

Understanding Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability (PAGI) for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care Project: Study Findings (OPRE Report #2023-050)

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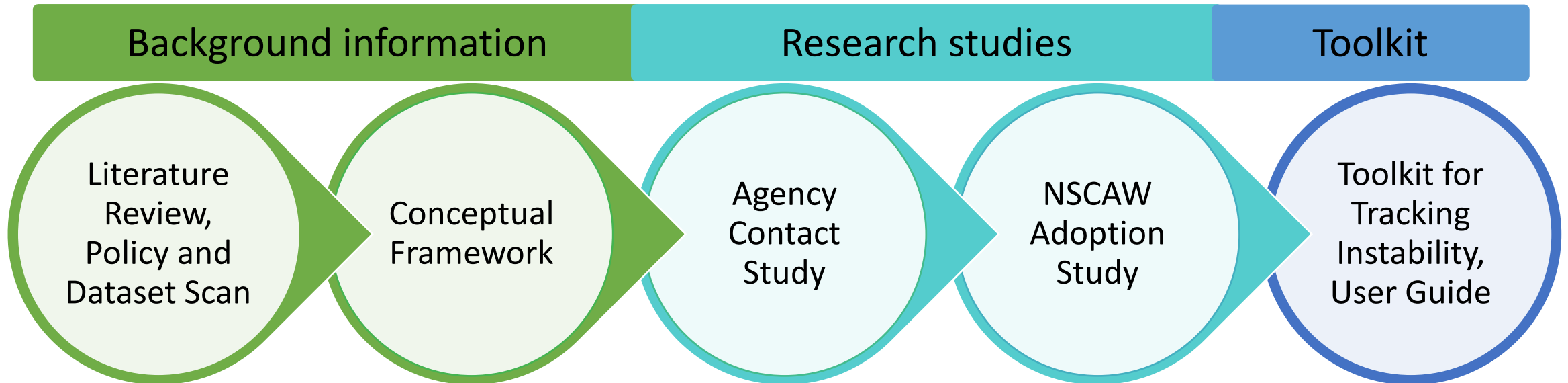
Alysia Blandon and Jackie Gross

Today's Agenda

- Describe the PAGI project goals, components, and key terms
- Summarize *Agency Contact Study* design, results and implications
 - Questions and Discussion
- Summarize *NSCAW Adoption Study* design, results and implications
 - Questions and Discussion
- Describe where to locate other PAGI project-developed materials

PAGI Project Goal and Activities

The 4-year PAGI Project aimed to examine instability for children who exit foster care to adoption or guardianship. It included several components.



Key Terms

■ Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability

“Post adoption and guardianship instability” refers to situations in which children who exit foster care to adoptive and guardianship homes no longer reside with their adoptive parent or legal guardian. This includes times when a child may reenter foster care (**formal instability**) or otherwise experience instability in their living arrangements, like running away or homelessness (**informal instability**).

■ Guardianship

For the PAGI project, guardianship is defined as a child who has exited foster care to the care of a legal guardian who receives a federally-funded, and/or state-funded, guardianship subsidy.

Types of Formal and Informal Post Adoption Instability

- **Formal instability**

- A legal termination of the adoption relationship, including termination of parental rights or emancipation
- Foster care reentry

- **Informal instability**

- Child runs away
- Child experiences some period of homelessness
- Child spends time in a transitional living program
- Child lives temporarily with a grandparent
- Child lives temporarily with another relative or other caregiver
- Child leaves home prior to age of 18 years

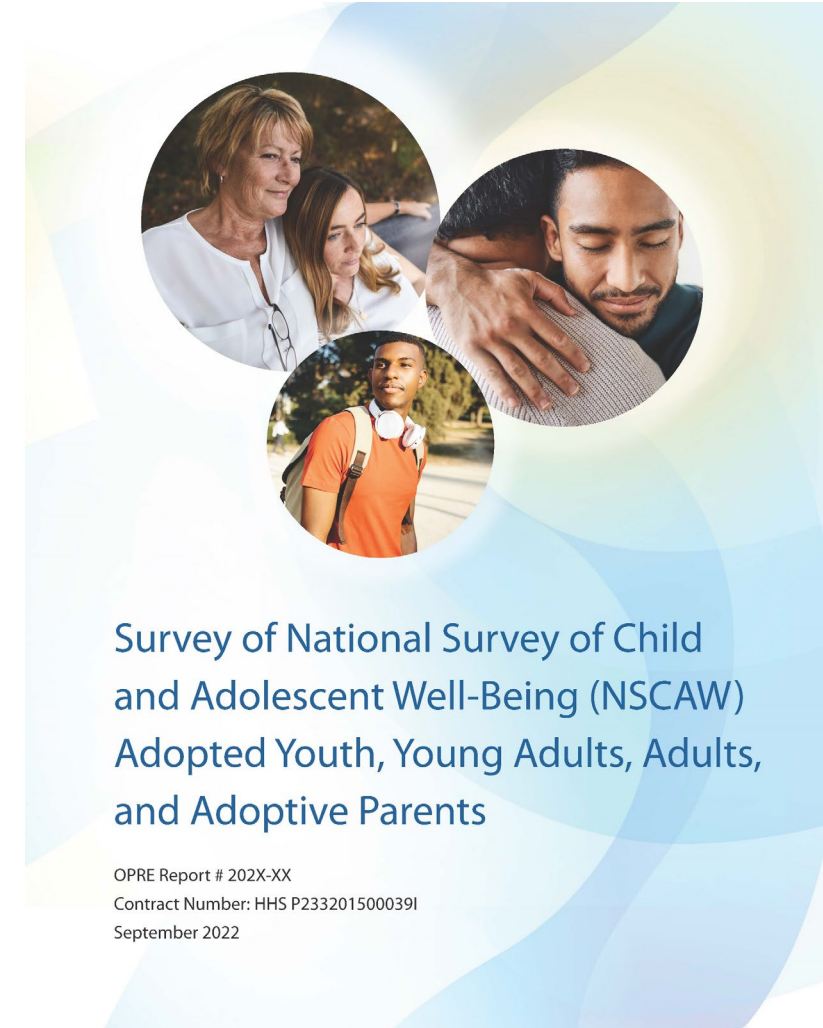
PAGI Project Research Studies

1. National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) Adopted Youth, Young Adults and Adoptive Parents Study (“**NSCAW Adoption Study**”)
2. Contact After Adoption or Guardianship: Child Welfare Agency and Family Interactions (“**Agency Contact Study**”)

NSCAW Adoption Study: Study Design and Findings

NSCAW Adoption Study: Purpose

- This study seeks to understand:
 - the extent to which children who exit foster care to adoption experience instability
 - risk and protective factors for several types of formal and informal instability
 - the quality of current relationships between adoptees and their adoptive parents
 - services and supports received by families who have adopted children who exited foster care, as well as barriers and facilitators to accessing those services and supports.



NSCAW Adoption Study: Study Design and Methods

- Study participants: Adoptees (and their adoptive parents) who exited foster care to adoption and were also former participants in a prior ACF study, the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW I or NSCAW II).
- Adoptees and adoptive parents completed online surveys or surveys by telephone (from June 2021 to March 2022) to describe their experiences with post adoption instability, the context surrounding post adoption instability events, their current parent-child relationships, and information about needed services and supports.
- Data from these new surveys were combined with older data available through NSCAW (such as maltreatment and foster care placement history, collected from 1999 to 2007 to understand post adoption instability).

NSCAW Adoption Study Participants:

Adoptee Characteristics (Number of Respondents = 383)

Adoptee Sex Assigned at Birth	
Male	47%
Female	53%
Adoptee Ethnicity	
Spanish, Hispanic or Latino	15%
Non-Hispanic	84%
Adoptee Race	
White	51%
Black or African American	31%
Asian	Less than 1%
American Indian or Alaska Native	About 1%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	Less than 1%
Other	6%
Multiple Races	9%
Adoptee Current Age	
Average Age	23.1 years
Age Range	15 – 36 years

NSCAW Adoption Study Participants:

Adoptee Pre-Adoption Characteristics (Number of Respondents=383)

Child Age in Early Adoption	
0–2 years (infant/toddlers)	17%
3–5 years (preschool)	33%
6 years or older (school-age)	50%
Child Behavior Problem (Child Behavior Checklist) in Early Adoption	
Yes	25%
No	75%
Parent Age at First Completed NSCAW Survey after Adoption	
45 years and younger	53%
45 and older	47%
Adoptive Parent's Relationship to Child	
Kin	34%
Non-kin	66%

NSCAW Adoption Study Findings: Prevalence of Post Adoption Instability During Childhood

- **Any Formal Instability:** 10% of families reported experiencing any kind of formal instability
 - 2% reported a termination of their adoptive parent(s)' rights or emancipation
 - 8% reported foster care reentry
- **Any Informal Instability:** 30% of families reported experiencing any kind of informal instability
 - 18% ran away
 - 8% experienced homelessness
 - 2% lived with a grandparent
 - 5% lived with another relative
 - 9% lived with other a non-relative
 - 17% left the home before 18 years old
 - 4% lived in a transitional housing program

NSCAW Adoption Study Findings: Formal and Informal Instability Often Co-Occur

- Most adoptees (67%) did not experience either formal or informal post adoption instability.
- But, of those who did experience formal instability (foster care reentry or adoptive parent TPR/emancipation), 68% had **also** experienced informal instability (e.g., running away, homelessness, living with another relative).

NSCAW Adoption Study: Factors Potentially Associated with Post Adoption Instability

- **Pre-Permanency Factors**

- Level of Maltreatment Harm
- Child Behavior Problems Early in Adoption
- Adoptive Parent's Relationship to Child (Kin/Non-kin)
- Adoptive Parent-Child Closeness Prior to Adoption
- Parent Motivations to Adopt

- **Post-Permanency Factors**

- Family Nurturing and Attachment during Childhood

- **Child or Parent Characteristics**

- Child Sex Assigned at Birth
- Child Race/Ethnicity
- Child Age at Adoption
- Parent Race/Ethnicity
- Parent Age at Adoption

NSCAW Adoption Study Findings: Factors Associated with Post Adoption Instability (1)

- Factors associated with *both* formal and informal post adoption instability included:
 - Less nurturing family relationships during childhood
 - The presence of child behavior problems early in the adoptive relationship
- Factors *only* associated with informal instability included:
 - Older child age at the time of adoption (adopted as preschool or school-age children, compared to adopted as infants/toddlers)
 - Child sex assigned at birth (being female)
 - Less adoptive parent-child closeness prior to the adoption

NSCAW Adoption Study Findings: Factors Associated with Post Adoption Instability (2)

- When accounting for the influence of all other potential risk/protective factors:
 - Only less nurturing family relationships continued to show a significant association with both formal and informal post adoption instability.
 - Children with behavior problems early in the adoptive relationship also continued to have higher rates of informal (but not formal) instability.

NSCAW Adoption Study Findings: Quality of Current Parent-Child Relationship

- Most adoptees (67%) and adoptive parents (73%) reported having “extremely” or “very” close current relationships with each other
- Most adoptees (66%) and adoptive parents (89%) reported feeling a strong sense of the adoptee’s belonging to the family.
- This was true even for many who experienced post adoption formal and informal instability.
 - More than half (56%) of adoptees who experienced formal instability and 45% of adoptees who experienced informal instability described a strong sense of belonging.
 - Although 25% of adoptive parents whose child experienced formal post adoption instability described currently feeling “not close at all” to their child, more than half described currently feeling “extremely” or “very” close.

NSCAW Adoption Study Findings: Services and Supports Received Post Adoption

- **Services for Adopted Child**

- 62% received mental health services
- 46% received educational supports
- 18% received support group for adoptive families, parents, or youth
- 6% received drug or alcohol treatment services
- 19% received job training or independent living skills

- **Services for Adoptive Parents**

- 32% received adoption support services from the child welfare system
- 67% received financial Assistance

NSCAW Adoption Study Findings:

Facilitators to Services and Supports

- **Adoptive parents** reported the two most common facilitators (*or factors that helped*) to receiving services were agency or provider support and their own self-advocacy. For example:

“The area agency/the people that work with different government programs and are aware of what is available. Also, the school system knowing what other programs available. The people out in the community who connected us with other programs.”

“Myself, fighting for them...”

- **Adoptees** reported the two most common facilitators (*or factors that helped*) to receiving services were having a supportive family and their own self-advocacy. For example:

“My grandparents cared a lot [and] only wanted the best for me, they did a lot of research.”

“I just had to do it on my own.”

NSCAW Adoption Study Findings: Barriers to Services and Supports

- **Adoptive parents** described the primary barrier to services as a general lack of assistance, support, or information received from the child welfare agency. For example:
 - “The agency is over worked, understaffed so the help received is minimal unless you constantly bug them.”*
 - “No one offered it. CASA and CPS just told us to take it slow and they would help. It never came!”*
- Although many adoptees reported family as a facilitator to services, many other **adoptees** reported unsupportive family members or their families’ lack of understanding about their needs as the primary barrier to services. For example:
 - “The adults who were caring for me did not realize that I needed counseling/therapy after trauma.”*
- A second barrier commonly reported by **adoptees** was lack of agency involvement. For example:
 - “I never had contact with an agency or anyone willing to help.”*

NSCAW Adoption Study: Conclusions

- Post adoption informal instability is much more common than formal instability, but often co-occurs with formal instability.
- Informal instability events are a sign that a child may be at risk for formal instability.
- Instability events may happen long after adoption finalization when many child welfare staff may have ended their contact with adoptive families.
- Helping to create nurturing family relationships may help to prevent post adoption instability.
- Most adoptees and adoptive parents describe their current relationships in positive terms—describing a strong sense that the adoptee belongs in the adoptive family and feeling very close to each other. This is true even for many families that have experienced post adoption instability.

NSCAW Adoption Study: Practice Implications

- Families' knowledge of and better access to available post adoption services and supports may help prevent post adoption instability.
- The child welfare system likely knows about foster care reentry, a child's emancipation or adoptive parent(s)' rights termination, but likely does not know about other informal instability events.
- It may be helpful for child welfare agencies to stay in touch with families long after adoption finalization in order to be in touch with families when instability is most likely to occur.
- Pre and post adoption supports appear particularly important for families finalizing adoptions for older children (particularly those adopted over 2 years of age) as well as for children with known emotional or behavioral health problems.
- It may be especially important to help adoptive families know how to recognize their child's mental health problems as well as the availability of mental health services in their community.

NSCAW Adoption Study:

Interactive Polls (1)

- Question #1: How surprised are you by how common **formal** post adoption instability (~10%) was in our study?
 - Very surprised
 - A little surprised
 - Not at all surprised
- Question #2: How surprised are you by how common **informal** post adoption instability (~30%) was in our study?
 - Very surprised
 - A little surprised
 - Not at all surprised

NSCAW Adoption Study: Interactive Polls (2)

- Question #3: Which types of post adoption instability do you think would be the most feasible for your agency to learn about from adoptees and their families? (Check all that apply)
 - Foster care reentry
 - Running away
 - Homelessness
 - Stays in transitional living programs
 - Living temporarily with a grandparent
 - Living temporarily with another relative or other caregiver

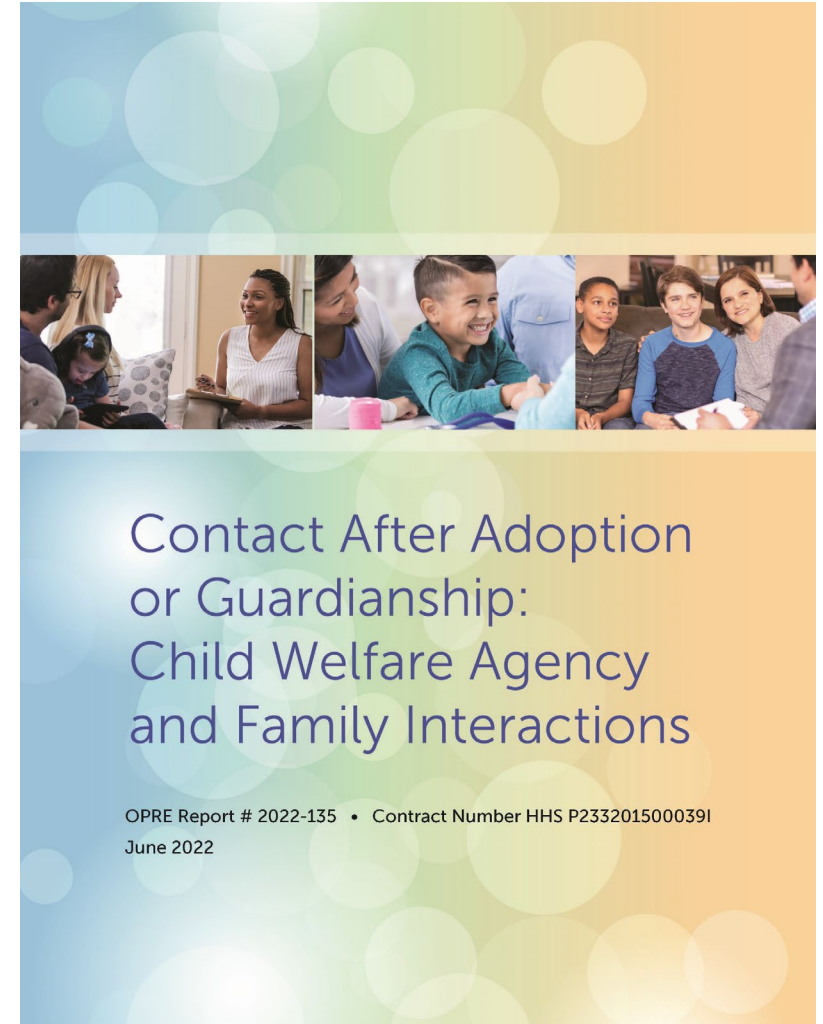


Questions?

Agency Contact Study: Study Design and Findings

Agency Contact Study: Purpose

- The study explores the intentional and unintentional ways public child welfare agencies contact or receive information about the stability and well-being of children and youth who have exited the foster care system through adoption or guardianship.
- [Contact After Adoption or Guardianship: Child Welfare Agency and Family Interactions | The Administration for Children and Families \(hhs.gov\)](#)



Agency Contact Study: Goals

- This study seeks to understand:
 - How commonly child welfare agencies initiate contact with families after adoption or guardianship and the types of contact that are initiated
 - How commonly families (parents or guardians, children, youth, and community members) initiate contact with child welfare agencies after adoption or guardianship and the types of contact that are initiated
 - What type of post adoption or guardianship instability events come to the attention of child welfare agencies
 - To what extent child welfare agencies track foster care reentry after adoption or guardianship and their confidence in this tracking

Agency Contact Study: Study Design and Methods

Agency Web Surveys

- Sent to Adoption Program Managers (APMs) in all 50 states
 - All 50 states were sent an Adoption survey
 - In the 38 states with federally-approved programs, APMs also received a Guardianship survey

Key Informant Interviews via Zoom with staff in 4 states

Note: The study should not be generalized beyond the child welfare agencies selected or used as the principal basis for public policy decisions

Adoption surveys

- 36 of 50 states responded

Guardianship surveys

- 24 of 38 states responded

Agency Contact Study Findings:

Contact Between Families and Agencies

Agencies that initiate contact with families after adoption or guardianship:

- Adoption: 20 out of 36 states (56%)
- Guardianship: 14 out of 24 states (58%)

Agencies reporting that families initiate contact after adoption or guardianship:

- Adoption: 35 out of 36 states (97%)
- Guardianship: 22 out of 24 states (92%)

The following set of slides provides additional information about the types of post-permanency contact agencies have with families.

Types of Agency-Initiated Contact with Families After Adoption or Guardianship

Most states initiate contact through agency follow-up after a:

- *subsidy change is requested*
- *request for service or support*
- *change to services outlined in a subsidy agreement*

Fewer states initiate contact through:

- *Agency follow-up after service completion*
- *Well-being letters*
- *Newsletters*

Method of State-Initiated Contact ^a	Adoption	Guardianship
	Number (%) of respondents (out of 20)	Number (%) of respondents (out of 14)
Agency follow-up after a subsidy change is requested	17 (85%)	13 (93%)
Agency follow-up after a request for service or support	15 (75%)	12 (86%)
Agency follow-up after a change to services outlined in a subsidy agreement	14 (70%)	12 (86%)
Agency follow-up after service completion	10 (50%)	5 (36%)
Well-being letter	9 (45%)	6 (43%)
Newsletter	9 (45%)	4 (29%)
Other	7 (35%)	3 (21%)

^a Among those agencies that initiated contact with families; Agencies could select more than one response

Agency Contact Study Findings: Agency Initiated Contact

Contact Needs to be Carefully Considered

- *"We are very clear that it is not the role of the state or local departments of social services to interfere or interject themselves in the homes of adoptive families ... We have to wait almost for people to come to us because we can't necessarily intrude in their lives."*
- *"Every year we are contacted by adoptive and guardianship families ... They call us because they have a lot of questions about why they are getting this letter, what it means ... And I tell them about us and they're just like, 'I didn't even know that existed.' So, then I'm able to enroll them into our services..."*

Types of Family-Initiated Contact with Agencies After Adoption or Guardianship

Most families initiate contact through:

- *Phone calls to—*
 - *specific agency staff*
 - *a general state agency number*
 - *staff at a different agency*
- *A state agency website*

Fewer families initiate contact through:

- *Helplines*
- *Walk-ins or visits to the state agency*

Method of Family-Initiated Contact ^a	Adoption	Guardianship
	Number (%) of respondents (out of 35)	Number (%) of respondents (out of 22)
Phone calls to specific staff members at the state agency	32 (91%)	16 (73%)
Phone calls to a general number at the state agency	24 (69%)	18 (82%)
Phone calls to specific adoption or guardianship staff members at a different (public or private) agency	23 (66%)	13 (59%)
Through a state agency website	22 (63%)	15 (68%)
Helpline for families	17 (49%)	10 (45%)
Walk-in or visit to the state agency office to request assistance	15 (43%)	9 (41%)
Other	3 (9%)	1 (5%)

^a Among those agencies that reported families contact them; Agencies could select more than one response

Agency Contact Study Findings: Family Initiated Contact

Agencies Encourage Family-Initiated Contact

- *“[We tell families that the child welfare agency] doesn’t close the door necessarily just because the child’s move to permanency. We’re still here to support you. The work of the agency does not end at adoption or guardianship finalization.”*
- *“We started promoting ... come early so you can learn these tools up front and therefore you can be prepared. You don’t have to commit to two years of service. You don’t have to commit to somebody into your house every week. It’s all how you feel comfortable, but understanding your child is going to have these needs at some point down the line, and we want to prepare you.”*

Types of Post Adoption Instability Events that Come to the Attention of Child Welfare Agencies

The most frequent types of notified instability events include:

- *Institutional or residential care*
- *Another living situation with friends or relatives*
- *Runaway*

In the past year, has the state agency been notified when a child experiences the following out of home events?	Adoption ^a
	Number (%) of respondents (out of 36)
Institutional or residential care	32 (89%)
Another living situation with friends or relatives	30 (83%)
Runaway from home	26 (72%)
Group home care	22 (61%)
Homelessness	21 (58%)
^a These items were not included in the Guardianship survey	

Tracking Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability

Adoption:

- *Most child IDs change from foster care to adoption, but they can be linked*
- *Most states have a data system flag showing foster care reentry.*

Guardianship:

- *Most child IDs do not change from foster care to guardianship (linking is not necessary)*
- *Half of states have a data system flag showing foster care reentry after guardianship*

Administrative Data Tracking (Pre- and Post-Legal Permanency) ^a :	Adoption	Guardianship
	Number (%) of respondents (out of 36)	Number (%) of respondents (out of 24)
States that change child IDs from foster care to adoption or guardianship	23 (64%)	1 (4%)
States that can link child IDs (foster care to adoption or guardianship)	32 (89%)	22 (92%)
State has a flag in the data system that indicates foster care reentry after permanence	27 (75%)	12 (50%)
^a Among all state agencies that responded to the survey		

Agency Contact Study Findings: Tracking Instability

A Tool to Track Foster Care Reentry is Needed

- *“The original foster case will have its own ID, the new [adoption] case will have its own ID, the new foster case will have a new ID...”*
- *“I think there needs to be ... something that helps identify ... adopted child[ren], because if you don't know what to look for, you won't know [how to find adopted children in the data system].”*

Confidence in Tracking Foster Care Reentry after Adoption or Guardianship

Of the states that reported a data flag, many are “extremely” or “very” confident in their data flag.

- 14 of 27 states (52%) of adoption respondents
- 5 of 12 states (42%) of guardianship respondents

How state agencies rated their level of confidence in the flag ^a	Adoption	Guardianship
	Number (%) of respondents (out of 27)	Number (%) of respondents (out of 12)
Extremely confident	4 (15%)	3 (25%)
Very confident	10 (37%)	2 (17%)
Moderately confident	8 (30%)	4 (33%)
Slightly confident	1 (4%)	1 (8%)
Not at all confident	4 (15%)	2 (17%)
^a Among those state agencies that reported having a flag in the data system that indicates foster care reentry after permanency		

Agency Contact Study Findings: Tracking Instability

Track Foster Care Reentry Starting at Intake

- *“Train from the beginning... hotline specialists, so they get the abuse reports they create the case in our [administrative data] system so having very intense training regarding ‘these are the things that you look for’, and ‘ask these questions’, ‘do a thorough search before you create someone new within the [administrative data] system’.”*

Agency Contact Study: Practice Implications

- Child welfare agencies might consider the development of a systematic way to track foster care re-entries and agency-family interactions after legal custody has shifted from the state to adoptive parents or guardians.
- A data system that helps track families who receive services after adoption or guardianship might enhance agency effort and help identify families and youth who may be struggling.
- The study highlights the need to develop supportive agency-family relationships that begin before adoption and guardianship are finalized and continue post-finalization.

Agency Contact Study:

Interactive Polls

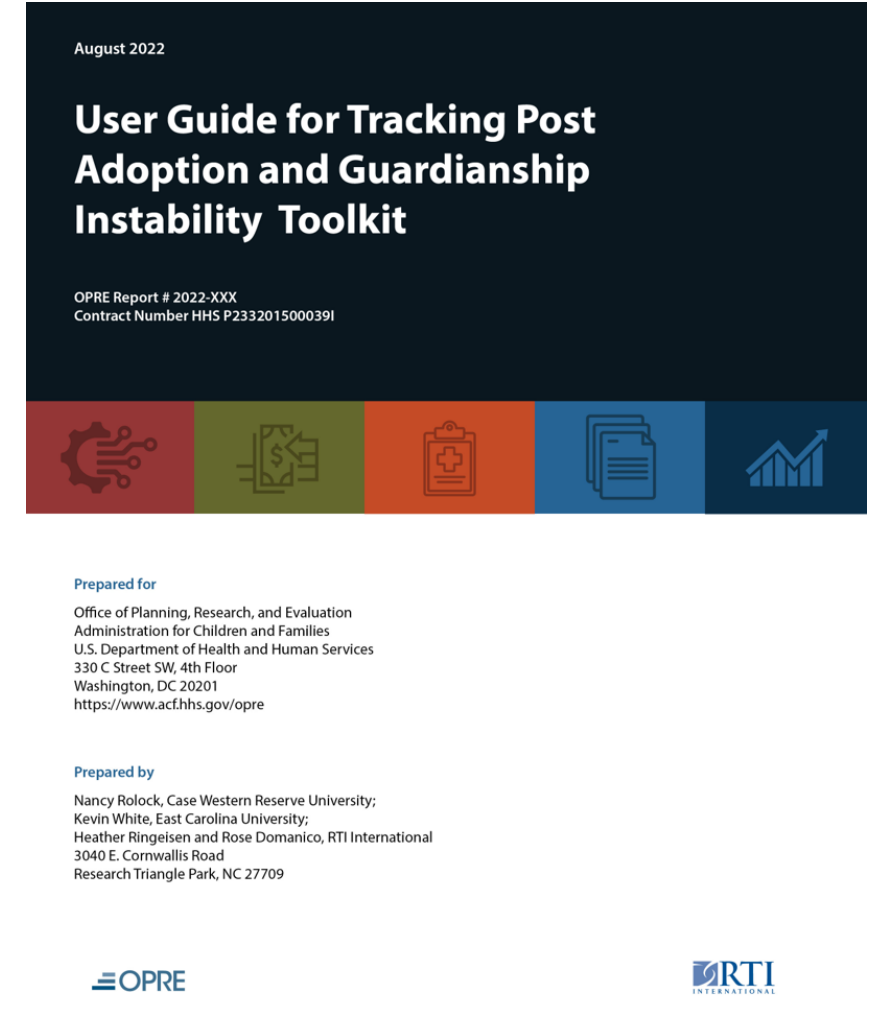
- Question #1: How interested would you say your agency is in tracking post ***adoption*** instability?
 - Very interested
 - A little interested
 - Not at all interested
- Question #2: How interested would you say your agency is in tracking post ***guardianship*** instability?
 - Very interested
 - A little interested
 - Not at all interested



Questions?

Toolkit for Tracking Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability

- **Tracking Workbook** with 7 spreadsheets, each a tool with a different source of data to help agencies track post adoption and guardianship instability.
- **User Guide** that explains how to use the tools within the tracking spreadsheet.
- **A well being letter example** in the User Guide Appendix that provides sample questions that ask about the child's well being.
- **Training Video and Slide Show Presentation** that explains how to use the tools



Thank you!

We would like to thank all the Adoption Program Managers (APMs) who took the time to speak with us during the conduct of this project.

We know that you are very busy, dedicated people. We so appreciate the time you spent with us, and for all that you do for adoptive and guardianship families across the United States!