



Adoptions Australia data visualisations

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Citation

AIHW

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About

The Adoptions Australia data visualisations allow you to explore data on adoptions through customisable charts and tables. The displays are updated annually and contain data back to 1998-99. Data in the displays are based on the National Adoptions Dataset Specifications.

Cat. no: CWS 67

- [Overview of adoptions](#)
- [Data](#)

Findings from this report:

- [Adoption numbers in Australia declined by 63% over the past 25 years - from 709 in 1996-97 to 264 in 2020-21](#)
 - [In 2020-21, the median length of time to process an intercountry adoption was 3 years and 4 months](#)
 - [Adoption by carers was the most common type of known child adoption in 2020-21 \(55%\), followed by step-parents \(42%\)](#)
 - [The 264 adoptions finalised in 2020-21 are the lowest number on record](#)
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Overview of adoptions

Adoption is a legal process involving the transfer of the rights and responsibilities for the permanent care of a child from the child's parent(s) to their adoptive parent(s). When an adoption order is granted, the legal relationship between the child and their parent(s) is severed. Any legal rights that existed from birth regarding the parent(s), such as inheritance, are removed. In relation to the adoptive parents, the legal rights of the adopted child become the same as they would be if the child had been born to the adoptive parent(s). A new birth certificate may be issued for the child recording the name(s) of the adoptive parent(s) as the legal parent(s) and, if given, the new name of the child.

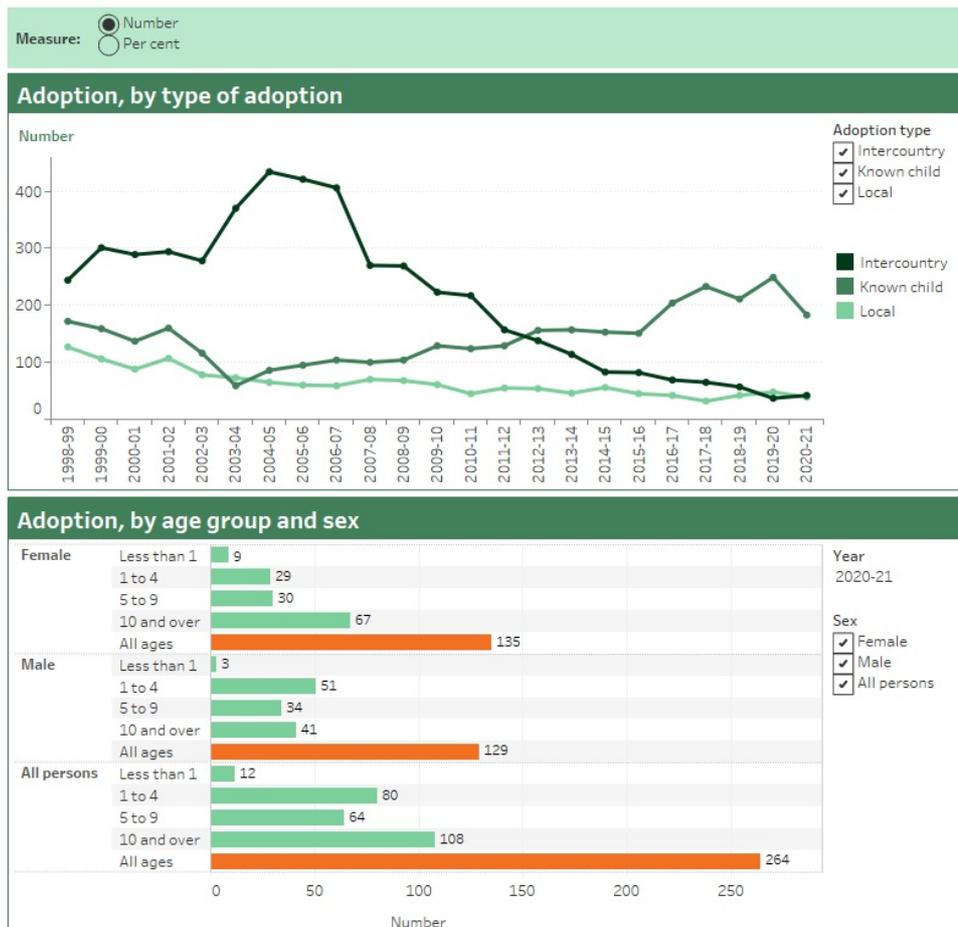
Adoptions processes

There are three types of adoption in Australia:

1. Known child adoption, which includes step-parent, carer and relative adoptions;
2. Local adoption, and
3. Intercountry adoption

The process of adopting a child varies between each of these adoption types, and can vary between the adoption agencies of each state and territory.

Two panels presented. The top panel shows how the number of intercountry, known child, and local adoptions have varied between 1999-99 to 2020-21. Over this period Intercountry adoptions were the most numerous type up to 2011-12, but known child adoptions have been most numerous since, with the proportion they account for generally increasing. The bottom panel shows the sex and ages of all adoptees by year. For adoptions finalised in 2020-21, 135 females were adopted compared with 129 males, with the majority of adoptees aged 10 or over.



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

What influences adoption trends in Australia?

A range of factors contribute to changes in the number of children adopted in Australia. These factors vary based on the type of adoption.

Factors affecting the number of adoptions of Australian children (local and known child) include, but are not limited to:

- declining fertility rates;

- the wider availability of effective birth control;
- increased support for single parents; and
- the emergence of family planning centres.

Legislation introduced by state and territory departments supporting the use of alternative legal orders, such as third party parental orders that transfer permanent guardianship and custody of a child to a relative or carer other than the child's parents, can also replace the need for adoption.

Factors contributing to the decline in intercountry adoptions include economic and social changes that enable children to remain with their birth family or be adopted in their country of origin. This results in fewer children needing intercountry adoption, leading to countries of origin working to reduce or manage the number of adoption applications they receive; for example, by introducing more stringent eligibility requirements, or quotas.

Has the age of adoptees changed over time?

The age of an adopted child can be influenced by circumstances related to the type of adoption. In known child adoptions, the age at which an adoption occurs can be affected by legislative requirements. For example, carers seeking to adopt a child need to have known the child for a certain length of time prior to an adoption being considered. In the case of step-parent adoptions, additional time is involved in forming step-families.

The age of children for whom intercountry adoption is considered appropriate can be affected by characteristics of the child and characteristics of the adoption process. This includes time taken to determine if intercountry adoption is in the best interests of the child, which may include initially seeking a suitable adoptive family in the child's country of origin.

Explanatory notes

Age is calculated from date of birth, in completed years. For known child adoptions, this is the age when the adoption order for the child was granted. For local and intercountry adoptions, it is the age at which the child was placed with the adoptive family.

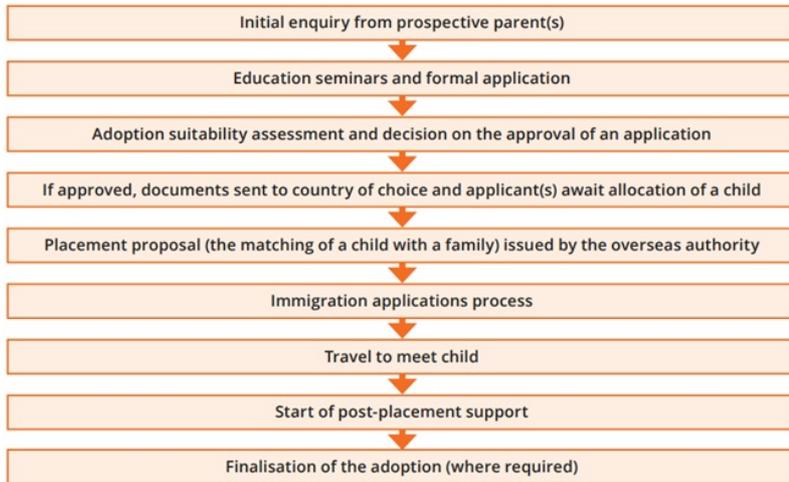
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Intercountry adoption in Australia

Intercountry adoption refers to the adoption of children from countries other than Australia through one of Australia's official adoption programs. These children are legally able to be placed for adoption, but generally have had no previous contact or relationship with their adoptive parent(s). A simplified overview of the intercountry adoptions process in Australia is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Overview of the intercountry adoption process in Australia



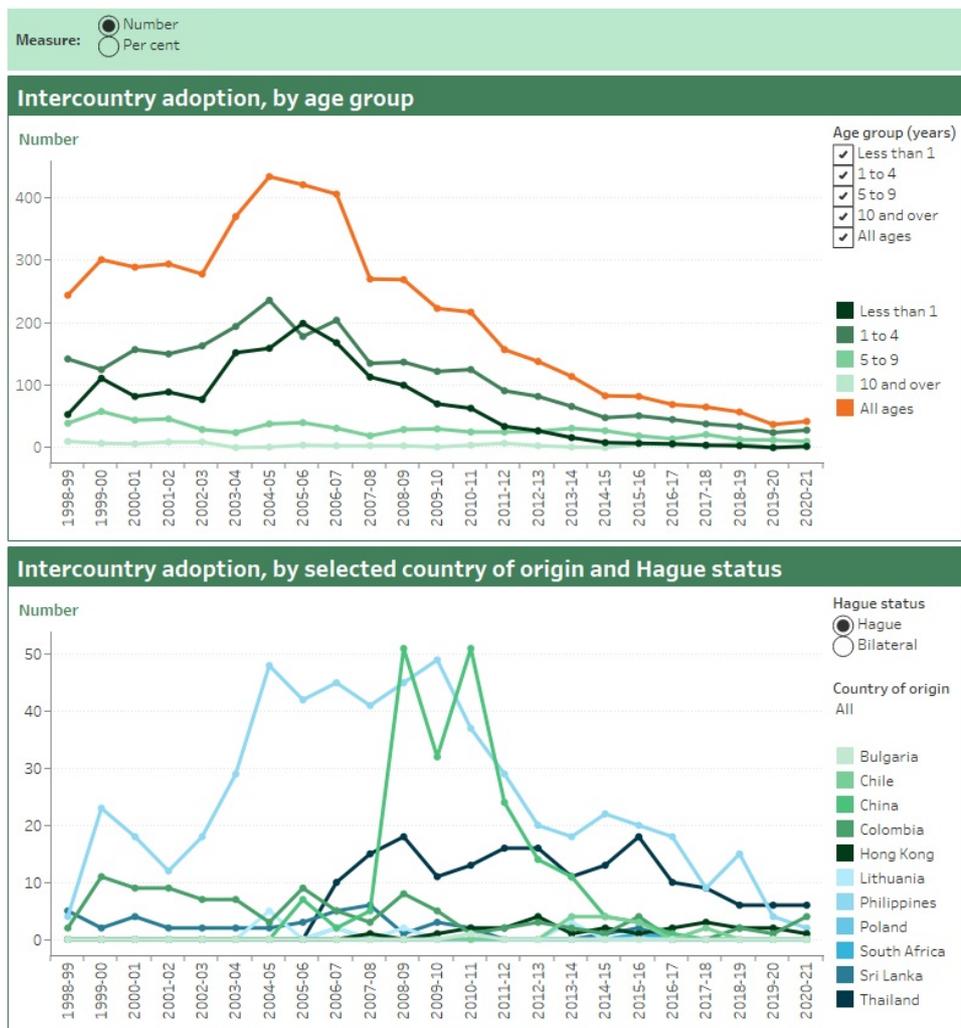
Note: Intercountry adoptions may be finalised in various ways, depending on the type of adoption. Processes might vary between jurisdictions.

Source: AIHW

Changes in overseas domestic adoption practices, and social factors such as the degree of acceptance of single motherhood or falling fertility rates in countries of origin, can affect the number and characteristics of children for whom intercountry adoption is considered appropriate. As traditional countries of origin improve in areas of economic and social development, options for domestic care also improve, and fewer children need intercountry adoption. This can result in more stringent eligibility criteria or further program restrictions for adopting young children, and an increasing proportion of those in need of intercountry adoption being children with complex backgrounds, health issues or impairments.

Directly influenced by the countries with which Australia has an adoption program, the majority of intercountry adoptions in Australia have consistently been from Asian countries of origin. Variations in the intercountry programs, including restrictions on these programs by either Australian authorities or authorities in the country of origin, contribute to changes in intercountry adoption trends.

Two panels presented. The top panel shows the number of intercountry adoptions per year, by age group of the adoptees, from 1998-99 to 2020-21. Adoptees aged 1 to 4 have been the most numerous group in all but one of the years across this period. Adoptees under 12 months were similarly numerous up to 2011-12, but have since represented a minor proportion. The bottom panel shows the number of intercountry adoptees, by year and by country of origin, from 1998-99 to 2020-21. For Hague adoptions, the Philippines has been the main country of origin for most of this period. For bilateral adoptions the main country of origin has varied over this period, but 2013-14 has been either South Korea or Taiwan.



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

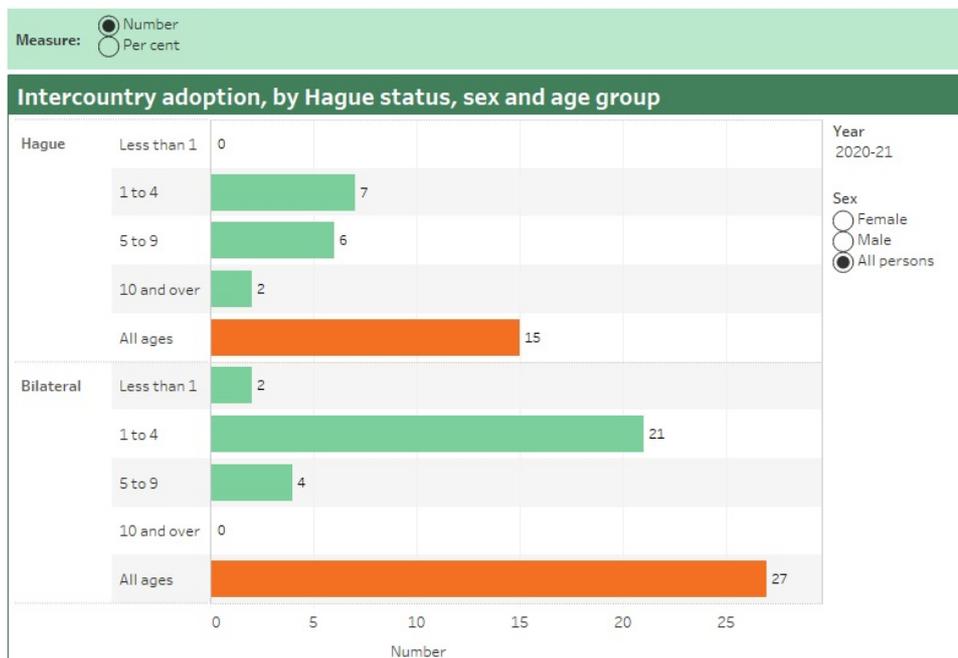
Types of intercountry adoption programs

Australia has been a party to the *Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (the Hague Convention) since December 1998. The Hague Convention establishes:

- uniform standards and procedures between countries, including legally binding standards and safeguards;
- a system of supervision to ensure set standards and procedures are observed;
- channels of communication between authorities in countries of origin and countries of destination for children being adopted; and,
- principles that focus on the need for intercountry adoptions to occur only where it is in the best interest of the child with respect to their fundamental rights, and to prevent abduction, sale, or traffic of children.

Not all of the countries with which Australia has an adoption program are parties to the Hague Convention. However, programs are established only where Australia can be satisfied that the principles of the Hague Convention are being met, regardless of whether the country is a signatory. In this context, bilateral arrangements exist with South Korea and Taiwan, which have not currently ratified the Hague Convention.

The plot shows the age distribution of intercountry adoptees, by year, Hague status (Hague or bilateral), and sex of the child. For both Hague and bilateral adoptions finalised in 2020-21, most adoptees were aged 1 to 4 at the time of placement for both males and females.



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

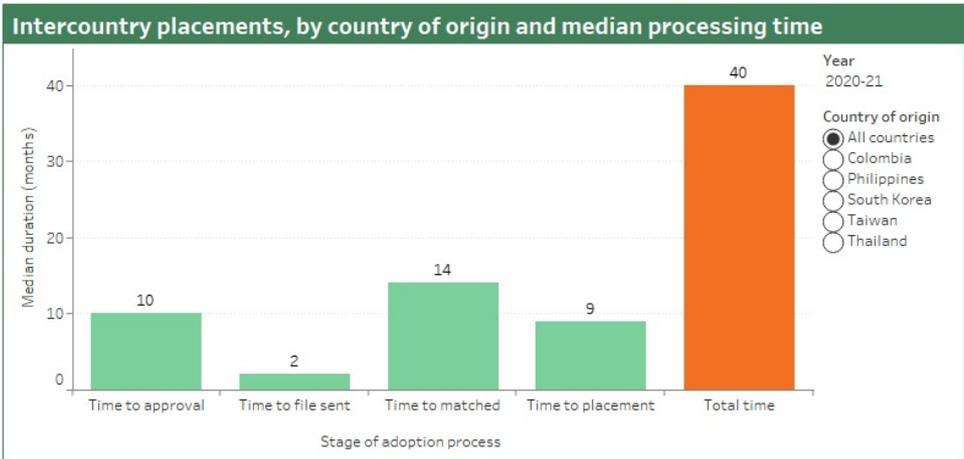
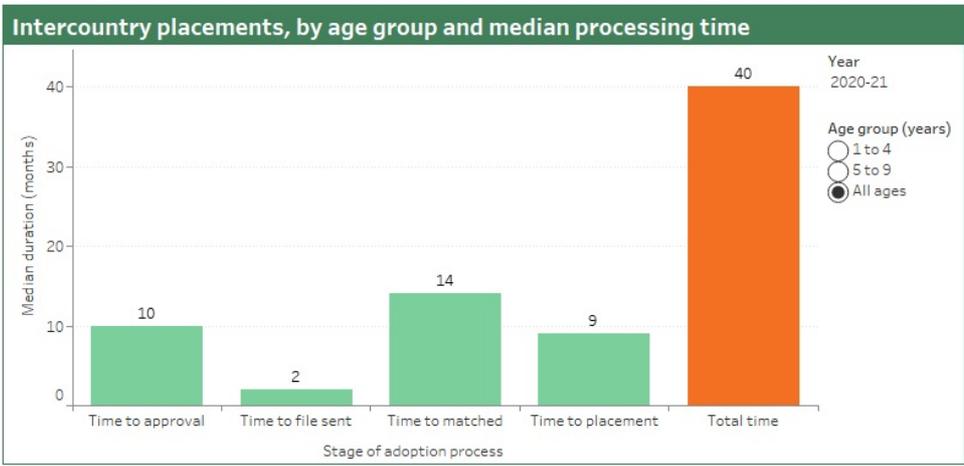
Processing times

Several factors outside of the control of Australian authorities can affect processing times, including the number and characteristics of children in need of intercountry adoption, the number of applications received, and the resources of the overseas authority. For example, Australia's partner countries generally have more applications from prospective adoptive parents willing to parent healthy younger children and infants than there are such children in need of adoption.

In contrast, a growing proportion of children in need of intercountry adoption are considered to have special needs and more complex care requirements. Targeted programs in countries of origin can assist with matching eligible prospective adoptive parents with these children and potentially reduce processing times.

It is also possible that some Australian applicants have their application in a country for a number of years with no outcome, and may change their application to an adoption program in another country of origin before they are successfully matched with a child.

Two panels presented. Both show the average processing times of intercountry adoptees, by year of adoption order finalisation, split by the stage of the process. In the top panel, this is presented by age group of adoptee. For adoptions finalised in 2020-21, the overall process took longer on average for children aged 5 to 9 compared with those aged 1 to 4. In the bottom panel, average duration is presented by country of origin. The overall process took longest on average for children from the Philippines (66 months), where the period from when the file was sent overseas to when the child was matched was the longest stage (40 months, on average).



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

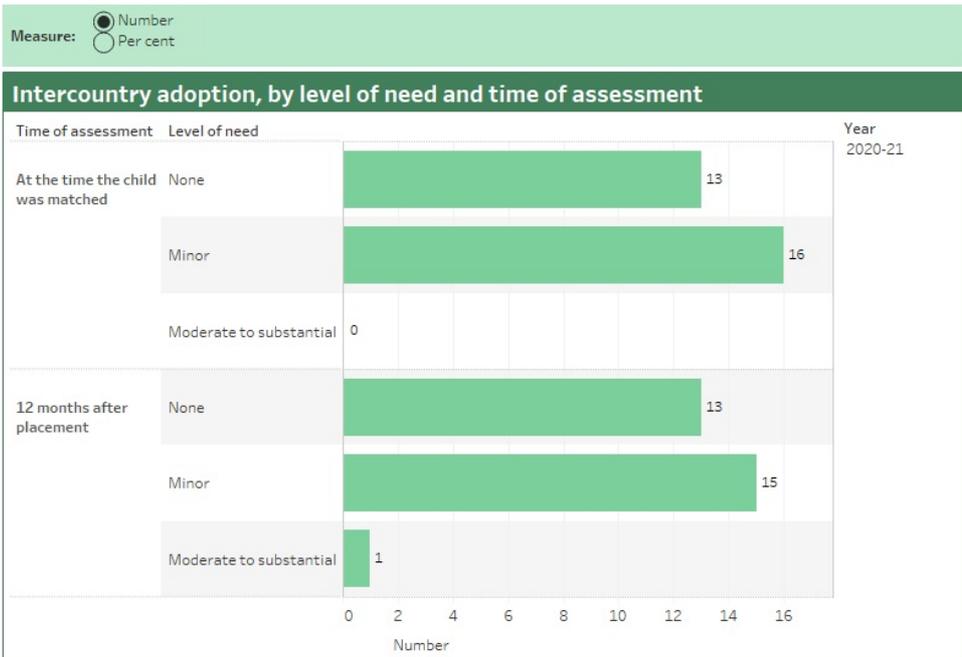
See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

Adoption of children with special needs

Special needs in the Australian adoptions context is defined as the level of resources or support services required by the adoptee and/or their adoptive family to foster healthy development and wellbeing, and to support positive family functioning and prevent adoption disruption. Special needs is examined through a continuum of level of need that is broken down into the following categories: no additional care needs, minor additional care needs, and moderate to substantial additional care needs. Children are assessed at the time they are matched and again 12 months after they were placed.

Children with special needs represent a growing proportion of children for whom intercountry adoptions is deemed appropriate, and the adoption process can be more difficult due to the need to find families who can care for the child’s specific needs.

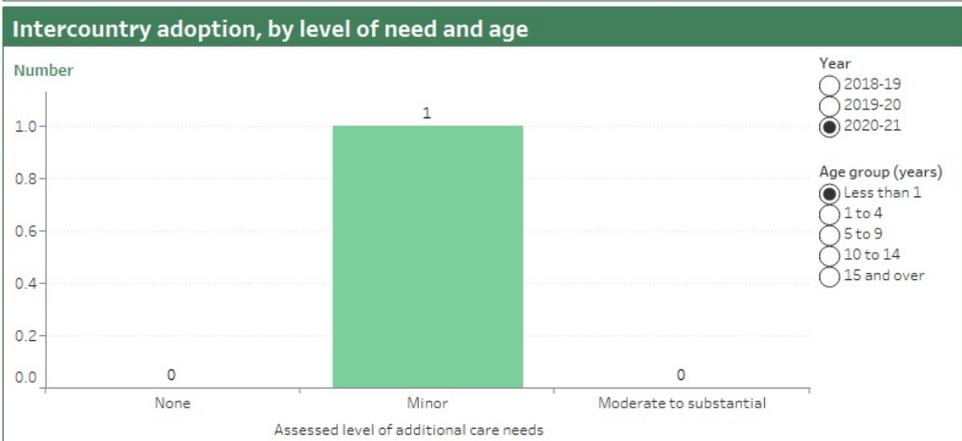
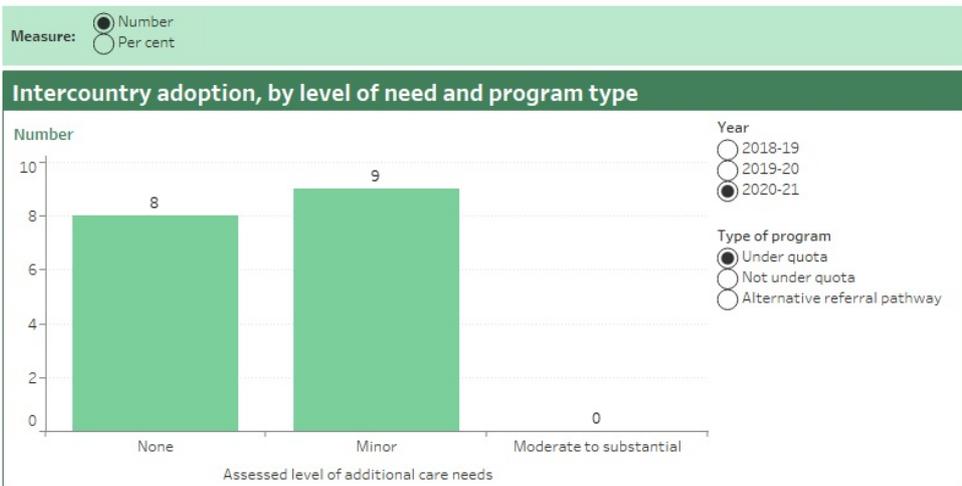
The plot shows the level of need for intercountry adoptees, by year, and by the time at which they were assessed (at the time the child was matched, and 12 months after placement). Of the children who entered Australia in 2019-20, 13 were assessed to have no additional care needs, 16 assessed to have minor additional care needs, and 0 assessed as having moderate to substantial care needs. When re-assessed 12 months after placement, one fewer child was assessed as having minor additional care needs, and one more child was assessed as having moderate to substantial care needs.



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

Two panels presented, both of which present data on the level of need of intercountry adoptees, assessed 12 months after they entered Australia. The top panel presents this data by the type of program through which the child placement occurred. For intercountry adoptees who entered Australia in 2019-20 under quota programs, the number assessed as having no additional care needs (8) was similar to those assessed as having minor additional care needs (9), with none assessed as having moderate to substantial additional care needs. The bottom panel presents data on assessed level of need by age group of the adoptee. For intercountry adoptees who entered Australia in 2019-20, the vast majority of those with no or minor additional care needs are aged 1 to 4.



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

Explanatory notes

Age is calculated from date of birth, in completed years. For intercountry adoptions, it is the age at which the child was placed with the adoptive family.

Only countries of origin with which Australia had an active adoption program since 2011-12 are presented. As at June 2021, Australia had an active intercountry adoption program with 13 countries: Bulgaria, Chile, China, Colombia, Hong Kong, India, Latvia, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Thailand.

Since 1998, adoptions where the Hague Convention had not entered into force in the adoptive child's country of origin before the file of the prospective parent(s) was sent were referred to as 'non-Hague' adoptions for national reporting purposes. Commencing 2017-18, the term 'bilateral' is used to refer to such adoptions.

The median length of time calculated for intercountry adoption processing times is reported in whole months. Medians are not presented where there were fewer than 3 placements in an age group or from a country of origin.

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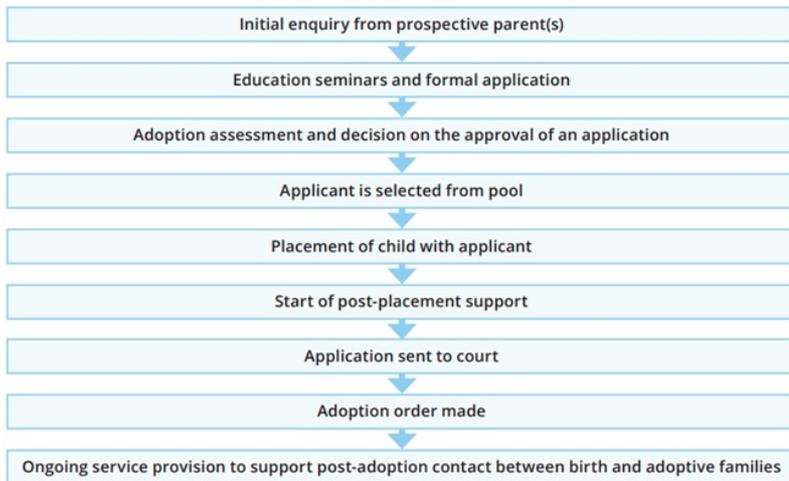
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Local adoption in Australia

Local adoption refers to the adoption of children born or permanently residing in Australia before the adoption who are legally able to be placed for adoption, but generally have had no previous contact or relationship with the adoptive parent(s).

A simplified overview of the local adoptions process in Australia is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Overview of the local adoption process in Australia



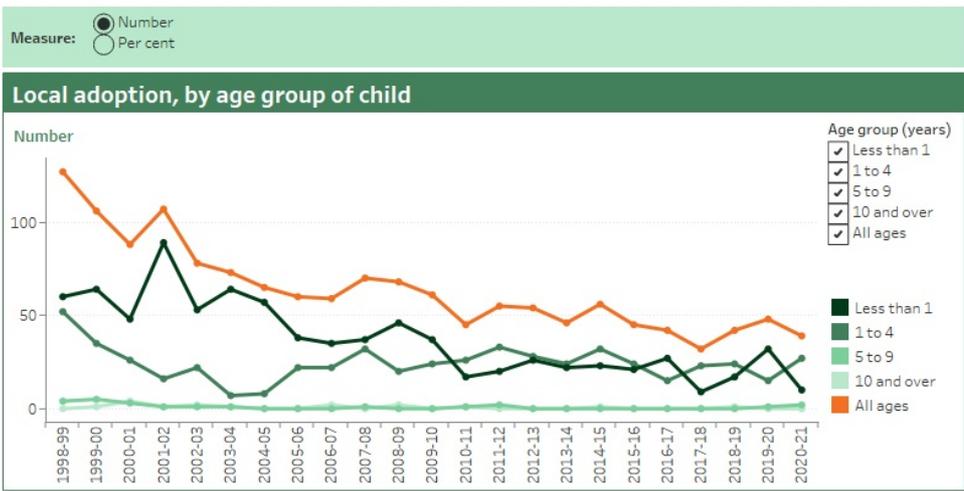
Note: Processes might vary between jurisdictions.

Source: AIHW

A complex interplay of social, economic and legislative factors influence the number of children in need of adopting and the characteristics of families seeking to adopt. These include:

- increased acceptance and financial support for unwed mothers,
- reduced stigma around children born outside marriage,
- the end of forced adoption practices in Australia,
- the increasing labour force participation of women,
- improved contraception and legalised abortion, and
- increased postponement of having children, and reproductive innovations.

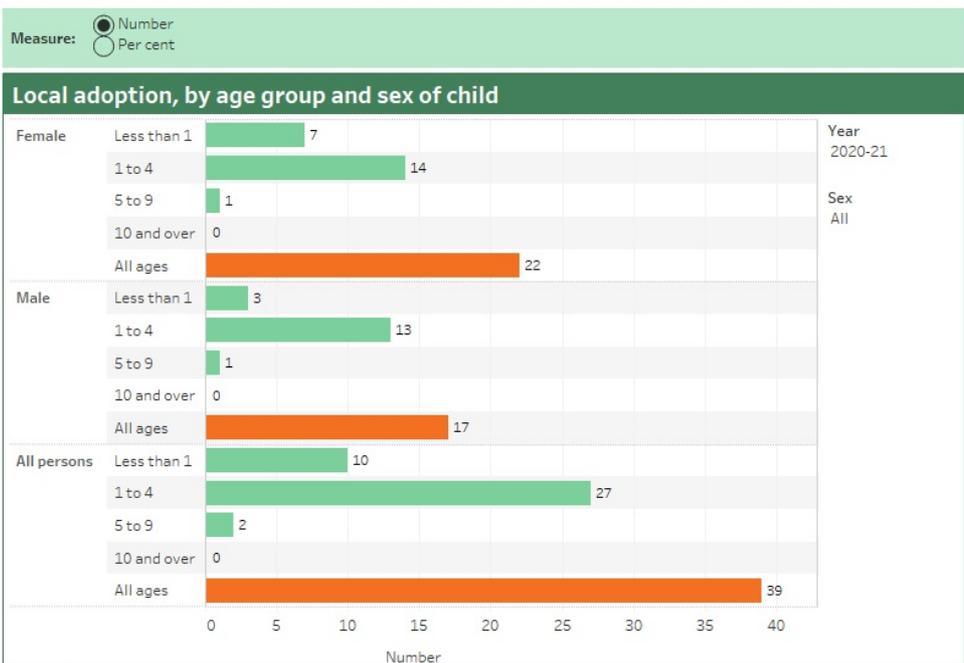
In general, children adopted through local adoption tend to be younger than those adopted through intercountry or known child adoptions. Two panels presented. In the top panel, the number of local adoptees is shown, by year and by the age group of the adoptee, from 1998-99 to 2020-21. The most numerous age category up to 2009-10 was adoptees under 1 year of age, and since then it has fluctuated between under 1 and 1 to 4. In the bottom panel, the number of contact and information exchange arrangements for local adoptees is shown by year, from 1998-99 to 2020-21. Adoptions with both contact and information exchange has been the most numerous type of local adoption across the majority of this period.



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

Since the 1980s, Australian adoption laws that govern the way information about an adoption can be accessed have undergone substantial changes. The secrecy that surrounded past adoption practices in Australia has largely given way to a system focused principally on the needs of the child, and characterised by the open exchange of information. Access to the adopted child by parties to an adoption (referred to as an ‘open’ adoption) is facilitated in all states and territories, although the degree to which this occurs varies across the jurisdictions. The plot shows the sex and age distribution of children adopted through local adoptions, by the year that the adoption order was finalised. For adoptions finalised in 2020-21, children aged 1 to 4 were the most numerous category for both males and females, followed by children aged less than one. More adoptees of females were finalised than males (22 compared with 17).



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

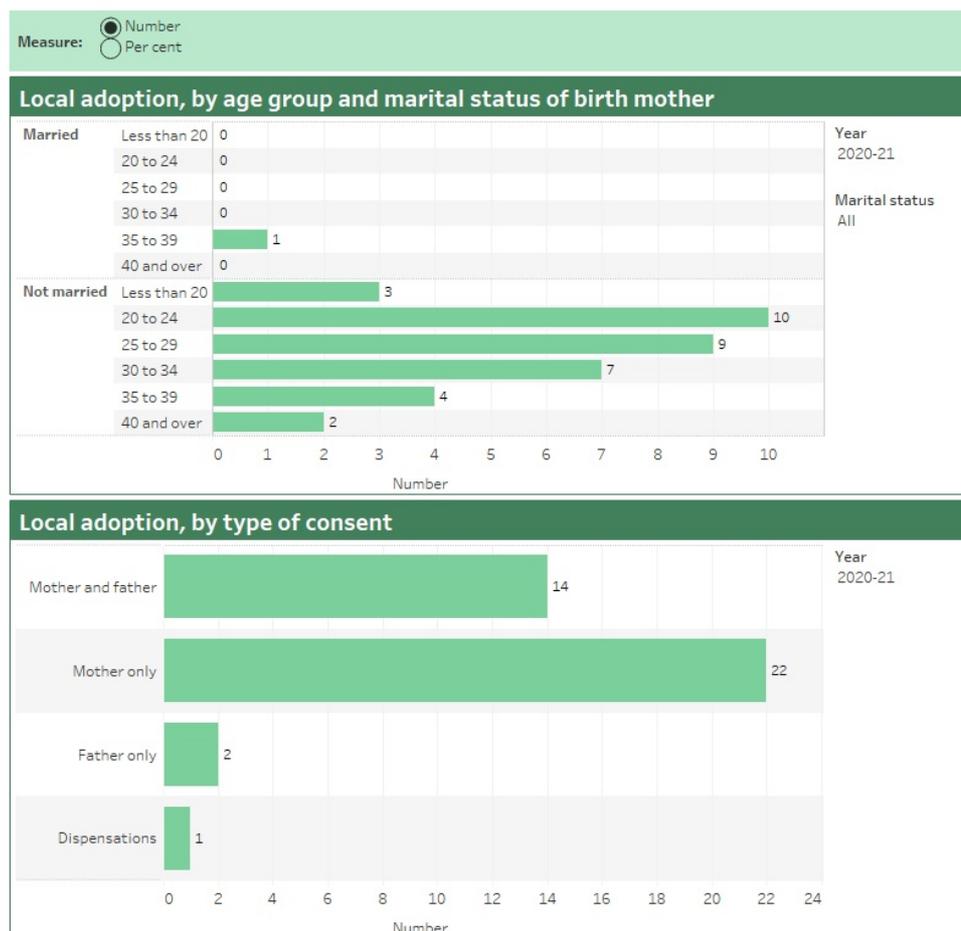
See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

Birth mothers and access to information

The birth mothers of adopted children tend to be younger than Australian mothers in the general population, and tend to be unmarried when the child was born. The marital status of these mothers is likely to be influenced by several factors, including the age at which they give birth to the child, as well as the trends of decreasing registered marriages and increasing de facto relationships in the general population.

Consent from both parents is generally required for an adoption order to be granted. However, a court may declare that the consent of a parent is not required. Grounds for dispensation applications vary under the legislation of each state and territory. In some jurisdictions the consent of the birth father is not required when his identity is unknown, making it unnecessary to dispense with his consent.

Two panels are presented. In the top panel, the age distribution is shown for mothers of children adopted through local adoptions, disaggregated by their marital status and by year. For local adoptions finalised in 2020-21, all but one mother was unmarried at the time the child was born, and for unmarried mothers the most numerous age group was 20 to 24 (10 mothers). In the bottom panel, the type of consent given for local adoptions is shown by year. The majority of adoptions finalised in 2020-21 had consent from the birth mother only (22 adoptions), with the next most numerous type being from both the birth mother and father (14 adoptions).



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

[See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.](#)

Explanatory notes

Age is calculated from date of birth, in completed years. For local adoptions, it is the age at which the child was placed with the adoptive family.

The mother's age is her age in completed years at the date of birth of the child.

Where the data indicate 'Mother only' or 'Father only', the other parent's consent was either dispensed with or not required. Where the data indicate 'dispensations', both parents' consent was either dispensed with or not required.

Last updated 12/11/2021 v13.0

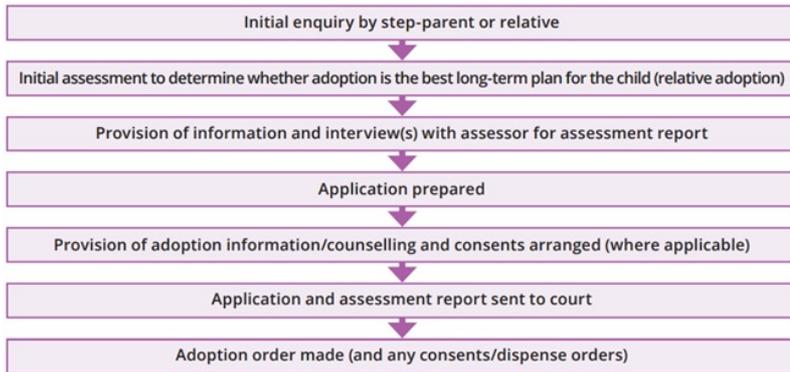
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Known child adoption in Australia

Known child adoption refers to the adoption of children who were born or permanently residing in Australia before the adoption, who have a pre-existing relationship with the adoptive parent(s) and who are generally not able to be adopted by anyone other than the adoptive parent(s). Known child adoptions include adoptions by step-parents, other relatives, and carers.

Simplified overviews of the known child adoption process for step-parent and relative adoptions (Figure 3) and carer adoptions (Figure 4) are presented below.

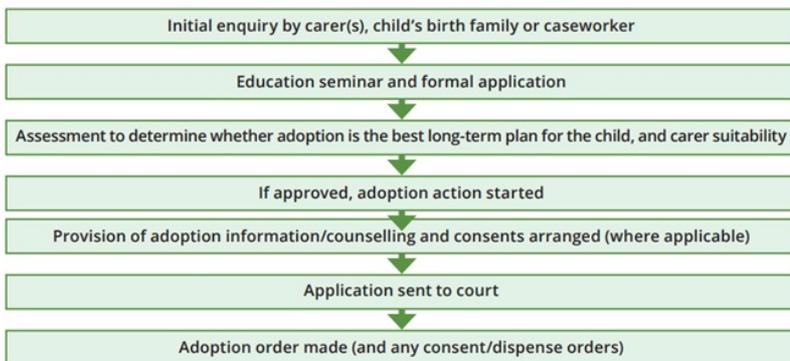
Figure 3: Overview of the step-parent/relative (known child) adoption process in Australia



Note: Processes may vary between jurisdictions.

Source: AIHW

Figure 4: Overview of the carer (known child) adoption process in Australia



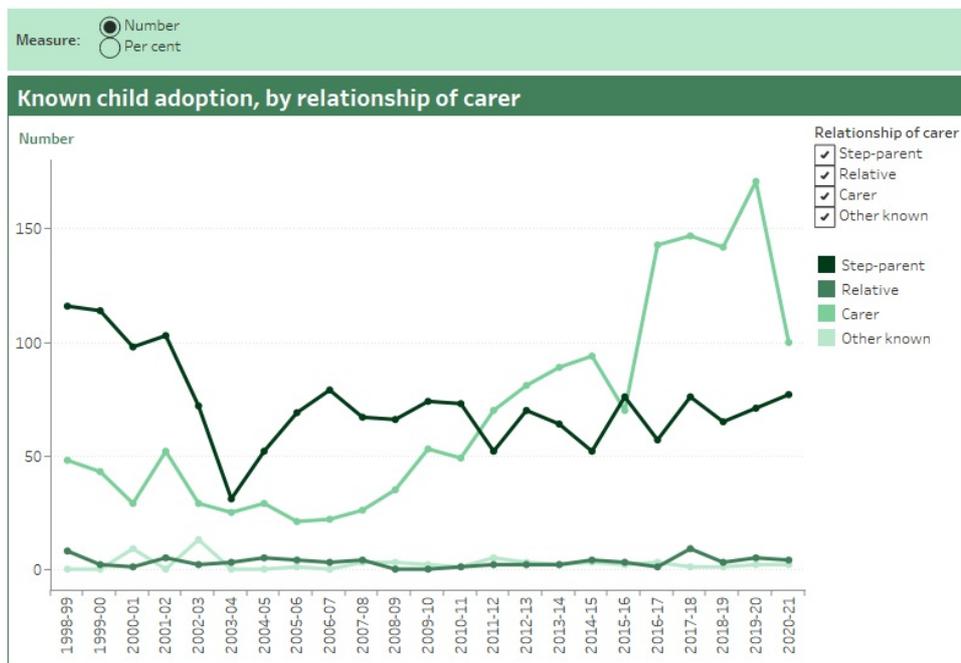
Note: Processes may vary between jurisdictions.

Source: AIHW

Known child adoptions provide children with a clear legal position, status, and stability within the family arrangement. In some circumstances, the adoption may be finalised after the adoptee is legally considered an adult. The majority of known child adoptions are by step-parents adopting their partner's children, or by long-term carers, such as foster parents, of children placed in their care.

Adoptions by relatives other than step-parents are less common, as states and territories have policies that promote the use of parental responsibility orders (e.g. permanent care and guardianship/custody orders) rather than adoption when a child is to be permanently cared for by another relative. Known child adoptions by people who are not carers or relatives, such as by commissioning (surrogate) parents, are uncommon in Australia.

The plot shows the number of known child adoptions, by relationship of the adoptive parent(s) and by year, from 1998-99 to 2020-21. Adoptions by step-parents were the most numerous type of known child adoption up to 2010-11, with adoptions by carers being most common since then. These two types of adoption account for the vast majority of all known child adoptions in all years across the period.



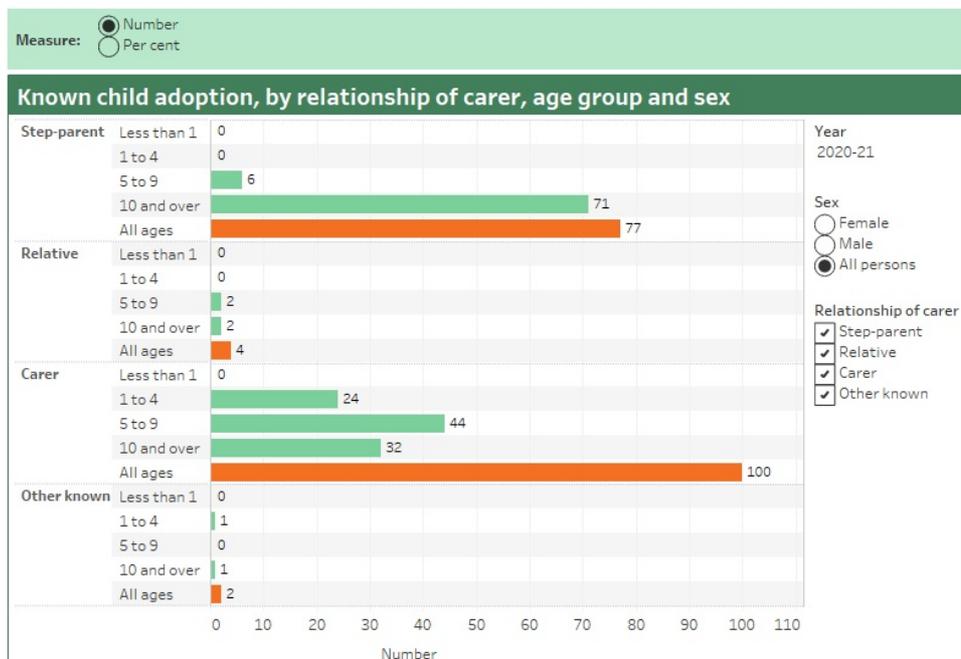
Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

Age of known child adoptees

The tendency for children in known child adoptions to be older is a product of minimum age requirements for some types of known child adoptions and, in many jurisdictions, the length of time the intended adoptive parent(s) needed to have had a relationship with the child before an adoption becomes possible. Children adopted by step-parents are generally older than those adopted under other types of adoption, including other categories of known child adoption, in part, due to the additional time involved in forming step-families.

The plot shows the age distributions of children adopted through known child adoptions, disaggregated by year and by the relationship of the adoptive parent. For known child adoptions finalised in 2020-21, all of the 77 children adopted by step-parents were aged 5 and over, with all but 6 aged 10 and over. For the 100 finalised adoptions by carers, the age distribution was more evenly spread, with most children (44) aged 5 to 9. No children were aged less than 1 in any category.



Source: Adoptions Australia
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

See the source data tables for further information and footnotes about these data.

Explanatory notes

Age is calculated from date of birth, in completed years. For known child adoptions, this is the age when the adoption order for the child was granted.

'Other known' was introduced as a reporting category in 2000-01, but not consistently used as a reporting category until 2007-08. In addition to adoptions from commissioning parents, adoptions recorded as 'other known' prior to 2007-08 may include adoptions where the relationship with the adoptive parent was unknown.

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Data visualisations help

The *Adoptions Australia data visualisations* allow you to explore data to find out more about adoption in Australia. This page will help you to get the most out of the displays.

Exploring displays

Switching between number and proportion

Where available, a menu above each chart can be used to switch between displaying numbers and proportions. Generally, number will be selected by default when you open a display page.

Measure: Number
 Per cent

Reading data points

Additional information will appear when clicking or hovering over a bar in a bar chart, or a point on a trend line. This includes the value represented by the bar/point.

Customising displays

Use the filters and dropdown menus on a display to select and deselect variables. These are located to the right of each display. Charts will automatically update to reflect the chosen variables.

Year
2020-21

Sex
 Female
 Male
 All persons

Relationship of carer
 (All)
 Step-parent
 Relative
 Carer
 Other known

Last updated 9/11/2021 v5.0

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Notes

Data on the displays are based on the [National Adoptions Dataset Specifications](#).

Data quality statement

[Adoptions Australia 2020-21 data quality statement](#)

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Related material

Resources

Australia's welfare snapshot

Snapshots are brief summaries that present easily digestible, interactive information on health and welfare topics.

[Snapshot: Adoptions](#)

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Data

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