

Releasing Pre-Adoption Birth Records: A Survey of Oregon Adoptees

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SYNOPSIS

Objective. In June 2000, Oregon implemented a citizen-initiated ballot measure that grants adult adoptees access to their birth records, which contain their birth parents' identifying information. Because other states are considering similar policy changes, the authors explored whether Oregon's new law is meeting the information needs of adoptees.

Methods. Birth records were abstracted for a 9% (221/2,529) random sample of adoptees who obtained their records from June 20, 2000, to July 20, 2000, to describe the population and the information they obtained. Telephone interviews documented their motivations, expectations, and whether they considered the birth record useful.

Results. The mean age of the adoptees was 41 years, 64% were female, and 97% were white. Virtually all received information about their birth mother; however, only one-third received information about their birth father. Of the 221 sampled, 123 (59%) participated in the telephone survey, 12 were ineligible, 84 could not be reached, and 2 refused. The most common motivations for requesting records were to find birth parents (29%) and to obtain medical information (29%). Twenty-nine percent received less information than they expected, with many expecting, but not receiving, birth father information. Thirty-three (47%) of the 70 adoptees who tried to find their birth mother were successful. The records were considered "very" useful by 52% of respondents, "somewhat" or "a little" useful by 42%, and "not at all" useful by 6%.

Conclusions. The results indicate that many adoptees received less information than they expected, and many did not meet their goals of finding birth parents or obtaining medical information. Nonetheless, the majority considered their birth records useful and important.

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On June 2, 2000, the Oregon Health Division (since renamed Oregon Health Services) implemented a citizen-initiated ballot measure that grants adult adoptees access to their sealed birth records, which contain the names and identifying information of their birth parents. At the time of a child's adoption, the original birth certificate is sealed and the child is issued a new certificate identical to the original except that the adoptive parents' information replaces that of the birth parents. Prior to June 2, 2000, the sealed, pre-adoption birth records were accessible to Oregon adoptees only through a court order. However, these records can now be requested and obtained by all adoptees ≥ 21 years of age through the same procedures and fees that apply to non-adopted Oregonians.

This change is the result of a movement led by adoptees and supporters to gain equal access to pre-adoption birth records. Advocates collected signatures and qualified for a ballot measure to be included in the November 3, 1998, statewide elections. Ballot Measure 58 passed 57% to 43%, but on December 1, 1998, two days before the new law was due to go into effect, a group of "Jane Doe" birth mothers filed suit. They argued that opening the birth records would violate their right to privacy and break promises of confidentiality given to them when they placed their children for adoption.

The court ordered an injunction, delaying implementation of Measure 58 until the lawsuit could be settled. At the same time, the Oregon Health Division's vital records section began to accept adoptees' requests for their pre-adoption birth records with the agreement that the requests would be processed in the order they were received if and when the injunction was lifted.

The birth mothers lost the suit and subsequent appeals, up to the State Supreme Court. Consequently, in accordance with the new law, on June 2, 2000, the vital records section issued its first batch of pre-adoption birth records to adoptees. By this time there was a backlog of 2,593 record requests waiting to be processed. As of September 2000, the backlogged requests were filled, and Oregon adoptees are currently able to obtain their pre-adoption birth records shortly after submitting their request.

An evaluation of the impact of releasing these records was imperative since this issue was vigorously debated, represented a major change in the handling of vital records, and required a substantial expenditure of health department resources and because other states are considering similar legislation. The objectives of the evaluation were to describe the adoptees who obtained their records in terms of: (a) the charac-

teristics of this population, (b) the information they obtained, (c) their motivations and expectations, (d) and whether they found the information useful.

METHODS

Sampling design

The data collection period for this survey was September 20, 2000, to September 29, 2000. Study participants were identified through random sampling of birth record request forms submitted to the Oregon Health Division's vital records section. The record request forms were stored in filing cabinets in order of the date submitted. Sampling was conducted in rounds such that one record was selected from every inch along each drawer during each round. Each sampling round resulted in the selection of approximately 50 records. Once interview attempts had been made for all adoptees sampled in one round, the next round was selected. Information on the front of the page was not visible to the individuals selecting the records. Sampling continued in this manner until the data collection period closed.

To ensure that the adoptees had some time (at least two months) to make use of the information, only adoptees whose birth records were sent to them before July 20, 2000, were eligible. Sampled requests were paired with their corresponding pre-adoption birth records and post-adoption birth certificates based on file numbers and verified using dates of birth. Phone numbers were available from the record request forms.

Exclusions

Adoptees raised by one birth parent and a step-parent were ineligible because their motivations and experiences would differ importantly from those raised by two adoptive parents. To facilitate the interview process, adoptees were also ineligible if a legal representative rather than the adoptee him/herself submitted the birth record request or they were currently living outside the U.S.

Data collection

Data were collected through record abstraction and telephone surveys. Abstraction of the record request form, pre-adoption birth record, and post-adoption birth certificate for the entire random sample was performed to collect demographic data and to estimate the percentage of records that were missing data. For each adoptee sampled, year of birth and the presence/absence of each of the following pieces of information was recorded: birth mother's name, age, race, address, and birth state; birth father's name, age, race, and birth state.

Additional demographic data, educational level and current state of residence, were collected from telephone survey participants. Data describing the adoptees' expectations and motivations and the usefulness of the birth records were also collected via telephone survey. The telephone survey instrument was developed with input from Oregon Department of Human Services vital records section staff. The first 15 interviews served as a pilot test of the questionnaire, which was modified slightly based on the responses of these 15 adoptees and the impressions of the interviewer.

To measure expectations, survey participants were asked, "Was there information that you were expecting to get that you did *not* get?" If they answered yes, up to three pieces of expected information were recorded. Participants were also asked, "Was there information on your birth records that you were *not* expecting to get?" Participants were also asked if overall the birth records contained more information than they expected, less than they expected, or about what they expected.

Survey participants were asked an open-ended question about their motivations, "Overall, what was your *primary* reason for requesting your birth record?" Many of their reasons had been anticipated through pilot testing and discussions with the vital records section staff—e.g., to find birth parents or to get medical information. Survey participants were then asked a yes/no question to indicate whether each anticipated reason was "part" of their motivation for requesting their birth record.

To determine the usefulness of the records, participants were asked to what extent their records helped them to accomplish their primary motivation: "a lot," "some," "a little," or "not at all." Overall usefulness of the record was assessed with: "Overall, would you say that the information on your birth record was 'very useful,' 'somewhat useful,' 'a little useful,' or 'not at all useful'?"

Usefulness was also assessed through a series of yes/no questions that allowed for estimation of the probability of adoptees finding their birth parents. These questions extracted: (a) whether the respondent had already found their birth parent before requesting their birth record, and if not, (b) whether they tried to find their birth parent after they received their birth record, and if so, (c) whether they found their birth parent using the birth record, and if so, (d) whether they contacted their newly found birth parent. Separate sets of questions addressed birth mothers and fathers. Additional questions, posed to adoptees who reported having contacted a newly found birth parent, addressed whether they asked their birth par-

ent for medical information, if they were given useful medical information, and the quality of their initial interaction.

Finally, telephone survey participants were asked whether getting their birth record was "very important," "somewhat important," or "not at all important" to them.

Data security and confidentiality

To ensure confidentiality, no personal identifiers were recorded on the record abstraction sheet or the telephone survey form. Much of the data abstracted from the pre-adoption birth record and the post-adoption birth certificate were recorded as simply present or missing (including birth mothers' names and state of residence). Other data were collapsed into categories so that the information was not specific to individual adoptees. During the telephone survey, personal identifiers, such as names, addresses, and phone numbers, were not collected. Once the abstraction and interview were complete, the birth records, which contained personal identifiers, were separated from the abstraction sheet and/or survey forms. Thus, it was no longer possible to link a record abstraction sheet or telephone survey form with an adoptee, their birth parents, or their adoptive parents.

RESULTS

A total of 221 (8.7%) adoptees were randomly selected from the 2,529 adoptees who had their birth records sent to them from June 2, 2000, to July 20, 2000. Their records were fairly complete in terms of birth mother information; nearly all listed the birth mother's maiden name, race, age, birth state, and address at the time of delivery (Table 1). By contrast, the majority of records were missing information about the birth father; fewer than one-third of the records listed the birth father's name, age, and birth state. We examined these data items because they were part of the standard live birth certificate throughout the years during which the sampled adoptees were born (1926–1979). By contrast, other pieces of information were added and removed over time; as a result, some birth records listed additional information, e.g., parents' occupations, birth father's residence, whether the birth mother had prior pregnancies and whether these children were alive, the town where parents were born in addition to the state, and birth mother's marital status.

Telephone survey

Of the total sample of 221 adoptees, 195 were called for the telephone survey (Figure 1). Of those not

Table 1. Birth parent information missing from pre-adoption birth records received by Oregon adoptees (N = 221)

Type of information	Percent missing	
	Maternal	Paternal
Name	0 ^a	70.1
Race	0.9	62.0
Age	0	68.3
Address	6.8	—
Birth state	1.4	72.9
Occupation	—	71.9

^aMother's birth or "maiden" name, not her married name.

called, 16 did not include a phone number on their record request form and 10 were ineligible, as defined above. Among the 195 adoptees who were called, 123 completed the survey. The survey protocol dictated that at least five attempts be made to reach each adop-

tee; however, eight adoptees were not called five times before the data collection portion of the evaluation was terminated. Only two people refused to participate, for a refusal rate of 1.0% (2/195).

Adoptee characteristics

Record abstraction for the entire sample ($N = 221$) revealed that the adoptees ranged in age from 21 to 74 years, with a mean age of 41.2 years (standard deviation [SD] = 10.8) (Table 2). The majority of adoptees requesting their records were female, and nearly all were born to white women. Survey participants and non-participants did not differ significantly in terms of age or mother's race; however, significantly more of the participants were female. Participants represented a wide variety of educational levels, and, as expected, the majority were residents of Oregon, Washington, or California. The amount of information obtained from their birth records did not differ between participants and non-participants (e.g., 31% of participants vs. 29% of non-participants received their birth fathers' names; $p=0.71$).

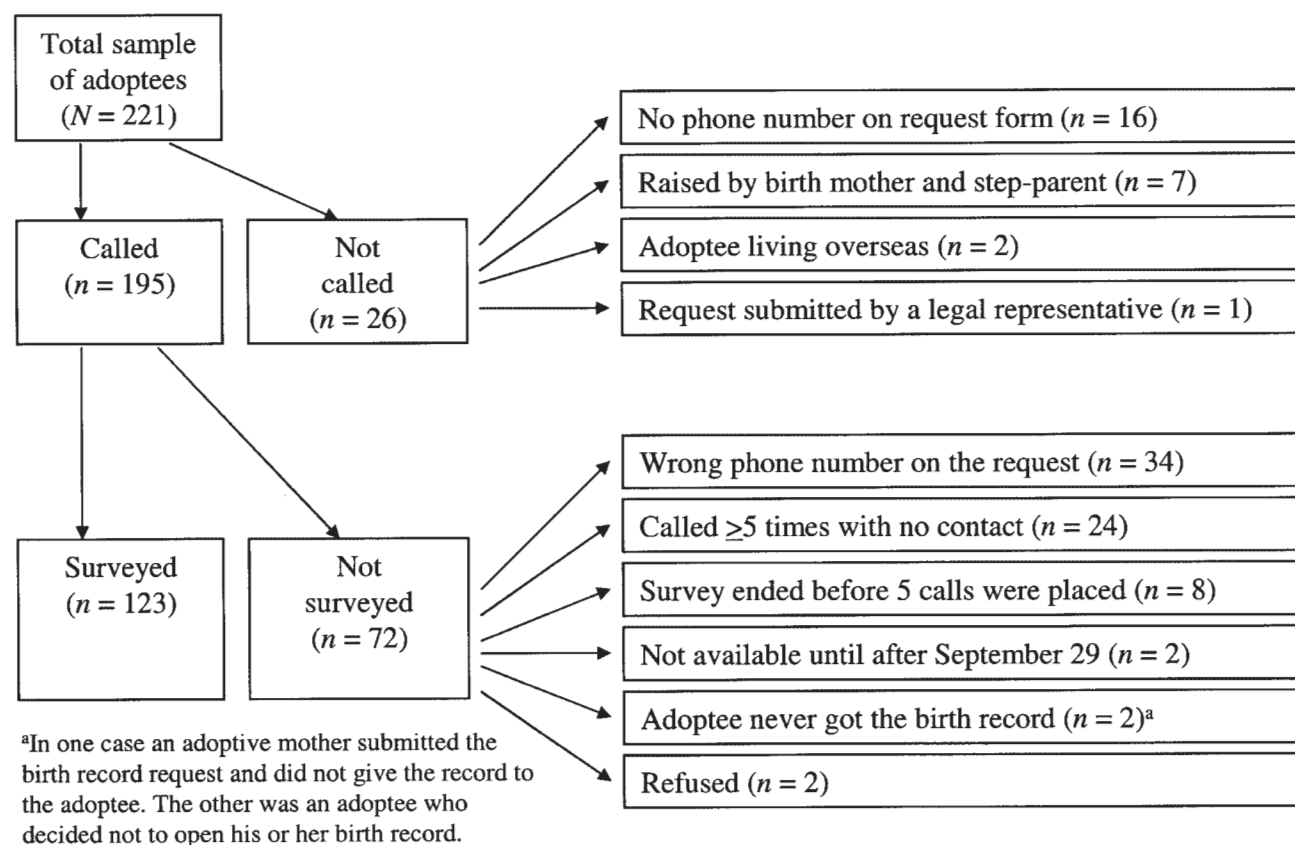
Figure 1. Flow diagram

Table 2. Characteristics of Oregon adoptees who received their pre-adoption birth records (N = 221)

Characteristic	Total	Telephone survey participants (n = 123)	Non-participants (n = 98)	p-value ^a
	Percent	Percent	Percent	
Age (years) ^{b,c}				
21-29	9.5	8.9	10.2	0.57
30-39	44.8	40.7	50.0	
40-49	20.8	22.8	18.4	
50-59	19.0	22.0	15.3	
≥60	5.9	5.7	6.1	
Gender ^b				0.002
Female	63.8	72.4	53.1	
Male	35.8	26.8	46.9	
Race of birth mother ^b				0.12
White	97.3	97.6	96.9	
Asian	0.9	0.0	2.0	
Missing	1.8	2.4	1.0	
Education				
Not a high school graduate	—	7.3	—	
High school graduate	—	11.4	—	
Some college	—	48.8	—	
College graduate	—	21.1	—	
Graduate school	—	11.4	—	
Current state of residence				
Oregon	—	60.2	—	
Washington	—	15.5	—	
California	—	6.6	—	
Other	—	17.1	—	
Missing	—	0.8	—	

^aChi-square tests.

^bData on non-participants were obtained from pre-adoption birth record request forms.

^cSince only year of birth was collected, age estimates were calculated using June 30 as the month and day of birth for all adoptees.

Adoptee expectations

Seventy-one (58%) survey respondents listed a total of 93 pieces of information that they expected to receive on their birth certificates, but did not. Information about birth fathers was, by far, the most common and accounted for 65% (60/93) of the expected pieces of information not received. Other expected pieces of information were specific to only one or a small number of respondents; however, each of the following was expected, but not received, by at least three adoptees: birth parents' birth dates ($n = 6$), medical information ($n = 4$), whether their birth mother had other children ($n = 4$), and birth parents' Social Security Numbers ($n = 3$). Four adoptees said they expected, but did not receive, their mother's address. These records were

not necessarily blank; instead, the address on the record may have been that of a "home for unwed mothers" or a similar type of institution, rather than a private residence.

When asked about the amount of information overall, 52% (64/123) of adoptees said their birth record contained about as much information as they had expected, 29% (36/123) said it contained less than they expected, 17% (21/123) said it contained more than they expected, and two respondents said they not know what to expect. The most common unexpected pieces of information received were birth mother's address ($n = 23$), birth parents' birthplaces ($n = 10$), birth parents ages ($n = 6$), birth mother's maiden name ($n = 4$), and birth hospital ($n = 4$).

Adoptee motivations

Finding birth parents was the most commonly cited primary motivation for requesting birth records ($n = 36$) (Table 3). Of these adoptees, 44% (16/36) said that they wanted to find their birth mother only, 11% (4/36) wanted to find their birth father only, and 44% (16/36) wanted to find both. The second most common reason was to obtain medical information ($n = 35$). Although getting medical information required contacting the birth mother and/or father, many of these adoptees indicated that the medical information was more important than a personal relationship. Despite the interviewers' probing for a more specific reason, 9% (11/123) said that they were simply "curious." Adoptees who got their birth records for "emotional reasons" included those who said they wanted to better understand their identity and those who said they were seeking closure or peace of mind. Confirmation of information, such as stories told by their adoptive parents (e.g., birth mother was a teenager) or that a person identified by a personal search was truly their birth parent, was the primary motivation for three adoptees. "Other" reasons included: wanting to get information about birth parents (e.g., their names) with no interest in finding or contacting them, and wanting to know whether they were named by their birth parents.

Most of the reasons listed above were the *primary* motivation for only a small number of adoptees. However, many adoptees agreed that these factors contributed to their decision to request their birth records (Table 3).

Finding birth parents

Prior to requesting their birth records, 15% of adoptees (18/123) had already found their birth mothers (Figure 2). Among adoptees who hadn't found their birth mothers previously, 67% (70/105) tried to find their birth mothers after they received the pre-adoption birth record. Of those who tried, 47% (33/70) found their birth mother. Once they found their birth mothers, most contacted them (70%; 23/33). After contacting them, nearly all asked for medical information (91%; 21/23) and, of those who asked, all but one said their birth mothers gave them useful medical information. Most of the respondents who had contacted their birth mothers described their initial interactions as "very good" (61%; 14/23) or "good" (26%, 6/23). Only two described the interaction as "mixed." No one described their initial interaction as "poor," but one birth mother reportedly refused contact, and data describing the initial interaction were missing for another adoptee.

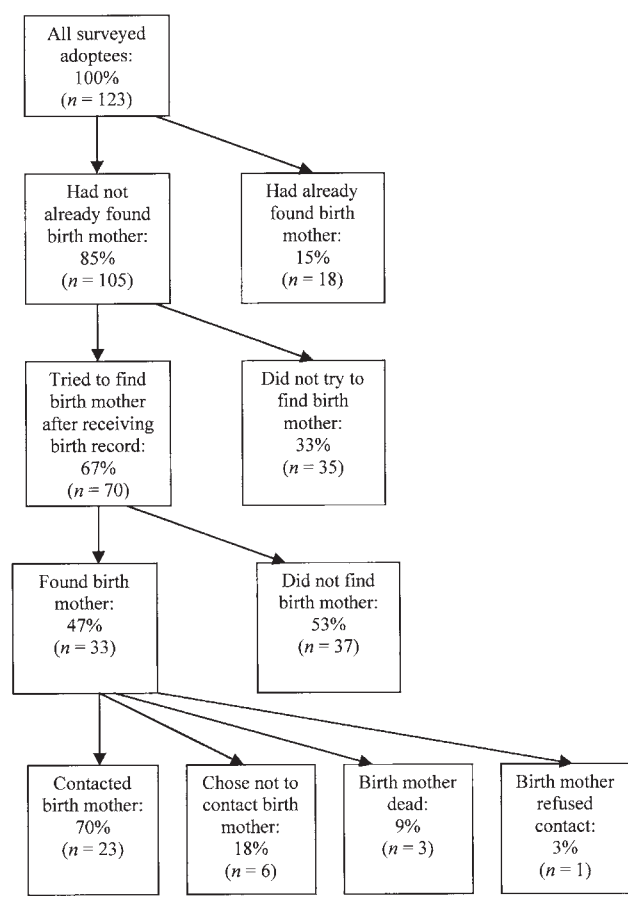
Far fewer adoptees found their birth fathers. Only 9/123 adoptees reported that they had already found their birth fathers before they requested their birth records. Of those who had not, fewer than one-third (28%; 32/114) tried to find their birth fathers once they received their birth records. Many explained that they did not try because they got no new information about their birth father. This was confirmed by a comparison of those who received their father's name with those who did not: 63% (20/32) of adoptees whose birth records listed a name for their birth father tried to find him vs. 15% (12/81) of those who did not get

Table 3. Adoptees' motivations for requesting their birth records ($n = 123$)

Motivation	Primary motivation	Contributed to decision
	Percent	Percent
Find one or both birth parents	29	64
Obtain medical information	29	55
Learn family heritage	11	71
Curiosity	9	— ^a
Emotional reasons (e.g., closure)	7	46
Exercise right to access the information	6	65
Find other members of birth family	2	48
To confirm other information (e.g., stories told by adoptive parents)	2	36
To better understand the circumstances of their adoption	1	49
Obtain information for their children	1	54
Other	4	13

^aNot asked.

Figure 2. Oregon adoptees' success in finding their birth mothers using information from their pre-adoption birth records



his name ($p < 0.001$). Half of these adoptees tried find their birth father (16/32), and about half of these (9/16) said they contacted him.

Overall, 29% of adoptees found at least one of their birth parents, and 21% contacted a birth parent. (Exclusion of adoptees who were already in contact with either birth parent raises these estimates to 31% having found at least one birth parent and 23% having contacted a birth parent.) It is likely that these rates will increase over time since several of the surveyed adoptees who had not begun searching said that they planned to in the future, and several others who had begun admitted that they had yet to pursue all information sources.

Usefulness

The usefulness of the records was examined in terms of the extent to which they helped adoptees with their

primary motivation; 45% (54/119) of adoptees said it helped "a lot," 28% (33/119) said it helped "some" or "a little," 26% (31/119) said it was "not at all" helpful, and one adoptee said, "I don't know because I haven't pursued it yet." (These percentages are based on 119 responses because this question was added after pilot testing the questionnaire with four participants.) Participants were also asked about the overall usefulness of their records, and far fewer indicated that the record was of no use: 51% (63/123) found the records "very useful," 41% (50/123) "somewhat" or "a little" useful, and only 6% (7/123) "not at all" useful. (Two said, "Don't know," and one response was missing.) Finally, nearly all adoptees said that obtaining their record was important to them, with only 2% reporting that it was "not important."

An observation not captured by the survey was the concern and empathy that many adoptees expressed for their birth mothers. Some adoptees envisioned birth mothers being as frustrated as themselves with accessing records and said that there should be a system through which birth mothers can get information about their relinquished children. Other adoptees struggled with the decision whether to contact their birth mothers, hesitating for fear of disrupting their birth mothers' lives. Two adoptees said that "letting their birth mother know that they were OK" was their primary motivation for requesting their birth records. Overall, it was clear that a large number of adoptees, while feeling entitled to their birth records, also felt compassion for their birth mothers and wanted to be careful not to disrupt their lives. Other researchers have noted similar feelings among searching adoptees.²

DISCUSSION

This is the first examination of Oregon's newly implemented law that grants adoptees access to their pre-adoption birth records. The findings of the record review portion of the evaluation suggest that virtually all adoptees who request their records can expect to obtain information about their birth mother; however, only one in three will obtain information about their birth father. Telephone interviews revealed that adoptees requested their birth records for many reasons, the most common primary reasons being to find their birth parents and to get medical information. Learning about their family heritage, exercising their right to access the record, and getting information for their children, although the primary reason for only a few, factored into the decision for more than half of adoptees. The records contained as much or more information than most adoptees expected, but many

were expecting information about their birth fathers and did not get it. Within a few months of obtaining their records, two-thirds of those surveyed tried to find their birth mother and about half were successful. By contrast few adoptees found their birth fathers. In general, adoptees felt that the records were useful and important.

Adoptees' experiences with searching for their birth parents varied dramatically. This is evident from the survey results: 15% of survey respondents already knew their birth mothers before they requested their records, while 53% of those who tried to find their birth mothers could not find them even with the information on their birth records. The variation in their experiences was also clear from anecdotal evidence: some quickly exhausted every information source and made no progress, others found their birth parents almost immediately, and others told intricate stories of the network of information and extended family they had encountered on their quest to find their birth parents.

Although their search experiences varied widely, nearly all of the adoptees who contacted a birth parent described the initial interaction positively. Of course, it is possible that the birth parents were less enthusiastic about these reunions. However, additional anecdotal evidence about the positive nature of these interactions comes from the fact that many adoptees reported that after their initial interaction they remained in frequent contact, and some had developed relationships with other birth family members as well.

It is difficult to compare our findings to those of others, primarily because Oregon was the first state to open records to adoptees, and also because there has been little scientific research in this area. Nonetheless, our findings are consistent with the research that has been done. The motivations of 12 individuals who obtained their records from Barnardo's Homes, which provided residential care for children in the UK from the 1870s to the 1980s, were described as "varied and complex" and included: finding birth family members, obtaining medical information, and curiosity.¹ The multiplicity of motivations behind searching was also evident in a survey of 124 Canadian adoptees who had been reunited with their birth mothers six months to four years earlier.² Like the Oregon adoptees, 76% of the participants in that survey reported that their initial interactions with their birth mothers went well. However, 24% reported having been received less than enthusiastically and 17% said they had terminated the relationship after the first meeting. A three-year follow-up survey of Canadian adoptees who had been reunited with birth parents found that approximately

half had developed close relationships, 6% were no longer in contact, and the remainder were still in contact but either did not feel close and/or were not satisfied with the frequency of contact.³ Given the dramatic increases in the number of adoptee and birth parent reunions in recent years, continued research into long-term outcomes of these reunions is essential.

Interestingly, most adoptees did not meet their stated goal, and yet most deemed the birth record useful and important. The primary goals of 58% of adoptees were to make contact with at least one birth parent, either to develop a relationship or to get medical information. Only 21% actually made contact with one or both birth parent(s). Nonetheless, 45% said their birth records helped "a lot" with their primary motivation, a larger proportion (52%) said that the record was "very" useful overall, and even more (98%) said that the record was important. The fact that many adoptees found the record useful and important, despite not meeting their stated goals, together with the wide variation in their search experiences, indicates that obtaining birth records and searching for birth parents is unpredictable and often results in unexpected outcomes, which adoptees find useful. This is consistent with Pugh and Schofield's findings that (a) even adoptees who received distressing and/or unexpected information felt that having the information, regardless of its nature, was helpful and preferable to ignorance and (b) individuals with no clear motive for obtaining their record still felt that having the information was very important.¹

Limitations

Since policy makers were actively debating this issue, it was important that the evaluation be conducted shortly after implementation of Measure 58. However, due to the early timing of the evaluation, survey participants were among the first Oregon adoptees to request and receive their pre-adoption birth records. As such, they may represent highly motivated adoptees who are more involved with and knowledgeable about adoption issues than adoptees in general. Additionally, the data collection portion of the evaluation was limited to 10 days, which may have reduced participation rates since thorough follow-up of adoptees whom we were unable to contact in this limited time period and those without phone numbers was not possible. In terms of timing, it is also important to consider that the adoptees' motivations and expectations were collected retrospectively and may be affected by experiences, thoughts, and feelings that occurred after the adoptees received their birth records.

Future research

This evaluation was limited to adoptees primarily because Measure 58 was designed to address the information needs of adoptees. Additionally, adoptees accessing their pre-adoption birth records were easily identified via the birth record request forms submitted to the Oregon Health Division vital record section. It was beyond the scope of this evaluation to include birth mothers and others who are affected by the unsealing of birth records (e.g., birth fathers, family members of birth parents, adoptive families). However, documentation of their experiences and perspectives is essential to understanding the public health impact of unsealing adoptees' birth records.

One area of research essential to more fully evaluating Oregon's policy changes is an evaluation of the use and utility of contact preference forms. In July 1999, while the ballot measure was in appeals, the Oregon state legislature passed an amendment to allow birth parents to file contact preference forms. These forms allow birth parents to declare whether they would like to be contacted and, if so, to include phone numbers and/or addresses. Once submitted, the contact preference forms are placed in the adoptees' sealed files and released to the adoptees if they request their birth records. As of September 2000, 312 birth parents had submitted contact preference forms, with 235 (75.3%) declaring they would like to be contacted and 77 (24.7%) stating they would not. Of the 221 records randomly sampled for this evaluation, contact preference forms had been submitted for 2 (0.9%).

Summary

Despite limitations, this evaluation provides useful information about adoptees' experiences with obtaining their birth records, which is pertinent not only to Oregon, but to adoptees and families throughout the country. Although there are no national estimates of the number of adult adoptees, it is clear that this issue affects millions of Americans. It is estimated that 1% to 4% of American families include an adopted child.⁴

Additionally, a random digit dialing telephone survey of 1,554 adults found that 6 in 10 Americans had experience with adoption, meaning that they themselves, a family member, or a close friend was adopted, adopted a child, or placed a child for adoption.⁵

Currently, all but four states restrict adult adoptees' access to their birth records, most through laws that were passed in the first half of the 20th century. As was the case in Oregon prior to Measure 58, adoptees in many states can access their birth records only with a court order. Numerous other states have modified their laws to allow adoptees to access their birth records given one or more of the following provisions: (a) their birth parents consent, (b) their birth parents have not filed a request for non-disclosure, or (c) their adoption was completed before or after a specified date. The debate over increased adoptee access to pre-adoption birth records will likely continue, as adoptee groups are active throughout the country.

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