Adoptions Australia Data Quality Statement 2015–16

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Identifying and definitional attributes

Metadata item type: Data Quality Statement

METEOR identifier: 659866

Registration status: AIHW Data Quality Statements, Superseded 13/12/2017

Data quality

Data quality statement summary:

• The Adoptions Australia collection contains data on adopted children, their adoptive families and birth mothers, as well as information on the number of contact/information requests and vetoes lodged by parties to an adoption. Data are collected on intercountry, local and known child adoptions. Additional data are also collected on the length of time of different intercountry adoption processes.

• The small population of the report creates some issues for reporting data. Proportional changes from one reporting period to the next, and rates based on small numbers must be interpreted with caution. Exploring trends over long periods (for example, 10 and 25 years) provides more robust results. The small population also increases the potential for attribute disclosure. Further, disaggregation of analyses by Indigenous status is not possible due to the small number of Indigenous children covered by the collection each year.

• The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) compiles the data each year using data extracted from the administrative systems of the state and territory departments responsible for adoptions. Some data are also provided by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

• Overall, the quality and coverage of data in the Adoptions Australia collection is good. Data are only partially available for 3 of the 27 collection tables (1 jurisdiction was unable to provide or only able to partially provide data), and data are rarely recorded as unknown in any of the collection tables.

Institutional environment:

The AIHW is a major national agency set up in 1987 by the Australian Government under the *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987* (Cwlth) to provide reliable, regular and relevant information and statistics on Australia's health and welfare. It is an independent statutory authority, which is governed by a management board, and accountable to the Australian Parliament through the Health portfolio.

The AIHW aims to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians through better health and welfare information and statistics. It collects and reports information on a wide variety of topics and issues, including health and welfare expenditure, hospitals, disease and injury, mental health, ageing, homelessness, disability and child protection.

The AIHW also plays a role in developing and maintaining national metadata standards. This work helps improve the quality and consistency of national health and welfare statistics. The AIHW works closely with governments and non-government organisations to achieve greater adherence to those standards in administrative data collections to promote national consistency and comparability of data and reporting.

One of the main functions of the AIHW is to work with the states and territories to improve the quality of administrative data, and, where possible, to compile national data sets based on data from each jurisdiction, analyse the data sets, and disseminate information and statistics.

Compliance with the provisions of both the *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987* (Cwth) and the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cwlth) ensures that the data collections managed by the AIHW are kept securely and under the strictest conditions to preserve privacy and confidentiality.

For further information, see www.aihw.gov.au.

Timeliness:

The reference period for *Adoptions Australia 2015–16* is from 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2016. The data set includes information related to all intercountry, local and known adoption orders finalised during this period, as well as limited information on placements that took place during this period.

The state and territory departments responsible for adoption provide data to the AIHW annually, following the end of each financial year. For the 2015–16 collection, the first iteration of data was due to the AIHW 6 weeks after the end of the financial year (by 5 August 2015), and data were finalised for all states and territories by 31 August 2016.

The data for each collection period are released in the AIHW's Adoptions Australia annual publication. In 2015–16, concurrent with the annual publication, key findings were released in an online snapshot, and through an interactive web portal.

Data from the Adoptions Australia collection are expected to be published in December of the final year of the reference period (that is, within 6 months after the end of the reference period).

Accessibility:

Publications containing Adoptions Australia data, including the annual Adoptions Australia reports and online snapshot, are available free of charge at www.aihw.gov.au.

Requests for unpublished data can be made by contacting the AIHW on (02) 6244 1000 or via email to info@aihw.gov.au. A cost recovery charge might apply to complicated requests. Depending on the nature of the request, requests for access to unpublished data might require approval from the state and territory data custodians and/or the AIHW Ethics Committee.

General enquiries about AIHW publications can be made to the Digital and Media Communications Unit via email to info@aihw.gov.au.

Interpretability:

Supporting information on relevant legislation and jurisdictional policies are presented at Appendix B of *Adoptions Australia 2015–16*. Supporting information is also provided in the footnotes to tables and in the Glossary. The AGD—the Australian Central Authority for intercountry adoption—provides expert advice on current intercountry adoption programs, which is incorporated into the report to inform and contextualise analyses.

Chapter 2 of *Adoptions Australia 2015–16* provides an overview of the 3 types of adoption in the report and further contextual information. Readers are advised to consider all supporting and contextual information to ensure appropriate interpretation of analyses presented by the AIHW.

Metadata for the Adoptions Australia collection can be found on METeOR, the AIHW's online metadata repository

/content/index.phtml/itemId/650865.

Relevance:

The Adoptions Australia collection is the authoritative source of national adoptions data for Australia. As well as providing information on the current period, the collection also allows for comparable trend data to be looked at. The collection is a valuable source for monitoring the role of adoption as part of Australia's response to issues of child welfare and safety.

Each year, the data collection includes information on intercountry, local and known adoption placements, and finalisations that occurred during the reporting period (that is, the 2015–16 reporting period would include data from 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2016). These data allow for analyses of the adopted child, the adoptive families, and, for local adoptions, the birth mothers of children with a finalised adoption order.

The collection also allows data on the number of contact/information requests and vetoes lodged by parties to an existing adoption to be looked at. In addition, data from the Department of Immigration and Border Protection on the number of visas issued for expatriate adoption and the countries of origin for these adoptions provide complementary information. When combined, these data give a detailed view of adoption in Australia.

Scope

A description of adoption and information on where the data for the collection are sourced is presented in Chapter 1 of Adoptions Australia 2015–16. A description of the categories of adoption included in the collection is provided in Section 2.1.

The Adoptions Australia collection contains data relating to 2 populations of adopted children:

• Finalisations—Children whose adoption orders were finalised during the reporting period. This includes orders made in Australia, and, in the case of some intercountry adoptions, where the full adoption order was made in the country of origin.

• Placements—Children, regardless of the status of their adoption order, who were placed with their adoptive families (that is, entered the home) during the reporting period.

There can be overlap between these 2 groups. Some children placed for adoption during the current period might not have their adoption finalised until a following year. In addition, some adoption orders finalised in the current period might relate to children who were placed in a previous year. However, the aggregate nature of the Adoptions Australia collection does not allow the degree of overlap to be determined.

The collection also contains data on the adoptive families and, for local adoptions, birth mothers of children with a finalised adoption order. In addition, data on the number of contact/information requests and vetoes lodged by parties to an existing adoption are collected.

Attribute disclosure

Due to the small size of the population covered by the collection, the potential for small cells is high. However, the risk of sensitive attribute disclosure is considered low, because:

• most report tables are aggregated to a national level

• there is the possibility that an observed placement is not finalised in the year it occurred (making the population of finalised adoption orders in a report difficult to observe, and, therefore, it is difficult to determine whether information about an observed adoptee is present in a particular report)

• most variables are considered of low sensitivity by national, state and territory adoption authorities, and some data are put in the public domain at a similar level of disaggregation by these authorities.

Accuracy:

Data for the Adoptions Australia collection are extracted each year from the administrative systems of the Australian state and territory departments responsible for adoption, according to definitions and technical specifications agreed by the departments and the AIHW.

Overall, the quality and coverage of data in the collection are good. In 2015–16, of the 27 data tables in the aggregate collection:

• only 3 tables did not contain data for all jurisdictions, as New South Wales was unable to provide data for 2 tables and Western Australia for 1 table

• 3 tables contain data recorded as unknown but no tables had an unknown category which comprised more than 1% of the data supplied.

Limitations in existing data

Existing national adoptions data are constrained by several factors, including limits in information recorded on state and territory databases for administrative purposes (for known child adoptions, this is further constrained by the level of involvement the department has in the adoption process), and the capacity of countries of origin to capture relevant information about children and their families.

For intercountry adoptees, it is common for only minimal information about the child's history to be available. For example, many children placed for adoption in China have been abandoned with very little or no information about their social, health or family background (IAA 2015). A United States study found that prospective parents adopting from Korea received more information about the child's birth family, prenatal circumstances and perinatal events than those adopting from China, parts of Eastern Europe, Latin America (primarily Guatemala), the Philippines and India (Welsh et al. 2008) .

Several areas that could enrich the understanding of adoption in Australia have no reliable data source.

Parents and families

Adoptive families

While reasonable demographic information on adoptive families is available for intercountry and local adoptions, comparable national data for known child adoptions are not currently available. For step-parent adoptions, this is due to the limited involvement of the state and territory departments responsible for adoption in the process. Information on adoptive families involved in carer adoptions is more likely to be available on other administrative systems, but the availability of these data across all states and territories requires investigation. With the growing proportion of carer adoptions in the Australian adoption context, this information will become increasingly important to understanding adoption in Australia.

Families of intercountry adoptees

An adopted child's ability to adjust can be affected by the quality of relationships in the adoptive family. Unrealistic or rigid parental expectations, especially around the adopted child's meeting of academic standards or societal norms, can interfere with adjustment (Passmore et al. 2009). The more informed adoptive parents can be about the child's developmental or physical disabilities or chronic medical conditions (where relevant), the more capable they are of realistically anticipating problems. This, in turn, has been found to lead to more positive adjustment outcomes (Bornstein 2002).

While research indicates the importance of adoptive parents' access to historical information in improving post-adoption outcomes, the capacity of countries of origin to determine and record information about a child is constrained by economic and social issues, and varies between countries. The amount of information available is generally inconsistent and of poor quality, making it unsuitable for reporting.

Processing times for local and known child adoptions

Adoption process timeframes in Australia are of significant interest to various stakeholders (from government officials, to prospective adoptive parents). Such data provide insights into the efficiency of contemporary adoption practices, and also speak to the lived experience of prospective parents seeking to form a family via adoption.

Data in this report provide an indication of the time involved in the intercountry adoption process and changes over time. However, data are not currently nationally available for the other types of adoption. For carer adoptions, complexities around

when the process should be considered to have commenced make it difficult to capture nationally comparable data. The availability of data on processing times for local adoptions has not currently been explored. These data could provide useful information on the similarities or differences between types of adoption.

Prospective adoptive parents and children in need of adoption

For intercountry adoption, national data have been reportable since 2011–12 on the number of applicants who became official clients of a state or territory department responsible for adoption in a given year. While useful, because the data only reflect new applicants in a given year, these data cannot currently be used to determine the total pool of prospective adoptive parents who have become official clients and are still awaiting the allocation of a child. The availability of similar data for local adoptions and for carers who have also been authorised as potential adoptive parents has not currently been explored.

Similarly, there is currently no way of determining the current population of children in need of adoption.

Information on both populations would help to inform the national picture of adoption in Australia, by providing insights into the present level of unmet need.

Adoptions of children with special needs

Due to complexities in determining a consistent definition of 'special needs', data on the adoption of children with special needs are not currently available in Australia. These data would help to further describe the population of children in need of adoption, inform prospective adoptive parents, and provide an indication of the types of supports required before and after adoption.

'Special needs', for the purposes of adoption, is not legally defined in Australia and countries of origin classify cases of special needs differently. However, in addition to mental or physical disabilities, behavioural problems and/or emotional disorders, the term is also often applied (in the context of adoption) to a broad range of conditions deemed to pose potential barriers to the permanent placement of a child and/or affect the outcome of an adoption (HCCH 2005; Tan et al. 2007).

Older children, and children who are part of a sibling group that is to be placed with the same adoptive family, might be considered as having special needs due to the added difficulty in finding a suitable family (Tan et al. 2007). For example, for local adoptions, Australian Central Authorities might consider children aged over 4 as having special needs, as they are likely to have been placed with multiple carers and have had fewer opportunities to develop close relationships with any one. Further, many of these children have had a history of deprivation, abandonment and trauma, which can leave them with developmental delays and emotional vulnerabilities, requiring long-term therapeutic and intensive parenting to promote secure attachments (HCCH 2005; Roberson 2006; Spark et al. 2008).

Adoption services and supports

Research suggests that access to adequate services and supports for both the adopted child and the adoptive family is essential for positive outcomes, especially for intercountry and special needs adoptions. Pre-adoption preparation and ongoing support programs have been identified as important factors that contribute to successful outcomes. Emotional support provided to adoptive parents by family and friends is also important for the success of an adoption (Spark et al. 2008). In 2009, the Intercountry Adoption Harmonisation Working Group announced the completion of the Nationally Consistent Core Curriculum. This is a framework consisting of 9 compulsory education and training units that help prospective adoptive parents understand and develop realistic expectations about the adoption process (AGD 2012). Such initiatives help make pre-adoption services more widely available across Australia.

Previous studies have highlighted some post-adoption support services needed by adoptive parents. These are particularly important for adoptive families of children with special needs. These services include support or counselling services, respite care services, financial support, advocacy services, support for siblings, special education services, emergency assistance, and crisis intervention services (Reilly & Platz 2008).

The importance of post-adoption support services has also been acknowledged in other countries. A recent report from the Parliament of the United Kingdom Select Committee on Adoption Legislation (2013) recommended the introduction of a statutory duty on local authorities and service providers to cooperate to provide post-adoption support.

Post-adoption support services provided by both government and non-government agencies are becoming increasingly available in all states and territories. The Australian and state and territory governments have agreed to work to improve the availability and accessibility of these services under the Commonwealth–State Agreement for the Continued Operation of Australia's Intercountry Adoption Program (Banks 2009).

To understand adoption in Australia, it is important to know how adoptees and adoptive families fare after an adoption is finalised. However, once an adoption is finalised it is difficult to identify an adoptee in administrative data, as they are legally no different from a child still living with their non-adoptive parent(s), and there is no requirement for adoptees to report their adoptive status. This makes gathering data on access to supports by adoptees and their adoptive families difficult. For the same reasons, the long-term outcomes of adoption (such as rates of disruption or levels of educational attainment) cannot be explored.

Addressing information gaps

The AIHW, with the support of the state and territory departments responsible for adoption and other national agencies, such as the Australian Government's Attorney-General's Department (AGD) and Department of Social Services, is continually working to improve the quality and comparability of national data. Where possible, the AIHW also seeks to work with its partners to expand national collections to improve coverage and make the collections more responsive to the needs of stakeholders.

Coherence:

The Adoptions Australia collection was initially developed in 1993. The report series started when the AIHW took over the national adoptions data collection in 1993. The first 3 editions were published in 1993 and 1994 (as data were collected back to 1990–91), and from 1995 an edition has been released annually. Before this, national adoptions data were collected and reported (briefly) by 2 other organisations: the National Working Party on Welfare Statistics (Australia) (WELSTAT) (from 1987–88 to 1989–90) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (from 1979–80 to 1984–85). No national data were collected in 1985–86 and 1986–87, resulting in a break in trend data for these years.

From the 1998–99 report onwards, the categories of adoption used in Adoptions Australia differ from those in previous publications. The categories were changed to better reflect the types of adoptions, and to bring the terminology more in line with that used by state and territory departments responsible for adoption. However, the new categories of adoption introduced in 1998–99 can still be mapped to those reported before this period, avoiding a break in trend data. See *Adoptions Australia 2008–09* for further details (AIHW 2010a).

Tables that have been consistently collected from 1990–91 onwards are comparable. In addition, data standards were carried over from the ABS Adoptions Standards (March 1982), allowing comparable data from the years before the AIHW collection to be incorporated into trends reporting. The report series uses the long history of data collection to analyse trends over a 25-year period to capture the effect of changes to local and international societal views and policies.

In 2003–04, additional tables on the intercountry adoption process were included in the Adoptions Australia national collection template. Before 2011–12, these data were not published as part of the Adoptions Australia report. In 2011–12, by agreement with the state and territory data custodians, these data were incorporated into the Adoptions Australia report (including trend data back to 2007–08).

From 2000 to 2007, the AIHW also provided the AGD with a detailed report on finalised intercountry adoptions from Hague countries as part of Australia's reporting responsibilities under the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. In 2008–09, tables with continuing relevance were incorporated into the main Adoptions Australia report, and the separate report was ceased.

Data products

Implementation start date: 01/07/2015

Source and reference attributes

Submitting organisation: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)

Reference documents:

AGD (Australian Government Attorney-General's Department) 2012. Intercountry Adoption Harmonisation Working Group—Nationally consistent core curriculum (NCCC) for parents considering intercountry adoption. Canberra: AGD. Bornstein MH 2002. Handbook of parenting: children and parenting, vol. 1, 2nd edn. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. HCCH (Hague Conference on Private International Law) 2005. Country profile for intercountry adoption receiving state: Australia. Netherlands: HCCH. Viewed 30 September 2015,

Relational attributes

Related metadata references:

Supersedes Adoptions Australia Data Quality Statement 2014–15
AIHW Data Quality Statements, Superseded 19/12/2016

Has been superseded by Adoptions Australia 2016–17: Quality Statement
AIHW Data Quality Statements, Superseded 12/12/2018