

# “There's Always Adoption”

How Americans Perceive Adoption in the U.S. Today

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# Introduction

# Introduction

How do ordinary Americans think and feel about adoption? And, in particular, how do U.S. women who have faced an unplanned pregnancy decision think and feel about adoption?

This report draws insights from hundreds of in-depth interviews with a random and closely representative sample of Americans to ascertain perceptions connected to the idea, realities, and lived experiences of adoption.

Its focus is not on perceived differences between families formed through adoption and families formed through biological kinship. Rather, it centers on Americans' general attitudes toward the institution of adoption, its social functions, its perceived value and failings, and its place in the landscape of discussions and decisions surrounding pregnancy, parenting, and abortion. The report's grounding and purpose is sociological, intending to increase understanding through data apart from particular positions or agendas.

Findings come from an exhaustive secondary analyses of in-depth interview data collected for the *National Abortion Attitudes Study*, a large qualitative study of Americans' thoughts regarding myriad dimensions of abortion. The report's Appendix includes more detail regarding the study's methodology.

Part One ("Conflicting Perceptions") focuses on adoption perceptions across the full interview sample (n=217). It names and illustrates seven themes (previewed on Page 5) that surface commonly within Americans' adoption talk.

Part Two ("Unplanned Pregnancy Decision Narratives") narrows attention to a subset of female interviewees who have personally made decisions regarding unplanned or unintended pregnancies. This section of the report identifies and illustrates seven key findings (previewed on Page 6) observed within the ways that women talk through their own experiences and decision making processes vis-à-vis unplanned pregnancy and adoption pathways.

The Conclusion reviews potential implications that this report's findings carry for understanding adoption and pregnancy decision making in the contemporary United States, posing avenues for further research and better informed, more productive public conversations.

# Common Adoption Perceptions Among Americans Overall

- Overall, Americans cast the *idea* and *ideal* of adoption in a positive light: as a social good promising mutual benefit for pregnant women, adopted children, and adoptive families.
- Americans depict adoption as readily available to women who cannot or do not wish to parent, sustained by a surplus of families ready and willing to adopt.
- High abortion rates lead some Americans to question whether women making pregnancy decisions have access to the information, resources, and social support needed to choose adoption.
- Americans level heavy criticism at the expense, challenge, and perceived inaccessibility of adoption for those who wish to adopt.
- Despite vast support for the ideals of adoption, Americans speak far more critically of foster care and its potential for negative impacts on children.
- Perceived flaws in the adoption system - combined with social and health risks associated with continuing a pregnancy - lead some Americans to evaluate abortion as more virtuous than adoption.
- Americans connect the successes and failures of adoption (and foster care) to the long-term successes, failures, and well-being of children impacted by it.



# Common Adoption Narratives Among Women Who Have Experienced Unplanned Pregnancies

- Women often keep unplanned pregnancies a secret, carefully navigating stigma and (non)support.
- Many women facing an unplanned pregnancy wish to parent, striving for resources and support to make that possible.
- Comparatively few women actively take steps (or ultimately choose) to place a child for adoption.
- Many women predict a high(er) level of attachment to a baby they've birthed, making adoption seem like an impossible pathway to pursue.
- Women fear unknown outcomes for children they might place for adoption, burdened with guilt if they were to encounter harm.
- Retrospectively, some women wish that they'd had additional information, resources, and social support to fully (or differently) evaluate pregnancy pathways.
- Women who have experienced an unintended pregnancy frequently uphold the value of leaving the final decision to the pregnant woman herself, minimizing undue legal or social pressures to choose one pathway over another.

# Part 1

# Conflicting Perceptions

An abstract graphic consisting of numerous thin, white, curved lines that originate from a central point on the right side of the image and fan out towards the left, creating a sense of motion and depth. The lines are set against a dark blue background.

# 1. “Adoption is wonderful”

Overall, Americans cast the *idea* and *ideal* of adoption in a positive light: as a social good promising mutual benefit for pregnant women, adopted children, and adoptive families.

Americans generally characterize the idea and ideal of adoption quite favorably. Across the political spectrum, Americans conjure largely positive descriptions of decisions to place children for adoption, children raised by adoptive parents, and parents who elect to adopt children.

Unlike other pregnancy-related events narrated without “happy” endings, Americans tend to celebrate the idea of adoption as needed, desirable, and (when successful) bringing positive outcomes for all involved. Widely shared approval for the idea of adoption makes the discourse surrounding it sound notably different from that surrounding abortion, which tends not to be celebrated even when it is fully supported. Virtually all Americans “want” adoption as a legal, well-facilitated, affordable, socially accepted, destigmatized, and accessible option for pregnant women, adoptive parents, and children for whom it makes sense.

*It's a win-win, for me.*

*I know so many adoptive parents. What a gift.*

*Yes, yes. I love adoption.*

*I met some people that were pregnant and didn't want to get an abortion because of their religious views or they felt a certain type of way, like that it would be murder, and they put the baby up for adoption, which is great. Give the baby a loving family. Maybe some couple that couldn't have kids could adopt a baby. I am great with that. Adoption's a great thing to me.*

*Adoption is wonderful. I think it's great.*

*Adoption is lovely.*

*I think adoption is really good...you're able to give your child off to someone that that can't have kids or is having some issues.*

*Adoption is great. I have a cousin who adopted a couple boys and it's great if you can't have kids or if you just want to adopt. I think it's great.*



Americans' adoption talk tends to showcase a *collective* orientation toward society-at-large rather than only to individual women making personal pregnancy decisions. The ideal of adoption in this light is viewed as not merely a *personal* good but a *social* good: uniting imagined children who need loving families with imagined loving families; providing imagined women who cannot or wish not to parent with an alternative. Unlike the more individualized frames dominant in abortion talk, Americans often frame adoption collectively: discussing not only pregnant women but society and children overall, families that "want babies," as well as the social toll of individuals evaluated as unprepared, disinterested, or unable to parent.

***To me, adoption is a great alternative for anybody. I think every kid has a right to be raised in a family environment...If we can make adoption more readily available, [...] society would be better for it. ...I think adoption is really, in my opinion, one of the biggest things you can do in your life, a human being can do, in order to pay back humanity. Because you're bringing up another person that would otherwise not have as much chance of a successful or a loving, nurturing of a family. If you bring that and give that to society, I think we are that much better off for it.***

***Adoption - I think it's the best thing out there. ...Possibly they are pro-life and they, once I got pregnant, 'I want to go through it, but I know that having this child would not be good for the child and for me. So, let's go the adoption route.' I've got a number of friends that have adopted and it's worked out really, really well. Some of them are a little more challenging than others, depending upon when you get them and what they've gone through...But oh, no, it's better than sliced bread.***

***Adoption, I think it's a wonderful thing. ... There are situations where children are born to be abandoned, are born to be unwanted, or any number of other things. ... We just need to be able to take them and raise them, give them the love that they need. I think it's an awesome thing.***

Americans often perceive children who are placed for adoption as at risk and adoption as a "rescue" of sorts, particularly for children predicted to face hardships such as physical ailments, poverty, inattention, abuse, or the lack of a "loving" family environment. Americans speak of adoption as a form of benevolence and social intervention. Adoption affirms that "unwanted" children are "wanted" and "loved," a value that some Americans ground in their religious beliefs.

***I think adoption is great — to give those kids who may not otherwise have a chance of being the ability to come to a family that wants them. ... To give those kids a chance is what they need. To try to just give them a place where they can call home and be loved and feel loved. I'm in favor of adoption...to give the kids any full chance that they have to be able to have an impact on society and live the life of what every child should do - to be loved and have the ability to be a kid.***

***I think adoption is important for our kids out there that do need a family and do need somebody to take care of them and love them. So yes, I believe in adoption wholeheartedly.***

*If [a woman] choose[s] to have that baby but it still is not something that works well within their life because of career, age, or whatever, I feel like being able to have adoption is great. I'm a huge supporter of adoption...A lot of kids they adopt overseas are disabled. Or they were abused with their birth parents... The parents couldn't do it.*

*In a perfect world - I would love it if every unwanted baby could be born and then adopted... because that's a picture of God, too. He adopted me as his child, it's like, "I'm in this family where I'm deeply loved." Of course I want these children that are unwanted somewhere else to be able to be adopted.*

*The adoption process I think is needed because there are so many unwanted kids that are out there that need to be in loving homes. ...It's heartbreaking... To know that a child can go to bed without being in a loving home is just awful.*

*There's just a lot of kids out there. I hear personal stories from the kids on what they're going through house-to-house and in the foster care system, kids come and go...I would love to just take one in and just give 'em a home. A home where you can guarantee them - like, promise them they're not going to hop around.*

Under the banner of “need” and “rescue,” Americans frequently position adoption as not only good but *better* when evaluated alongside the choice of abortion or (what is predicted as) poor parenting. Descriptions evoke subtle moral assessments and ranking of pregnancy pathways, positioning “good” and “ready” parenting before the “gift” of adoption by a “loving” family in its absence, followed by the potential necessity of abortion. Adoption emerges as a “preferred” pathway to abortion by many Americans – especially (but not only) those who feel morally (and perhaps also legally) opposed to abortion.

*I would like to see babies born and put into the adoption system. I would like to see that a life is not ended, but I would allow again for the choice. So I guess that I would hope they would choose life. But I'm not going to feel strongly and adamant and critical about that. It's still a choice.*

*If somebody came to me and they sat down and talked to me about it, I would empathize with them and that's really all I can do, other than give them, like I said, other people to talk to - resources, options, and offer to adopt the baby if they decide to carry it. And I would help them through it. Because that's the other thing that I've come through in my mind: I will adopt all these babies just because I want to have them do this - not have an abortion. But it all depends, again, on what's the health risk to the mom and what's gonna happen with the baby. Yeah, I think that we should make it more available to people to be able to adopt and make it easier for adoption.*



***I wouldn't want to judge people, but I would say if you're healthy and you're able to give this baby, and you don't want it, to someone that can't have babies, that would be better. I mean, what she has is human. Is it a bummer for her? Maybe. Is it inconvenient? Sure. That doesn't mean you kill a child. Maybe she could put it up for adoption or whatever. That seems like a much better option than just killing it.***

***If you don't want a child, I'd say first, don't conceive it. But obviously that's not a government solution. It's not something you can- it's not a standard you can impose on them. So I'd say I would- out of protection for the baby, I would say put it up for adoption. There are statistics that for every baby born that isn't - that doesn't have a family - there are 32 parents willing to adopt. So, why not give them a shot?***

Glowing reviews of adoption as “wonderful” are often couched in the language of “ideals,” or the caveat that it doesn’t always work out according to the ideal. Americans differ in the extent to which (or whether) they allude to this “darker” side of adoption (covered in a subsequent section); but regardless, the idea and ideal of adoption are revered by most everyday Americans as positive social goods.

## 2. “There's always adoption.”

Americans depict adoption as readily accessible to women who cannot or do not wish to parent, sustained by a surplus of families ready and willing to adopt.

Americans commonly depict adoption as a known, obvious, and accessible option available to any woman who is pregnant and does not wish to parent the child. They frequently use phrases like “there’s always adoption” and refer to “lots” of people who “long” to have a child. This paints a picture of adoption in the US as a high demand arena, with far more willing adoptive parents than children available to adopt. Most Americans talk about “babies,” inferring infant adoption as opposed to adoptions that occur later in a child’s life. Few allude to differences corresponding to socioeconomic or health factors among children that may impact likelihood of adoption.

*There’s always adoption. There’s a lot of people who would love to adopt.*

*There’s always an option for adoption.*

*Well, there's always adoption. I think that [pregnancy from rape] would be a terrible predicament to be in, but I still can't say you can kill the baby.*

*There’s sometimes people who have an actual hardship, and they know they can't [parent], but then there's always adoption. They could put the baby up for adoption.*

*There’s a lot of people out there that would love children and can’t have ‘em. And then there’s a lot of people that have ‘em and have ‘em and have ‘em and don’t want them.*

*You could put [a child born with a ‘severe defect’] up for adoption. Maybe someone with a kind heart who’s not cold wouldn’t [terminate the pregnancy] - I wouldn’t want to have to do that to a baby. I guess that’s just a little inhumane, you know? So, yeah, there’s always adoption.*

*I think there’s always adoption. If you just don’t want any more kids, and you had too many, then you should be taking precautions to make sure you don’t have any more babies. And if you do, then you might as well give somebody else the chance of a family than just get rid of a healthy baby.*

*The state don't wanna get stuck supporting a baby, another baby that someone had, [but] there’s always adoption. And they can always make it work. And there are assistance programs out there that they can seek.*



Americans envision a steady pool of suitable families willing and ready to adopt children. A “there’s always adoption” line of thinking hinges upon this ready demand and the presumption that any child placed for adoption will be adopted.

***Lots of families would kill to have the babies, you know? They’re waiting years trying to get those babies. It’s like, okay, you’re just - you’re killing a life that someone wants.***

This paves three potential pathways (parenthood, adoption, or abortion) early in a pregnancy, whereas later in a pregnancy, most Americans narrow perceived options to two, exempting dire health situations: parenting or adoption. Adoption is “always” an option; abortion, only “sometimes.”

***I don't like the late term [abortion]. If that baby is a healthy baby, help the baby. And adoption is always an option.***

***If that child’s viable, there should never be an abortion. It should be induced. And give it to somebody that wants it.***

***If you waited that long, I feel like you should lean towards the, like, giving him to somebody else who maybe couldn't have a child or wants a child, or an adoption. As much as I see kids struggle in the foster care system, it's still better at that point then - in my personal opinion - if you waited that long to do it.***

With adoption “always” an option, many Americans see it as the only alternative to parenting once the fetus reaches a certain point in development.

The argument that “there’s always adoption,” moreover, pairs with rationales many Americans offer for disapproving of or regulating abortion (whether partially or fully). For this subset of Americans, adoption functions as a rationale to dissuade, disagree with, or disallow a women’s choice to terminate a pregnancy.

### 3. “Realize that there are options.”

High abortion rates lead some Americans to question whether women making pregnancy decisions have access to the information, resources, and social support needed to choose adoption.

The relative “obviousness” of adoption as a ready alternative leads some Americans to question why women do *not* choose it – or, more specifically, why so many women choose to have an abortion rather than place a child for adoption when the perceived demand is so high and adoption is “always” an option. High rates of abortion lead some Americans to presume that women don’t “realize” that adoption is an option or that adoption does not seem viable or realistic to them.

*There’s always adoption. But that’s why education is hugely important, too. That’s part of the puzzle piece. You need to have education.*

*I don’t know why a baby like that couldn’t have been given up for adoption if they really didn’t want the baby.*

*You can always give it up for adoption...I run into people who are like, ‘No, I don’t wanna give my baby up for adoption because nobody else is gonna raise my kid.’ And I’m like, ‘But you’re, like, four months pregnant, and I would rather have somebody else raise my kid if I don’t want to than to not.’*

*I’m not sure we put enough emphasis on adoption as an option in this country... ‘I don’t want to have a kid. I’m not doing that to my body.’ Awesome, but you know, you’d be an awesome mom. Adoption’s an option. They don’t even have a clue about – no one thinks of that, and I wish we – yeah.*

*In an ideal world, unwanted pregnancies wouldn’t be an issue. But I’d say the ideal policy would be that women – there would be more public access to crisis pregnancy centers and adoption centers to help them realize there are more options other than like, killing the baby.*

*There are options. You can have the baby. If you don’t want the baby, there are adoption agencies. I mean, there are ways to have that baby.*

Some Americans translate their moral ordering of pregnancy pathways into an ethical imperative for pregnant women: if she cannot parent “well,” she “should” choose adoption. This names adoption as a superior option to both abortion and “bad” parenting – even when the legal choice remains “hers” to make. Adoption is construed as the moral obligation or “responsibility” of a pregnant woman who does not wish to (or cannot) parent effectively.



*I mean, there's just so many different situations, but just because you went out and you banged - you know, the daddy ran off, whatever, I don't feel like that's really fair - I think you need to be responsible even if your responsibility is to go ahead and have the kid and put it up for adoption.*

*Even in the worst case where if you are raped and you are there and you don't want it and it's a big inconvenience, sorry. You know, sue the guy that did it for everything he's worth. You want to talk about a death penalty for the guy, I'm willing to listen. ...But that doesn't give you the right to kill somebody else. You know, you have to provide that care. Now, when the baby is born, you want to give him to somebody else? You can go to - there are drop off places. Anybody will take them.*

*If they're going to have [the baby], and they decide that they don't want to have it, the least that they could do would be at least put it up for adoption.*

*I do have sympathy for that child. I would like to push adoption. If you're unable to take care of the child yourself...if they're not able to do so, I'd push adoption. I would say, I'd tell them, probably, to push more personal responsibility - like, once you have the child in your life, try to ensure as good a quality of life, as best as you can make it....I don't want to force a woman to be a single mother...as I said, keep looking at adoption. But if the woman doesn't feel she's able to, ready to take care of a child, then she shouldn't be forced to.*

Americans who do not support legal access to abortion in some or all cases are especially likely to raise adoption as the solution when a woman does not wish to parent, commonly characterizing a decision to terminate as inscrutable, irresponsible, or immoral.

## 4. “It's a broken system”

Americans level heavy criticism at the expense, challenge, and perceived inaccessibility of adoption for those who wish to adopt.

Alongside (and sometimes in place of) Americans' glowing reviews of adoption as “wonderful” comes a strong counter message regarding adoption in the United States today: that it's expensive, rife with problems, hard on pregnant women, discouraging to potential adoptive parents, and disruptive to the vision of a happy childhood promised by the ideal of adoption.

Several Americans mention the high expense of adoption for families interested, noting this as a barrier to their and others' willingness or ability to do so. Americans describe adoption as inaccessible even for those ready to love and care for a child in need.

*It's very expensive. It's upwards of \$30,000 to adopt a child...[My friend] ended up going out of country and adopting his daughter from China. And it was significantly cheaper.*

*We have a broken system. I want to adopt, but adoption is extremely expensive. And it's going to settle that family with debt for years and years to come, and so it's hard...We probably need more families to step up and be willing.*

*There's so many kids in the system now, as it is. I know that they've been talking about lowering the cost of adoption just to get more fosters to volunteer into the system so that we can get more kids homed versus keeping them...so, if they can do that, then adoption would be more reasonable. It would be a much bigger option, so the only cause for abortion should just be for medical reasons.*

*The cost is astronomical.*

*I think the adoption process is way too long, and it's uncertain who you're gonna get.*

*It's so expensive to adopt! It's just crazy to me, it boggles my mind. Granted, it is a child, and you make sure they're going to the right home, but if a family is desperately looking for a child, I know that they will take good care of that child, they shouldn't have to pay an arm and a leg to bring a child home! So, it's just something I feel like conservatives don't necessarily talk about - is all these kids that in our foster care system and are up for adoption, just in this country alone. It's just incredible to me.*

*There's a lot of people out there that I personally know...I personally would adopt if we could just say 'hey, it's only \$10,000.' We could do that. I'm not gonna fork out \$30,000 for a kid.*



***I definitely think adoption should not be as extremely inaccessible as it is today. Prices should definitely - I understand how expensive it is, especially if you're using a surrogate, you're paying for her medical bills, the child's medical bills, any treatments they need, care. I also think, though, that the system should not be that inaccessible.***

***I actually don't want biological children, so I have a very big heart for adoption. I really wish that they would make adoption more affordable and less paperwork.***

Americans also point to other, non-financial barriers to adoption, describing excessive red tape, general difficulty, or highly restrictive criteria that make it nearly impossible to qualify. Some mention specific frustration with not being able to adopt a child as a single parent or member of the LGBTQ community. Others point to the heartbreak of an adoption that almost - then doesn't - happen.

***The laws that exist are so arcane that you can't, like, no one's a viable adoptive family. You have to meet a certain set of criteria.***

***I've heard that it's difficult to adopt in the United States. I have a friend who's adopted two from China and from Kyrgyzstan because it was easier that way. So, yeah, I mean maybe that's something that needs, you know, it needs to be easier to adopt children in our country.***

***I feel like for a lot of families, like my friends that are fostering - didn't qualify. Weren't able to adopt in some way, shape or form, and didn't have enough money to adopt. Not letting gays necessarily adopt, when they could totally take on that responsibility...? It angers me a little bit.***

***Personally, I want to end up having between four to five kids, mostly through adoption....LGBTQ couples are more likely to foster then adopt - at three times the rate of heterosexual couples. And by establishing that barrier, you're putting more children in danger by keeping them in a system that's broken. They shouldn't be in a system that's not servicing them. And then you're preventing them from actually getting the care that they want and need to develop healthily and happily.***

***I had looked into [adoption]. I got as far as an informational meeting and was quickly told - there were a lot of different couples there - I was the only single person there. And they basically said it would be harder for me to adopt as a single person than as a two person relationship or couple. There are a lot of variables in the U.S. It's harder for a single person to adopt. Overseas it is a lot easier.***

***It took them three years to adopt these two boys when it shouldn't have taken that long.***

***My friend and her husband had helped this girl. This girl was going to let this couple adopt. And so, they were so excited. And they worked with the girl and helped her all through the pregnancy. Sent out Christmas cards with their picture and the girl's picture. And the idea was that once the baby was born, that the birth mother would still have a relationship. Well, what happened to them was, once the girl actually had the baby in the hospital, she changed her mind. And of course, my friend said 'I can't blame her,' but she— it was such a heartbreak. I mean, she had a room ready. Can you imagine?***

The perception of high expense, restrictive criteria, and lack of a guaranteed outcome underlie part of why Americans perceive a ready supply of families willing... but unable...to adopt.



## 5. “Look at these poor children that are in foster care”

**Despite vast support for the ideals of adoption, Americans speak more critically of foster care and its potential for negative impacts on children.**

Compared to the generally positive descriptions Americans offer for the idea and ideal of adoption, descriptions of foster care tend to be far more critical. Foster care is perceived as a distant second to long-term adoption, evaluated as an experience that puts children at higher risk for unhealthy environments and unhappy outcomes. The realities of foster care – with which many Americans have personal or associational experience – paint a portrait of adoption that is far from the “wonderful” panacea envisioned in its ideal form. Foster care talk instead depicts a pathway for adoptive children that is not guaranteed to succeed and that compounds the hardship perceived to come with not having loving, biological parents starting from birth.

*Foster care and all that stuff is really, really, really difficult for kids and really sets them back in life.*

*The foster system in the city – and I’m sure in the whole United States – is really screwed up.*

*I think that adoption is great, but I think it’s difficult...to give up a child would be difficult. But you see so many kids in the system that are not wanted and so difficult to get them adopted. Then again, there’s so many people that want kids that it’s like I think that’s really – I mean, I have a cousin that’s adopted and so I think well, if [the biological mother] wouldn’t have had her, then we wouldn’t have her in our family, so that’s such a great blessing. There are so many people that want children, but then it seems like there are so many just sitting in the system that aren’t being taken care of. So, I don’t know, that’s a hard one to connect to.*

Americans draw attention to children in the system who are not adopted quickly or at all, leaving them to move around and linger in the system. Some reference chances of adoption declining substantially after infancy. Myriad problems that fostered and adopted children might bring with them, perhaps the result of hardship experienced before and after birth, compound the issue of an unlikely adoption.

*People are like, 'Well, what about adoption?' Well, so many kids aren't being adopted. So many kids are in foster homes. It's so sad, just what they have to go through.*

*There's a lot of kids that aren't adoptable out there. I mean, there's a lot of kids that are healthy and normal that aren't adopted.*

*Babies are more likely to get adopted quicker than older kids.*

*It's unfortunate, but a lot of parents won't take in a child that's severely damaged with mental issues and things like that.*

*A lot of these kids - they got to feel grass, and they go to feel the warm sun on their face, but not in a positive way. I mean, most of their experiences were negative, traumatic. Of course they got a hot, warm meal at school because of the program - where they didn't go hungry here, be cold, but being stuffed in a house with eight different kids 'cause no one wants to adopt them out? That's no way to live.*

*My aunt, she was in the system, but she didn't go into the system until she was like nine or 10. And that's not an adoptable age usually. You know, people usually want babies.*

*I think [adoption's] a viable option... But in reality, you realize that most of the children that are born and sent to adoption are actually going to orphanages. Or might go to orphanages or foster homes and everything. So they still don't get a good family setting, or it's not a given that they would have a better life.*

*My brother-in-law and his wife, they spent a tremendous amount of time at the doctor's office trying to figure out how they can help these boys overcome their addictions to the drugs that were in their system when they were babies. So, it's super hard... They had set it up so this little boy would have to see his mom. And then the day that he was supposed to see her, she had OD'd. And how do you tell this little boy, "Okay, I'm gonna take you to see your mom, but now you're not gonna see her because she's dead?"*

Contrasting the ideal of adoption - which affirms that a child is "wanted" - Americans talk about hardships in foster care that leave children feeling the opposite. This perception applies especially to those who enter foster care as older children, seen as less likely to be adopted then - or perhaps ever.



Some Americans raise further critiques of foster parents who are abusive, inattentive, or doing it for “the check” and taking advantage of the “system.”

***Does adopting a kid guarantee that kid's safety? Well, you hope that people are screened, but it doesn't. Any more than it does when people have their kid naturally. Do you really know how that kid's going to turn out? No.***

***[My state] is one of the worst places to put a child up for adoption. I did the research. It is absolutely heinous what they do to the children. Usually they age out or they get kicked out of the foster system because there's too many kids. They can't take care of them all. And most of the people who are in the foster system, like foster parents, are in for the money. They don't care about the kids. But there are couples, good people out there that do care about the kids, but the bad outweigh the good in this state. It's really bad.***

***The foster system sucks right now. There's foster parents who sexually abuse the kids, or just physically abuse them as well, and they just mainly get it for the money. ...Adoption is good, too, but I think someone like social services people should get involved for at least six months to a year and see home life - how it is, and home life for the kid. Sometimes they just put them in the wrong places. ...If [a child] lands in foster care, then they're pretty much screwed.***

Unlike the perceived ideals of adoption, the perceived realities – and, in particular, perceived realities of foster care – carry far less promise in the minds of everyday Americans.

## 6. “If they get pregnant, they would end up choosing abortion”

Perceived flaws in the adoption system – combined with social and health risks associated with continuing a pregnancy – lead some Americans to evaluate abortion as more virtuous than adoption.

Negative potential outcomes of adoption make room for some Americans to suggest that abortion is in fact a “better” route than assuming the risks of giving birth and placing a child for adoption. Americans point to reasons why pregnancy termination might benefit (a) the would-be-child placed in the system as well as (b) the woman making a decision to terminate or continue a pregnancy through a full nine months.

For children, some deliberate whether abortion is a more ethical choice than adoption:

*Most people that I know...if they get pregnant, [they] would end up choosing abortion. One of the reasons is because they know that bringing the child just to put them in the adoption system is not going to do any good. Because we already have so many children in it that have been in it for years or they're going to end up aging out of the system and have nowhere to go, no resources. So, a lot of them would rather have that be fixed before – nobody should talk about ‘We should just put them in adoption,’ because that system is just not working.*

*I've heard that argument of, ‘Is it better to abort the child, or to put them into the foster program or the orphanage program?’ Yeah, I don't know. Being alive – it's funny, me being alive, I'm trying to decide this, and I tell you I like being alive. So from that perspective, I would absolutely rather if someone put me in an orphanage then to have aborted me, but I also know there's horror stories of, you know, overcrowded, underfunded orphanages out there.*

*I've had friends in the system...I've heard stories of the system and it's like, why would you even want to – yes, you can have the child and give it up for adoption, but there's no guarantee that that child is gonna go to a loving family, you know what I mean? There are so many things that are just broken. Being like ‘Well, just have the child and put it into the system’ – But why? You know, that just doesn't sound right. I've had a couple best friends that were in the system and it's like – they're not the most striving, thriving people, you know what I mean?*



*Nobody's going to adopt a baby, basically, if there's something wrong with the baby. There's a slim chance in hell. That baby stays in foster care the rest of his life. Who knows what foster people do to kids. ... They just want the money from the kids, but I feel sorry for the child. So it's probably better off that they aborted then let it sit in somewhere until it's 50, 60 years old, because he can't go out on his own, or put him in a mental institution where they treat 'em like trash.*

*It's totally a woman's choice. And if a woman is pregnant and it's not what she's ready to do, I think it's morally wrong to bring a child into this world that you don't want. I mean look at, oh my god, look at these poor children that are in foster care. There's so many that need a mommy and daddy and even up into like the homes that keep teenagers, none of those kids are in there because they had a mommy or daddy that loved them. They're kids that have just been pushed to the side. And that's morally wrong to me.*

*If you have very low income and you cannot afford another kid, I don't think it's right to bring another kid into the world when you know starting off that you aren't gonna be able to provide for that kid. That money that you have, you should save for your current kids, the ones that are actually existing right now. Knowing that this kid is gonna be born into a world where they're going to have to struggle and they might not know where their next meal is coming from or they might not have stable parents and they might end up in the foster care system and stuff like that. If you have the opportunity to not bring a kid into that world because you don't think it's right, then I think you should take it.*

*I think a lot of horror stories of foster parent abusing, sexually abusing kids, so I just can't help but think, if I was pregnant, I'd fear giving up my child and learning maybe that child was sexually abused. I would feel so guilty. I would almost feel like I should have had the abortion. Maybe I'm being a little paranoid here...but it breaks my heart.*

Americans point also to the risks and potential hardship of carrying a pregnancy to term, alluding to health during pregnancy, safety during delivery, and the personal, mental health, social, and professional consequences that arise from placing a child for adoption.

*I don't think a lot of people understand what the pregnant body goes through. There are a lot of people that are like, 'Oh, they can just put the baby up for adoption, there's plenty of women that want that baby.' And it's like, 'Do you know what that does to that fifteen-year-old's body?' There's so much birth trauma, even for women who want to have a baby and want to have that experience that then you're going to make women who don't want to keep that baby, that don't see that as part of their life, that can't support that baby, or for many other reasons why they got pregnant, you're going to make them go through an extra layer of trauma that can be avoided?*

*Usually what people bring up is adoption. And personally - I was adopted - and I just don't - if you don't want to have the kid, you don't have to. Sometimes adoption isn't easy, sometimes it's kind of hard to say bye to your baby once it's in your arms. So, I just think that if you're not in the right situation, if you don't have the money to take care of a child, sometimes you don't have the heart to give one up for adoption. You might still bring the baby into the world not have enough money and not be able to take care of the baby. So, I think abortion should still be a choice.*

*You start thinking about giving it to adoption, but that also means that the girl, if she would be okay with having a baby at her age. And all the cases where children also have babies. Like 12-year-olds and 14-year-olds would also be having a child at that time, while they can also get an abortion when they are young. I'm not a proponent of saying, 'Oh, yeah, just go for abortion,' but it's an option that you have and it is the last option that you can use. That is a decision that you can make.*

*I think about the mental health for the mother, if she decides that she can't take care of the child - where does that leave her? And her mental health in giving that child up, knowing or not knowing where that child is going to end up? And then the physical burden, too, of carrying that child for nine months?*

*I think if you fit into a certain category, then [adoption] is an option, and that's a very viable option, but what about the people who will lose their jobs because they are having a child and aren't married and may really struggle to ever get back? Like, the front end of the adoption thing is a barrier. ... My sister got pregnant when she was 28-years-old, and she was working at a Catholic school and was not married, and lost her job...I have friends who were adopted. Awesome, that's great, that's wonderful, that, again, whoever that was in a place where they could do that. But how many times are people not in a place where they're able to do that?*

*I know that there's, like, adoption and stuff, but it's not always right for everybody. Not everybody can carry a baby for nine months and then have the heart to give 'em up, but then have the heart to know that you can't care for it either. I don't know. I feel like if you have the option and it's soon enough in your pregnancy and it's a decision you want to make, people shouldn't judge you off of it.*

Perceived negative outcomes for children, women, or both can position adoption as a less attractive - or even less moral - choice than pregnancy termination for some Americans.



# 7. “It's just not one solution – you have to go beyond that”

Americans connect the successes and failures of adoption (and foster care) to the long-term successes, failures, and well-being of children impacted by it.

Amid conflicting adoption perceptions at the intersection of ideals and realities, everyday Americans point to impacts that extend well beyond the moment a pregnancy or parenting decision is made. Again highlighting the collective, social functions of adoption, Americans reference correlations between the success (or failure) of adoption and success (or failure) of children who move through it and into hospitals, schools, workplaces, and social environments for a lifetime.

*I don't want to wind up taking care of everybody else's [children] - those that were unwanted from the very beginning. I'm not in favor of it. ...Foster care is a good system, but DHS has its hands so full, so full it's mind-boggling. And we hear about these tragedies out here. And then we all go, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God." But look what's happening behind closed doors that you just don't know. I think there is many children that are neglected, many children that - I mean the school system is a mess, the school system is in an almighty mess. And I think some of it is we have people who were not prepared to take care of those children. ... You decided to be pregnant, but you don't want it - please, in the name of God, let's have mercy now.*

*I support adoption services. I disagree with people saying that 'they'll just put it up for adoption' is a viable alternative in all cases. Look how many kids are in the foster care system in this country? It's like 300,000. How many more are there going to be when everything's carried to full term that no one's gonna want? Granted, a lot of them are older kids. How do they get to be older kids? They've just been there forever. So, yeah, while I appreciate the sentiment of adoption, I don't think it's a catch all panacea for the abortion problem, or a solution to not having any more abortion.*



*Adoption isn't always the best. ...My mother was adopted. Her friend was adopted out. They went to horrible families. They're really messed up, and it's sad. It's just not one solution - you have to go beyond that. The woman wants to give up her kid, sure; but go beyond that. How we gonna help this kid blossom into an individual that not only can be the best they can be, but be insightful, and crave knowledge, and be an inspiration? Not only to themselves, but to others? ... Trying to ingrain that into children who don't have parents. Who were given up. Still - tell them that they are loved.*

*I think it's ridiculous some of the times that the argument is that yeah, there's pro-life, and then you have this child and it ends up in the foster care and then people forget about it. Oh yeah, you want everybody to have these kids, but what are you gonna do for the social impact or the financial burden of this child?*

*I just look at the kids that I've worked with that have experienced the neglect, the abuse. And growing up in how many different foster homes? Because that's just the way that the system is, because we have a lack of resources and a lack of support. And the behavioral effects that that has on the children, how it affects their academics, how they bring those behaviors into the school, and we don't have the resources in the school to support those behaviors. And so, we're just not able really to meet these children's - this child's needs, or any of these kids' needs if they're born to somebody that can't keep them and then don't have kinship or go into the system and then are lost in the system.*

*I think a lot of horror stories of foster parent abusing, sexually abusing kids, so I just can't help but think, if I was pregnant, I'd fear giving up my child and learning maybe that child was sexually abused. I would feel so guilty. I would almost feel like I should have had the abortion. Maybe I'm being a little paranoid here...but it breaks my heart.*

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In light of the perceived reality (and flaws) of the adoption system, some Americans shift the ethical obligation away from pregnant women and onto those who wish to support adoption, urging intervention in the form of adopting and fostering children of all ages, races, and abilities, as well as increased resources to promote long term success.

*It's easy for a conservative to say, "Oh, I'm pro-life," but not doing anything to help, either. I think that's probably part of our call to foster care, too, is we just have to be willing to help them if we're going to have these beliefs.*

*Sometimes I get pretty snippy, because I think those that are pro-life, who want to have a woman carry the child for any reason...want all these children to be born - children that are not going to be wanted, children who possibly end up in social services and might end up being dead, or being abused and whatever. ...If you are pro-life, my question is, "How many children have you adopted?" ... If you believe it that heavily, then why haven't you adopted a child? Not a baby, a child. They go kind of like hand-in-hand.*

*I would choose life every time if I had an opportunity, but it's not up to me to decide that for everybody. And so, I want pro-life organizations to be funded. I want people to have opportunities to understand what their options are and realize that there are options. There are adoption options, there's support, there's programs, there's all kinds of things to help you get from here to there. Where you sit today doesn't mean that's the way it's gonna look tomorrow.*

Conversations about adoption, then, inevitably spill over into broader conversations regarding inequality, social support, and moral positions matched (or unmet) by practical actions.



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Part 2

Unplanned Pregnancy

Decision Narratives



Women who have been in a position to consider placing a child for adoption share many of the perceptions that reverberate among Americans overall: namely, that the ideal of adoption is wonderful but the reality is less certain. But they differ in how they narrate their own decision-making processes when facing an unintended or unplanned pregnancy. Rather than seriously considering adoption as an equal option alongside parenting or pregnancy termination, most women in the study describe narrowing their choice to parenting or abortion. Support from family (emotional and financial) emerges as a key deciding factor for many in choosing between these two options.

Ahead, the report explores women's reasons for *not* choosing the adoption pathway. It includes personal accounts from women who followed a parenting pathway as well as women who followed an abortion pathway. They hold in common an experience of an unplanned pregnancy for which they did *not* choose adoption. Interviews did not surface any direct accounts of women who chose to place a child for adoption (though one came close), a population worth exploring in a future study.

# 1. “I got to just solve this problem and then pretend it doesn't exist”

Women often work to keep unplanned pregnancies a secret, carefully navigating stigma and (non)support.

A common issue women raise when telling the story of pregnancies that do not yield adoption decisions relates to the stigma of an unintended pregnancy and associated secrecy. Many women describe feeling uncomfortable telling family members – or anyone – about their pregnancy (or eventual decision to terminate a pregnancy). Continuing a pregnancy makes it difficult or impossible to maintain secrecy. Unlike adoption, an undisclosed abortion – women explain – affords the possibility for privacy, fewer disruptions, and to evade embarrassment, shame, judgment, and stigma. Several mention feeling as though their pregnancy (or corresponding decision) would not be supported, thus preferring to keep it quiet.

*I was scared of telling my parents when I was pregnant...It was just a shock for me and I just didn't know how to handle it.*

*I was in my twenties, and it was just an unwanted pregnancy and I was scared. I didn't want anybody to find out ... You always think that your parents are going to kill you if they find out something like that, but they probably would not have, and they would've been supportive, you know, thinking back now. But at the time, I was scared.*

*My decision wasn't going to be supported, so I didn't tell anyone... It's [a woman's] moral obligation to themselves and their child to make the decision before two months.*

*If I had told my parents at the time...My parents would have still made me feel bad about it or said this was wrong... I think I was just in denial and so I let it not bother me. But then I remember in my twenties at one point going, 'Oh, yeah, that did ha-, like, it's almost like I forgot about it, because I just pushed it away.' ...I don't think I did [deal with those feelings] at the time because I was just trying to like – 'I got to just solve this problem and then pretend it doesn't exist.' And then later I really, I came to term with this - with those feelings and then I was okay with it. But if you don't ever come to terms with those feelings, I think it could create a problem for you later on.*

Given that abortion decisions tend to happen relatively quickly (the large majority of abortions occur within the first trimester), the window for contemplating options is typically short. Silence can function as strategic avoidance of conversations about alternative pathways including adoption.



## 2. “I’m having a baby! I want this!”

Many women facing an unplanned pregnancy wish to parent, striving for resources and support to make that possible.

Several women rule out adoption as an option when they learn they are pregnant unexpectedly because they want to have and raise the child themselves. Many describe situations with limited resources or support, but a strong emotional commitment to birth and parent a child, nonetheless. This group describes decisions narrowly focused on making parenting possible, ruling out both abortion and adoption as alternatives despite (in some cases) friends or family encouraging them otherwise.

***I was 16...it was shortly after Roe v. Wade. All my friends tried to get me to go - they were gonna pay for the abortion. They were pushing me for it. And I’m like, ‘Heck no, I’m having a baby! I want this!’ ...My mom was very supportive, my dad wasn’t around, and I dropped out of high school. That’s the path I went. I wasn’t raised to go to college. I was raised to be barefoot and pregnant, pretty much [laughs].***

***My mom, when I first got pregnant with my daughter, I was in college, so she was thinking more of my future. She’s like, ‘You’re my daughter.’ She’s like, ‘You’re in school. Why? No.’ So she’s like, ‘No, you’re in school. This is going to be a ‘no’ for me.’ [But] I was just like, ‘I can’t do it. Sorry, I can’t do it.’ ...I think adoption is a beautiful thing, [but] I hate all the different situations that the children are put in, the mental effect that it has on them, the effect that it has on their whole life.***

***At that time in my life, I went over all the options, you know, having a baby, abortion, adoption. And just, for me, right at that moment in my life I just knew that I - those weren’t even options. My only option at that time was keeping her. I didn’t feel like the other two were even options.***

Cindy told of getting pregnant unexpectedly “out of wedlock” at 27, thinking, “Oh my goodness; what am I going to do? I’m so scared.” She contemplated abortion and went to her father, saying, “Dad I’m scared, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I only make a certain amount of money. How am I going to raise this child? I don’t want to be on low-income housing and all of that.” His reassurance led Cindy to decide “I’m going to keep this baby,” even when her boss subsequently fired her. Of her decision, she says, “In hindsight, you’re like, oh my gosh, what a gift, because we have like 15 grandchildren...it was so worth it.” It’s a message she would share with a woman in her shoes – “There’s help out there. There’s adoption, things like that. Because there are a lot of options out there.”

Women in this group tend to narrate their pregnancy decision pathway as a choice between parenting and abortion, less commonly talking about adoption. Like Cindy, many speak positively of adoption in general but rarely mention it as a serious contender in how they discerned their choice at the time. Women tend to talk instead about how they disclosed their pregnancies to others, what that response sounded like, and what resources or support was available to them, impacting their ultimate decision.

### 3. “I’ve thought about adoption”

Comparatively few women actively take steps (or ultimately choose) to place a child for adoption.

Most women facing an uncertain pregnancy decision ultimately choose to terminate their pregnancy or parent the child; a far smaller proportion choose to place a child for adoption.

Elise seriously considered adoption in response to her unplanned pregnancy: “I’ve thought about adoption before with one of my kids, and I’ve gone through even flying out to meet the lady and everything.”

Elise had at that point already experienced two abortions – both before turning 18 and both of which felt “forced” by her mom. She gave birth to her first child, a son, at age 18 (“My mom offered me abortion money then. I told her no, ‘cause at that point – I’m sorry, I was totally against it”). Four years later, Elise faced another pregnancy decision. She and the man involved in the pregnancy were “on again, off again.” She “thought about having an abortion” once again, but “didn’t have the money.” Her thoughts next turned to adoption as an option:

*Then I thought about adoption, and looked in the phone book, because this was before you could Google everything [laughs]. Looked in the phone book and I found an agency and I flew out to – we [my boyfriend and I] both flew out when I was about four months along. No one knew I was pregnant until I was like six months. I flew out, met the lady, we spent a couple days. We went to a lawyer.*

Elise explains how her circumstances grew more challenging after the visit: she broke up with her boyfriend and didn’t have the resources to fly to the adoptive family’s home state for labor and delivery. Without her boyfriend by her side, she’d have no companion and no one to care for her four-year-old son during the delivery. Elise explains that she asked the adoptive family to fly to her, instead, but they declined, at first. Elise shares what happened next, ultimately changing her plans:

*By this time, my mom heard wind of me being pregnant. And she said, “I hope you take care of him.” And by the time I got the response from the lady saying, “Yes, I’ll come out there,” my mom had already put herself in and said, “Hey, listen, we’ll do this together.” So that’s what kinda ended it. And I felt really bad. She was a really, really nice lady. I mean, I felt so bad, but, yeah.*



Feeling more prepared with her mom's offer to help, Elise went on to birth and parent her second son. She and her boyfriend got back together and continued an on-again and off-again relationship that included another pregnancy ending in abortion ("this time I did choose myself to go ahead with [an abortion] personally") and a third son, after which point she elected tubal ligation. She's now married her boyfriend and her mom continues to help out. Family means everything to Elise: "It's basically my mother, my husband, and my kids. We are just like a little ball of family happiness."

While she did seriously consider adoption for herself, Elise says that the idea of adding one more child to a broken foster care system shakes her overall confidence in it:

***I just feel like there's so many people who, at the clinics, they have the signs, like, 'Adoption, not abortion.' But I feel like there's so many kids that can be adopted that are in the world right now. So I just feel like if I was gonna have a kid and I knew I couldn't raise it, I wouldn't want it in foster care.***

"I feel like everyone has their choice," says Elise, and "I wouldn't ever want anyone to feel forced to do it, but I wouldn't want anyone to feel bad about doing it either, so it's just – I just feel like it's so personal. Everyone has their own choice on what they want to do."

## 4. “By the time that I held it, I probably would have kept it”

Many women predict a high(er) level of attachment to a baby they’ve birthed, making adoption seem like an impossible pathway to pursue.

Several women offer the explanation that adoption wasn’t something they ever considered seriously because they knew that once they gave birth, it would be impossible to place that child for adoption. Carrying a child for nine months and experiencing delivery would spark an emotional attachment that they anticipated would override their countervailing sensation that parenting was not the right choice for them. Women describe terminating a pregnancy early on as preventing or granting greater separation from such feelings.

*My first thought was, well, I’m still not ready to be a parent yet. And I don’t think I could financially provide for this baby yet. I could do adoption, but who’s to say after bonding with a baby nine months inside of you and going through labor that you wouldn’t change your mind? And I had no room to change my mind. So, I needed to make the decision then and there.*

Meg sought an abortion illegally prior to Roe v. Wade, not wanting to experience the “struggle” her friend went through with an adoption:

*The only woman that I knew that went through an unplanned pregnancy...she got pregnant and decided to have the child, and so she carried it and went through it without ever having anybody know back in her hometown. She made excuses not to go home, for them not to come out, and so they never knew. And then she gave the baby up for adoption. So it was very difficult. Very secretive...It was hard for her as I think it must be for any woman if you make that choice. I think you’re so brave to do that, and you know it was a struggle - ‘Yeah, I can’t keep this child,’ and yet ‘Oh my goodness, I’ve carried this child for nine months.’ And I’m sure she felt like in the end she did the right thing, but it’s very, very difficult. So, yeah, I think women are very brave who make that choice but they shouldn’t have to make that choice.*

Later adopting a son, herself, Meg still cannot fathom “carrying a child for nine months and then giving it away”:

***My son is adopted. ... We have always told him the reason that we were fortunate to have him is that his mother, his birth mother loved him. And this is what I believe: if a woman's gonna carry a child for nine months, that she loved him so much but she just wasn't ready to be a mommy and she wanted him to have the best life he could have. And I think women that are brave enough and want to make that choice should be able to. And I think, more power to you, you know, you're a brave woman to, I can't even imagine carrying a child for nine months and then giving it away, it is not even in my thought concept. I can't imagine. ... That's why the whole deal is choice, choice. What's right for me, it maybe is right for you, but they should be able to make that choice.***

Like Meg, several women with abortion experiences chose later to adopt a child. Several explain how the attachment felt different in their own pregnancy, not having given birth:

***I didn't actually give birth and have to be faced with this decision ... once you have the child ... I can imagine - 'If had terminated this pregnancy, I wouldn't have this creature, this creature so amazing.' ... But for me, not having actually given birth, I don't have that same thought process.***

***I can't see a woman having a baby - and going nine months and then handing that baby over to somebody. I can't see that. That's just heart-wrenching to me, because my thought would be, 'I had this child and I gave it away.'***

Others express similar aversion to the idea of “giving a baby away” at the end of a pregnancy:

***I think adoption is great. I, for me personally, it wasn't something, it wasn't an option for me. It wasn't the route that I wanted to take. You know, more power to the women that can do that. I wish I could have, but there was just no way. You know, I think adoption's great. My husband and I have discussed adopting in the future, so yeah.... It crossed my mind, but I feared that if I went through with that and made the decision to give that child up for adoption, that it would be much harder on me at the end when I had to, you know, give them away. And I thought mentally that I probably couldn't do that.***

***I also had a roommate in college - she'd had a baby, and, because she got pregnant and then she had to give the baby away - And she was heartbroken. And it affected her terribly, too. So probably she would have had an abortion if she could have, because, that - I couldn't have given a baby away. If I kept it full term, I could not have done that. So that's probably why I did that, because the gap would have been— I don't think I could have given it away for adoption. ... My girlfriend, the one that had to give the baby away - Now, that affected her whole life. ... That really was really bad for her. She just thought about that child. She had it full term and then gave it away. That - I just couldn't do that. But I think that was the parents that wanted to give it and not her. She probably would have kept it.***

The anticipation of emotional attachment leading to a change-of-heart (or deep emotional scar) disincentivizes women from an adoption decision.



## 5. “You give a kid up for adoption, you have to worry about that kid the rest of your life”

Women fear unknown outcomes for children they might place for adoption, burdened with guilt if they were to encounter harm.

Echoing critiques of foster care common among Americans’ overall perceptions, women who face a decision about an unplanned pregnancy also talk about concern that an adoption decision would put a child at risk for a lifetime of suffering. Many describe how they imagined themselves worrying about a child they placed for adoption forever thereafter, unsure how the child was doing. Some say they would harbor guilt for any ill effects, troubled by an inability to ‘protect’ or ‘save’ them from harm.

*If you were asking, ‘Would I choose to give a kid up for adoption or abortion?’ I would choose abortion. Because - you give a kid up for adoption, you have to worry about that kid the rest of your life. Like, you never know what kind of family - even though they seem great - what kind of family your child ends up with. And say you meet this mother and father and it feels like they’re all happy and married, then you find out your kid’s getting molested or something. And you have to deal with that the rest of your life. I don’t believe in that. I think if you did go all the way through the trimesters, nine months, and you have the kid, you might as well keep it at that point. Because I think that would be worse than to think about every day, like, what’s going on in this kid’s life? Or does this kid hate me now, because they know their real parent is out there and I walked away? So, I would choose abortion - still - over adoption.*

*I think adoption is wonderful. It’s a really great thing to do. I was just so young. That was an option that was presented to me and, you know, I just couldn’t do it. I knew it would have been best for the baby, because I was so young and didn’t have any money or anything. But I just am not that unselfish, you know [laughs]? ...My mother wanted me to go to a home for unwed mothers and come back and be ‘as good as new’...[but] I knew that I could never spend the rest of my life wondering what happened to my baby. ... They were gonna ship me off to a home for unwed mothers. You have the baby, put the baby up for adoption, which - my friend did that - and I was just like, ‘I don’t think so’ and I ran away.*

*I think it's great that some people decide to do [adoption]...[but] I would've been very miserable just thinking that I would have a kid and just send them into the unknown, in a system that I already knew it was broken. I don't think I could've lived with that.*

*What if they're abusing this child? Then how will I feel? Or, I wasn't there to protect the child, you know, because I gave it away to somebody who was unfit, or they put the child in harm's way. Then that's gonna bother me. I can't see handing the baby over. Now I can see where people have children, and they are not doing like they're supposed to be, and the state takes over for the safety and well-being. I see that because apparently you ain't doin what you're supposed to do with. If the child or the children are not being taken care of or being abused mentally, physically, verbally or however; then I see the state taking those children away from that, and trying to provide a better place for them. I see that, but me as a person, I could not bear a child and hand it over. There's no way I could do that. No way.*

Implicit in this protective impulse is a self-evaluation by women that they would be good – or better – parents to the would-be child, for whom they would wish happiness, not suffering.

## 6. “At the time, I really didn't know”

Retrospectively, some women wish that they'd had additional information, resources, and social support to fully (or differently) evaluate pregnancy pathways.

Some women look back on their experience and wish that they'd been given more or different information or support to weigh all options, including adoption. This desire often comes through as advice or a set of recommendations geared toward women in their situation or social services targeted to that population.

*My heart does go out to people who experience [an unplanned pregnancy]. I think there needs to be more options, there needs to be more reaching out to people who have a conscience about abortion but don't know what to do. And I know that's what crisis pregnancy centers are for, but it's so hard to reach people who are afraid to talk about it. I mean, I didn't tell anybody. And if I went back to it at that age now, I would still be just as afraid to talk to somebody about it beforehand. I think there needs to be somehow a greater reach to people when they are that scared and don't know what to do with options. At that particular time of my life, I was single; I was working as a*

*restaurant manager and took everything I had just to get by. And if I had gone through a pregnancy in that particular place, at that particular time, I really don't know what I would have done. I can look back on it now and know that there were options, but at the time, I really didn't know.*

*If somebody would have said, 'Just have it and give it up for adoption,' if somebody would have said that, I probably would have said 'Okay.' And then who knows? By the time that I held it, I probably would have kept it. Even if I did adopt it, it's still a born baby, you know? Yeah, so I think that that's the one thing that's missing is it should be, in abortion clinics, it should be all kinda names of people who want to adopt. You know what I'm saying? 'Don't do this. There's [so-and-so], she don't have no kids, she can do this. You see these pictures or you see people there that want kids. I think abortion clinics should have all these people that want kids, they should go to the doctor at the abortion clinic and say, 'Look.' Just be standing in line. That's the best place to get it. Just stand in line and say 'Hey, just sit in there and talk to the momma. Even if you do gotta give her some more money, here's a couple thousand, have the baby and I'll take it off your hands.' That's how they can lower the abortion rates. You know what I'm saying? That's where the couple should hang and say, 'We need a kid bad, we can't have our own kids.' ...Especially if they're low-income, they'll be like okay even if it's like \$1,000 or \$2,000. You'd be surprised how \$1,000 can go a long way.*



***I think that we should make it more available to people to be able to adopt and make it easier for adoption. ...How about offering free counseling? Because there's programs out there, we can get grants and stuff to offer stuff. People don't have money. They'd rather go pay to get an abortion because they're more worried about the cost of having to take care of their kids or they're homeless and they don't have a way to - again, they don't know that they can put the child up for adoption. ...I think that they're leaving it up to the mother, of the person who's pregnant, to make that decision, to feel like they can go and talk to people, that they can go to a hospital, they can put it up for adoption, they can abort the baby. You know, but again, it's all about the education. I'm not saying be pro-choice and there's no consequences. Let's be pro-choice but give them the tools to understand what their choice is.***

Notably, each of the women quoted above express regret about their own abortion decisions and wish retrospectively for an intervention that would have offered (or convinced them of) an alternative pathway. Women with lower levels of regret are less likely to narrate their own decision making process as one that was insufficiently informed.

## 7. “We should not be so pushy about it”

**Women who have experienced an unintended pregnancy frequently uphold the value of leaving the final decision to the pregnant woman herself, minimizing undue legal or social pressures to choose one pathway over another.**

Several women who have been in a position to make decisions regarding an unplanned pregnancy emphasize the need to make resources, information, and options known and available as opposed to “forcing” choices or prioritizing one pathway over another. Many describe feeling “forced” into eventual outcomes, whether by family members, the man involved in the pregnancy, or the cultural and legal contexts in which they made their decisions.

Most describe adoption through this lens – as a pathway that should be readily presented as an option but not as “a mandate.”

*I'm grateful that there's an option. But I don't think it should be a mandate that you have to carry this child and if you don't want it, then you have to make sure that you give it up for adoption. So I don't think that should be connected. I think adoption should be available as a wonderful choice for those who seek it.*

Hailey felt as though the care clinics she contacted when she was pregnant were “pushing me for pro-life and giving up the kid for adoption,” something she did not want after her own childhood experiences with instability and abuse in the foster care system. Ruling out adoption, Hailey explains, “I've dealt with a lot of people that have come through the adoption agency, and they really weren't ever told they were loved. That they were wanted. That they were needed. And that is something I personally do not wanna deal with.” But she felt like she was on her own when she made her pregnancy decision:

*I said, “No, that's not an option.” And they didn't really provide me with anything. They said, “Yeah, that's okay if you wanna choose that.” But there was no information. I spent maybe six days with eight different phone calls just ripping out my hair because I was tryin to figure out what to do. I was stuck. I knew I couldn't take care of this kid. I knew I didn't want to give this kid up because he's gonna have some serious problems, not just mentally, but maybe physically. It was pretty horrible. I was beating myself up for a while after that. I mean, I'm not heartless; I did feel for the kid. ... You have to think rationally about reality. What's really gonna happen. You just can't think, “Oh, these people are going to help me.” No, they won't really help you. They can only help you for a certain amount of time, and then you're on your own.*

Hailey proposes the alternative of a “hotline” or “center to get all the information you need” – “a new facility which combines all the choices. Not just pushing [women] into one funnel.”

***If you go around this town, there are billboards about “pro-life.” We should not be so pushy about it. If we're gonna have a billboard about helping a woman in a difficult situation - by being raped or pressured into starting a family - we should have a hotline where they can have - be given multiple different options other than abortion.***

Like Hailey, many who have experienced an unintended pregnancy stress the value of non-judgmental contexts within which they may discern and decide what feels right to them.



# Conclusion



Americans' adoption perceptions contain both high praise and deep critiques, generating a somewhat paradoxical evaluation of adoption in the United States today. A collective orientation distinguishes adoption talk from the more individualized lens that often characterizes perceptions of pregnancy decision-making. Americans generally "want" adoption and see its societal value. They also wish that its implementation in practice would better match the ideals of its vision. A perceived mismatch between ideals and reality generates widespread skepticism and uncertainty. An imperfectly realized social good transforms into a perceived social ill carrying grim impacts through a lifetime.

Americans' adoption skepticism and uncertainty, moreover, creates a backdrop against which women enter their own decision making processes regarding unplanned, unintended pregnancies. For many, adoption gets evaluated as possibly good for someone (else) but risky and therefore not worthwhile for me. Pregnancy (and abortion) stigma, moreover, deters women from participating in conversations that feel persuasive rather than open, informative, and supportive.

Women who make a choice to place a child for adoption are viewed as inscrutable – doing something that seems unfathomable or hard to understand unless mandated by the state. While some Americans evaluate women as "brave" for making the "best" choice for a child they "love," these perceptions bump up against simultaneous narratives of adoptive parent "heroes" lauded for "saving" "unwanted" children from "unloving" families (and women) perceived ill-equipped to provide a suitable home and good life.

This sets up women, accordingly, to either internalize negative evaluations or engage in emotional labor to maintain a view of themselves as "loving" and providing the "best" for their kin. The oxymoron compels many women to hide their pregnancies, terminate a pregnancy early on, or garner resources to parent. The decisions of women who terminate pregnancies are frequently interpreted as mysterious or immoral when there's "always" adoption," and yet the decision process that transpires often rules out adoption early on as an impossibility. A substantial number of women, moreover, describe wanting foremost to parent the child themselves, albeit perhaps lacking the material, relational, and social support to do so – and do not want someone else to parent (or even harm) the child in their place.

To the extent that adoption gets framed by the American public as “saving” children from a doomed circumstance or “unloving” parent – something “wonderful” for society, adopted children, and adoptive parents – this casts a negative and potentially insurmountable stigma for pregnant women to overcome in their personal decision-making, hearing that by making an adoption choice they are themselves unloving, ill-suited for parenthood, and putting a child at risk. Such stigma reverses the meaning of adoption from a social good into a personal failure.

Avoiding this, women commonly choose between parenting or abortion, not parenting, adoption, or abortion. Adoption is a far less prominent part of the storyline in how women narrate their unintended or unplanned pregnancy experiences. While the presumption tends to be that it is a “supply” issue of few women knowing about or choosing adoption, the “demand” side introduces caricatures of pregnant women and their children that might in fact undermine “supply.”

Alternative frames may modify the bridge from perception-to-decision; for example, frames that affirm women’s own statements of love, attachment, and felt desire to protect children they birth as well as lauding them as co-heroes in adoption narratives. Seeing children placed for adoption as more than victimized by unloving mothers might likewise modify the bridge from perception-to-decision.

This report is exploratory more than conclusive in nature, guided by secondary analysis using available interview data from a national cross-section of Americans. It is possible – likely, even – that other prominent storylines and variations would be raised by including women who chose to place a child for adoption. Future research could explore more directly differences among pregnant women who ultimately decide to parent, to have an abortion, or to place a child for adoption.



Appendix

About the Study

This sociological report is based upon secondary analyses of data collected for the National Abortion Attitudes Study (NAAS) led by Tricia Bruce, Ph.D. Abortion-specific findings from this study are summarized in the 2020 report “How Americans Understand Abortion” and other publications.

The NAAS recruited a random sample of 2,500 Americans in 2019 via postal letter across six different U.S. regions. Not yet knowing the study topic, letter recipients were initially invited to complete an online questionnaire requesting basic demographic and social information (gender, race, age, religion, ideology, education, political affiliation, and family status). The resulting list of respondents was used to create an interview sample of 217 diverse Americans whose characteristics closely approximate the U.S. population as a whole.

A team of five sociologists then conducted in-depth, mostly in-person interviews lasting 75 minutes on average. Interviewees received a \$30 gift card for their confidential participation. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by the research team.

Key Sample Characteristics, NAAS Interviewees:

- Female 54% | Male 46%
- Non-Hispanic White 68% | Non-Hispanic Black 14% | Hispanic 10% | Asian 2% | Other/multiracial 6%
- “Gen Z” 5% | “Millennials” 33% | “Gen X” 22% | “Baby Boomers” 34% | “Silent Gen” 6%
- Liberal 33% | Moderate 33% | Conservative 34%
- Democrat 37% | Republican 27% | Independent/Other 35%
- Less than college degree 41% | College degree or more 54% | Other 5%
- Married 53% | Single never married 30% | Other 17%
- Children 59% | No children 41%
- Protestant 41% | Catholic 21% | Jewish 4% | Other religion 7% | No religion 27%

Specific to adoption, all interviewees were asked an open-ended version of the following question: Can you tell me more about your views on adoption, and how they might connect to your views on abortion? Additionally, the open-ended nature of interviews prompted numerous opportunities for interviewees to bring up adoption-related commentary. Some, for example, mentioned adoption in the course of explaining their moral or legal views on abortion. Others told personal stories of adoption based upon their own experience or that of others in their network. Still others shared stories about unplanned pregnancies or experiences of infertility, during which the topic of adoption surfaced.

Qualitative coding of NAAS interview transcripts generated 876 excerpts containing specific references to adoption, totaling nearly 200,000 words across all transcripts. Coding captured another 432 excerpts referencing decisions corresponding to unplanned pregnancies. The sample includes many Americans who disclosed personal experiences with abortion; personal experiences with unplanned pregnancies leading to parenthood; and personal experiences having been adopted or in foster care, having adopted an infant or child, and having contemplated placing a child for adoption.

For the purposes of the current analysis, the NAAS sample is limited in that none of the 217 interviewees disclosed having personally placed a child for adoption. The interview protocol, moreover, did not incorporate a full battery of questions specific to adoption given its broader focus on the issue of abortion.

### **About the Report Author / Lead Researcher**

Tricia C. Bruce (PhD, University of California Santa Barbara, 2006) is a sociologist and award-winning author/editor of numerous books, research articles, and high-impact reports. She holds affiliations with the University of Notre Dame's Center for the Study of Religion and Society and the University of Texas at San Antonio's Department of Sociology. She is Chair-Elect of the American Sociological Association's Religion Section. Her research has been supported by the National Science Foundation, Louisville Institute, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, and more, and her writing has appeared in outlets including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Science Advances*. She is currently completing a book on Americans' abortion attitudes using a groundbreaking in-depth interview study.

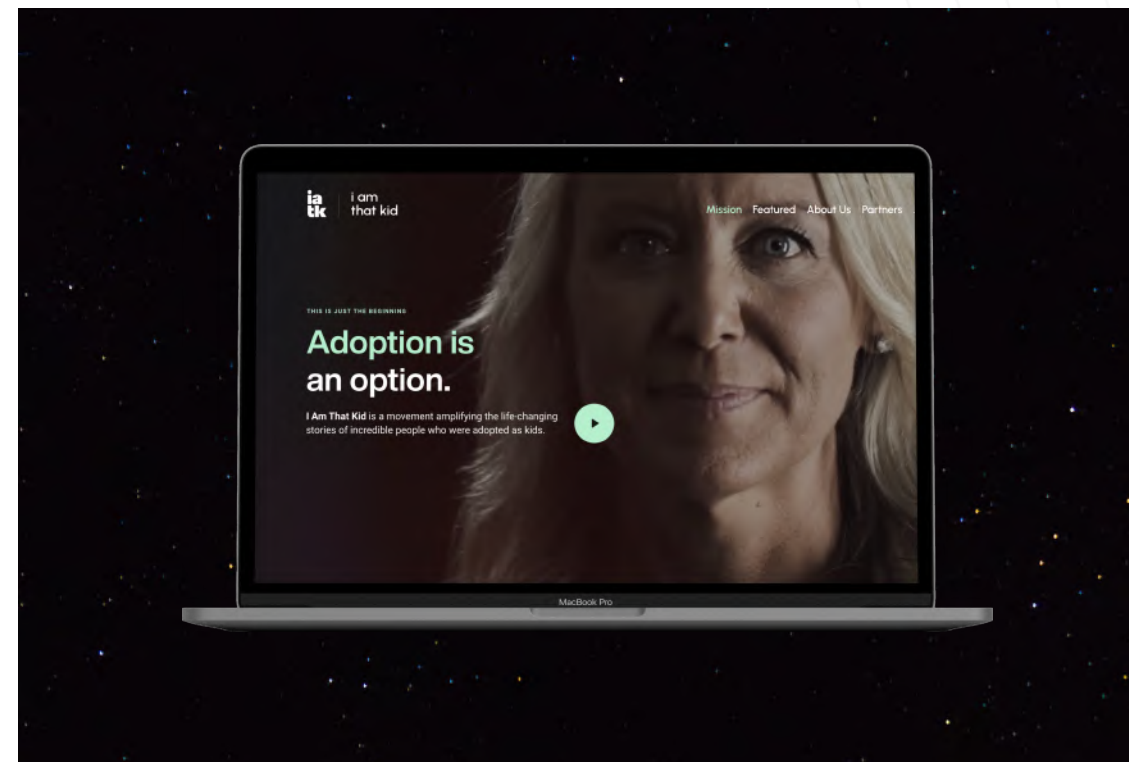


# About the Opt Institute



Opt Institute is a non-profit research and think tank dedicated to access to and support for private infant adoption.

To learn more about our research and our initiatives please visit: [optinstitute.org](https://optinstitute.org)



**I Am That Kid** is a platform amplifying the life-changing stories of incredible people who were adopted as kids. [iamthatkid.com](https://iamthatkid.com)



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