

RESEARCH NOTE

Adoption in Canada: A Neglected Area of Data Collection for Research

SANDRA HEMPHILL*

SUSAN McDANIEL**

H. DAVID KIRK**

A Need for Research on Adoption

For some decades there has been in Canada, as in the United States, recurrent public interest in adoption. At various times this interest has been kindled by professional concern about unauthorized child placement and by the plight of children made homeless by war and other calamities. More recently the issue attracting public attention has been the rise of social movements favouring the removal of legal and administrative restrictions. Almost everywhere in North America the original birth records of the adopted have long been sealed, presenting adult adopted persons with difficulties confronted by no other category of persons.

In spite of a widespread awareness of adoption among various publics, remarkably little is available in the way of quantitative information on adoption. It is almost impossible to assess correctly the frequency with which adoption is practiced in different sections of Canada's population and what changes have occurred in these patterns over the past several decades. This paper addresses the problems of adoption data collection, tabulation and dissemination and attempts some preliminary analysis of adoption trends in this country based on the data that are available. It also makes certain recommendations for the collection and preparation of adoption data.

Why this Research Concern?

There have always been children who through death of their parents or other familial or social difficulties lose or become separated from their original mothers and fathers. Societies have evolved different means of coping with this universal phenomenon. The most common means used throughout the world is that of close relatives or family friends acting as surrogate or foster parents. In conjunction with this kind of caretaking, there has been reliance on orphanages typically maintained either by religious or government bodies, as well as foster homes and adoption. Of these, the past three decades has seen a considerable

*Department of Mathematics, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G1, Canada.

**Department of Sociology, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G1, Canada.

decrease in reliance on orphanages, and a related increase in the emphasis on foster care and adoption.¹ According to some authors this change is due to the perceived inadequacy of the alternatives, and the desire of people who are unable to procreate to nevertheless "parent" children (Shudde, 1955; Jonassohn, 1965; Schoenberg, 1964). This movement may also have been promoted by political interests, given that adoption is the least expensive option for the public purse.

Legal adoption, sanctioned by a court decree, is a relatively recent phenomenon in Canada. When adoption is discussed in this paper, it refers only to legal adoption. It is, of course, recognized that legal adoptions do not comprise all adoptions occurring in Canada but the definition corresponds to published data on adoption.

A number of social trends in Canada are now impinging on legal adoption dynamics. These might be categorized as "supply" and "demand" factors. Each set of factors has a positive and negative impact on adoption in a quantitative sense. In terms of supply such trends as increasing rates of illegitimacy, growing family dissolution and even sociopolitical instability in other parts of the world probably operate to increase the supply of adoptees. Other trends such as increased availability of contraception and abortion and changing norms about the acceptability of a never-married woman raising children born out of wedlock may be seen as countervailing influences. In terms of demand factors, such trends as increasing concern with decreasing fertility in the western world and desire to perpetuate the nuclear family without contributing unduly to world population growth might be seen as increasing the demand for adoptees. Decreasing demand might be attributed to increased availability of fertility drugs and medical techniques which circumvent sterility and perhaps increasing apprehension about taking an unknown child in light of the current public debate about adoptees seeking their "roots."

Existing Adoption Data

It is obvious that for the social scientist studying the family in Canada at present, the subject of adoption is an important and enticing one. However, consideration of the current "state of the art" of adoption research in Canada leads to the following observation. As a branch of family research its importance has been recognized (Kirk, 1964; Wargon, 1974) but work has been badly hampered by lack of an adequate data base. Therefore in the field of adoption, one can cite very little substantive research. There is, for example, the work by Kirk with comparative data on adoptive parent-child relations in Canada and the United States (1964); that by Kirk and Jonassohn, a comparative study of children in adoptive and non-adoptive families in Nova Scotia (1973); and the recently published Canadian Council on Social Development report by Hepworth (1980). The data base has not been developed for a number of reasons, most important of which was the discretion and confidentiality traditionally surrounding adoptions (Wargon, 1974). One Canadian demographer has pointed out that families with adopted children cannot be identified in Canadian census data and adds that "although records of adoptions are routinely compiled

¹ That there was a decided trend away from institutional care by 1940 in Canada is noted in the recently published report *Foster Care and Adoption in Canada* (1980) by H. Philip Hepworth Canadian Council on Social Development.

by the provincial governments, these records are prepared for administrative purposes only by the various provincial departments responsible for the supervision of adoption procedures, and are not suitable to research needs" (Wargon, 1974:129).

In Canada, collection of adoption data is the responsibility of the provinces and territories. Data on which this paper is based were solicited by the authors from the appropriate government departments in each of the ten provinces and the two territories in Canada. When these data are routinely published at all they appear typically only in the annual reports of the various provincial departments responsible for adoption. The researcher interested in studying adoption trends in Canada has the enormous challenge of unearthing data which, if available, are often not comparable across provinces. This problem is noted by Hepworth as well (1980:131).

Analysis of data collected from all provinces and the two territories in Canada reveals additional problems. Measures of adoption employed by individual provinces are not comparable. In some instances, measures have changed over time within the same province providing another challenge to those interested in doing trend studies of adoption, even within a particular province.

Although all provinces and territories collect and tabulate some data on adoptions, only some provinces publish age and sex breakdowns in their tabulations.² Only four provinces, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Quebec distinguish between relative and non-relative adoptions. One provincial agency suggested that the latter information was available only from the various child welfare agencies in that province. Anomalies also are found in the tabulated data. For example, the sum of relative and non-relative adoptions in Nova Scotia does not equal the total number of adoptions in that province.

Lack of comparability of adoption data across provinces is further confounded by the proliferation of categories into which adoptions are placed. Data were supplied to the authors on "ward", "non-ward", "private", "agency", "parent's own", "defacto", "relative", and "non-relative" adoptions. Definitions of these terms were often not provided. A further difficulty in attempting to study basic trends in adoption over time in Canada or to compare provinces is the challenge of discovering which of the many agencies involved in the complex process of adoption actually collects, tabulates and disseminates data to researchers and other interested parties.

In light of these weaknesses of the data on adoption and obvious problems with provincial comparability, a discussion of trends in adoption in Canada presents a major challenge to researchers. In addition to the problems described above, adoption data have not been available at all for some provinces and territories until very recently. Data are available for Saskatchewan only from 1968, for the Northwest Territories only from 1971. New Brunswick reports no data available until 1960 and then gaps exist for 1968, 1970, 1976,

² Jonassohn (1965) reports age and sex specific adoption data for the provinces of British Columbia and Nova Scotia. New Brunswick and Quebec provided the authors with age-sex distributions of adoptions. Hepworth (1980) provides fairly detailed information for British Columbia and Quebec including age categories of adopted children.

and 1977. Quebec adoption data begin in 1949. No data were available in that province for 1977 at the time the authors made their request in late 1978 and early 1979. Hepworth's (1980: 136) single table showing adoptions by province presents data only for the late 1960's and 1970's.

A further challenge to data analysis is provided by the fact that in some provinces the relevant information is shown for calendar years and in some by fiscal years. The Province of New Brunswick switched from fiscal year to calendar year collection and back to fiscal year in the period from 1960-1975. In preparing data for this paper, the authors transformed available data to calendar years. Fiscal year adoption data were divided into appropriate portions based on each province's fiscal year and added to the complementary portion of the preceding year. This procedure resulted in two calendar years of unreported data in the case of the Province of New Brunswick. In spite of these difficulties a trend analysis of the data on adoption is presented here.

Trends in Adoption in Canada

Table 1 presents Crude Adoption Rates (adoptions per 1,000 total population) for those four censal years for which adoption data are available for most provinces in Canada. Considerable variability in rates of adoption for each year is apparent. For 1976, rates range from a low of .464 in Quebec to a high of 2.79 for the Northwest Territories. For 1971 a somewhat smaller range is apparent from a low of .649 in Quebec to a high of 2.84

TABLE 1
Adoptions per 1,000 Population Canada and Provinces
1961, 1966, 1971, 1976

	1961	1966	1971	1976
CANADA	.691	.812	.919	.666
Newfoundland	.378	.614	.833	.888
P. E. I.	.688	.765	1.19	.719
Nova Scotia	.644	.731	.883	.918
New Brunswick	.970	1.11	1.01	—
Quebec	.617	.597	.649	.464
Ontario	.823	.954	.924	.688
Manitoba	—	.778	1.22	1.02
Saskatchewan	—	—	.591	.516
Alberta	1.28	1.11	1.49	1.05
British Columbia	.911	1.15	1.18	.727
Yukon	.684	.973	1.58	1.05
Northwest Territories	—	—	2.84	2.79

Sources: Adoption data are taken from individual provincial reports mailed on request to authors; Population data are taken from 1971 Census of Canada, Statistics Canada, Population: Age Groups, Table 7, pp. 7-1 through 7-10; 1976 Census of Canada, Statistics Canada, Population: Age Groups, Table 11, pp. 11-1 through 11-4.

in the Northwest Territories. In the 1960's for which no adoption data are available for the Northwest Territories, Alberta shows the highest rate of adoption in 1961 followed by New Brunswick while British Columbia reveals the highest rate in 1966, closely followed by Alberta. In 1966, Quebec again has the lowest rate but in 1961 it is Newfoundland with the lowest rate overall, .378.

For these four census years, all but four provinces experience a peak adoption rate around 1971 with a moderate decline by 1976. Only Ontario and New Brunswick experience a peak adoption rate in 1966. Only in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia does the rate of adoption continue to rise from 1961 through 1976. For Canada as a whole, the peak is reached in 1971. These peaks for the most part correspond with data presented by Hepworth (1980: 136), reproduced as Table 2. Hepworth's data which use non-censal years show peak adoption periods for Newfoundland and Nova Scotia in 1974-75, for New Brunswick in 1972-73, for Ontario in 1969 and for Saskatchewan in 1974.

The obvious interpretations of the statistics presented in Tables 1 and 2 is that they probably do not entirely reflect interprovincial differences, but include in addition to the latter, variability in reporting, classifying and tabulating adoption data. This is reminiscent of previous findings in a large scale study of the prevalence of adopted children in clinic populations in Montreal. There it was shown that "the most typical and problematic obstacle to accurate and reliable data collection lay in the semantics of adoption. The term 'adopted child' had a number of different meanings to the various admission workers at the several participating centres" (Kirk *et al.* 1966: 293).

Alternatively, the inter-provincial differences as reflected in the statistics might indicate, in part, differential departures from the more traditional means of solving the problem of children without families. Those provinces with lower rates of legal adoption might utilize

TABLE 2
Peak Years for Adoption by Province
(excluding territories)

Canada	1970-71
Newfoundland	1974-75
P. E. I.	1971-72
Nova Scotia	1974-75
New Brunswick	1972-73
Quebec	1971-72
Manitoba	1969
Saskatchewan	1974
Alberta	1972
British Columbia	1970-71

Source: Hepworth, H. Philip. 1980, *Foster Care and Adoption in Canada*. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, Table 52:136.

informal arrangements, foster homes and orphanages to a greater extent than those with higher rates. The Hepworth (1980) report reveals sufficient variability in foster care across provinces to indicate some support for the latter interpretation.

The finding that most provinces experienced a decline in the legal adoption rate in 1976 similarly calls for interpretation. It might be that the supply of children to be adopted has, in fact, diminished due to increasing reliance on contraception and abortion or to increasing numbers of children born out of wedlock being kept by their mothers or fathers. Alternatively, though less likely, is the possibility that legal adoption is no longer as popular as it was in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

The hypotheses suggested by these data deserve further investigation. Researchers attempting to test such alternative hypotheses, however, must be enterprising indeed because of the deficiencies in the data already cited. Information required to test the hypotheses suggested here might include foster home data, data on numbers of children available for adoption and data on numbers of babies born out of wedlock but kept. The challenge of amassing these data is enormous, as is noted by Hepworth (1980).

Recommendations

In a 1973 paper on health and welfare statistics prepared for the eight federal-provincial conference on economic statistics, one writer recommended the following on behalf of the Province of Alberta:

Much data useful in planning and developing social policies are being collected administratively by all provincial departments of welfare. Information is available on the percentage of the population on welfare by sex, age and reason for assistance, welfare expenditure per capita, child neglect cases per 1,000 population, child welfare cases per 1,000 population and numbers of children surrendered for adoption per 1,000 population. With some degree of variation, these figures are available in most provinces historically. We recommend that some consideration be given to the routine publication of these administrative data on a provincial comparative basis.

(McDaniel, 1973: 32)

Although a number of other recommendations made by the provinces at that time were acted upon this one was not. It is therefore recommended here that some standards for the routine collection of data on adoption be developed and implemented by the provinces. The precedent of routine collection of vital statistics data by the provinces and their tabulation and publication is necessary before research on adoption can proceed. At a minimum, these data on adoption should use standard definitions of terms, standard categories for classification, standard years as the basis of data collection and an age-sex breakdown of adoptions for all provinces and territories in Canada.

It is further recommended that data on adoptive families be routinely collected by the provinces on a standardized basis and made available to users. Such information as age of both spouses, family size including both additional adopted and natural children and

ethnicity and/or religion is particularly recommended for inclusion. Since these data are already available on individual adoption records, their routine tabulation should not pose much of an additional workload on departments of welfare or social development.

The study of adoption trends and dynamics in Canada is a much neglected area of family research. Although there have been some attempts by researchers to study the subject, most notably the study by the Canadian Council on Social Development authored by Hepworth (1980), research efforts have been and will continue to be seriously restricted by the lack of an adequate basic data base. It is hoped therefore that these recommendations will be heeded to enable research to proceed in this obviously important area of family research.

Acknowledgements:

The authors owe particular thanks to Sylvia Wargon of Statistics Canada for her thoughtful comments and contributions to this paper.

REFERENCES

- Hepworth, H. Philip
1980 *Foster Care and Adoption in Canada*. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development.
- Jarvis, George K.
1974 "The probability of suicide: identification of Canadian population segments at risk." Unpublished manuscript.
- Jonassohn, Kurt
1965 "On the use and construction of adoption rates." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 27 (4): 514-521.
- Kirk, H. David
1964 *Shared Fate: A Theory of Adoption and Mental Health* New York: Collier Macmillan.
- Kirk, H. David, Jonassohn, K. and Fish, A.
1966 "Are Adopted Children Especially Vulnerable to Stress?" *Archives of General Psychiatry*, Vol. 14, pp. 291-298.
- Kirk, H. David, and Jonassohn, K.
1973 *Halifax Children: A Study of Family Structure and the Health of Children* (mimeo, 90pp. available on request from H. D. Kirk, University of Waterloo).
- McDaniel, Susan A.
1973 "Health and welfare statistics in Alberta: some thoughts for improvement with emphasis on federal-provincial relations." Paper prepared for the Eight Federal-Provincial Conference on Economic Statistics, May 1973. Montebello, Quebec.
- Schoenberg, Carl
1964 "Adoption: the created family." *The Annals*.
- Shudde, Louis O.
1955 "Orphanhood—a diminishing problem." *Social Security Bulletin*, March.
- Wargon, Sylvia T.
1974 "Census Data and Social Analysis: A Canadian Example" *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* (Spring): 125-133.