organizations**. Birth mothers shared that these are the ones they could trust and rely on throughout the adoption process, from their decision-making to post-adoption. However, a third sub-theme emerged where a few birth mothers shared that they had 3) **no one to turn to** for support.

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#### **Family and friends were the most frequently noted individuals who offered support to birth mothers.**

*My family, you know, they were always there, always supportive, right from the very start, [and] throughout the process, with me, you know. They knew it was a difficult decision, [and they were] giving me advice to help me to see this (adoption) is actually a good decision and how it is best for me. So, they actually helped me. If they weren't there, actually, I don't think I was going to give the child up for adoption because of my perception. The way I thought about adoption from when I was younger, I was never going to give up my child for adoption—like never. But they kept telling me that this may actually be a good idea, you know, [and that] you may see the bright side of this. And I was like, OK.*

In some instances, family members had gone through the adoption process themselves, and participants noted that having someone who had had similar experiences was helpful and comforting. One mother stated that a relative “also helped me so much because she had gone through the same process. So, sharing with someone who had been in the same situation was something nice and very, very helpful.”

Family and friends were often the only ones from whom the birth mothers in the focus groups received support, as shown in the statement, “I didn't have any support from the community, except my family and close friends who understood my situation.”

#### **In addition to family and friends, birth mothers acknowledged the support they received from adoption professionals and organizations.**

*... I went [to], I think, the places like pregnancy resources and the lady there, when she told me how far along I was, I was so surprised. And...I felt like she was so supportive and I'd never see her again. She was like, 'These are your options,' 'These are what we can do for you,' 'This is what we'd be willing to help you do.' And I was just so emotional because I was like, 'Oh my God, it's so late. I'm 32 weeks already. That's, that's insane. And I just felt like I was crying so hard and she was just there for me. And I didn't even, I don't even remember her first name, and she probably doesn't even remember mine. And I felt like out of my whole...pregnancy that I was aware of, that was probably my biggest supporter, for sure, I know.*

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Similarly, another birth mother stated:

*When I got to that pregnancy center, I got to talk to this very nice lady. She was just really friendly and welcoming and accepting. I didn't have a lot of people in my life at that time, like for support. So, it was really influential.*

**While most birth mothers shared that they had received support from significant others in their adoption process, a few mentioned that there had been no support for them.**

This sub-theme was noted not only for the time when the adoption was taking place, but also for the post-adoption period. Recalling the time that the adoption was taking place, one birth mother said:

*I think it (having a support system) would have decreased my anxiety a little bit around the situation. When you're only interacting with the people who are wanting to adopt and their attorney, you feel a lot of pressure. You feel, at least I felt very like, I knew I was making a good decision, but there was just kind of that underlying current of nobody's really in my corner in this, it's just me. And so, I think if I had had either my own attorney or some other representatives, I could have more safely communicated my concerns to them without being fearful of disappointing other people or making other people upset with questions.*

This statement from another birth mother illustrates the lack of post-adoption support for birth mothers, as well as her appreciation for the opportunity to share her experience with other birth mothers via focus groups:

*For some reason, at the time when the adoption was placed, I felt like I was the only birth mother in the world and I was so sad. I felt so alone and I would go online [to] look [at] just stuff like about birth mothers. And then when you guys sent the email about the birth mother, you know that you guys are doing all this, this research. I was like, there's other people. I know, I knew there was other birth mothers, but it just felt so unreal because it feels so like I was saying earlier, it feels like it's a taboo. It feels like not everybody does it or it's looked down upon. And it just feels really nice knowing that there's other people who are going through the exact same thing.*



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## Bias Against Birth Parents and Adoption

In the focus groups, birth mothers shared the bias they perceived against birth parents and adoption. Two sub-themes emerged in relation to this theme, which are 1) **stigma and judgment**, and 2) **difficulty in sharing and disclosing the adoption experience**.

### Many birth mothers shared the stigma and judgment they perceived about their decision to place a child for adoption.

They have perceived from others the judgement that their adoption decision was neglectful of their responsibilities as a parent. Stereotypes birth mothers described included “people giving up their children for adoption are unloving and cold,” “[placing a child for adoption is an] act of irresponsibility,” and “[placing a child for adoption is] something she (the birth mother) shouldn’t have been doing.”

In response to this stigma and judgment, birth mothers want society to know that their adoption decision was made “out of love” for their children. One mother shared the perceived stereotypes of birth mothers, and said:

*We did not place our children for any neglectful reason. We're not neglecting duties or our child or our culture. We love our children and we did what we know is best for our child. And it was not done out of neglect. I always fear when I share my story, someone's going to think that I placed my child because I was like using drugs or drinking, and it's like, this was a choice. ... There's a stigma with it (adoption). And I think ultimately, it's always an act of love. Not neglect.*

Many birth mothers spoke of the need for community support toward birth mothers as well as community education. This birth mother emphasized the importance of support not only from a birth mother’s family, but also from the society:

*First of all, I would like to say the families of the birth mother should be really supportive. I think that's the first thing for me. They should try as much as possible to be really supportive because I mean, it's not an easy thing. It's not easy for a mother to let go of a child. And then secondly, the society, they should try as much as possible before you judge a birth mother who's giving up a child for adoption. They should consider what the birth mother is going through, or what [the] birth mother might go through if she keeps the child, [and] stop being judgmental. And that mothers shouldn't be stigmatized. They*

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*should be accepted. They should be welcomed. They should [not] make them feel like [they are] less or different in the society. So, I think if this society shows more love to mothers that are giving their children up for adoption and you help them heal better— yeah, it will help them heal with time.*

Furthermore, one mother made a comment about the terminology we use, and how it might reinforce the stigmatization:

*And if there is one thing that I would love to see change in the adoption space, I really don't like the term 'giving up your child for adoption.' I think it has a lot of negative connotations and I think it's very limiting and it's not quite representative of what happens. ... So what I like to say is that I entrusted my child to her adoptive parents because that's a lot more reflective of really how I feel about the experience. ... I would love that whole term (giving up your child) to just go away and be changed... like 'entrusting your child.' Or maybe somebody will come up with something else that's even better. I would love to see that changed.*

#### **Birth mothers' perception of bias often prevented them from sharing their adoption experience.**

Many believe they “have to keep it held within,” as one put it. In the focus groups, birth mothers noted that they shared their adoption experience with only a small number of individuals. One said, “What I have been feeling for me was that I chose not to tell most of the people, so I got no one to judge me.” Similarly, another mother shared:

*That (receiving support from an adoption agency) was like the first time in my pregnancy that I actually felt like I had support because actually, nobody knew that I was pregnant, except for two people and my family. They still don't know, even though I was like living with my dad at that time.*

This birth mother shared her experience of no longer sharing her adoption experience after she felt her friend's judgmental attitude. She said:

*I still remember one, one of the two people that knew [about my adoption decision]. I think she was kind of judgmental towards my decision. And we're still friends, and we just, we don't talk about it (my adoption experience). She has mentioned [it], I think once or twice, and I can tell, like she's very hesitant*



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*there like that. That was years ago, but she was very hesitant to bring it up and there was definitely judgment present.*

## Journey of Healing

In the focus groups, birth mothers shared that their journey of healing was an ongoing process that would continue throughout their life. Three sub-themes about factors that supported birth mothers' healing process were identified: 1) **connection with their child and adoptive family**, 2) **connection with a community of birth mothers**, and 3) **the wish to be with their child**.

While the first two sub-themes recognized the importance of connections in birth mothers' healing process, the third sub-theme highlights the continuing trauma and difficulties many birth mothers experience, which are illustrated by their comment, "I wish I could be with my child."

**For birth mothers who were able to connect with their child, the relationship with their child and adoptive family significantly promoted their healing process.**

It was comforting for them to be part of their child's life as is shown in the following statement:

*And the fact that I am still part of my child's life is one of the things that has helped me in the healing process. So, from time to time, I am allowed to meet with the baby and all that. And also, I keep in touch with the family that adopted my child. We communicate.*

One birth mother acknowledged that not every birth mother had a connection with the child, and she perceived her relationship with the child as a privilege. She said,

*I'm so happy. You know, seeing my child, getting to see my child, you know, and relate to the family. No, I think every mother would be happy to be in my position right now because I know that not every birth mother gets to have this opportunity. This is actually a good thing for me, though, because I feel I have a higher advantage here, you know. I get to see my child, I get to visit with the family. My child gets to visit me. So, I'm so, so happy about it. I'm so happy about the whole journey, and content.*

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Even when birth mothers were not currently in contact with their child, they had the hope that they would be able to connect with the child one day.

*So, you hold on to that hope and you allow yourself to grow and be the best person that you would want that child to meet one day.*

#### **Connection with other birth mothers also supported birth mothers' healing process.**

Birth mothers noted that it was very helpful to meet and talk with other birth mothers who shared similar experiences. While the support from significant others was important, birth mothers believed that they would not fully understand their experiences and what they had gone through.

*... about nine months after I had placed [my child] for adoption, meeting other birth mothers and parents was really where some genuine deep healing began for me because it was validating. And it was just to have a sense of community was also nice and hopeful because I see these other people who have functional open adoption relationships...even though they're not perfect, you know. Even though things aren't always wonderful and great, they're still there and they're still working on it, and it's a good experience for everyone involved for all three parties. And so that gave me a lot of hope as well. So that was for me, it was a very quintessential part of my healing process.*

Similarly, statements from other birth mothers illustrate this, including, "having such groups (support groups for birth mothers) helps us feel that we ain't alone," and "definitely speaking with other birth mothers was helpful."

However, it was also mentioned that it was not easy to find a community of birth mothers, which made them feel lonely. One mother said, "I don't actually know any other birth mothers except for my mother, and I have a wide circle of family and friends. But so far, I'm kind of alone in that perspective, you know?" Similarly, another mother stated:

*I also felt like nobody in my circle of friends and family has ever gone through this before. And so...I felt like there was only so much they could do to help with what I was going through, you know, after having placed a baby for adoption. And it was just a little surreal to leave a hospital and never hear from any personnel again. I never went in for a six-week appointment because it was just too traumatizing for me, and there was just no follow-up. So, I was*

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*fortunate because I had good friends and family systems to support me, which is significant. But it did feel very lonely at times because it was such a unique experience to go through.*

A few birth mothers even expressed their appreciation of the focus groups for this study because the focus groups provided a platform to share their experiences with other birth mothers. One mother said, “I have learnt so much and I really appreciate being part of the focus group today.” Another mother asked the research team to have more focus groups, saying, “I would encourage you to continue hosting such groups in the future,” illustrating the need for a space where birth mothers can share their experiences and offer support to each other.

#### **They wished that they could be with their child.**

While the connection with their child and other birth mothers helped birth mothers in their healing process, birth mothers, especially those who have no or limited connection with their child, shared that they were living with the consequences of their adoption decision, which was not to be with their child.

*I was always thinking, 'How is my child faring? Is he, is he being treated well? Is he eating well?' Those are just the things that keep coming to my mind. But because I know the family I gave him, so sometimes I'll just take it off my head and then focus on what I'm supposed to be doing. So, I would say...that's the attitude with me that changed. I became a little bit cold because I really wanted my child around.*

Many birth mothers had similar feelings and thoughts as shown in these statements, including:

*I had a lot of anxiety at first. I was not sure how the child would grow up. I'd have wished to be in their life and maybe teach them their first words.*

and

*I would have wished to be in my child's life and would have wanted to change that, just to be involved in their life. In a way, this [open adoption] wasn't available in my case.*

This feeling of grief and loss was painful for birth mothers, especially those who do not have contact with their child, and they found the healing process difficult. This is illustrated in the

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following statement, “Passing by a park and seeing parents with their kids is quite unhelpful.” Another mother shared:

*You know, had there been another option where I wouldn't have had to be so dependent on others for childcare help, which I couldn't afford, I think the thing that makes me the most unhappy is that it (placing a child for adoption) was necessary in the first place.*

## Conclusion of Birth Parent Survey and Birth Mother Focus Groups

“I knew I was making a good decision, but there was just kind of that underlying current of nobody’s really in my corner...it’s just me.” This sentiment was shared directly by one mother and reiterated by others. **Too often, birth parents lack the support from others before, during, and after a placement.** This lack of support makes it difficult for birth parents to share their adoption experiences and perpetuates the cycle of stigma by not allowing the broader community to hear or learn from the breadth of birth parents’ experiences.

At first, it may seem paradoxical that, for birth parents, both adoption satisfaction and stigma associated with adoption have both increased over time. However, when considering the significant changes that have occurred in adoption practices over the past several decades, these changes make sense. In the 1970s and 1980s, many private domestic adoptions were “closed,” meaning the original birth records were not available to adoptees and contact/relationships between birth families and adoptive families were usually non-existent or mediated and anonymized by an agency. Moreover, birth parents’ experiences were not discussed as openly and freely as they are today. It was not uncommon for women to conceal their unplanned pregnancy from their family, friends, and community. With fewer people aware of the pregnancy and adoptive placement, there would naturally be less perceived stigma.

While we can be glad that current practices lead toward higher levels of birth parents’ adoption satisfaction, higher rates of birth parents describing their decision-making as free and non-coerced, and higher rates of birth parents saying they received accurate information about adoption, **we must still recognize and respond to birth parents’ perception of stigma.**

This study highlighted new considerations and reinforced existing beliefs that birth parents, and their experiences, are complex, nuanced, and unique—and, ultimately, birth parents are a population deserving of the most ethical services and compassionate care.

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### Key Takeaways

#### **Expectant parents should be the decision-makers for their placements.<sup>7</sup>**

Expectant parents considering an adoption placement for their children deserve accurate information about adoption and should be in a position to decide whether or not an adoption placement is the right decision. Therefore, the need for ethical adoption practices and access to accurate information continues to be of utmost importance for any pregnancy counselor or adoption professional who is working directly with expectant parents considering adoption.

#### **Stigmas persist.**

Stigmas and biases against adoption persist, with birth parents feeling stigmatized for their adoption decision. This undoubtedly compounds the stress for parents considering an adoption decision and may lead toward inappropriate pressure when negative biases could be clouding their judgement. For counselors and adoption professionals, this underscores the need to equip expectant parents and birth parents with tools and talking points on how to deal with individuals who are unsupportive of their decision to place, especially if they are interfering with the decision-making process. For the wider community, it should lead toward reflection on our views and biases toward parents who make the decision to place a child for adoption.

#### **More support is needed.**

Birth parents, especially birth mothers, often have concerns during their decision-making process and do not always have support from others. Additionally, many report not receiving services for post-adoption needs they had. Birth parents are too often overlooked by policymakers, advocates, and professionals in post-adoption supports. Along with other members of the adoption community, we ought to include birth parents as a standard part of post-adoption service provision.

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<sup>7</sup> Birth parents who first choose to parent and then choose to place for adoption should likewise be well-informed during the decision-making process regarding whether adoption is right for them and their children.

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### **Space is needed for birth parents' experiences to be shared.**

We were overwhelmed by birth mothers' and birth fathers' response to and involvement in this research project. Initially we recruited birth mothers for two focus groups and then added a third group. Within a matter of days, the researchers recruiting birth mothers for participation received over 200 inquiries showing interest. Similarly, the quantitative survey, open to both birth mothers and birth fathers, resulted in a large sample size from individuals who were generous enough to share their personal experiences.

Prior to our analysis, it was evident that birth parents appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences, express their concerns, and even connect with other birth mothers (within the focus groups). We urge more adoption service providers to create meaningful spaces and opportunities for birth parents to share their experiences with one another, the larger adoption community, and beyond. Not everyone will fill out a survey, share their story on social media, or speak in public. But there's room to create a variety of simple ways to include, acknowledge, and give space to share, including public speaking at events, surveys, focus groups, one-on-one meetings, writing (blogs, social media, books), podcasting, mentoring, support groups, and retreats.

### **Birth fathers have an important role.**

If birth parents are the most overlooked amongst the adoption triad, that experience is even more pronounced for birth fathers. Our findings show that birth fathers have concerns, perceive stigma, participate in open adoption relationships, and often seek to have an active role in the placement decision. Our ability to increase inclusion for birth fathers can help normalize their role in the adoption community and in the broader public perception of birth parents' roles and experiences.

### **Birth parents benefit from connection with each other.**

As was noted in the focus groups, it is meaningful for birth mothers to be able to connect with other birth mothers at some point in their journey because it helps them to connect over shared experiences and validate specific feelings — and ultimately, to know they are not alone. Birth mothers noted that it was very helpful to meet and talk with other birth mothers who shared similar experiences. While the support from others who are not birth mothers is also important, birth mothers indicated other birth mothers were the ones who could best identify with and understand their experiences. Examples of ways that adoption services providers can facilitate post-placement connection points include support groups, retreats, meet-ups, dinners, virtual events, and online forums.



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### **We all benefit from hearing birth parents' stories.**

The birth parent population is diverse. Our understanding will increase as we share stories that reflect the diversity of birth parents' adoption experiences. Sharing stories can help in the following ways:

- Empower expectant parents with greater understanding of their options and enable them to imagine what adoption can look like.
- Help other birth parents find connection, healing, and validation through shared experiences.
- Educate prospective and current adoptive parents on how to honor and respect birth parents and promote better ongoing connection with them.
- Provide adoptees with information about the role of birth parents and the breadth of their experiences.
- Teach adoption professionals about how their practices impact birth parents.
- Normalize the role and place of birth parents in our larger society. (To normalize does *not* mean to oversimplify or downplay the complexities involved, but rather to recognize and de-stigmatize these individuals' roles, decisions, and views.)



## Future Research

With relatively scarce research about birth parents, future research on birth parent experiences is needed. Research about birth fathers is especially needed because they have often been left out of the picture by adoption researchers.

Although the majority of birth parents reported satisfaction with their adoption decision, especially those who placed for adoption more recently, approximately 22% of birth mothers and nearly 8.6% of birth fathers expressed dissatisfaction with the adoption decision; this is not an inconsequential number of people with a negative experience. Future focus group research on this sub-population may expand our understanding of the reasons for dissatisfaction and ways to improve practices or provide additional supports. It would also be beneficial to gain a better understanding of those individuals who indicate neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction with their adoption decision; more in-depth analysis of this population's experiences and perspectives could prove insightful.

The findings on the increasing percentage of birth parents who experience stigma point toward the need for additional research into birth parents' experiences. *How* is this stigma communicated to and perceived by birth parents? How acutely is it felt? In what ways are birth parents impacted? Why are there differences in stigma experiences based on race/ethnicity? What can be done to redress or mitigate the impact of stigma?

This report only examined the experiences of those who participated in a private domestic adoption. Future research on birth parent experiences is needed around intercountry adoption and adoption from foster care.

## **Limitations**

Our survey questions presumed respondents had an ability to accurately recall past experiences. Such recall has obvious limits, and that is especially true for responses that are further in the past.

Another limitation is that our survey was only available in English; if a birth parent was not fluent in reading English, participation was not possible or was constrained as their understanding of the survey questions would have been limited.

Although the report includes data from 1,399 respondents, this represents a small fraction of the actual population of birth parents in the United States. Only 17.1% of respondents were birth fathers, and so they constitute a much smaller sample than birth mothers. It is also possible that those with specific or strongly held views are disproportionately included given the means by which respondents were sought.

The focus groups were designed to elicit qualitative information and not intended to generalize the findings to a broader population. Although randomly selected among those who indicated interest, the participants are not necessarily representative of the larger birth mother population.

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

The focus group research and birth parent survey were conducted following Institutional Review Board review and approval from The Catholic University of America.

## **Acknowledgements**

### **Content Reviewers**

Prior to launching the survey, National Council For Adoption piloted the survey with birth parents asking them to provide feedback about the clarity of the questions and their experience completing the survey. In addition, we engaged subject matter experts in survey building and adoption research as well as professionals involved with birth parent support and services to help us build a meaningful, robust, and accurate survey. Our survey was improved due to the helpful feedback we received from these birth parents and professionals.

Thank you!

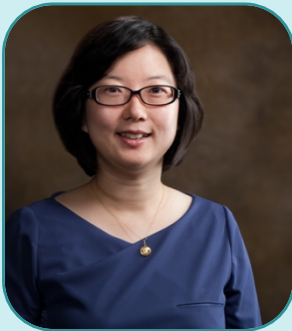
### **Survey Respondents and Focus Group Participants**

Finally, a survey of this breadth and depth would not be possible without the willingness of participants to tell us about their experiences. We believe each of these individuals completed the survey and/or participated in the focus groups out of a desire to improve the general knowledge about birth parents and strengthen professional practice.

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*The authors declare no conflict of interest.*

## About the Organizations



BraveLove is a non-profit, public charity organization headquartered in Dallas, Texas, that exists to change the perception of adoption through honest, informative, and hopeful communication that conveys the bravery of mothers. BraveLove is focused on de-stigmatizing adoption with a vision that adoption becomes a more supported option for women in unplanned pregnancies.

Through the creation and distribution of compelling media and messaging, BraveLove aims to erase any shame surrounding adoption and instead show how adoption can be an amazing act of love and bravery. For more information, please visit [www.bravelove.org](http://www.bravelove.org)



Founded in 1980, National Council For Adoption (NCFA) is a leading authoritative voice for adoption and is passionately committed to the belief that every child deserves to thrive in a nurturing permanent family. NCFA's nonprofit work promotes a culture of adoption

through education, research, advocacy, and collaboration that aims to serve children, expectant parents, birth parents, adopted individuals, adoptive families, and adoption professionals. For more information, please visit [www.adoptioncouncil.org](http://www.adoptioncouncil.org)



The Opt Institute provided a grant to fund this research. The Opt Institute is a national research foundation and think tank dedicated to improving access to and support for private adoption. For more information, please visit [www.optinstitute.org](http://www.optinstitute.org).





