

# Adoptions in Australia over time

Web report | Last updated: **28 Apr 2023** | Topic: [Adoptions](#)

## About

Due to the small number of annual adoptions and the multiple years that can be involved in an adoption process, trend analyses over extended periods can provide more robust and meaningful insights than analyses of change over shorter periods. In this report, trends going back to 1968–69 are explored in the context of broader social, societal, and policy changes that occurred in Australia and internationally.

**Cat. no:** CWS 91

- [Data](#)
- [Adoptions Australia 2021-22](#)

### Findings from this report:

- In 1971–72, almost 10,000 children were adopted in Australia in what has been known as the forced adoption era
- Compared to the peak of overseas adoptions in 2004–05, adoption numbers in 2021–22 have declined by 96% from 434 to 16
- After open adoption legislation was introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, domestic adoption numbers fell substantially
- Following the peak in adoptions in 1971–72, adoption numbers decreased 98% from 9,798 to 208 in 2021–22



## Summary

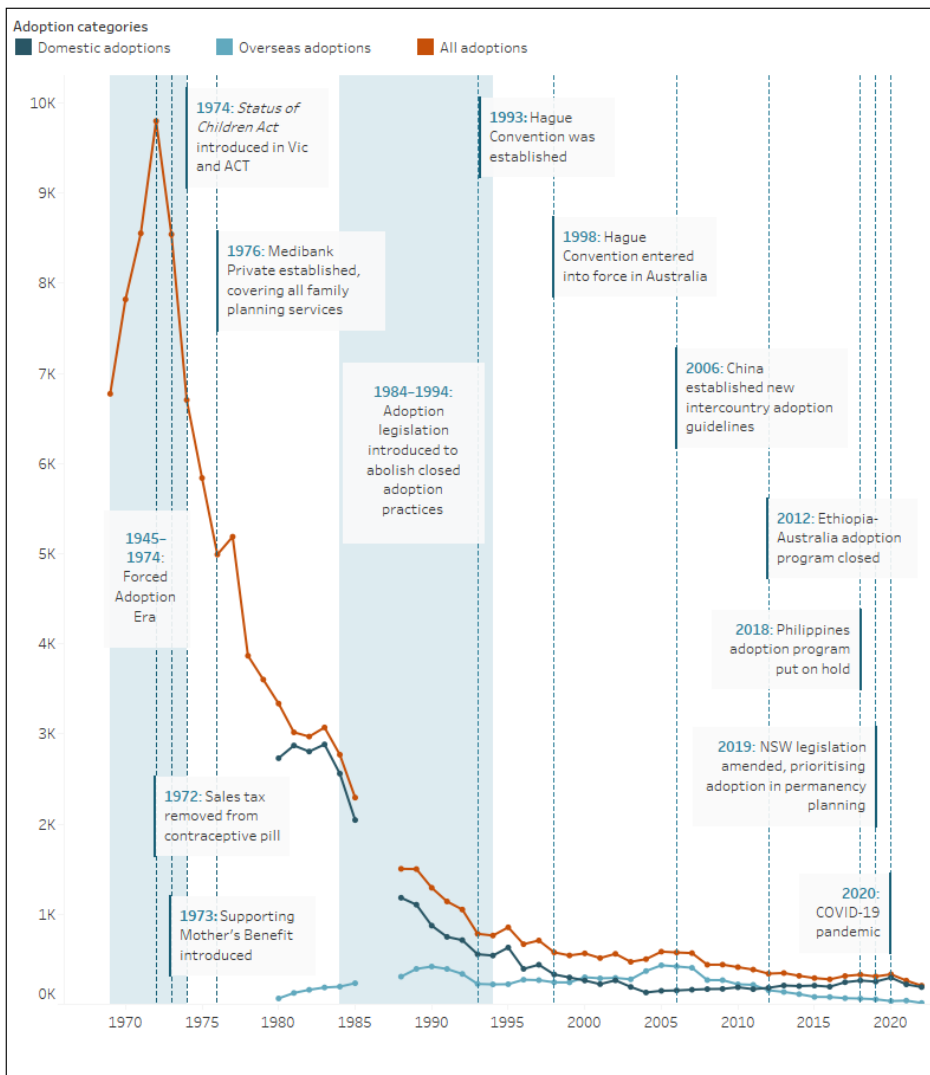
In Australia, adoption numbers have fallen from 6,733 in 1968–69 to 208 in 2021–22. This decrease reflects broader societal and policy changes occurring within Australia and worldwide (Higgins 2012).

This report explores how changing societal, legislative, and social views have affected numbers of adoptions over the last 53 years (Figure 1). Trends in adoptions can be categorised into domestic adoptions of Australian children (local and known child adoptions) and children born overseas (intercountry adoptions).

<b>Post-war period</b>	<b>1970 to 1980</b>
Closed adoptions and forced separation	The 'adoption crisis'
<b>1980 to 1990</b>	<b>1990 to 1999</b>
The move to open adoptions	The Hague Convention
<b>1999 to 2011</b>	<b>2011 to 2021</b>
The rise and fall of intercountry adoption	Alternative pathways to family formation

**Figure 1: Number of adoptions and key moments in Australia, 1968–69 to 2021–22**

The line chart shows the number of finalised adoptions in Australia from 1968–69 to 2021–22, alongside historical key moments. After a large increase in finalised adoptions between 1968–69 to 1971–72 which occurred during the era of forced adoption, the number of adoptions have declined substantially.



Source: AIHW Adoptions Australia data collection (1990–91 to 2021–22), AIHW analysis of ABS cat no. 4406.0 (1979–80 to 1984–85), AIHW analysis of Adoptions National Data Collection WELSTAT (1987–88 to 1989–90).  
<https://www.aihw.gov.au>

## Notes

1. Each year represents a financial year, for example 2022 represents the 2021–22 financial year.
2. No national data were collected in 1985–86 and 1986–87.
3. National data prior to 1979–80 did not differentiate between overseas and domestic adoptions.
4. Totals for 1979–80 to 1981–82, 1983–84, 1984–85, 1987–88, 1988–89 and 1991–92 include adoptions involving children where birthplace or relationships to the adoptive parent(s) was unknown. Therefore, numbers for subcategories may not add to those for the total. A full list of these data discrepancies is in Table S10 in the Adoptions Australia supplementary data tables.
5. Prior to 1998–99, 'intercountry adoptions' were referred to as 'adoptions of overseas-born children by non-relative'.

## Post-war period: Closed adoptions and forced separation

Between the end of the second World War and the mid-1960s, the post-war 'baby boom' saw a large and sustained increase in the number of babies born (ABS 2007). By 1970, 8.3% of all births occurred outside of marriage, almost doubling from 4.8% in 1960 (Qu 2010; Qu et al. 2022). This period also saw an increase in the number of widows and single mothers which influenced societal attitudes, resulting in a general intolerance of 'disadvantaged' populations – those who were living in poverty, persons of colour, and single parents (Australian Senate 2012). These populations were seen as 'unfit' to provide a suitable environment for children, leading to the forced separation of children from 'disadvantaged' families, primarily single mothers (Australian Senate 2012).

This era of forced adoptions (also known as closed adoptions) from 1945 to the early 1970s, was based on the 'clean break' theory which assumed that babies' characteristics were predominantly formed by their environment, rather than genetics. The application of this theory argued that early separation of predominantly unmarried mothers and babies would safeguard the welfare of the child (Australian Senate 2012). This is seen in the number of adoptions occurring at the time – between 1968–69 to 1971–72, adoptions in Australia rose from 6,773 to 9,798, an increase of 45% over 4 years. The number of adoptions in 1971–72 is the highest number on record. Although national data were not available before this point, analysis conducted by the Australian Senate (2012) shows that from 1951 to 1973, the rate of adoptions showed a substantial increase from about 1.15 per 1,000 Australians aged 20 to 49, to about 1.8 per 1,000.

This philosophy was also reflected in adoption legislation of the time with a model Adoption Bill developed in the early 1960s by both the Commonwealth and the States at the recommendation of the Commonwealth Attorney-General. This legislation supported the concept of 'adoption secrecy', where it was believed that by suppressing the child's birth identity and creating a new 'legitimate' identity, "the genealogical history of the adoptive parents was now that of the adopted child" (Ley 1992, p. 101). To ensure that the 'clean break' theory was practised, original birth certificates and records of the adoption order were kept secret and new birth certificates were issued with only the adopted parents' details.

Clean break theory also implied that white married couples with secure incomes represented the 'ideal' family unit and were regarded as the only family capable of providing appropriate care for children (Australian Senate 2012). If a child was born into a family where these ideals were not met, and they were unable to be adopted, institutionalisation was believed to be more beneficial than keeping the child with their family. Although this philosophy affected many families who did not fit the 'norm', single mothers were the most affected (Inglis 1984; Jones 2000). Between World War II and 1975, about 30–40% of unmarried women who became pregnant spent time in an institution to conceal their pregnancy before having their child taken from them upon birth (Swain and Howe 1995).

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## 1970 to 1980: The adoption crisis

In May 1973, the Commonwealth Government introduced the 'Supporting Mother's Benefit', which aimed to provide financial assistance to 'unwed mothers' (Higgins 2010). This coincided with a decrease in the number of adoptions from its peak of almost 10,000 adoptees in 1971–72 to 8,542 in 1972–73.

In 1974, the *Status of Children Act* was introduced in both Victoria and Tasmania. This Act was created to "remove the legal disabilities of children born out of wedlock", officially identifying children born from single mothers as 'ex-nuptial' as opposed to 'illegitimate'. Advocacy groups, such as the Council of the Single Mothers and Their Children (CSMC) created in 1969, challenged the stigma of adoption and provided support to single and 'relinquishing' mothers.

The contraceptive pill was introduced in 1961 but was generally restricted to married women. Unmarried women could only access the pill if there was an identifiable medical reason. Further, abortion could only be performed if there was a medical necessity. Where this was not the case, abortions were performed illegally by doctors, with large fees as well as substantial risk to women.

From the early 1970s, several social and policy changes made access to contraception and abortion easier to access for all women. Following a combination of reforms to South Australian law in 1969, and judgements in the lower courts of Victoria (1969 Menhennit judgement) and NSW (1972 Levine judgement), the parameters surrounding when a woman could get an abortion widened to include her economic situation. This made abortions more readily available to women. In 1972, the sales tax was removed from the contraceptive pill, and it was included under the pharmaceutical benefits scheme. When Medibank Private was introduced in 1976, all family planning services provided by doctors, including abortions, were covered.

These shifting societal and legislative changes set the groundwork for the 'adoption crisis', named for the shortage of babies available for adoption (Cuthbert et al. 2010; Quartly et al. 2013). The number of adoptions over this time reflect this 'shortage'. After the peak in adoption numbers in 1971–72, adoption numbers decreased 66% from 9,798 to 3,337 in 1979–80.

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## 1980 to 1990: The move to open adoptions

During the 1980s, there were a range of changes to legislative and social factors surrounding adoption, such as greater social acceptance of raising children outside of marriage, and declining birth rates. This contributed to the further decline of adoptions in Australia. From 1980–81 to 1989–90, adoptions in Australia decreased by 57% from 3,018 to 1,294.

Advocacy groups successfully petitioned to remove the blanket of secrecy created by the practise of closed adoptions, with legislation implemented across Australia throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Higgins 2012). This led to the establishment of 'open' adoptions, with more information exchange and contact between the adoptee and the birth family. The implementation of 'open' adoptions has resulted in a range of improvements to the adoption process, in particular the requirement for consent to be provided by birth parents, as well as higher quality assessments and benchmarks to evaluate the suitability of prospective parents (Higgins 2012).

Reunion services were also established, initiated by NSW in 1976, to assist birth parents and adopted children from closed adoptions in making contact. Retrospective action was also undertaken to open previously closed birth and identity records in former adoptions. Likely due to changing adoption processes (Cuthbert et al. 2010), domestic adoptions (children adopted from within Australia) decreased by 70% from 2,872 to 874 between 1980–81 to 1989–90.

Over the same period, there was a 231% increase in intercountry adoptions in Australia, from 127 in 1980–81 to 420 in 1989–90. It is likely that the number of children adopted from overseas is understated throughout the mid-to-late 1970s, as evidence suggests that several private adoptions of children born overseas occurred following Operation Babylift in 1975 (Cuthbert and Fronek 2014; Forkert 2012).

The increase in intercountry adoptions can be largely attributed to the 'adoption crisis', with prospective parents turning to intercountry adoptions for family formation (Cuthbert et al. 2010). The societal perception that intercountry adoption was a humanitarian intervention for children in developing countries further contributed to its rising popularity (Young 2012).

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## 1990 to 1999: The Hague Convention

Throughout the 1990s, legislative reform continued throughout Australia, shifting domestic adoption practices away from the 'clean break' theory (Higgins 2012). During this time, domestic adoptions continued to decline, falling 65% from 749 in 1990–91 to 265 in 1999–00.

In 1993, the *Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Intercountry Adoption* ('Hague Convention') was introduced. This likely contributed to the 44% decrease in overseas adoptions from 393 in 1990–91 to 222 in 1993–94. The Hague Convention was created to protect children and their families against 'the risks of illegal, irregular, premature or ill-prepared adoptions abroad' (Hague Conference on Private International Law 2022). In Australia, the Hague Convention entered into force on 1 December 1998. From 1993–94 to 1998–99, the number and proportion of children adopted from overseas fluctuated before surpassing domestic adoptions for the first time in 1999–00.

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## 1999 to 2011: The rise and fall of intercountry adoptions

Intercountry adoptions were continuing to rise, largely driven by fewer children who could be adopted domestically resulting in an increased demand of children available for adoption in Australia. This led to prospective parents seeking children who could be adopted overseas (Hilferty and Katz 2018). Further, while the adoption reform movement in Australia had shifted adoption practises from closed to open, intercountry adoptions generally maintained 'closed' adoption practises. Academics have suggested it is likely that prospective parents increasingly turned to intercountry adoption following adoption reform, to bypass legislative changes and create further distance between themselves and the birth family (Cuthbert et al. 2010). In Australia, the popularity of intercountry adoptions was reflected in the data – intercountry adoptions surpassed domestic adoptions for the first time in Australia in 1999–00 (301 intercountry compared to 265 domestic).

As intercountry adoption numbers continued to rise, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services conducted an inquiry into intercountry adoption following a review of the AIHW's *Adoptions Australia 2003–04* report (Australian House of Representatives 2005). This inquiry resulted in 27 recommendations to tighten regulations surrounding intercountry adoptions, including improvements in state and territory practices and a more active role for the Commonwealth. The number of intercountry adoptions peaked in 2004–05, both in Australia (434 intercountry compared to 151 domestic) and worldwide (Selman 2012), followed by a global decline of these adoptions.

In 2006, China, one of the largest 'sending countries' for intercountry adoption, established new adoption guidelines requiring adoptive parents to be a heterosexual couple who had been married for at least two years, to the exclusion of single parents or same-sex couples (Selman 2009).

Alternative methods to adoption for family formation were also being accessed by prospective parents. In 2006, 45,986 assisted reproductive technology (ART) treatment cycles were reported from fertility centres in Australia to the Australia and New Zealand Assisted Reproduction Database (ANZARD) (AIHW 2008). Global surrogacy gained popularity around the same time intercountry adoptions began to decline (Rotabi and Bromfield 2016). Petersen (2014) identified a range of factors influencing the global decline of intercountry adoptions, including:

- increased domestic solutions for children needing families
- activism against intercountry adoption increasing public scrutiny and,
- media coverage of unethical practises of intercountry adoption.

Domestic adoptions also changed, with more children being adopted through known child adoptions – of the 163 domestic adoptions in 2006–07, there were 104 known child adoptions. In the preceding years, from 2006–07 to 2010–11, adoptions in Australia were declining, dropping 32% from 569 to 386. While domestic adoptions increased slightly over that period by 3.7%, intercountry adoptions dropped 47% from 406 to 217. There was also an increase in the median length of time for processing intercountry adoptions from 3 years and one month in 2007–08 to 4 years and one month in 2010–11. This may have also contributed to the steep decline in intercountry adoptions compared to the slight increase in domestic adoptions.

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## 2011 to 2021: Alternative pathways to family formation

In the 2000s, broader social trends and changing social attitudes reduced the need for adoption as it became easier for both Australian and overseas born children to remain with their birth family and within their country of origin. Legislative changes, such as the increased use of legal orders to adoption, were also introduced to build alternative pathways for children to permanent, stable homes (AIHW 2016). The increased prioritisation of alternative pathways for children to have a safe, stable environment saw a drop of 39% in the number of adoptions from 341 in 2011–12 to 208 in 2021–22.

Australians also continued to opt for methods other than adoption for family formation, such as ART and surrogacy. The *Surrogacy Act 2022* commenced in the Northern Territory on 21 December 2022, introducing surrogacy as an option for people with fertility issues. With the introduction of this Act, all states and territories now have legislation in place regulating altruistic surrogacy. In 2020, 87,206 ART treatment cycles were reported from Australian fertility clinics (Newman et al. 2022). From 2015 to 2020, the number of singleton births (birth of one child) following ART treatment has increased from 13,519 to 17,375. Data on surrogacy is limited, but according to data from ANZARD in 2020, there were 233 embryo transfers undertaken by a female patient who carried, or intended to carry, a child on behalf of intending parent(s) (Newman et al. 2022). Of these, 91 resulted in a live birth.

In 2011–12, the number of intercountry adoptions fell below the number of domestic adoptions and continued to decline. This drop in intercountry adoption numbers may have also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted travel, with the government closing international borders and banning or restricting travel nationwide. Resources were also allocated to manage the virus. The long-term impacts of COVID-19 on adoption processes is still currently unknown, however, the 62% drop in intercountry adoptions from 42 in 2020–21 to 16 in 2021–22 may indicate that these closures had some affect. By 2021–22, only 16 children were adopted from overseas, the lowest number on record.

Domestic child adoptions have continued to remain higher than intercountry adoptions since 2011–12. Of these domestic adoptions, the number of known child adoptions have consistently been higher than local adoptions. Notably, from 2010–11, carer (known child) adoptions surpassed the number of local adoptions, with a substantial increase occurring following amendments to NSW legislation introduced in 2014. This policy established adoption as the highest preference for child permanency planning (except in the case of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child or young person) if reunification with parents or guardianship with suitable others is not practical or in the best interests of the child (NSW Government 2019). From 2011–12 to 2019–20, the number of children adopted by carers increased 144% from 70 to 171. As these adoption processes stabilised, the number of carer (known child) adoptions, and known child adoptions overall, have decreased, with carer adoptions dropping 45% from 171 in 2019–20 to 94 in 2021–22.

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## Data

[Data tables: Adoptions Australia 2021–22](#)

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## Notes

### Amendment

**28 April 2023** – It was previously stated incorrectly that the NSW Child Protection Legislation Amendment was introduced in 2019–20. However, this amendment was enacted in 2014. The sentence referring to this legislation has been changed to reflect this.

### Data quality statement

[Adoptions Australia 2021–22 data quality statement - external site opens in new window](#)

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## Related material

### Resources

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#### Adoptions Australia 2021–22

##### Resource

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#### Data visualisation: Adoptions in Australia over time

##### Educational resource

In Australia, adoption numbers have fallen from 6,733 in 1968–69 to 208 in 2021–22. This decrease reflects broader societal and policy changes occurring within Australia and worldwide. Explore the data from the Post-war period and the proceeding five decades.

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#### Related topics

- [Adoptions](#)
  - [Child protection](#)
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