

# New study shows bias toward adopting children of certain ethnic, racial backgrounds

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Nikki Khanna, associate professor of sociology, has written extensively on race and ethnic relations with a focus on biracial and multiracial Americans and racial identity. Credit: Sally McCay

As America continues to adopt more children internationally than any other country, hundreds of thousands of children in the U.S. – most of whom are children of color – sit in foster care awaiting adoption. Though some Americans express a desire to adopt non-white children, even they have limitations when it comes to adopting children of certain

racess, especially African Americans, according to a new study.

The article "We Didn't Even Think about Adopting Domestically: The Role of Race and Other Factors in Shaping Parents' Decisions to Adopt Abroad" in the journal *Sociological Perspectives* revealed a number of race-based reasons why people choose to adopt abroad and how the complicated issue of race in America plays into that decision.

Researchers interviewed 41 predominantly white parents from the northeastern United States who adopted 33 [children](#) from 10 different countries of varying ethnic and racial backgrounds. When it came to adopting domestically, the majority of children were white, with 18 of the parents explicitly stating that they did not want to adopt a black child, particularly African American children, who they frequently described as "too different" both physically and culturally.

"The fact that some respondents went abroad to actively seek children of color challenges the assumption that parents simply choose to adopt abroad because they are in search of white children they could not find in the United States," explains lead author Nikki Khanna, associate professor of sociology at the University of Vermont. "Yet, even for many parents who were open to or actively seeking children of color, they had limits; they were open to children of varying racial backgrounds, but not black – especially not African American."

#### Reasons vary for adopting abroad

In some cases, the decision not to adopt domestically was based on non-racial factors such as the fear of birth parents changing their mind and wanting their child back. Some parents expressed concern about open adoptions where the birth parents maintain some degree of contact with their child, which is more common in domestic adoption. Others preferred choosing or being matched with a child from another country as opposed to being chosen by a birth mother in the U.S. from a pool of

candidates. There was also an assumption that adoptive children in the U.S. have more health issues due to alcohol or drug abuse by their mothers.

When it came to race, the most commonly cited reason for not adopting a black child, especially an African American, was that parents "did not think it was in the child's best interest." Researchers placed this response into two categories: racism (concern over how the child would be treated by their community and extended family) and socialization (feeling ill equipped to teach child about African American culture and how to deal with racism).

Other reasons for not wanting to adopt a black child included bonding fears; family prejudice; and racial stereotypes. The latter included the portrayal of black males being too out of control and unruly as opposed to more positive racial stereotypes of Asian women, for example, who are perceived as more "obedient, docile and passive."

Khanna says that although parents would sometimes use "coded" language to mask potentially racist comments, many were surprisingly frank. For example, some parents expressed concern over being able to bond with a black child given the differences in physical appearances. One woman, who adopted a child from Guatemala, said that she "probably wouldn't have adopted a black child ... Hispanic seems less different for me than black."

Another couple said that even though they wanted to diversify their family by adopting a child of color, adopting a black child seemed too different. "It's weird that we were fine with Asian," said the woman. "We were fine with South American. And we weren't fine with African American." When asked why she said, "maybe I wasn't exposed, or I just thought it would be too different."

## Future implications

Meanwhile, as Americans continue to adopt primarily from China, Ethiopia, Korea, Ukraine, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Nigeria, more than 400,000 children remain in [foster care](#) in the U.S. Approximately 60 percent of those are children of color, including 35 percent who are black.

"Given these findings, encouraging American parents to adopt in the United States may prove difficult," concludes Khanna, whose primary research focus is on biracial and multiracial issues in America. "These findings also have implications for broader race relations in the United States, given that parental preferences regarding the race of their adoptees reflect the American racial hierarchy that relegates black/African Americans to the bottom tier."

**More information:** N. Khanna et al. "We Didn't Even Think about Adopting Domestically": The Role of Race and Other Factors in Shaping Parents' Decisions to Adopt Abroad, *Sociological Perspectives* (2015).  
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