Impact of past adoption practices: Summary of key issues from Australian research

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Overview

- Purpose and scope of literature review
- Terminology
- Background and historical context
- Prevalence
- Key themes identified from existing research
- Current needs of women affected by past practices
- Adequacy of the evidence base
- Implications and research opportunities

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Purpose & Scope of Literature Review

- Searched relevant social science databases for research

- Consulted with key stakeholders to identify relevant material

- Developed system for 'classifying' material to be able to assess the quality of the evidence

  - what we know;

  - what other sources of information suggest might be the case; and

  - what we don't know

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Terminology

Mothers affected by past adoption practices:

- Relinquishing mothers
- Birth / natural / genetic mothers
- Mothers of the "stolen white generation"
- Real parents

The experience:

- Losing a child to adoption
- Separation
- Adoption of ex-nuptial children

Classifying information on past practices

- Individual historical records
  - Hospital records
- Analysis of historical practices
- Case studies / biographies
- Expert opinion
- Parliamentary inquiries
  - Tasmania & NSW
- Unpublished reports
- Published social science research studies
  - Qualitative and quantitative empirical data

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Background & historical context

Social attitudes:

- Supporting Mothers Benefit - 1973

- "Illegitimacy" progressively removed - 1974

- Abortion legalised - 1970s

- Previously: Common for babies of unwed mothers to be adopted

Professional attitudes during 1960s & '70s:

- Demand for adopted babies outstripped 'supply'

- Adoption secrecy & 'clean break theory

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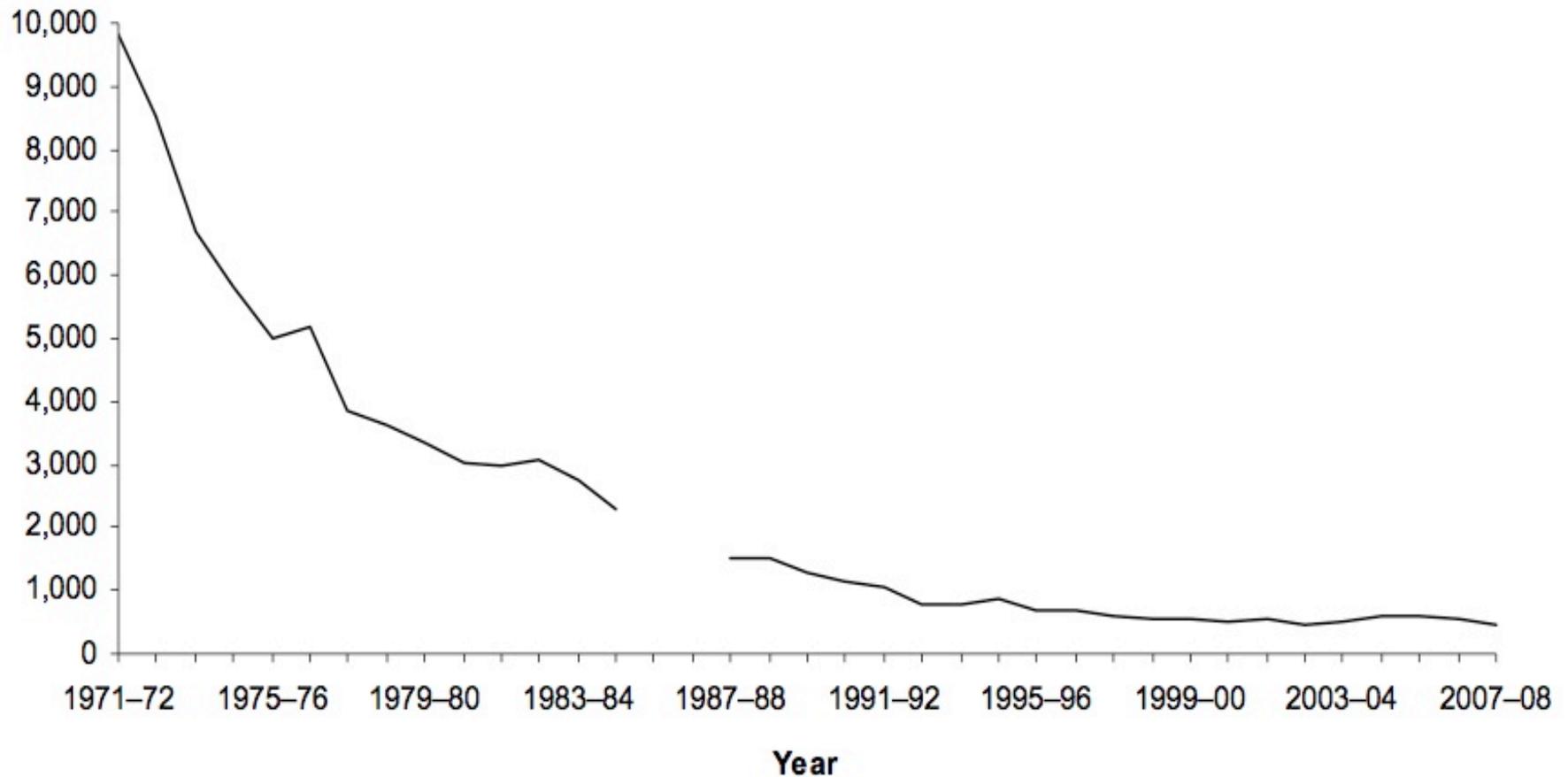**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

Research data on prevalence

- No prevalence study of 'forced' adoptions

- Available data do not differentiate between 'forced' and 'voluntary' relinquishment

- Only data are administrative records since 1969, collated annually by AIHW

- Peaked in early 1970s

    9,798 adoptions in 1971-72

- Declined rapidly since

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Rates of adoption

Number of children

Y-axis: 0, 1,000, 2,000, 3,000, 4,000, 5,000, 6,000, 7,000, 8,000, 9,000, 10,000

X-axis (Year): 1971–72, 1975–76, 1979–80, 1983–84, 1987–88, 1991–92, 1995–96, 1999–00, 2003–04, 2007–08

Year

Source: AIHW, 2009

Extent of the research

Type of study	No.
Analysis of historical practices	5
Case studies / biographies	4
Expert opinion	14
Parliamentary inquiries	2
Unpublished reports	2
Qualitative social science studies	4
Quantitative social science studies	4

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Overview of key themes in the literature

1. Range of people involved
2. Grief, loss & trauma
3. 'Solution' to a trifecta of social problems
4. Choice & coercion
5. Secrecy, silence & shame
6. Reunion experiences
7. Time, healing, ongoing effects & current needs

1. Range of people involved

Past adoption practices have involved and potentially affected:

- Mothers
- Fathers
- Children who were adopted
- Adoptive families (parents, grandparents, siblings)
- Government and non-government agencies and workers

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2. Grief, Loss and Trauma

How best to understand the impact?

- Grief & loss (Winkler & Van Keppel, 1984)
- Trauma framework

Traumatising aspects of past practices:

- Failure to gain consent
- Failure to advise of right to rescind
- Differential treatment to married mothers (use of drugs; access to baby; information; right to name the baby)

3. Solving a 'trifecta' of social problems

Societal views & actions of individuals and organisations conspired to bring together a solution to three 'social problems':

- illegitimacy
- Infertility - whose needs were prioritiesed?
- impoverishment - lack of options; unfit;

- Were societal views universal?
- Were social attitudes at the time the sole reason for the treatment of these women?

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4. Choice & coercion

- Are there factors that differentiate between unmarried mothers who kept their babies, and those who were encouraged, forced, or manipulated into relinquishing their baby?

  - role of supportive family…?

    "Joy did not trust her mother's reaction well enough to ask for help. Around that time her mother had angrily denounced a neighbour and her daughter for their 'easy' solution to an unplanned pregnancy. She told Joy, 'You needn't come running to me for the easy way out. You make your bed and you lie in it' Joy's bed had to be made outside the family where adoption was the only solution offered"

    (Inglis, 1984, p. 31)

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4. Choice & coercion… cont.

Marshall & McDonald (2001) categorised mothers into three groups:

- Mothers who feel they were coerced

- Mothers who continue to feel sad and regretful, but believe it was the right thing to do

- Mothers who feel they made the decision on their own, and are content with that decision

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5. Secrecy, silence & shame

- Began with pregnancy, continued through the birth, the process of separation from their babies, and on into their future lives.

  - => invisibility

- Formalised through an explicit policy of 'adoption secrecy': the 'clean break' theory

- To what degree did (and does) the silence contribute to the ongoing detrimental effects?

- Absence of information & supports at the time (both before birth, and after the child was adopted)

- Compared to research on the experiences of infant bereavement - importance of communication for positive adjustment of mothers

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6. Reunion/contact experiences

- Changes in state/territory legislation, have allowed access to birth records

- Adoptees attempting to make contact with their mothers

- Contact services manage the process with either party able to place a veto on contact

- Those searching for information out-weight those lodging vetoes (AIHW, 2009)

- Motivations:

- Adoptee: information (health); identity

- Mother: to communicate that the child was loved/wanted

- Reunion experiences vary (little research on 'what works')

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7. Time, healing, ongoing effects

- Case studies show that it is *not* simply a case of 'time heals'.

  => invisibility

- Mothers go on 'wondering & worrrying' (Swain, 1992)
- Is reunion a necessary step for healing?
- Individual psychological needs of all those affected
- Information
- Counselling & support from skilled, trauma-informed practitioners
- Public awareness and recognition
- Education for those providing services or coming in contact with those affected

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Ongoing needs

- Mothers:
- Personal identity (self-identity as a good mother)
- Relationships with others (partners, children)
- Connectedness with others (problematic attachments)
- Ongoing anxiety, depression and trauma
- Fathers: lack of information; participation; contact
- Adoptees: identity; choice to seek contact
- Families: - supporting children through reunion; dealing with own feelings of being 'usurped' by biological mother

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Next Steps: A National Study

- In June 2010, Community and Disability Services Ministers Council (CDSMC) announced that it was commissioning AIFS to conduct a major 18-month research study

- National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices

- Nature and scope of study are currently being finalised

- Focus on experiences of those affected by past practices:
  - Mothers
  - Fathers
  - Children who were adopted
  - Adoptive families (parents, grandparents, siblings)

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Presentation based on:

Higgins, D. J. (2010). *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. Amended April 2010]. Canberra: FaHCSIA.

Available at:

http://fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/pubs/ past_adoption/Pages/default.aspx

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