

Adoptions Australia 2019-20; Quality Statement

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Identifying and definitional attributes

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Data quality

Data quality statement summary:

- The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Adoptions Australia collection contains data on adopted children, their adoptive families and parents, 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 and the number of visa applications approved for children adopted through expatriate 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 identification of individuals. Further, disaggregation of analyses by Indigenous status is not possible due to the very small number of Indigenous children covered by the collection each year.
- The 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 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs.
- Overall, the quality and coverage of data in the Adoptions Australia collection are good; however, data are only partially available for 7 of the 31 collection tables with 1 or 2 jurisdictions unable to provide data. It is rare for data to be recorded as unknown in any of the collection tables.

Institutional environment: The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is a major national agency set up by the Australian Government under the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987](#) to provide reliable, regular and relevant information and statistics on Australia's health and welfare. It is an independent corporate Commonwealth entity established in 1987, 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 range of topics and issues, ranging from health and welfare expenditure, hospitals, disease and injury, and mental health, to ageing, homelessness, disability and child protection.

The Institute also plays a role in developing and maintaining national metadata standards. This work contributes to improving the quality and consistency of national health and welfare statistics. The Institute works closely with governments and non-government organisations to achieve greater adherence to these 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 datasets based on data from each jurisdiction, to analyse these datasets and disseminate information and statistics.

The [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987](#), in conjunction with compliance to the [Privacy Act 1988](#), (Cth) ensures that the data collections managed by the AIHW are kept securely and under the strictest conditions with respect to privacy and confidentiality.

Timeliness:

The reference period for *Adoptions Australia 2019–20* is from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020. The data set includes information related to all intercountry, local and known child adoption orders finalised during this period. It also includes limited information on placements that took place during this period, parties accessing their adoption records during that period, and adoption vetoes.

The state and territory departments responsible for adoption provide data to the AIHW annually, following the end of each financial year. For the 2019–20 collection, due to accommodations put in place to support states and territories in their response to the unprecedented impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), additional time was provided for departments to provide data required for national reporting. The first iteration of data was due to the AIHW 12 weeks after the end of the financial year (by 27 September 2020), and data were finalised for all states and territories by 4 November 2020.

The data for each collection period are released in the AIHW's *Adoptions Australia* annual publication. In 2019–20, concurrent with the annual publication, key findings were released through a number of online products including factsheets on intercountry, local and known child adoptions. Data from the AIHW *Adoptions Australia* collection are generally published in December of the final year of the reference period (that is, within 6 months after the end of the reference period). Due to the impacts of COVID-19 and accommodations made to support state and territory departments participation in the 2019–20 collection, *Adoptions Australia 2019–20* was released on 17 March 2021. The report is accessible for free through the AIHW website

Accessibility:

Publications based on the *Adoptions Australia* collection, including the annual *Adoptions Australia* reports, are available at www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-welfare-services/adoptions.

Requests for unpublished data can be made by completing a data on request form at www.aihw.gov.au/our-services/data-on-request. 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.

For general enquiries about AIHW publications visit www.aihw.gov.au/contact-us.

Interpretability: Supporting information on relevant legislation and jurisdictional policies are presented in the Adoptions Australia reports at Appendix B: Legislation. Supporting information is also provided in the footnotes to tables and in the Glossary. The Australian Government Department of Social Services—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 the report 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.

Relevance: The Adoptions Australia collection is the authoritative source of national adoptions data in Australia. As well as providing information on the most recent reporting period (for the 2019–20 reporting period this refers to data from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020), the collection also allows for comparable trend data to be examined. 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 child adoption placements, and finalised adoption orders. These data relate to adopted children, 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 examined. In addition, data from the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs on the number of visas applications approved for children adopted through expatriate adoption processes, and the program status of countries of adoptee citizenship for these adoptions provides complementary information. When combined, these data give a detailed view of adoption in Australia.

Scope

A description of adoption and information on the sources of data for the collection are presented in Chapter 1 of the annual Adoptions Australia report. 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 orders, who were placed with their adoptive families during the reporting period (that is, for local adoptions, when the child is taken into care of the prospective adoptive parent(s), and for inter country adoption, when the child enters Australia).

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 2019–20, of the 31 data tables in the aggregate collection:

- 7 tables did not contain data for all jurisdictions, as New South Wales was unable to provide data for 2 tables, Western Australia for 5 tables, and the Australian Capital Territory for 4 tables
- 4 tables contain data recorded as unknown, but no tables had an unknown category that comprised more than 3% of the data supplied.

Coherence:

The Adoptions Australia collection was initially developed in 1993. The annual

Adoptions Australia 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) (from 1987–88 to 1989–90) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (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 1998–99 onwards, the categories of adoption used in Adoptions Australia reports 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.

Tables that have been consistently collected from 1990–91 onwards are comparable. In addition, data standards were carried over from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 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 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). Due to restrictions on the release of Subclass 102 visa data to the AIHW by the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, introduced by the *Australian Border Force Act 2015*, visa data in 2014–15 and 2015–16 were heavily suppressed. New collection tables and national technical specifications were introduced in 2016–17 to allow alternative reporting of these data.

From 2000 to 2007, the AIHW also provided the Australian Government Attorney General's Department 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 series, and the separate report was ceased.

In 2016–17, a number of existing collection tables had their scope expanded to include adoptions by known carers, such as foster parents. These data were reported for the first time in *Adoptions Australia 2017–18*. This additional information was included in the national collection due to the growing prominence of this type of adoption in the Australian context (between 2000–01 and 2019–20 carer adoptions rose 490%).

From 2016, the AIHW collaborated with state, territory, and Australian Government agencies to develop national definitions, and improve the availability of data on the adoption of children with special needs. In *Adoptions Australia 2018–19*, data on the needs of intercountry adoptees placed with their adoptive families in 2017–18 were reported for the first time. This reporting continued in 2019–20. Updated data on 'sex' and 'Indigenous status' were also included in the 2019–20 collection to make these compliant with national standards related to these demographic items.

The 2019–20 collection also saw the introduction of a national estimate of intercountry adoptees adopted from 1979–80 to 2018–19—including an estimate of those adoptees who would now be 18 years or over.

Limitations of existing data

Existing national adoptions data are constrained by several factors, including limits in information recorded on state and territory databases for administrative purposes, and the capacity of countries of origin to capture relevant information about

children and their families. For some types of adoption such as known child adoptions by step-parents or expatriate adoptions, this can be further constrained by the limited involvement of the department in the adoption process. For intercountry adoptees, it is common for only minimal information about the child's history to be available.

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

Adoptions by carers

Development work undertaken since 2016 has allowed the collection of demographic information on adoptive families involved in known carer adoptions that is comparable to what is collected for intercountry and local adoptions. Children and young people involved in adoptions by known carers often have a complex pre-adoption care history that can involve child protection services. However, due to the aggregate nature of the Adoptions Australia collection, data on this pre-adoption history are currently unable to be reported.

Families of intercountry adoptees

Research indicates the importance of adoptive parents' access to historical information in improving post-adoption outcomes; however, 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 processing time frames 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 the Adoptions Australia report series currently 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 started make it difficult to capture nationally comparable data. Due to the impact of COVID-19, plans to explore the availability of data on processing times for local adoptions as part of potential data improvements in 2019–20 did not proceed. 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. A field test of a number of new collection tables seeking to address this gap was conducted in 2018–19. Due to the impact of COVID-19, it was agreed to delay further development of these tables until after the 2019–20 collection.

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.

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.

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.

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 not 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) are difficult to ascertain.

Addressing information gaps

The AIHW, with the support of the state and territory departments responsible for adoption and the Australian Government 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.

Source and reference attributes

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

Relational attributes

Related metadata references: Supersedes [Adoptions Australia 2018–19; Quality Statement](#)
[AIHW Data Quality Statements](#), Standard 13/12/2019

Has been superseded by [Adoptions Australia 2020–21; Quality Statement](#)
[AIHW Data Quality Statements](#), Superseded 28/04/2023