

# Impact of past adoption practices

## Summary of key issues from Australian research

### Final report

A report to the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

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## Executive summary

Although reliable figures are not available, in the decades prior to the mid-1970s, it was common for babies of unwed mothers to be adopted. Estimates of the number of women, children and families affected by the adoption of babies of unwed mothers are considerable. However, there is limited research available in Australia on the issue of past adoption practices. The purpose of the attached paper, commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), is to review existing research literature about past adoption practices in Australia.

## Themes identified in the research literature

The available information highlights the following themes:

- the wide range of people involved, and therefore the wide-ranging impacts and “ripple effects” of adoption beyond mothers and the children that were adopted;
- the role not only of grief and loss, but the usefulness of understanding past adoption practices as “trauma”, and seeing the impact through a “trauma lens”;
- the ways in which past adoption practices drew together society’s responses to illegitimacy, infertility and impoverishment;
- anecdotal evidence of the variability in adoption practices;
- the role of choice and coercion, secrecy and silence, blame and responsibility, the views of broader society, and the attitudes and specific behaviours of organisations and individuals;
- the ongoing impacts of past adoption practices, including the process of reunion between mothers and their now adult children, and the degree to which it is seen as a “success” or not; and
- the need for information, counselling and support for those affected by past adoption practices.

## Key messages

There is a wealth of material on the topic of past adoption practices, including individual historical records, analyses of historical practices, case studies, expert opinions, parliamentary inquiries, unpublished reports (e.g., university theses), as well as published empirical research studies. They include analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data, gathered through methods such as surveys or interviews.

Despite this breadth of material, there is little reliable empirical research. To have an evidence base on which to build a policy response, research is needed that is representative, and systematically analyses and draws out common themes, or makes relevant comparisons with other groups (e.g., unwed mothers who did not relinquish babies, or married mothers who gave birth at the same time, etc.).

There is scope for new research to provide information where there are current gaps:

- conducting archival research on individual hospital records, administrative data and other historical documents, which could be used to answer questions around the extent of practices, variability between practices in different locations, factors that might have affected this, and the impact on individuals involved;
- supplementing such historical research with qualitative in-depth interviews with key informants from the time, such as relevant professionals and organisational leaders;
- conducting a systematic, representative study of the experiences of mothers affected by past adoption practices, their adopted children, the families who adopted them, and others involved in past adoption practices;
- examining the reasons why not all illegitimate babies of unwed mothers were adopted – and what distinguished between these two groups;

- using surveys or interviews to understand more about the value of reunions and “what works” to assist with the reunion process; and
- conducting surveys or interviews with men about their experiences as a father of a child who was adopted, as well as the experiences of the subsequent partners of the women who were unwed at the time of the adoption.

Building a reliable evidence base around the extent and impact of past adoption practices requires careful sifting between different sources of information. Consideration should also be given to how generalisable conclusions might be, given the role that individual authors may have (independent researcher, autobiography, biography, or a mixture). Good practice in evidence-based policy-making suggests prioritising where possible conclusions based on systematic research (although it must be recognised that retrospective research is descriptive and cannot say whether one event “caused” another).

## Conclusions

This review has shown that past adoption practices have the potential for lifelong consequences for the lives of these women and their children, as well as others, such as their families, the father, the adoptive parents and their families. Although there is a wealth of primary material, there is little systematic research on the experience of past adoption practices in Australia. In many areas, the information needs of those developing policies or services to support those affected by past practices cannot be addressed by the existing research base.

In assessing the value of the research literature in understanding the context and impact of past adoption practices, it is important to acknowledge that we are viewing past behaviour and judging it by the standards of today—with the benefit of hindsight. This does not discount the impact of these practices on those affected. Views about the moral correctness of past practices, or even the contributions of individuals or institutions are evident in the literature and while this material is distinguished from research, its significance is still acknowledged. For example, while acknowledging the pain and suffering of those affected by these past practices, the Parliament of Tasmania Joint Select Committee (1999) aptly summed up what the body of literature also shows:

In hindsight, it is believed that if knowledge of the emotional effects on people was available during the period concerned, then parents may not have pushed for adoption to take place and birthmothers may not have, willingly or unwillingly, relinquished their children. (p. 11)

Taking the time to understand the full extent of the impact of past practices is needed in order to be able to tailor appropriate service responses to meet the needs of those affected.

# 1 Introduction

The Supporting Mother's Benefit was introduced in Australia in 1973.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this event (and the other social and legal changes that affected the lives of single mothers and their babies in the 1970s), it was common for babies of unwed mothers to be adopted. This act had the potential for lifelong consequences for the lives of these women and their children, as well as others, such as their families, the father, the adoptive parents and their families. Commentators, professional experts, researchers and parliamentary committees have all accepted that past adoption practices were far from ideal, had the potential to do damage, and often did.

However, there is limited research available in Australia on the issue of past adoption practices. Finding relevant literature to review in this field is problematic, as it is difficult to identify research that examines the issues of consent and the contested nature of what "voluntary" relinquishment would look like, given the social attitudes, historical social work/child welfare practices and financial pressures at the time (such as views about single mothers, ex-nuptial children, illegitimacy and so on). A search of the literature on adoptions that addresses historical perspectives provides the closest alignment to this issue. There appears to be a dearth of literature published in peer review outlets, so the issue of critiquing the validity of the claims is an important one—separating out anecdotes, case studies, historical critiques and solid empirical data on the impact of past practices.

The purpose of this paper, commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and prepared by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), is to review existing research literature about past adoption practices. This literature review is the first step in developing an evidence base for use by government in understanding the issues. While the focus of this report is to identify and review relevant Australian research on past adoption practices, limited references (or comparisons) are made to overseas literature where relevant—particularly that of New Zealand—and where documents were easily accessible.<sup>3</sup>

At the outset, it is important to differentiate between the process of conducting new research and reviewing the existing research literature. For example, searching for and analysing historical documents/individual records, or gathering perspectives of those who experienced the practices under examination constitutes new research, rather than a literature review. It is beyond the scope of the current document to do anything beyond identifying and reviewing published literature (and to a limited extent, unpublished research literature).

In conducting this review, AIFS undertook the following steps:

- searching to identify relevant research literature, using social science databases;

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<sup>2</sup> The importance of the availability of this commonwealth pension to the economic circumstance of single mothers, and their capacity to provide for a child is widely noted in the literature (e.g., see Swain & Howe, 1995). There may have been other state/territory allowances or other payments that unmarried mothers might have been eligible for; however, the degree to which they were widely available, or whether there was variability in the way that women were advised of their eligibility to any such financial supports, has not been subject to systematic historical research.

<sup>3</sup> An extensive international literature search has not been conducted, as the focus is on understanding past Australian adoption practices and their impacts, and it is acknowledged that factors such as local laws, organisational cultures, and social attitudes are likely to shape both the practices themselves and their impact.

- consulting with key stakeholders to uncover other research literature;<sup>4</sup>
- bibliographic snowballing (uncovering additional research cited in the documents identified through the first two steps);
- classifying literature according to the taxonomy of research identified below; and
- highlighting key issues/themes that are identified in each report.

### *Terminology*

A range of different terms is used in the literature to refer to both adoption practices, and the women affected by them. These include:

- relinquishing mothers;
- parents who relinquished a child to adoption;
- birth mothers;
- natural mothers;
- genetic parents;
- adoption of ex-nuptial children;
- mothers affected by past adoption practices;
- mothers of the “stolen white generation” (analogous to the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children removed from their parents, which occurred at roughly the same time period) (Cole, 2008);
- real parents (Grafen & Lawson, 1996);
- losing a child to adoption (McGuire, 1998);
- reunited mother of child/ren lost to adoption (Farrar, 1998);
- separation from babies by adoption (Lindsay, 1998); and
- rapid adoption (the practice of telling a single mother her baby was stillborn, and the baby being adopted by a married couple).

It is acknowledged that some of the terms are perceived as “value-laden”, either because of their acceptance of a particular point of view (e.g., “stolen” implies illegal practices), or because their attempt at neutrality (e.g., “relinquishing mothers”) potentially hides what are alleged as immoral or illegal practices. For the purposes of the current document, where possible, the terms used by the authors of the reports being reviewed will be used to describe their findings.

It is important to note that in this review, the research on the removal of Aboriginal children and the subsequent creation of a Stolen Generation has not been included. The particular circumstances—in terms of geography, race, cultural attitudes, and separate legislative context—means that the issues are best considered separately. (Although, it is acknowledged that there may be strong similarities in terms of the actual experiences of individuals, and their psychological impact). The historical and psychological issues relating to the Stolen Generation has been well documented elsewhere (for example, in the ‘Bringing them Home’ Report, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

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<sup>4</sup> In late November 2009, FaHCSIA convened teleconferences with groups of relevant stakeholders to outline the purpose of the literature review that they were commissioning AIFS to conduct (i.e., this report), and to seek their input regarding appropriate material of which people were aware that would be appropriate for inclusion in the current report. The author of this report led the discussion, explaining the scope of the review, and the focus on research studies rather than individual case material or historical records. Stakeholders very generously supplied a considerable amount of material that was relevant to the current report. However, there were a number of overseas studies that focused on particular issues (e.g., the negative consequences of adoption for adoptees) in which the authors did not distinguish between “adoption” per se and past practices where relinquishment of children was rigorously promoted, accompanied by levels of coercion, which is the particular focus of this report (e.g., von Borczyskowski, Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2006). A considerable body of historical and personal records were also provided which were not able to be reviewed; however, the existence of this material—and the lack of systematic analysis of such records—contributed to the formation of the author’s conclusions about the adequacy of the research base, and opportunities for further research to inform policy.

## 1.1 Prevalence estimates and historical background information

With national statistics only compiled from 1969–70 onwards, it is not possible to reliably calculate the total (cumulative) number of past adoptions across Australia. Since 1969, rates of adoption of Australian-born children by non-related persons (i.e., excluding overseas adoptions, and adoption by step-parents, etc.) was highest in the early 1970s (with the highest being 9,798 for 1971–72). From then, there has been a rapid decline through to the early 1990s, since when it has remained relatively stable (see Box 1).

Winkler and van Keppel (1984) estimated that there were 35,000 non-relative adoptions during the 12 years from July 1968 to June 1980. In terms of lifetime prevalence—considering both past and more recent rates of adoptions—Winkler, Brown, van Keppel, and Blanchard (1988) estimated that “one in 50 women in Western countries in 1988 have placed a child for adoption (traditional, closed adoption) since the beginning of the twentieth century” (p. 48). Although not based on verifiable data, it highlights the issue that as they accumulate over a number of decades, the number of adoptions in total is likely to be significant. Winkler et al. also estimated the number of people affected by adoption (including birth parents, adoptive parents and the adoptee) to be 1 in 15 (see p. 3). Inglis (1984) claimed that, in Australia, more than 250,000 women have relinquished a baby for adoption since the late 1920s. Although she did not describe the basis for this calculation, it is one that has been widely cited since.

Therefore, there are no reliable data on the true extent of past practices, or the proportion that report ongoing negative effects. We do not have accurate data on the number of Australians who were affected, including not only the mothers themselves, but the fathers, any other subsequent partners the mothers had, the children who were adopted, and their adoptive parents, as well as wider family members of each of these.

## 1.2 History of adoption laws and policies

It is beyond the scope of this research literature review to conduct an in-depth analysis of past laws and institutional policies in Australia, and the changes that have occurred over time. However, these issues have been addressed in detail in a couple of major books, particularly Swain and Howe (1995) and Marshall and McDonald (2001). Some of the key milestones, as described by these authors, are outlined below:

- Legislation on adoption commenced in Western Australia in 1896, with similar legislation in other jurisdictions following.
- Before the introduction of state legislation on adoption, “baby farming”<sup>5</sup> and infanticide was not uncommon.
- Legislative changes emerged from the 1960s that enshrined the concept of adoption secrecy and the ideal of having a “clean break” from the birth mother.
- The Council of the Single Mother and her Children (CSMC) was set up in 1969, which set out to challenge the stigma of adoption and to support single and relinquishing mothers.
- The status of “illegitimacy” disappeared in the early 1970s, starting with a *Status of Children Act* in both Victoria and Tasmania in 1974 (in which the status was changed to “ex-nuptial”).
- Abortion became allowable in most states from the early 1970s (the 1969 Menhennitt judgement in Victoria and 1971 Levine judgement in NSW).
- Further legislative reforms started to overturn the blanket of secrecy surrounding adoption (up until changes in 1980s, information on birth parents was not made available to adopted children/adults).

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<sup>5</sup> Refers to the provision of private board and lodging for babies or young children at commercial rates, a practice that was often abused for financial gain, including cases of serious neglect and infanticide (see Marshall & McDonald, 2001, p. 21).

- Beginning with NSW (in 1976), registers were established for those wishing to make contact (both for parents and adopted children).
- In 1984, Victoria implemented legislation granting adopted persons over 18 the right to access their birth certificate (subject to mandatory counselling). Similar changes followed in other states (e.g., NSW introduced the *Adoption Information Act* in 1990).
- By the early 1990s, legislative changes in most states ensured that consent for adoption had to come from both birth mothers and fathers.

Since these legislative changes, adoption practices have reflected this shift away from secrecy to open adoptions. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), which publishes national statistical information on adoptions in Australia, noted that in 2007-08:

Agreements made at the time of adoption indicate that the majority of local adoptions are now “open” (77%)—only 23% of birth parents requested “no contact or information exchange”. (AIHW, 2009, p. 20)

### 1.3 Societal attitudes

Moving outside of the psychology and social work literature into areas such as history and sociology provides some insights into some of the attitudes and key turning points in society’s views relating to the issue of adoption. Again, the purpose of this review is not to comprehensively examine these issues, but to note some of the key themes that have been discussed in the literature:

- From the 1940s, it was seen as desirable to relinquish children as early as possible—straight after birth.
- Women’s magazines became fierce advocates for adoption.
- Waiting lists of prospective adoptive parents began to emerge in 1940s and 1950s.
- As demand outstripped supply, the pressure to relinquish was particularly high in maternity homes where matrons and social workers were often personally acquainted with the prospective adoptive parents.
- Children with disabilities continued to be classified as “unfit goods” (see Swain, 1995, and Marshall & McDonald, 2001).

#### *Different perspectives*

Many authors talk about the “adoptive triangle”: (a) the adopted child, (b) the birth (or “relinquishing”) mother, and (c) the adoptive parents. Each of these “parties” to the events may bring a different perspective. The primary focus of this review is to look at research literature on mothers who gave up babies for adoption, and the impact on them of the surrounding experiences. There is a much wider body of research looking at both the experience of adoptive children, and the experiences and needs of adoptive parents; however, it is beyond the scope of this brief review to give detailed consideration to these perspectives. It is important to note that in drawing any conclusions about the events of the past, consideration must be given to whose “eyes” through which the events are seen, and the emotional investment they have in their perspective.

#### *Value of different sources/types of information*

Researchers and policy-makers need to make value judgements about competing pieces of information—particularly when opposing perspectives or conclusions are drawn. The weight placed on different sources of information and different types of evidence will depend on not only the quality and reliability of that source (and the potential for bias or limited generalisability), but also on the purpose of the information. In other words, different types of evidence can be usefully used to answer different questions or address different information needs. In relation to past adoption practices, the following table outlines some of the different types of material that is available and how best to understand their usefulness.



Table 1. Classifying the range of research and information sources relating to past adoption practices

Type of document or information	Examples of issues addressed	Strengths and limitations
Individual historical records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personal documents relating to individual cases, including:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– case files from hospitals or welfare departments</li> <li>– birth certificates</li> <li>– consent forms or other administrative documentation</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rich detail about individuals or particular institutions</li> <li>▪ Limited generalisability: does not address whether issues were unique or commonly experienced</li> </ul>
Analysis of historical practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Uses documentary evidence (case files, administrative records, legislation, policy documents, etc.) to understand the social climate and legal framework at the time</li> <li>▪ Could include interviews from key informants (e.g., hospital matrons, nurses, doctors, social workers, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Depending on the search strategy used, may allow for conclusions to be drawn about the extent of particular issues</li> <li>▪ Administrative data may be used to calculate (or estimate) prevalence data</li> </ul>
Case studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personal stories (autobiographies and biographies) (Note: It is important to differentiate between collations of case studies/biographies, and systematic qualitative research that has an explicit participant selection criteria/process; and a systematic integration/synthesis of the evidence into themes)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Taken together, multiple case studies are useful for identifying the full range of issues that may have been experienced</li> <li>▪ Individual case studies do not allow you to identify how typical or common the issues are</li> <li>▪ Literature varies in the degree of synthesis of themes across cases</li> </ul>
Expert opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Could be based on status as an expert in a content area (e.g., psychiatry), or experience in working in the sector (nurse, doctor, social worker etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provides different views (but perspectives not always transparent)</li> <li>▪ Data source may be unclear (e.g., whether they are personal views or conclusions based on systematic, structured, empirical data analysis is not always clearly differentiated)</li> </ul>
Parliamentary inquiries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Collation of a range of sources of information, including: personal experiences, expert opinions, historical records (both individual data and systematic analysis of multiple records/sources), as well as empirical research from the social science traditions (including psychology, psychiatry, social work, sociology, anthropology)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Draws out a broad range of issues</li> <li>▪ Mix of all the above, but mostly personal stories</li> <li>▪ While there is some “testing” of the reliability of the evidence, issues of representativeness or generalisability, or the differentiation between different sources of evidence (along the continuum of research quality/reliability) are often missing</li> </ul>
Unpublished reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reports by institutions, government departments, or student theses from universities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May not have gone through the process of peer review by independent experts</li> <li>▪ Are difficult to access</li> </ul>

Published empirical* studies: <i>Quantitative</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Independent researchers analyse data using recognised social science methods</li> <li>▪ Involves systematic analysis of the data across multiple participants</li> <li>▪ Includes data collected through surveys, interviews, direct observation of participants/subjects</li> <li>▪ Can be collected at one point in time (cross-sectional), or can follow the same group of participants over time (longitudinal)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Peer review process for journal articles is recognised within the research community as the highest form of evidence, as the information is subject to scrutiny (e.g., many journals require that the data are available for re-analysis on request)</li> <li>▪ Often rely on volunteers (self-selected samples), which may allow for bias in results, reducing the generalisability of the findings</li> <li>▪ Data are retrospective</li> <li>▪ Research designs are often cross-sectional (rather than tracking experiences over time)</li> <li>▪ Possibility of recall bias if the adoption experiences were not recent</li> </ul>
Published empirical* studies: <i>Qualitative</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Using explicit selection criteria, and recognised methodology for systematically identifying themes, and synthesising information emerging across participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Strength similar to case studies (see above), but with the added benefit of drawing out common themes (but not the degree to which those themes are representative)</li> <li>▪ Qualitative data show rich lived experience of participants, but not whether the themes and issues that emerged are representative</li> </ul>

Note: \* Empirical research refers to studies where researchers base their conclusions on data collected systematically via a direct or indirect method, utilising recognised methods of analysis to synthesise the information or test hypotheses.

Often a particular product or item of literature (such as a conference presentation) is a combination of some of the above information types, such as where autobiographical case material is interwoven with discussion—though not necessarily systematic analysis—of historical material, reviews of the literature, and expert opinion.

### *Biography/case study posing as research*

Part of the difficulty in assessing the quality of the evidence and drawing together consistent themes or conclusions from the research literature is that in this topic area, where the personal story is the data, it is very easy for (auto)biographies and/or case studies to pose as research. For example, Nancy Verrier’s “primal wound” theory about the impact of adoption on children is presented using much of the language of academic research (Verrier, 1998, n. d.). Her arguments are based on a number of recognised theories (mainly psychoanalytic). However, despite articulating an hypothesis, she does not *test* the hypothesis (e.g., through experimental or observational data). Although often described as a “researcher”, what she provides is more accurately described as an autobiographical perspective from an adoptive parent, drawing on research to understand her daughter’s experience of adoption. This is not to say that Verrier’s perspective is not valid (it is), or that her theory is not sound (it is consistent with a number of other largely untested psychoanalytically oriented theories), but simply that it is not empirically tested. The basis of quantitative research methods is that a falsifiable hypothesis<sup>6</sup> is proposed, and a research study designed to attempt to do so. If the null hypothesis is rejected, then the researcher can assume that appropriate conclusions based on the data are defensible.

<sup>6</sup> A falsifiable hypothesis refers to situations where you can test whether the opposite is true. For example, if you hypothesise that women are smarter than men, examining the IQ scores of equivalent groups of men and women can be used to support or falsify the hypothesis.

## 2 Key themes

The literature that was reviewed for this report is briefly summarised and categorised, using the taxonomy outlined in Table 1. These are included in the appendix, as follows:

- Table A1. Analysis of historical practices
- Table A2. Case studies
- Table A3. Expert opinion
- Table A4. Parliamentary inquiries
- Table A5. Unpublished reports
- Table A6. Published empirical studies

The key themes that have emerged from these documents are drawn together below before addressing the issues of the current needs of those affected by past adoption practices and the adequacy of the research evidence base.

### 2.1 Range of people involved

The range of people involved who played a role and who are potentially affected by past adoption practices include:

- mothers;
- the adopted children;
- fathers (although the father was not always known, anecdotal evidence from case studies suggests they often were, and included not only boyfriends, but also husbands; however, there is a dearth of research looking at their role and any impact of past events on them and their lives);
- the mother’s family (failing to provide support, actively demanding relinquishment, silence and censure);
- management/leaders of the organisations involved with adoption (hospital administration, leaders of churches or religious orders);<sup>7</sup>
- individuals within these organisations (social workers, nurses, doctors, nuns);
- state/territory governments (responsible for enacting child welfare legislation, operating the statutory welfare department, and funding/regulating other non-government organisations to operate adoption services);
- the adoptive family;
- doctors treating infertile couples (creating demand for babies to be given up for adoption);
- political and social structures available to support single mothers (absent or inadequate—the Supporting Mother’s Benefit was not introduced until 1973, coinciding with a rapid decline in adoptions from the peak of 1971–72);
- psychological and social work theories that were used by proponents to support various aspects of the adoption practices (including the “clean break” theory); and
- broader societal attitudes (such as: the role of women; sex and illegitimacy; poverty and the capacity of single women to effectively parent and raise good citizens; the silence that descended on pregnancy outside of marriage; closed adoption).

The range of people involved suggests therefore the potential for wide-ranging impacts, including the possibility of the effects of past adoption practices on these individuals in turn “rippling” through to others, including other children and family members. The trauma experienced by one individual can have effects on others, for example, by affecting their emotional availability, relationship skills, sense

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that during the decades when great numbers of women were surrendering children for adoption (including the 1970s), the major social institutions of government, church and the law were governed almost entirely by men (Marshall & McDonald, 2001, p. 80).

of identity and self-efficacy, or by affecting the quality of their own parenting skills.<sup>8</sup> Although these issues are sometimes identified in case studies, there has not been explicit examination of the nature and extent of such impacts.

It is also important to consider the role of the parents of the young unwed mothers affected by past adoption practices. For example, one of the women from Kate Inglis' (1984) ground-breaking Australian compilation of personal testimonies, "Joy", described her emotional reaction when she thinks back on the actions of her own mother:

The longer I'm a mother the more amazed I am about what she [my mother] did to me. I mean after what you go through with kids you'd fight for them, wouldn't you? (p. 31)

## 2.2 Grief, loss and trauma

Very few research studies on the effects of past adoption practices are based on theoretical models. The two theories that have been used to understand the impact of "relinquishment" (see Winkler & Van Keppel, 1984) are:

- grief/loss (in comparison to other bereavement experiences); and
- as a stressful life event (focusing on specific stressful aspects of the experience, including pregnancy, shame, moving towns, lack of social support, and isolation from family, as well as the event itself of separation from the child).

In discussions about these frameworks during the consultations with key stakeholders (see footnote 3), some stakeholders felt that both of these frameworks underestimate the impact and do not fully capture the experience of past adoption practices. They preferred to describe their experiences within a trauma framework.<sup>9</sup> Social science researchers have used a trauma framework to understand the impact of similar phenomenon (e.g., the effects of child maltreatment or adult sexual assault), but this has not explicitly been posited or tested empirically in relation to mothers affected by past adoption practices (Connor & Higgins, 2008).

### *Traumatising aspects of past practices*

During the consultation with stakeholders, AIFS was advised that there were a number of "gaps" in the traditional research literature where particular issues of relevance for affected mothers were not considered. During the consultation, the following issues were highlighted, many of which relate to the issue of consent and coercion, and the theme of ongoing trauma:

- administration of high levels of drugs to the mother in the perinatal period (pain relief, sedatives and a hormone that suppresses lactation) that were believed to affect capacity to consent;
- not allowing the mother to see the baby (actively shielded by sheet or other physical barrier during birth, removing the baby from the ward immediately after birth);
- withholding information about the baby (e.g., gender, health information, even whether the baby was a live birth);
- discouraging the mother from naming the baby;
- bullying behaviour by consent takers (seen as the "bastions of morality", protecting "good families");
- failure to advise the mother of her right to rescind the decision to relinquish;

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<sup>8</sup> For a description of the "ripple effects" and the way that trauma can affect the family members of someone who has experienced sexual assault, see Morrison, Quadara, & Boyd (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Trauma frameworks use the language and ideas from the psychiatry and psychology of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The diagnostic category of PTSD grew out of the experience of clinicians working with war veterans who continued to feel the impact of their experiences through symptoms such as flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, physical symptoms, and anxiety-related emotional responses to current events and relationships.

- failure to adequately get consent from the mother (too young to be able to give consent; interacts with other issues raised above that impaired the ability to give fully informed consent: consent given while under the influence of drugs; not fully informed of rights, etc.);
- differential treatment from married women;<sup>10</sup>
- abandonment by their own mothers/families;
- the closed nature of past adoption practices (secrecy, and the “clean break” theory; see Iwanek, 1997);
- married couple’s entitlement to a child (adoption was a mechanism for dealing with infertility; see Harper, 1992) (with the joint “problem” of illegitimacy and infertility; see Frame, 1999); and
- experimentation on newborn babies with drugs, with children dying or being adopted without any follow-up of these experiments (see Parliament of Australia Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2004).

These are all issues that were presented to two different state parliamentary inquiries (in NSW and Tasmania), but on which the evidence is currently equivocal. It would take some significant historical research on archive material to determine the extent to which these practices were widespread and different to the treatment of single mothers who kept their babies or married mothers (NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, 2000; Parliament of Tasmania Joint Select Committee, 1999).

Across all of these issues, one overriding theme that stakeholders emphasised was the trauma of the separation of mother and child—the “unresolved trauma of adoption” (Goodwach, 2001, p. 76). This is consistent with the professional views of a psychiatrist from NSW, Geoff Rickarby, who worked in child psychiatry in the 1970s. On the basis of his clinical experience, he asserted that “ultimately grief is irresolvable when the mourning process is prevented or arrested” (Rickarby, 1998, p. 57).

In other words, it is not just grief and loss, but *unresolved* nature of the issues that compounds the grief and loss. A recurring theme in the literature is that of silence, and that the lack of resolution is an ongoing trauma. For mothers, this means knowing that your child is out there; wondering how they are; and knowing that there is a possibility of reunion - not the “severed bond” as promised by the clean break theory that shrouded the event in silence (see Iwanek, 1997).

In her qualitative study of eight birth mothers, Goodwach (2001) found that “the bewilderment, anger and sense of loss painfully evoked the initial separation from the baby which had never been worked through” (p. 77).

In describing the grief and trauma, many authors draw on related bodies of research, using recent infant–mother attachment research to support their contention that separation causes emotional damage to both mother and child (e.g., Cole, 2009). It is somewhat ironic that earlier research in this same field (e.g., Bowlby, 1969) was used to justify the practices of the time (i.e., not allowing the child to bond with the birth mother so as to provide a “clean break” to allow bonding with the new adoptive parents).

### *Mothers want their children to know they were wanted*

Anecdotal evidence from case studies suggests that mothers, particularly those who have not had any contact, continue to be traumatised by the thought that their child will grow up thinking that they were not wanted. During the consultation with stakeholders about the adequacy and extent of the literature, one mother stated:

It wasn’t the children who were not wanted. Mothers weren’t wanted because they were unmarried.

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<sup>10</sup> Discriminatory practices were exemplified by the use of file markers such as “UB” (short for “Unmarried—Baby for adoption”), which determined the social work and nursing practices (Farrar, 1997). Such practices have been understood by some authors to be punishment for the “moral failure” of the women, with activities being carried out unsympathetically by staff.

In the absence of other information, many adoptees assume that they were unloved and unwanted. Reunion, or some form of information exchange or contact can help with communicating the mothers' circumstances and the reasons surrounding the adoption, including feelings such as having no option, being coerced, or feeling vulnerable.

## 2.3 Solving three social problems: Illegitimacy, infertility and impoverishment

Adoption was seen by many at the time as being explicitly (or implicitly) the solution to the intertwined problems of: illegitimate babies, the risk of impoverishment (and consequent neglect) for single mothers, and the needs of infertile couples. Without adequate support from families or social support services for single mothers, a pregnant single woman risked a life of poverty (Swain & Howe, 1995). Swain and Howe argued that the success of adoption was built upon the grim prophecies that depicted single women raising their children as being condemned to living in poverty and despair, leaving little hope for the child to have a successful and happy life (p. 151). They argued that by rendering a child legitimate, adoption aimed to eliminate the disadvantages of illegitimacy; however, it created another level of secrecy and deception, making the problems it sought to solve more complicated.

Authors who have drawn on documentary evidence from the time, as well as retrospective information from mothers about their adoption experiences, have identified a number of common themes relating to the dominant social views, and the consequent treatment of single pregnant women. These include:

- shame;
- silence;
- blame (fear of passing on delinquency through bad parenting; seeing pregnancy as being the effects of “sin”); and
- discriminatory behaviour (compared to the treatment of married mothers in hospitals).

According to Harkness (1991), both the adoptive mother and the “relinquishing” mother can be seen as products—or victims—of the time in which they lived:

a punitive and patronizing society anxious to graft newborn babies on to “good” (married) mothers as quickly as possible. (p. 2)

Society saw “adoption of ex nuptial children as a means of protecting children from their single mothers, who were often thought to be unfit parents, and also as a means of punishing their mothers” (Jones, 2000, p. 51). Swain and Howe (1995) talked about how silence was part of the “punishment” for the single woman who became pregnant:

The mother although preserved from the physical isolation of earlier eras, faced a mental exile, her reputation intact so long as her “secret” remained untold. Her pregnancy hidden ... she was compelled to collude in her own punishment by maintaining her silence. (p. 11)

Swain (1992) argued that “community hostility towards single mothers and fears about the ‘quality’ of their offspring resulted in secrecy becoming central to Australian adoption practice”. Based on an analysis of historical documents from NSW, Jones (2000) argued:

It was thought that removal of illegitimate children, children at risk of neglect or moral contamination and children from hard-core problem families would give the family a second chance to heal itself just as single mothers would be able “to live happy and useful lives” after relinquishment, for in those days before grief counselling, mothers were expected to “get on with life” instead of confronting their grief and loss. (pp. 52–53)

Marshall and McDonald (2001) commented that the literature on the experiences of young women who gave their children up for adoption was:

full of sad, sometimes brutal, tales of how they were bundled out of sight, often to have their babies in distant places ... In reviewing adoption practice in those earlier years it is

astonishing ... that so little was done for the mother who had to consider the adoption of her child. There were no organised support systems. (p. 4)

Although the literature is fairly consistent in acknowledging the social attitudes of the time as the reason for the treatment that single mothers received, the one empirical question that remains is to consider the experiences of unwed mothers whose babies were not adopted. Christine Cole (personal communication, 30 November 2009) has advised that her PhD thesis (underway) is the first that addresses this issue, and she is finding from interviews with over 50 mothers that unwed mothers who kept their babies did not feel the same social pressures, and often described having supportive parents, or a witness who ensured that their rights were upheld. Apart from this research currently underway, there is anecdotal evidence of the variability in adoption practices, but little systematic research examining the reasons why not all “illegitimate” babies were adopted, and what factors distinguish between these two groups of mothers.

## 2.4 Choice and coercion

A common response from relinquishing single mothers on the pressures of giving up child was that they felt like they had little or no choice. One mother interviewed by Swain and Howe (1995) stated:

They said to me “the decision is yours” ... But it was mine without any help anywhere. (p. 145)

Another said:

The social worker ... talked to me and put the papers down. I guess I knew then, well, I just didn't see what else I could do, it wasn't what I wanted. (p. 145)

Commentators acknowledge that there were seen to be limited choices for these women, and “coercive social forces” led many women to sign consents for adoption up until legislative reform in 70s and 80s (Marshall & McDonald, 2001). A number of different contributors to the inquiry held by the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues (2000) identified the lack of choice experienced by single pregnant women in the past. This included the lack of availability of contraception and abortion, and the lack of awareness and respect for the rights of women (e.g., to see the child, to revocation, or to choose between relinquishment or keeping the baby).

From mothers' stories of past adoption practices, Marshall and McDonald (2001) concluded that mothers' responses fall into three groups:

- mothers who feel they were coerced;
- mothers who continue to feel sad and regretful but still believe it was the right thing to do; and
- mothers who feel they made the decision on their own and are content with that decision (pp. 62–63).

Marshall and McDonald (2001) noted, however, that some mothers' experiences may cross over two or more groups, or their responses may shift over time as they face new experiences or as particular events occur—such as a reunion experience. Again, empirical evidence for the existence of the groupings, or relative size of each, is lacking.

## 2.5 Secrecy and silence

Secrecy and silence began with the experience of teenage/single pregnancy, and continued through the experience of adoption and the future lives of the women subjected to these past practices. Swain and Howe (1995) provided data suggesting that between World War II and 1975, approximately 30–40% of women who became pregnant out of wedlock spent time in an institution to conceal pregnancy (i.e., they became invisible). However, the invisibility did not stop with the birth and the adoption. The silence continued: according to accounts of mothers, their experience of adoption was “a particular kind of hell we weren't allowed to talk about” (Harkness, 1991, p. 4). Case studies provide evidence that women kept the secret, often not sharing the information with friends, partners or subsequent children until much later—if at all.

Adoption secrecy was the main priority in adoption legislation prior to the 1980s. Ley (1992) argued that:

it was believed that by obliterating a child's birth identity it was possible to create for an adopted child a new identity which would ensure the genealogical history of the adoptive parents was now that of the adopted child. (p. 101)

Swain and Howe (1995) noted that "the relinquishing mother was seen as poor, and ashamed and needing to be relieved of her child, yet still potentially predatory and hence to be denied all knowledge of its future fate" (p. 137).

Winkler and van Keppel (1984) noted that the legislation at the time was "operating from the incorrect assumption that the relinquishing mother wants her identity to remain a secret to her child" (p. 9). Silence resonates through the lives not only of the mothers, but also of their adopted children. As one adoptee stated:

I think one of the worst things about "closed adoption" is the silence—the social covering up of the visceral, emotional, psychological, genetic and historical connections to the original mother and the denial of loss for all. (Durey, 1998, p. 104).

In attempting to explain the ongoing detrimental effects of adoption that their study uncovered, Winkler and van Keppel (1984) argued that the silence that surrounded "relinquishment" significantly contributes to the harmful effects experienced by many of the women involved. They review briefly the research on bereavement experiences for mothers who have a child die during or shortly after childbirth. The key element associated with a positive adjustment for bereaved mothers is communication—yet for mothers who "relinquished" a baby to adoption, the secrecy and silence compound the difficulties they experience (Winkler & van Keppel, 1984).

## 2.6 Reunion experiences

Since the changes in legislation allowing access to birth records, and the establishment of services to assist with making contact, significant numbers of adoptees and birth mothers have exchanged information or made contact. The protection of privacy that has been put in place allows for either the parent or the child to place a veto on being contacted by the other party.

Regarding the number of vetoes placed on contact between adoptive children and their birth parents, AIHW (2009) noted that those searching for information outweighed those with objections:

As in previous years, in 2007–08 the number of applications for information far exceeded the number of vetoes lodged against contact or the release of identifying information—2,832 compared with 140. (p. 30)

In choosing to attempt reunion, one of the main motivations for mothers is to know about their child's welfare; however, this is tempered with concern about how such an approach would be received:

Relinquishing mothers ... while wanting to know that their children are alive and well, are often reluctant to intrude into their lives or worry about upsetting their relationships with the adoptive parents. (Harkness, 1991, p. 149)

Another common motivation is that birth mothers want their child to know that they belonged and were loved/wanted. In one of the testimonies presented by Harkness (1991), "Gayle" reflected on her daughter, and what she hoped the adoptive parents would do:

I thought of her often. Just wondering and hoping that she was happy. I also hoped when she got older that her parents would be kind about me. That they would tell her that I loved her. (p. 78)

Harkness (1991) referred to the following phases in reunion:

There's the anticipation and excitement as the search nears conclusion, the euphoria of the first meeting, the honeymoon period, the "let-down", transition, and finally, resolution. (p. 204)



However, reunion experiences are not always positive. Feelings associated with the reunion experience can include renewed guilt for the past “relinquishment” and fear of rejection by the child, mixed with positive feelings like relief, or sense of connection. If the outcome is not positive, contact may cease (e.g., see Farrar, 2000). Consideration should also be given to the perspectives of the adoptee, usually a young adult at the time that reunion is attempted. Although a small body of literature is starting to emerge on adoptees’ issues, including their reports of reunion experiences (e.g., Durey, 1998; Frame, 1999; Moloney, 1998; Rogers, 2008; Swain & Howe, 1995), there is scope for larger scale research, and to match the information emerging from this research with that emerging from research with mothers affected by past adoption practices.

Frame (1999) provided a detailed, richly annotated account of his experience as an adoptee searching for his biological family.<sup>11</sup> His account is interesting, in that he is largely positive about his personal experience of being adopted (though recognising the injustice and lack of care in past adoption practices). However, he acknowledged significant inner conflicts about adoption that even reunion has not resolved. He cited an unpublished 1987 report by the Post-Adoption Social Workers’ Group of NSW that acknowledges the variability in outcomes of reunion:

The outcomes of reunions are unpredictable and participants need to steel themselves for all kinds of possibilities that may follow upon their meeting (cited in Frame, 1999, p. 151).

Swain and Howe (1995) found that many adoptees used fantasy to fill the gaps of the heritage, and that coming to terms with the adoption experience was important for establishing a positive self-identity.

## 2.7 Time (does not) heal all wounds

Contrary to the popular myth that “time heals all wounds”, one theme that was fairly consistent across the different studies and methodologies reviewed here was the notion that the pain and distress of their experience of adoption did not just “go away” with the passage of time. In his qualitative study, Condon (1986) wrote:

A most striking finding in the present study is that the majority of these women reported no diminution of their sadness, anger and guilt over the considerable number of years which had elapsed since their relinquishment. (p. 118)<sup>12</sup>

However, the healing effect of time is exactly what practitioners at the time expected. Indicative of some of the views of the time, Lawson (1960), an obstetrician, paid little or no heed to the possible impact of adoption on the mother. Advice to his medical colleagues to deal with the “big problem” of “single girls who become pregnant” instead promoted the presumed positive benefits for the child, with no mention of the mother:

The prospect of the unmarried girl or of her family adequately caring for a child and giving it a normal environment and upbringing is so small that I believe for practical purposes it can be ignored. I believe that in all such cases the obstetrician should urge that the child be adopted. In recommending that a particular child is fit for adoption, we tend to err on the side of overcautiousness. “When in doubt, don’t” is part of the wisdom of living; but over adoptions I would suggest that “when in doubt, do”, should be the rule. (p. 165)

Reinforcing the notion that the feelings do not just “go away”, on the basis of his data from adoption information service users, P. Swain (1992) claimed that most birth mothers “go on wondering and

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<sup>11</sup> It is beyond the scope of the current review to consider all the literature on the experiences of adoptees; however, Frame’s (1999) biographical account is interspersed with a thorough review of the empirical literature, and warrants consideration, particularly in relation to the expectations and outcomes of reunions between birth parents and their adult children who were relinquished.

<sup>12</sup> Condon (1986) did acknowledge the potential bias of his research participants being recruited through a support group for relinquishing mothers. However, without data from what would be an incredibly expensive, ethically complex and logistically difficult population-based study, it will never be known the degree to which self-selected samples—such as from self-help groups or adoption information services—are representative of the views and experiences of all mothers who relinquished children in the past.

worrying about their child for the rest of their lives. For almost all, the contact with their child brings immense relief” (p. 32).

In a recent qualitative study with a limited, non-representative sample, Gair (2008) observed the feelings of powerlessness, low self-worth, depression and suicidal feelings/behaviours in people affected by past adoption practices in Australia—including adoptees, birth mothers, a birth father and an adoptive mother. However, the extent of such effects in a representative sample has not been measured.

### *Lack of social support from family*

Across the different literature types, a consistent theme was that the mothers whose babies were adopted reported less social support from their family than single mothers who kept their babies.

### *Lack of information pre-relinquishment and post-relinquishment support*

From an autobiographical perspective, Frame (1999) described the situation for his birth mother after she relinquished him:

Like many girls in a similar position, she was advised to forget about the child and continue with life as though nothing had happened. No mention was made of the trauma and grief associated with relinquishing a child. There was no offer of any continuing spiritual or psychological care. None existed. (p. 29)

### 3 Current needs of women affected by past adoption practices

Marshall and McDonald (2001) noted that there is considerable (emotionally charged) debate around the effects of adoption with, at the extremes, some extravagant claims for and against adoption as a practice. The purpose of this review is not to debate the merits or otherwise of adoption or what the research says about how current adoption practices could be improved. Instead, the focus is on understanding the impact of past adoption practices, and the evidence from the research literature that can be used to assist with understanding and developing appropriate responses to the needs of women affected by past adoption practices.

Many writers (including autobiographical accounts and collections of case studies) either indirectly or directly identify that one of the crucial issues for mothers affected by past adoption practices is for their experiences to be publicly recognised. For example, in her recent edited volume of mothers' perspectives interspersed with documentary material, Cole (2008) quoted the following response from a psychiatrist, Dr Geoff Rickarby. In response to an interview question on his expectations of the NSW inquiry into adoption practices (which reported in 2000), Rickarby stated:

I would have liked to have seen a huge exposure of what was actually done ... you know ... for the adoptees to actually see what a helpless isolated position their mother was in, what drugs were given to them, what coercion, what brainwashing, what illegal things happened and how they were taken from their mothers. (cited in Cole, 2008, p. 173)

This points to a common theme across all of the research: the pervasiveness of the silence and shame, and the impact this has had in terms of isolation, lack of support and specific services. Marshall and McDonald (2001) argued that long-term pain for relinquishing mothers could have been relieved if they had had help in dealing with the relinquishment, accompanied by support and the opportunity to know something about the child (p. 73).

Based on her advocacy work with mothers who have been separated from their babies by adoption, Lindsay (1998) identified some of the needs that she recognised as being part of the healing process (which she sees as a societal responsibility):

- availability of ongoing counselling with highly skilled psychologists;
- provision of trauma counselling services pertaining to mothers and children traumatised by adoption separation;
- establishment of advertising campaigns encouraging mothers to speak out;
- provision of education programs for GPs and other health services providers; and
- avoidance of statements that are likely to re-traumatise (e.g., referring to “unwanted babies”, “your decision”, “birth mother”, “think about how the adoptive parent feels”).

At the conclusion of their groundbreaking Australian empirical study, Winkler and van Keppel (1984) recommended that two things were most needed for these women:

- counselling and support; and
- increased information.

The efficacy of these various services or actions have not been empirically tested in relation to the specific population group; however, they are consistent with the broader theoretical and empirical literature on other forms of trauma, such as the field of child abuse and neglect or adult sexual assault (see Astbury, 2006; Connor & Higgins, 2008). Consideration should also be given to the difference between generalist services, and specialised mental health and other support services for this particular group. As with other groups who have experienced pain and trauma, having society recognise what has occurred (i.e., naming it, and understanding how it occurred and its impact) is an important element in coping with and adjusting to the deep hurt they have experienced.

Winkler, Brown, van Keppel and Blanchard (1988) noted:

Many older adoption practices were cruel and insensitive, reflecting older, harsher social attitudes; the scars left by these practices have never really healed for many people. The probability, therefore, is substantial that adoption-related problems will occur over a person's full life course. (p. 3)

Given that past practices cannot be “undone”, one of the steps in the journey for both mothers and children given up for adoption is the choice around reunion. Given the variability in responses provided in the case study literature, and the absence of any systematic empirical evidence, this is an area where further research would be of particular value. Services attempting to support those affected—including professional counsellors, agencies and support groups—would all benefit from a greater understanding of typical pathways through the reunion process, estimates of the number of reunions that have occurred, the perspectives of those involved, and factors that are associated with positive and negative reunion experiences.

Apart from these issues relating to reunion, the research material—supported strongly by the case studies and autobiographical material (see Appendix, Tables A2 and A3)—points to other ongoing issues for mothers affected by past adoption practices. These issues include:

- personal identity (the concept of “motherhood” and self-identity as a good mother);
- relationships with others, including husbands/partners, subsequent children, etc.;
- connectedness with others (problematic attachments); and
- ongoing anxiety, depression and trauma.

## 4 Adequacy of the evidence base

Finally, the focus turns to three key areas where there are gaps in the adequacy of the research literature: using records of individual cases, reunion experiences, and the effects of past adoption on fathers and other family members.

### 4.1 Research based on individual records

Some individual adoption case records were submitted as evidence to the NSW inquiry on adoption practices (NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, 2000). However, they do not appear to have been the subject of proper empirical (systematic) analysis. Such examinations would need to be looked at state-by-state, due to the different legislative frameworks and organisational contexts.

Stakeholders have identified a number of examples of primary evidence that, on an individual basis, highlight particular issues—including cases of what may constitute illegal or unethical behaviour. This includes hospital records, case file notes, among others. However, such documents are archival or historical records, and do not as such constitute a research study that could be included in a review of the research literature. However, what this points to is a gap in the research literature. There does not appear to be any such systematic research of original documents, although it is critical to answering questions that are raised by some of the other material available (biographies, case studies, qualitative research and historical policy analysis)—such as how extensive the allegations of illegal practices are (including the failure to properly take consent). As Marshall and McDonald (2001) noted, many women remain silent, and it is difficult to gauge how representative the views of women are who have told their stories (p. 62).

There appears to be a large number of individual historical records that could be the subject of research, but there is little evidence of there being an adequate “body of research” relating to past adoption practices from an individual perspective. Instead, historical examinations have focused on more systemic, societal-level analyses (i.e., examining legislation, policy documents and other sources of evidence to understand society’s views, as well as the policies and practices of particular organisations). For example, in its collection, the State Library of Victoria has extensive archives from a range of organisations on issues to do with past adoption practices in that state that could be the subject of systematic analysis. The sources of data include:

- Victorian Children’s Aid Society;
- National Council for the Single Mother and her Child (Australia);
- Public Record Office Victoria;
- Parliament of Victoria;
- Child Welfare Department;
- Statutory Authority of the Department of Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools to Place Neglected Children in Service;
- Crown Solicitors;
- Children’s Overseas Reception Board;
- Department of Industrial and Reform Schools;and
- Victorian Multicultural Commission.

The archives include: laws, annual reports, minutes, financial records, case histories, court committals, fostering and adoption records of children under the care of the State, client files of children “evacuated” to Australia from the UK during WWII, registers (State Wards Register; Institutionalised Children’s Register); correspondence, published records, press cuttings and photos, press releases and newsletters. Similar collections are likely to exist in other states, and could usefully be the subject of rich archival research to understand better the context, organisational policies and actual adoption

practices that occurred, including any factors associated with variability between organisations or between jurisdictions.

## 4.2 Reclaiming motherhood: Reunion experiences

There is a limited body of research on reunion experiences, and the evidence appears mixed as to the degree to which this process is uniformly beneficial for those involved (birth mother, adoptive parents, adoptee). Evidence on “what works” to assist with the reunion process is lacking.

In its final report on the inquiry into adoption practices, the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues (2000) acknowledged the need for a major independent research study on the process of reunion and its impact on adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents and their families. Although making a recommendation to this effect, the results of any such study do not appear to be publicly available. Given the similar issues raised in the Tasmanian inquiry (Parliament of Tasmania Joint Select Committee, 1999) and the considerable variability in responses to the reunion process evident in the literature that is available (mostly anecdotal), this would seem to also be an important area for further research on a national basis.

## 4.3 Fathers and other family members

The focus of the current literature review has been on the young women whose babies were adopted and the effect of this on their lives, and to a lesser extent, the adopted children (particularly in relation to reunions). However, it is important to also consider the perspectives of biological fathers and other family members, such as children, partners, siblings or grandparents. In particular, there is an absence of research to help understand the experience of men, either as adoptees or as fathers (Frame, 1999). Marshall and McDonald (2001) also acknowledged that little is known about birth fathers. Until recent legislative reforms, consent from the father to put a child up for adoption was not required. They cite one US study by Deykin, Patti, and Ryan (1988), who found that at the time of birth, most fathers were young, unemployed or students, and that only half were involved in the adoption process. Some birth fathers have felt hurt and angry at their exclusion (by mothers or adoption workers), others were never told and some may not have felt any strong feelings (Marshall & McDonald, 2001). More recently, Gary Coles (2009) looked at the views of birth fathers, and the impact of past adoption practices on them. He noted common findings across a series of studies were that fathers do care about the child (though there may be a delayed sense of responsibility), and that they suffer emotional consequences such as loss and guilt, often including the loss of their relationship with the birth mother.

## 5 Conclusion

This review has shown that the experience of past adoption practices has the potential for lifelong consequences for the lives of both the woman and child, as well as others, such as the mother's family, the father, and the adoptive parents and their families. Although there is a wealth of primary material, there is little systematic research on the experience of past adoption practices in Australia.

In particular, this review has highlighted the opportunities for further work to be done in order to enable enhanced understanding and appropriate responses to the needs of those affected. This includes:

- analysis of historical data, including individual records, supplemented by qualitative in-depth interviews with key informants from the time, such as relevant professionals and organisational leaders; and
- systematic study of the experiences of mothers, their adopted children, the families who adopted them, and others involved in past adoption practices.

Some of the challenges in addressing these information needs through research is that retrospective research is descriptive, but cannot provide causal pathways. There are also challenges in identifying participants for such research, and acknowledging and taking into account the potential bias that may come from individuals' particular roles. Some of these issues can be addressed through careful research, including comparison, where appropriate, with population data (e.g., when looking at rates of mental health problems, or criminal justice involvement).

In assessing the value of the research literature in understanding the context and impact of past adoption practices, it is important to acknowledge that we are viewing past behaviour and judging it by the standards of today, with the benefit of hindsight. This does not discount the impact of these practices on those affected. Views about the moral correctness of past practices, or even the contributions of individuals or institutions are evident in the literature and while this material is distinguished from research, its significance is still acknowledged. For example, while acknowledging the pain and suffering of those affected by these past practices, the Parliament of Tasmania Joint Select Committee (1999) aptly summed up what the body of literature also shows:

In hindsight, it is believed that if knowledge of the emotional effects on people was available during the period concerned, then parents may not have pushed for adoption to take place and birthmothers may not have, willingly or unwillingly, relinquished their children. Witnesses and respondents [to the Inquiry], who include some adopted children, would not therefore be experiencing the pain and suffering which continues to influence their lives. (p. 11).

There are a number of different people involved, who could be seen either as being "responsible" for, or affected by, past adoption practices. Across all of the types of research literature, a recurrent theme—or rather an often barely articulated undercurrent—is the issue of blame and responsibility. Commentators, experts, researchers and parliamentary committees have all accepted that past adoption practices were far from ideal, had the potential to do damage, and often did. What is often left unspoken is the issue of responsibility. It is implicit in discussions around the adequacy of consent (and the allegation of widespread immoral and illegal behaviours, such as failing to advise about rights of revocation, administration of high levels of drugs that could affect decision-making ability, etc.). In addition to the choice and volition of the woman involved (however impeded or affected), questions remain about how to best understand how these past events occurred.

Taking the time to understand the full extent of the impact of past practices is needed in order to be able to tailor appropriate service responses to meet the needs of those affected.

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## Appendix: Taxonomy of selected literature on past adoption practices

Table A1. Analysis of historical practices

Author(s)	Year	Study	Focus	Key themes and issues
Iwanek	1997	"Healing History: The Story of Adoption in New Zealand"	Analysis of socio-historical factors that explain past (closed) adoption practices	The author identifies three broad groups of factors that explained past adoption practices, namely: colonisation, child welfare theories, and social stigma. She concludes: "As well as the psychological and genetic theories used to justify 'choice' of a mother to give up her baby, she also was reminded of other factors. There is no doubt that any mother who kept her ex-nuptial child suffered such severe stigma and deprivation that it would, in turn, affect the child. Economically, it was also difficult to survive" (p. 16)
Lancaster	1983	"Secrecy in Adoption: An Historical Perspective"	Literature review of historical documents	Reviewing evidence of secrecy provisions, the author argues that, at the time, they were seen as necessary in order to protect three things: (a) the anonymity of birth parents, (b) the adopted child from the stigma of illegitimacy, and (c) the privacy of adopted parents from birth parents
Marshall & McDonald	2001	<i>The Many-Sided Triangle: Adoption in Australia</i>	A history of adoption laws and practices in Australia, and the effects of adoption—and reunion—on both the genetic and adoptive parents, as well as the child who is adopted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prior to a shift in the social context in the 1970s, having children out of wedlock was seriously frowned upon and adoption seen as the only form of legitimisation for children. Status of "illegitimacy" only disappeared in early 70s, starting with <i>Status of Children Act</i> in Vic. and Tas. in 1974, which changed the status to "ex-nuptial"</li> <li>▪ Relinquishing mothers often treated cruelly</li> <li>▪ During the 1970s, adoption began to be seen as exploitation of single mothers for the benefit of middle-class couples with fertility problems</li> <li>▪ Progressive legislative changes from 1984 to 1994 opened up records for adult adopted persons and their birth parents, ending the era of adoption secrecy</li> </ul>
Swain & Howe	1995	<i>Single Mothers and Their Children</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ History of single women and their children (primarily in Victoria)</li> <li>▪ Quantitative data gathered for 19th century from sample of 150 ex-nuptial births drawn at 5-year intervals from the index of Victorian births</li> <li>▪ 20th century data gathered by "listening to the voices of women" from newspaper references, reports from charity agencies, court references, and magazines. One-on-one interviews with mothers who had relinquished a child were also undertaken</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Adoption was heavily promoted in the post-WW1 era as the "ideal solution" for women becoming pregnant out of wedlock</li> <li>▪ Enormous pressure on women to give up babies if not married</li> <li>▪ The stigma of being single and pregnant was by no means universal; however, the potential for ostracism was ever-present</li> <li>▪ Women—and their families—went to "extraordinary" lengths to keep their pregnancy secret</li> </ul>
Winkler, Brown, van Keppel, & Blanchard	1988	<i>Clinical Practice in Adoption</i>	Women who volunteered to be interviewed	Chapter 4 outlines common post-relinquishment problems, services available during and after the decision-making period, and guiding principles for ethical therapeutic practice with birth parents

Table A2. Case studies

Author(s)	Year	Study	Who did the research include?	How many people?	Method/analysis	Key findings or themes
Cole	2008	<i>Releasing the Past: Mothers' Stories of Their Stolen Babies</i>	Relinquishing mothers	15	Collation of selected autobiographical material, supplemented with historical documents, media excerpts and artwork	The book concludes that the suffering of these women is ongoing, and calls for a public declaration to children that they were loved, that their mothers wanted them, and did not willingly give them away
Harkness	1991	<i>Looking for Lisa</i>	Women who had relinquished a baby whom author met through personal contacts in Australia and NZ	6 (including author's own story)	Case description	Author did not identify cross-cutting themes. Some issues that occurred in multiple cases included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ carrying a secret</li> <li>▪ coercion (lack of knowledge about revocation rights)</li> <li>▪ importance of social mores and the pressures of silence and invisibility, and moral castigation</li> <li>▪ limited social options for young pregnant women</li> <li>▪ lack of mutuality (boys "got" girls pregnant, but responsibility ended there)</li> <li>▪ wanting information to know that their child is OK</li> </ul>
Inglis	1984	<i>Living Mistakes: Mothers Who Consented to Adoption</i>	Women who volunteered to be interviewed	16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Case description (no integration or synthesis of themes)</li> <li>▪ Inglis has collated together "these fragments of women's lives ... to give some idea of the range of experience which would seem to characterise adoption for those mothers willing to speak of it" (p. 19)</li> </ul>	Author did not identify cross-cutting themes
Moloney	1998	"Family' as Constructed by an Adoptee After Contact with Birth Family"	Adoptees who had made contact with their birth parents	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analysis of themes from 2 in-depth interviews and a focus group of 12</li> <li>▪ "Family" maps were constructed to depict structures and relationships within the family as adoptees indicated the closeness and/or distance they perceived themselves to be with others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Communication was identified as a crucial element in the inclusion of members – perceived honesty central to the issue of communication. Adoptees who did not include birth relatives in their family map attributed this to a lack of communication</li> <li>▪ Time shared between family members was important in establishing and maintaining relationships</li> <li>▪ Many participants spoke of a "natural affinity" with their birth relatives and saw similarities as a bonding agent</li> <li>▪ Based on review of the research literature from the 1970s and 80s, argues that adoptees' need for information about genealogical background outweighs possible negative outcomes</li> </ul>

Table A3. Expert opinion

Author(s)	Year	Capacity in which expertise or opinion is being provided	Type of information or basis of argument	Key themes and issues
Cole	2009	Researcher (PhD candidate)	Review of literature and legal frameworks	Examines how the principles that underpinned past adoption practices (e.g., focusing on the needs of adults wishing to acquire a child, rather than the wellbeing of the child, or the support needs of the parent) can still be seen in operation in the current child protection systems, with large numbers of babies being taken into non-parental care
Coles	2009	Researcher	5 studies in the past 2 decades on birth fathers	Birth fathers care about the children they fathered and experience ongoing effects, such as grief, loss, low self-esteem and guilt
Dietrich	1992	Personal (relationship to the issue not disclosed)	Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Draws the links between past adoption practices and the contemporary issues of surrogacy</li> <li>▪ Noted the negative effects of silence: "Open adoption and access to information is now gaining prominence as the best way to handle the effects of relinquishment" (p. 116)</li> <li>▪ The lifelong grief experienced by relinquishing mothers has often gone unrecognised by any social institution and remained hidden from the world</li> </ul>
Durey	1998	An adoptee	Autobiographical, focusing on the emotional intensity felt by many adoptees and birth mothers (perceptual bodily awareness, memory and emotion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Draws on psychoanalytic/feminist theory to understand author's own experience. Speaking of the reunion experience after closed adoption, she writes: "in order to meaningfully reconnect there has to be a palpable understanding of that initial connection with the mother's body and at a deeper level of recognition an acknowledgment of the psychic link" (p. 106)</li> <li>▪ "For successful reconciliation within adoption, I believe the force of desire needs to be acknowledged. The adoptee searches for the original mother and the birth mother searches for her lost child. Emotionally and in a visceral sense each 'remembers' the other as they were in that original dyad, prior to birth, and afterwards—before they were lost to each other. They can have a strong desire to reconnect, but can never return to that actual original shared 'state', and so in this sense desire is never met." (p. 110)</li> </ul>
Farrar	1998	Reunited mother of two children lost to adoption	Highlights the hospital culture and practices at maternity homes in NSW throughout the 1950 and 60s, based on anecdotes and analysis of existing literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Until the 1970s, social workers and the media referred to unmarried mothers as "the girls", which reinforced stereotypes that invoked disempowering public responses, from pity to condemnation, and also promoted the desirability of the nuclear family</li> <li>▪ Where marriage was not an option for mothers, the alternative was for pregnant young women to be sent off to maternity homes run by hospitals or religious organisations, relinquish their baby once born, and then return home to "normality" some weeks later, the events surrounded in secrecy, but with their reputation intact</li> <li>▪ A prevailing theme of the experience was that unmarried mothers should be grateful for maternity home charity, the tone often patronising, with emphasis on the unselfishness of giving up her baby</li> <li>▪ Maternity homes would often ensure that mothers' lactation was suppressed and many did not get a chance to see the baby after birth. Farrar claims there is evidence of malpractice in maternity homes, with stories of blindfolding mothers while in labour, and not informing the mother of the sex of the baby</li> </ul>

Author(s)	Year	Capacity in which expertise or opinion is being provided	Type of information or basis of argument	Key themes and issues
Frame	1999	Adopted (adult) child	Autobiography, interspersed with reviews of relevant literature on socio-cultural factors and empirical data about the experience of relinquishment, adoption, and reunion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Frame summarises the three key messages from the available literature: in the past, adoption was practiced without care. there was a government enforced silence. and that the secrecy was a violation of individual rights</li> <li>He notes the effect of social stigma on adoptees, and explains the reason for its impact in terms of the adoptee's awareness of the conception not being welcomed; the birth not being a source of pride; being surrendered by the person from whom you expect love and nurture; erasure of former identity; secrecy around past history; being raised by people with whom there is no biological connection; and legal severing of ties to biological forebears (see p. 52)</li> <li>He provides insights into the adoptee's experiences in searching for biological parents, including: curiosity, the search for identity, and wanting information about medical/genetic inheritance issues</li> <li>He critiques Verrier's "primal wound" theory, noting her failure to demonstrate that all adoptees are disturbed people, or that there is in fact a "primal wound"</li> </ul>
Lawson	1960	Obstetrician at Sydney's Royal Women's Hospital	Personal views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strongly endorsed obstetricians urging unmarried girls to give up their child for adoption (though he did not encourage marriage solely for the purpose of making a birth legitimate)</li> <li>Claimed that: "Adoption brings joy to the adopting parents and the prospect of a better life to the child, and makes the life of the mother much easier. Often the experience matures the mother, and I have seen many happily-adjusted married women who have had a child out of wedlock" (p. 166)</li> </ul>
Lindsay	1998	Mental health worker, midwife, childbirth educator	Emotive arguments (not based on research data per se)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sees adoption as a private and public form of organised social violence perpetrated on adolescents and developing women, claiming that adoption is not based on the needs of young pregnant women, but on the needs of the adoptive parent</li> <li>Claims adoption should not be an option under any circumstances, as the experience is traumatic for all involved</li> <li>Claims there are characteristics common to both the experience of child sexual abuse and adoption (e.g., secrecy, denial, shame, illegal behaviour, violation)</li> <li>Notes the problematic position of social workers (who were the consent-takers for the relinquishment of children) attempting to provide counselling and support to these same women now</li> </ul>
Marburg	1998	Adoptive parent	Autobiography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The author reflects on the challenge that the changes in law from "closed" to "open" adoptions provides to adoptive parents, and the effects of a child searching for—and reuniting—with biological parents</li> <li>In one of the most poignant chapters, "With Hindsight", she acknowledges that after her initial anger and resentment at the changes to the laws that enshrined secrecy and anonymity, she has come to see the importance of truth and honesty, while noting that the rights and needs of adoptive parents are rarely articulated or considered</li> </ul>
McGuire	1998	Mother of child separated by adoption	Autobiography	Describes the author's personal experience of isolation, being misinformed, and the personal implications for her, including her capacity to mother

Author(s)	Year	Capacity in which expertise or opinion is being provided	Type of information or basis of argument	Key themes and issues
Meggitt	1992	Relinquishing mothers	Personal experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relinquishing mothers face questions such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– how they live in society as women who are seen to have abandoned their children</li> <li>– in what ways women can know their child</li> <li>– how the boundaries are drawn in a relationship between mother who is not a mother and her child</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Meggitt discusses the positive and negatives of open adoption throughout the paper and of the benefits and issues stemming from the Victorian <i>Adoption of Children Act 1984</i></li> </ul>
Robinson	1998	Author does not provide her own credentials, or describe how cases were selected	Compiled stories of 3 cases	Discusses post-adoption trauma and grief, concluding that the experience of loss by natural mothers is “unique”: “her grief cannot be resolved in the same way that the grief associated with other losses can be resolved” (p. 290) because the child is not dead—they lack a concrete focus for their grief. This was magnified by practices such as not being allowed to touch or care for their babies, or to name them, prior to giving them up for adoption
Verrier	n. d.	Adoptive parent	Theoretical suppositions and autobiographical material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Primal wound theory—the author’s basic premise is that it is not the adoptee that is abnormal, but the process of adoption per se, as it disrupts the primal bond between mother and child</li> <li>▪ She notes that “many adoptees relentlessly pursue knowledge about the circumstances of their adoption and about their biological families”.</li> <li>▪ She asserts that demanding behaviour by adoptees stems from the biological parent’s rejection of the child: “It is my hypothesis that the severing of that connection between the child and biological mother causes a primal or narcissistic wound which often manifests in a sense of loss (depression), basic mistrust (anxiety), emotional and/or behavioral problems and difficulties in relationships with significant others” (p. 3)</li> </ul>
Winkler, Brown, van Keppel, & Blanchard	1988	Clinical psychological experience	Practice wisdom based on empirical study of relinquishing mothers (Winkler & van Keppel, 1984)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Many of the difficulties experienced by birth parents are directly or indirectly the legacy of past social values and adoption practice” (p. 49)</li> <li>▪ Birth parents commonly reported: feeling pressured into relinquishing their child by adoption workers and others; not being given adequate information about alternatives; not being told their rights (e.g., revocation period); not being prepared for the strong emotional reactions they experienced that are associated with grief (guilt, anger, despair, sadness); and not being encouraged to actively mourn the child</li> <li>▪ Events that commonly trigger emotional reactions in birth parents include: child’s birthday, anniversary of relinquishment, formation of new relationship, birth of subsequent children, death of grandparents, and any publicity about adoption issues</li> </ul>

**Table A4. Parliamentary inquiries**

There have been two major parliamentary inquiries in Australia, which have received submissions that cover a range of different types of evidence, including expert views (from professionals involved with the administration of various parts of the adoption processes in the past), personal testimony from those affected, and submissions based on reviews of the literature, or analysis of empirical data.

Author	Year	Title	Available	Key findings
NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues.	2000	<i>Releasing the Past: Adoption Practices 1950–1998. Final Report</i>	< <a href="http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/56E4E53DFA16A023CA256CFD002A63BC">www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/56E4E53DFA16A023CA256CFD002A63BC</a> >	The committee concluded that past adoption practices in NSW, though based on the values and attitudes that were prevalent in society in the 1950s and 1960s, were “misguided”, and acknowledged that “on occasions unethical and unlawful practices have occurred” (p. xiii)
Parliament of Tasmania Joint Select Committee	1999	<i>Adoption and Related Services 1950–1988</i>	< <a href="http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/Ctee/reports/adopt.pdf">www.parliament.tas.gov.au/Ctee/reports/adopt.pdf</a> >	The committee found that past practices in Tasmania had a significant personal effect on the witnesses and respondents, and found conflicting (or insufficient) evidence to make any definitive conclusions regarding whether unlawful or unethical practices had occurred

**Table A5. Unpublished reports**

Where stakeholders have advised about theses that are available, these have been reviewed. However, there are a number of other theses that have been written, but were not available for review.

Author(s)	Year	Thesis title	Degree/university	Method/analysis	Key findings or themes
Farrar	2000	<i>Relinquishment and Abjection: A Semanalysis of the Meaning of Losing a Baby to Adoption</i>	Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Technology, Sydney	Adopts a post-modern feminist analysis to understand the impact of past practices of adoption in NSW (1960–1975)	Despite the societal demand for silence, mothers whose babies were taken away from them by adoption have “turned their private silence into a voice for justice”. The author writes from the “silent horror” of being a mother of two children lost to adoption. After the initial “success” of reunion with both, based on the fantasy of togetherness, relinquishment was once again her experience
Rogers	2008	<i>Adoptees in Reunion: The Psychological Integration of Adoption: Motivation for Reunion, and the Reunion Relationship</i>	Unpublished honours thesis in psychology, Swinburne University, Hawthorn	Based on in-depth interviews, the author examines the experiences of 12 (closed) adoptees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Common reasons for seeking reunion were need for medical information and identity consolidation</li> <li>▪ Important aspects of reunion ultimately were the relational bonds, connections to birth family, and sense of belonging</li> </ul>



**Table A6. Published empirical studies**

Author(s)	Year	Study	Who did the research include?	How many people?	Method/analysis	Key findings or themes
Berryman & Cowell	1998	"Understanding Reunion: Reflections from the Post-Adoption Resource Centre, NSW"	Users of the PARC service: both those actively searching, and those who were "found"	52 "searchers" 29 "found people"	Descriptive analysis based on telephone interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A majority of searchers and a larger majority of found people described the reunion relationship in positive ways (99% had no regrets with the reunion)</li> <li>▪ Overall, participants felt that the approach through a mediator helped prepare them for contact. A significant number of found people (38%) said that they felt they would have responded differently if the searcher had contacted them directly</li> <li>▪ Reactions to reunion experiences included: satisfying their curiosity about the circumstances of their birth (found adopted people); finding their adult child and relief at knowing that adult child is alive (found birth parents); importance of understanding their history and personal identity (searching adopted people); sense of relief and of peace of mind (searching birth parents). The most difficult aspect of reunion for birth parents was "reliving the pain" of the past</li> <li>▪ Searchers identified more negative effects from the reunion than found people</li> </ul>
Condon	1986	"Psychological Disability in Women Who Relinquish a Baby for Adoption"	Relinquishing mothers recruited through advocacy/support group	20	Survey with mothers about events at the time of relinquishment, changes in intensity of effects over time, and a measure of current chronic psychological disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 14 (70%) had no contact with the baby at delivery</li> <li>▪ Most (18: 90%) had attempted to seek information about their child</li> <li>▪ Almost all reported little or no support from family, friends or professionals</li> <li>▪ Themes experienced by some (but not necessarily the majority) of participants were: becoming pregnant again within 1 year of relinquishment, overprotective of subsequent children, use of alcohol/sedatives to deal with distress of relinquishment, increased feelings of anger &amp; guilt, adverse effects on relationships with men</li> </ul>
De Simone	1996	"Birth Mother Loss: Contributing Factors to Unresolved Grief"	Voluntary sample of mothers from adoption organisations across the US, as well as those who heard about the study from newspaper adverts and word-of-mouth	264	Descriptive statistics and correlations to assess the relationship between "unresolved grief" and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ thoughts/feelings about circumstances of the relinquishment</li> <li>▪ loss</li> <li>▪ life history</li> <li>▪ present life circumstances</li> <li>▪ demographic data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Higher levels of grief (i.e., "unresolved grief") were associated with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– perceptions of having been coerced into relinquishing the child</li> <li>– feelings of guilt and shame</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Researcher found that, in addition to completing the survey, respondents also wrote or phoned, and "seemed to have a need to communicate in a personal way with the investigator and wanted the opportunity to express in their own words their feelings about the relinquishment experience" (p. 67)</li> </ul>

Author(s)	Year	Study	Who did the research include?	How many people?	Method/analysis	Key findings or themes
Field	1992	“Psychological Adjustment of Relinquishing Mothers Before and After Reunion With Their Children”	NZ women who had been able to re-contact their children, and comparison group of NZ women who had made initial contact with the department and were awaiting possibility of reunion, but had not yet made contact	238 206	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Survey of mothers’ relinquishment experiences and current adjustment to provide comparison of the two groups (pre-contact and post-contact mothers)</li> <li>Examination of variables that could mediate the relationship between reunion and the women’s psychological wellbeing and long-term adjustment, such as access to information, and past and current levels of emotional support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most mothers reported getting little or no emotional help at the time of the pregnancy (71%) or immediately after relinquishment (69%); half either didn’t see, or didn’t hold their baby after the birth; 60% felt little or no choice in the decision to relinquish (no difference between groups on these factors)</li> <li>No difference between birth mothers who were pre- or post-reunion in current psychological wellbeing or the intensity of their feelings. Post-reunion mothers reported higher levels of current emotional support</li> <li>For the contact group, 61% were totally/very satisfied, 23% somewhat satisfied, and 16% not very or not at all satisfied. Since reunion, feelings became less positive over time (after the “honeymoon” period), but significantly more positive than the pre-reunion mothers</li> <li>Mothers who lacked information about their child reported higher levels of guilt and lower psychological wellbeing</li> <li>Researchers noted more variability within than between the two groups (i.e., reunion and its effects are far from uniform)</li> </ul>
Gair	2008	“The Psychic Disequilibrium of Adoption: Stories Exploring Links Between Adoption and Suicidal Thoughts and Actions”	Adoptees, birth mothers, adopted father, adopted mother	20	Non-representative sample recruited through personal networks, newsletters and snowball technique	From the narratives of these 20 interviews, the author draws out themes around denial of reality, the invisibility of their own needs, powerlessness and the links to suicidal thoughts, feelings and behaviours are documented
Goodwach	2001	“Does Reunion Cure Adoption?”	Qualitative interviews with birth mothers involved with closed adoption, following reunion with their adult children in the past 3 years—recruited from Adoption Information Services ( <i>n</i> = 8)	8	Content analysis of face-to-faced open-ended interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“The multiple losses of adoption had not been mourned, and were either not resolved, or were even exacerbated by reunion” (p. 74)</li> <li>No one to talk to about the experience of adoption</li> <li>4 of the 8 mothers felt rejected by their child after the reunion experience</li> <li>Important for mothers to know that their children understand that they were wanted</li> <li>Intense relief to know that their child is alive and well</li> <li>Looks like a family member, but is a stranger</li> <li>Difficulties in reunion seen as their own fault, reactivating grief</li> <li>Researcher concluded that women had been punished, silenced, neglected and isolated—reunion does not “cure” adoption—and emphasised the need for counselling to be provided</li> </ul>

Author(s)	Year	Study	Who did the research include?	How many people?	Method/analysis	Key findings or themes
Grafen & Lawson	1996	"Relinquishing and Non-Relinquishing Mothers: Emotionality, Personality, and Experience"	Relinquishing mothers recruited from one self-help source and comparison group of non-relinquishing mothers	No information provided	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Neither group are representative</li> <li>No data are presented on the sample, methodology or data analysis</li> </ul>	As methodology and results data were not presented, conclusions cannot be relied on. However, the authors claimed that in comparison with non-relinquishing mothers, relinquishing mothers had: elevated negative experiences; diminished positive experiences; more insecure attachment; higher levels of avoidance, anxiety and loneliness; and less social support from family
Logan	1996	"Birth Mothers and Their Mental Health: Uncharted Territory"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Surveys with all birth parents referred to the voluntary After Adoption Service in the UK over a 6-month period</li> <li>In-depth interviews with random sample of these</li> </ul>	101 30	Interviews with birth parents about their mental health and factors affecting this (most having relinquished a child more than 20 years prior)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High incidence of depression (rooted in guilt, anger, sadness and grief). 23 interviewees self-reported significant depression; 19 saw themselves as having a mental health problem; 6 had made attempts on their own lives, and 2 reported feeling suicidal</li> <li>32% had been referred to a specialist mental health service</li> <li>Key themes from the interviews included: lack of support from families and the adoption agency; inability to express feelings; the emotional demands of the search process; and negative impact of other significant life events compounding the effect of relinquishment</li> <li>The authors note the impact of contact (reunion) is varied, with some having positive experiences, and others finding the contact increased the guilt they were feeling, or had other mental health consequences</li> </ul>
McPhee & Webster	1993	"Exposing Adoption Myths: Access to Information About Origins in Victoria"	Registrants with the Adoption Information Service (Vic.)	249	Analysis of administrative data of outcomes of enquiries (from both adopted persons and natural parents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Claimed that, as a group, natural parents' need for information about their child has been largely overlooked in the research literature</li> <li>A significant proportion of adopted persons wish to meet their parents</li> <li>In the period 1985–88, only 2% of adopted persons refused to either meet or exchange information with their natural parent</li> <li>Most natural parents (84%) wanted to meet their relinquished child</li> </ul>
Swain, P.	1992	"Adoption Information Services: Myths and Realities"	Registrants at the Berry Street Adoption Information Service in Victoria between 1985 and Jan 1988	340	Statistical analysis of file review of all registrations for the service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The authors concluded that the view that many birth parents would not want contact with their relinquished child is not borne out by practice</li> <li>Birth parents (11.8% of registrations) who registered for the service never forgot their relinquishing experience</li> <li>The majority of birth parents did not believe their decision was in itself wrong—most believed there was no other option</li> </ul>

Author(s)	Year	Study	Who did the research include?	How many people?	Method/analysis	Key findings or themes
Winkler & Van Keppel	1984	<i>Relinquishing Mothers in Adoption: Their Long-Term Adjustment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Voluntary sample of mothers who had relinquished a 1st-born child, recruited either from support groups or from media articles</li> <li>▪ Data on psychological health of a comparison group of unmarried mothers from Perth who were matched for age, marital status, occupation and country of birth</li> </ul>	213	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Quantitative analysis of factors affecting the psychological wellbeing of the relinquishing mothers included: perceived social support, feelings of loss, opportunities to express feelings, experience of other stressful life events</li> <li>▪ Supplemented with qualitative comments from participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relinquishment was: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– associated with long-lasting detrimental impacts (compared to data from matched group of unmarried mothers)</li> <li>– seen as the most significant and stressful life event</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Psychological adjustment was: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– negatively related to sense of loss—particularly on child's birthday or milestone dates (seen as "unresolvable" without information on the fate of their child)</li> <li>– positively related to perception of availability of social support from family and friends; early and later expression of feelings; and availability of opportunities to do so (e.g., support groups)</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Sense of loss was seen as "unresolvable" without information on the fate of their child. Authors acknowledge the strong relationship between sense of loss and psychological impairment could be due to young age of pregnancy, or pre-existing psychological maladjustment</li> <li>▪ Authors conclude that past closed adoption practices had detrimental effects, and that the results support the need for pre- and post-relinquishment counselling and support services</li> </ul>