



Contact After Adoption or Guardianship: Child Welfare Agency and Family Interactions

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Contents

OVERVIEW	0-1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	ES-1
INTRODUCTION	1-1
2. METHODS	2-1
2.1 Study Design and Methods	2-1
2.1.1 Web Survey Methods	2-1
2.1.2 Key Informant Interview Method.....	2-1
2.2 Instruments and Data Collection	2-2
2.2.1 Web Surveys.....	2-2
2.2.2 Key Informant Interviews.....	2-3
2.3 Participants	2-4
2.3.1 Web Survey	2-4
2.3.2 Key Informant Interviews.....	2-4
2.4 Analysis.....	2-4
2.4.1 Web Survey Analysis	2-4
2.4.2 Key Informant Interview Analysis	2-4
3. RESULTS	3-1
3.1 State Agency–Initiated Contact with Families After Adoption and Guardianship.....	3-2
3.1.1 Web Survey Findings	3-2
3.1.2 Key Informant Interview Findings	3-12
3.1.3 Summary of Findings on Agency-Initiated Contact.....	3-14
3.2 Family-Initiated Contact After Adoption or Guardianship.....	3-15
3.2.1 Web Survey Findings	3-15
3.2.2 Key Informant Interview Findings	3-18
3.2.3 Summary of Findings on Family-Initiated Contact	3-21
3.3 Out-of-Home Events After Adoption	3-21
3.3.1 Web Survey Findings	3-22
3.3.2 Key Informant Interview Findings	3-23
3.3.3 Summary of Findings Related Out-of-home Events After Adoption.....	3-25

3.4	Administrative Data Linkage for Children who Exit Foster Care through Adoption or Guardianship	3-25
3.4.1	Web Survey Findings	3-26
3.4.2	Key Informant Interview Findings	3-27
3.4.3	Summary of Findings Related to Data Linkages	3-29
3.5	Findings Related to COVID-19	3-29
3.5.1	Summary of Findings Related to the Impact of COVID-19	3-30
3.6	Synthesis from Web Survey and Key Informant Interview Findings.....	3-30
3.6.1	What contact do child welfare agencies initiate with families after adoption or guardianship, and how does this contact provide information on the well-being of the child or youth?	3-31
3.6.2	What contact do families (parents or guardians, children, youth, and community members) initiate with child welfare agencies after adoption or guardianship?	3-32
3.6.3	How do child welfare agencies use the information gathered about families after adoption or guardianship?	3-34
3.6.4	To what extent do child welfare agencies track information about children post adoption and post guardianship? What challenges do child welfare agencies experience in tracking instability formally and systematically?.....	3-35
3.6.5	Differences in Adoption versus Guardianship Findings	3-36
3.6.6	Differences between Web Survey and Key Informant Interview Findings	3-37
3.7	Conclusion	3-37

4. REFERENCES 4-1

Tables

Table 1.	Types of Post-Permanency Contact with Families and Administrative Data Tracking, Among All State Agencies that Completed the Surveys.....	3-2
Table 2.	Types of State Agency–Initiated Contact Among States Reporting Contact Initiated by the Agency	3-4
Table 3.	Intended Newsletter Audience Among States Reporting Sending Newsletters	3-4
Table 4.	Newsletter Frequency, Among States Reporting Sending Newsletters.....	3-5
Table 5.	Types of Information Collected from Families in Well-being Letters Among States Reporting Sending Well-being Letters.....	3-6
Table 6.	How States Use Collected Information Among States Reporting Sending Well-being Letters.....	3-7
Table 7.	How States Store and Receive Information from Well-Being Letters Among States Reporting Sending Well-Being Letters	3-7
Table 8.	Types of Information States Maintain in Records Among States Reporting Following up with Adoptive Families after a Request for Service or Support	3-8
Table 9.	Types of Information Collected Among States that Follow up with Families After Service Completion.....	3-10
Table 10.	Information States Require to Request a Change to an Adoption or Guardianship Subsidy, Among States that Report Receiving Subsidy Change Requests	3-11
Table 11.	Information Required to Change the Services in a Family’s Adoption or Guardianship Services Agreement Among States Reporting Follow-up after Receiving Subsidy Change Requests	3-12
Table 12.	Ways in Which Families Contact States Among States Reporting Contact Initiated by Families.....	3-16
Table 13.	How Former Foster Youth Contact States Among States Reporting Contact Initiated by Foster Youth	3-17
Table 14.	How Community Members Contact States Among States Reporting Contact Initiated by Community Members.....	3-18
Table 15.	Type of Out-of-Home Events Reported to Agencies After Adoption	3-22
Table 16.	State Informants of Out-of-Home Events After Adoption	3-23
Table 17.	Level of Confidence in the Data System Flag to Identify Children who Return to Foster Care after Adoption or Guardianship Among States that Report a Data Flag	3-27

Overview

The role of the child welfare agency changes once legal permanence through adoption or guardianship occurs. Legal responsibility for children shifts from the agency or court to adoptive parents and guardians. Research finds that some families struggle and need additional supports and services to maintain family stability after adoption or guardianship. Although most children living in adoptive or guardianship families do not re-enter state custody after adoption or guardianship finalization, 5% to 20% of children may experience 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.

The *Contact After Adoption or Guardianship: Child Welfare Agency and Family Interactions study* explored the ways that child welfare agencies obtain information about post adoption and guardianship instability. This report summarizes the methods and findings of the study.

Primary Research Questions

- What contact do child welfare agencies initiate with families after adoption or guardianship, and how does this contact provide information on the well-being of the child or youth?
- What contact do families (parents or guardians, children, youth, and community members) initiate with child welfare agencies after adoption or guardianship?
- How do child welfare agencies use the information gathered about families after adoption or guardianship?
- To what extent do child welfare agencies track information about children post adoption and guardianship? What challenges do child welfare agencies experience in tracking instability formally and systematically?

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.

Method

This study used a multimode approach, including web surveys and key informant interviews. State adoption program managers completed up to two web-based surveys. One web survey focused on adoption practices and one focused on guardianship practices. Representatives from four child welfare state agencies also participated in key informant interviews. These interviews gathered in depth information about post adoption and guardianship agency practices and procedures.

Key Findings and Highlights

- Study findings show that many states initiate contact with families after adoption or guardianship. This contact includes sending newsletters and well-being letters to families, providing services and supports to families, surveying families about their needs, or offering

training opportunities to help keep families engaged with the child welfare agency. More than 90% of state agency participants also indicate that families initiate contact with their agencies after adoption or guardianship. This contact most commonly occurs by phone when a family calls an agency to express a service need.

- Most state agencies have access to data to help them monitor when children re-enter foster care after adoption or guardianship. However, state agency participants report that their agencies do not typically create reports on the frequency of post adoption or guardianship instability.
- Agency staff are sometimes, but not consistently, notified about children’s instability events beyond foster care re-entry. For example, agencies report that it is not unusual for an adoptive parent or guardian (or sometimes youth) to notify an agency staff member that a child is residing in residential or institutional care, is in group home care, has run away from home, is homeless, or is living with friends or relatives. However, this information is not often tracked systematically.
- The study’s results highlight the need to develop supportive agency–family relationships that begin before adoption and guardianship are finalized and that continue post-finalization. Agency efforts could be enhanced by a data system that helps track families who receive services after adoption or guardianship and those who may be struggling.

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the results of a study designed to understand child welfare agency processes and procedures for obtaining information on 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. The *Contact After Adoption or Guardianship: Child Welfare Agency and Family Interactions Study* (hereafter referred to as “The Contact after Adoption or Guardianship Study”) explores the intentional and unintentional ways public child welfare agencies contact or receive information about the well-being and instability experiences of children and youth who have exited the foster care system through adoption or guardianship. This study represents one of two primary data collection efforts undertaken as part of the Administration for Children and Families’ (ACF’s) *Understanding Postadoption and Guardianship Instability for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care* (PAGI) project.

Overview

The role of the child welfare agency changes once legal permanence through adoption or guardianship occurs. Legal responsibility for children shifts from the agency or court to adoptive parents and guardians. Research finds that some families struggle and need additional supports and services to maintain family stability after adoption or guardianship. Although most children living in adoptive or guardianship families do not re-enter state custody after adoption or guardianship finalization, 5% to 20% of children may experience post adoption and guardianship instability. The *Contact After Adoption or Guardianship: Child Welfare Agency and Family Interactions study* explores the ways that child welfare agencies obtain information about post adoption and guardianship instability. The study attempts to understand how agencies use the information gathered about families after adoption or guardianship and to what extent this information is systematically tracked.

The study used a multimode approach, including web surveys and key informant interviews. State adoption program managers completed up to two web-based surveys. One web survey focused on adoption practices whereas one focused on guardianship practices. The web surveys gathered information about child welfare agency operations and protocols related to their interactions with adoptive or guardianship families. Thirty-six of 50 state adoption program managers completed the adoption survey. Twenty-four adoption program managers representing one of the 39 states with a federally subsidized guardianship program completed the guardianship web survey. Representatives from four child welfare state agencies also participated in key informant interviews. These interviews gathered in depth information about post adoption and guardianship agency practices and procedures.

Key Findings

Many states initiate contact with families after adoption or guardianship. This contact can include sending newsletters and well-being letters to families, providing services and supports to families, surveying families about their needs, or offering training opportunities to help keep families engaged with the child welfare agency. The study participants note the importance of balancing outreach to adoptive and guardianship families in need with a respect for families’ rights to self-determination, autonomy and privacy. As one study participant stated:

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.

More than 90% of state agency participants also indicate that families initiate contact with their agencies after adoption or guardianship. This contact most commonly occurs by phone when a family calls an agency to express a service need. As one participant stated:

[We tell families that the child welfare agency] doesn't close the door ... just because [of] 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.

Study participants report that having dedicated staff who understand the specific needs of adoptive and guardianship families is a key feature of effective post adoption and guardianship support. Study participants also suggest that finding ways to encourage families to reach out for support early, prior to a crisis, is a challenging but important aspect of providing effective support to adoptive and guardianship families. As one participant stated:

Families begin to struggle and at first—they don't feel like they should make any contact [with the child welfare agency]. They don't really know that this may be a behavior or an issue that could get worse...And they don't make contact with us until they're kind of in that crisis mode...and are like, 'We can't do this anymore'.

Agency staff are sometimes, but not consistently, notified about children's instability events beyond foster care re-entry. For example, agencies report that adoptive parents or guardians (or sometimes youth) occasionally notify an agency staff member that a child is residing in residential or institutional care, group home care, has run away from home, is homeless, or is living with friends or relatives. However, when instability events are reported to the agency by adoptive parents, guardians, or youth, the best and most appropriate response of the agency is not always clear and often takes a team approach with the family for solving the crisis.

Agency staff consistently report that they can use administrative data systems to track when children reenter foster care after adoption or guardianship, and that it is possible to link data across foster care and adoption or guardianship records. For example, most agencies (75%) include a flag (or field) in their data systems that indicates when a child has returned to foster care after adoption or guardianship. However, study participants also expressed very different levels of confidence in the degree to which this system flag consistently captures all incidents where children re-enter foster care after adoption or guardianship. Of the states that reported a data flag, 55% of adoption respondents and 42% of guardianship are "extremely" or "very" confident in their data flag. Moreover, state agency participants report that their agencies do not typically create reports on the frequency of post adoption and guardianship instability.

In states that serve both adoptive and guardianship families, there are few differences in how outreach or contact occurs or how information is used. However, one difference relates to the child IDs used to track children through administrative data systems. In sum, child IDs typically change when a child is adopted but do not typically change when a child exits care through guardianship. Another difference is a potential barrier to services for guardianship families that relates to terminology. Specifically, state

agencies may use the term “post adoption” to describe post-permanency services and activities (e.g., post adoption worker, post adoption services), even if the intent is to be inclusive of both adoption and guardianship.

Participants suggested that a key to improving data systems for tracking instability events is to train all staff who might encounter a child or youth who has re-entered foster care after adoption or guardianship:

Train from the beginning... hotline specialists, so they get the abuse reports [as] they create the case in our [administrative data] system...[have] 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’, so you won't have these duplicates or confusion as to the linkage of the child to a case.

Agency representatives also indicate that they use agency outreach to families as an opportunity to suggest helpful services and supports.

Every year we are contacted by adoptive and guardianship families because they have received [a letter from the agency] ... 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...

Conclusion

Research on post adoption and guardianship instability is critical to helping ACF build the body of knowledge about the types of post adoption and guardianship instability and the strengths, supports, and resources that promote post-permanency stability. The web survey and the key informant interviews show important and innovative ways that agencies are in contact with families after adoption and guardianship. The study also highlights the need to develop supportive agency–family relationships that begin before adoption and guardianship are finalized and continue post-finalization. Future efforts should consider tools and resources to support agencies in creating (1) an effective service system for helping adoptive and guardianship families from foster care through adulthood and (2) a data system that allows the child welfare system to better understand who receives supports and services after adoption or guardianship and who may be struggling without support or services.

Introduction

The role of the child welfare agency changes once legal permanence through adoption or guardianship occurs. Legal responsibility for children shifts from the agency or court to adoptive parents and guardians (Smith, 2014; Testa, 2013). Research finds that some families struggle and need additional supports and services to maintain family stability after adoption or guardianship (Vandivere et al., 2021). Yet, existing research regarding the nature of the contact that occurs between adoptive or guardianship families and child welfare agencies after adoption or guardianship is limited (White, 2016).

Knowing what type of contact families have with child welfare systems could provide insights to the field about how families are doing after adoption and guardianship (Fuller et al., 2006; Rolock & Fong, 2019). This includes understanding how often, and in what ways, child welfare agencies initiate contact with families and under what circumstances families initiate contact with agencies. For example, some agencies may initiate contact through newsletters or by monitoring families' receipt of adoption or guardianship subsidies. Meanwhile, families may contact the child welfare agency to access services or to request a change in their adoption or guardianship subsidy arrangement. Existing research does not provide much information about contacts between agencies and families or how agencies use the information they collect to help families formed through adoption or guardianship.

The Understanding Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care (PAGI) project, funded by the Administration for Children and Families, is conducted by RTI International, Case Western Reserve University, and East Carolina University. The project studies risk and protective factors at the individual, family, and agency levels related to instability. The project also studies child welfare agency post-permanency family contacts and support services. The PAGI project has several components ([*Understanding Postadoption and Guardianship Instability for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care*](#)). The *Contact After Adoption or Guardianship: Child Welfare Agency and Family Interactions Study* is one component of the larger PAGI project.

The practices and policies that guide agencies' interactions with adoptive or guardianship families depend on local and state jurisdictions and the agency's type of operational funding. Definitions, practices, and policies for adoption and guardianship also vary across child welfare agencies based on the adoption or guardianship subsidy's source (e.g., state vs. federal funds), which state is giving the subsidy, and which state is reviewing the subsidy (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Subsidies can also vary based on the type of legal permanence (i.e., adoption or guardianship). For instance, some subsidies pay for services for children who exit foster care through adoption but do not pay for the same services for children who exit foster care through guardianship. As such, it is important for research studies to gather information specific to both types of legal permanence.

The *Contact After Adoption or Guardianship: Child Welfare Agency and Family Interactions Study* (hereafter referred to as "The Contact after Adoption or Guardianship Study") seeks to understand child welfare agency processes and procedures to help obtain better information on post adoption and guardianship instability. The study explores the intentional and unintentional ways public child welfare agencies contact or receive information about the well-being of children and youth (in particular, their experiences of instability) who have exited the foster care system through adoption or guardianship.

Additionally, this study investigates how child welfare agencies track children and youth who exit the foster care system to adoption or guardianship and what information they collect.

The Contact after Adoption or Guardianship Study seeks to answer the following four research questions:

1. What contact do child welfare agencies initiate with families after adoption or guardianship, and how does this contact provide information on the well-being of the child or youth?
2. What contact do families (parents or guardians, children, youth, and community members) initiate with child welfare agencies after adoption or guardianship?
3. How do child welfare agencies use the information gathered about families after adoption or guardianship?
4. To what extent do child welfare agencies track information about children post adoption and guardianship? What challenges do child welfare agencies experience in tracking instability formally and systematically?

This report summarizes the methods and key findings from *The Contact after Adoption or Guardianship Study*.

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. The child may re-enter foster care or otherwise experience instability in their living arrangements. This instability can include running away from an adoptive or guardianship home or experiencing homelessness. Post adoption and guardianship instability may not always be a negative event. For instance, if a child goes to live with their grandmother, it may be because it is the best choice for that family and for that child at the time. Furthermore, a child may re-enter foster care explicitly to access services (e.g., residential treatment) that the parents cannot afford. In both examples, parent–child relationships may stay intact, and the child may return to the care and custody of their adoptive parents or guardians after treatment or at the end of a longer stay with extended family. In some cases, residing with another family member may create more stability, depending on the quality of the relationships with that other family member. Because previous research studies have not fully explored the ways that informal placement instability may occur in adoptive or guardianship families, the research is unclear about which factors relate (positively and negatively) to various types of instability.

Guardianship

For the PAGI project, guardianship is defined as a legal arrangement in which a child has exited foster care to the care of a guardian who receives a federally or state-funded guardianship subsidy. The PAGI project does not focus on guardianship funded through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or other federal or state programs, nor does this project focus on guardianships that occur without a foster care entry (where children are diverted from foster care to directly enter a kin placement).

2. Methods

2.1 Study Design and Methods

The Contact after Adoption or Guardianship Study used a multimode approach that included up to two web-based surveys of adoption program managers (APMs) in all 50 states. One web survey focused on adoption practices, which all APMs received, and one focused on guardianship practices. The study team sent a separate guardianship survey to APMs from the 38 states that have a federally subsidized guardianship program (i.e., Kin-GAP). The study team selected six child welfare state agencies to contact for follow-up key informant interviews after the data collection period ended.¹ The following section describes the methodology for the web surveys and key informant interviews.

The RTI International, Case Western Reserve University, and East Carolina University Institutional Review Boards reviewed and approved study protocols. In addition, the Office of Budget and Management (OMB) reviewed and approved the study (OMB Control Number: 0970-0567; expiration date: 4/30/2022).

2.1.1 Web Survey Methods

The study team and the Children’s Bureau identified APMs from all 50 states who would receive the study invitation with the web survey link(s). The Children’s Bureau sent the initial outreach email that explained the study goals and parameters. A second email message to participants came from a member of the study team and included a link to the web survey(s), the consent process, and contact information for any questions or concerns. APMs had 9 weeks to complete the survey(s). During this time, the study team sent follow-up reminder emails and made phone calls to non-responders to encourage survey completion.

It is important that research in this area address potential variations in post adoption versus post guardianship practices among state agencies. Child welfare agency contact with families who have adopted may be different from contact with families who have assumed guardianship. For example, the rules and procedures for adjusting an adoption versus a guardianship subsidy and the services available to adoptive versus guardianship families are different. Recognizing these differences, this study conducted two separate surveys—one focused on adoption practices and one focused on guardianship practices. APMs in states with approved guardianship program received two links: one for an adoption survey and a second for a guardianship survey. Both surveys asked similar questions, but participants reported separately about their interactions with families formed through adoption and families formed through guardianship. To avoid participant confusion or misunderstanding, the PAGI project defined guardianship at the beginning of the web survey (see the definition in the *Introduction*).

2.1.2 Key Informant Interview Method

After completing agency web survey data collection, the study team, with OPRE and the Children’s Bureau, selected a subset of state agencies for key informant interviews. The study team defined key informants as subject matter experts who are staff in private and public agencies who provide post

¹ For this report, child welfare state agencies will be referred to as state agencies.

adoption and guardianship supports and services. The study team sought to gain a deeper understanding of agency practices and policies through these state agency key informant interviews. The study team identified participants who represent a variety of practices based on their web survey responses about how state agencies engaged in post-permanency outreach to families (e.g., through newsletters or well-being letters), how families contacted state agencies for services (e.g., through a hotline), or innovative practices in working with adoption or guardianship families identified by participants. Additionally, the study team sought state agencies that reported monitoring post adoption or guardianship foster care re-entry and strong confidence in capturing those reentries in their administrative data.

Based on the web survey responses, the study team selected six state agencies for key informant interviews, and four agreed to the interviews. Representatives from each of the four state agencies met with the study team in state-specific meetings held by video conference to discuss the overall purpose of the stakeholder interviews, identify key child welfare agency staff and stakeholders to participate in stakeholder interviews, and coordinate document submission for study team review. If the state agency identified documents relevant to post adoption or post guardianship practice that they could share, the study team conducted a document review prior to each interview. Document reviews helped the study team become more familiar with the materials used by the agency in their interactions with adoptive and guardianship families. Documents included newsletters, surveys sent by the state agency to adoptive or guardianship families, and website links.

The study team worked with state agency staff to schedule and conduct the interviews (see **Section 2.2**). Each interview used state-tailored discussion guides and was recorded on Zoom and transcribed by a member of the study team. Two members from the study team used the transcriptions to identify common and important themes within and across the interviews (see **Section 2.3**). Additionally, individual reports were produced for each of the four state agencies for their own records. To protect anonymity, individual state agencies will not be discussed in detail within this report. The following sections describe the agency web survey instrument and state agency key informant discussion guides in greater detail.

2.2 Instruments and Data Collection

2.2.1 Web Surveys

Two web surveys gathered information about child welfare agency operations and protocols related to their interactions with adoptive or guardianship families. The study team developed the surveys specifically for this project based on discussions with current APMs and other child welfare organization leaders.

The surveys covered the following topics:

- Agency-initiated contact with families after adoption and guardianship (e.g., newsletters, well-being letters, agency follow-ups after service completion or subsidy changes);
- Family-initiated contact with agencies after adoption and guardianship (e.g., helplines, phone calls to adoption or guardianship staff members at the agency, walk-ins or office visits);

- Out-of-home or instability events after adoption (e.g., homelessness, run away, foster care re-entry); and
- Child welfare agencies' capacity to link information about adoptive and guardianship families with existing child welfare administrative data systems.

Participants accessed the web survey(s) through a unique link that was available for 9 weeks, allowing the participant flexibility to complete the survey at their convenience. Among those who fully completed the survey, it took 21.55 minutes on average (SD = 20.44 minutes) to complete the adoption web survey and 10.84 minutes (SD = 10.32 minutes) to complete the guardianship web survey.

The Agency Web Survey on Adoption included more items than the Agency Web Survey on Guardianship; consequently, several tables in **Section 3** reflect only results from the Agency Web Survey on Adoption. We have inserted N/A in the tables where questions were not asked in the guardianship survey.

2.2.2 Key Informant Interviews

The study team developed discussion guides to gather in-depth information from the four state agencies about innovative agency practices related to post adoption or guardianship family contact. The study team tailored discussion guides for each state agency using the web survey responses and included the following topics:

- Agency-initiated contact with adoptive and guardianship families (e.g., newsletters, well-being letters, agency follow-ups after service completion);
- Family-initiated contact with agencies (e.g., phone calls to an agency hotline or a general number at the child welfare agency, contact through an agency website);
- Tracking instability after adoption and guardianship (e.g., run away from home, homelessness, placement in a group home or residential treatment facility);
- Administrative data tracking (e.g., whether pre- and post-foster care IDs match or are linked);
- Contact and tracking outside the agency (e.g. contracted service providers or community members such as health care personnel or school personnel); and
- Impact of COVID-19 (e.g., agency contact or operations relevant to contact with families).

The interview discussion guides included flexible and open-ended questions. The interviewers encouraged key informants to elaborate on topics particularly relevant to practices within their agencies. The study team conducted interviews virtually via Zoom and did not provide compensation for the agency staff's time. Five key informants participated in interviews across the four state agencies between June and August 2021. The five interviews lasted 66.70 minutes on average (SD = 16.66 minutes). Most participating states had one interview session, but one participating state had two sessions, as the study team did not complete the interview guide in one interview.

2.3 Participants

2.3.1 Web Survey

Of 50 state APMs, 36 completed the adoption survey; 24 of the 38 eligible state APMs completed the guardianship survey. Two states with guardianship programs completed the adoption survey only; one state with a guardianship program completed the guardianship survey only. Four states started the web surveys but did not complete them. The four partially complete surveys were omitted from study analyses.

Most (76%) state child welfare systems across the United States are state-administered (38 of 50 states) and 12 of the 50 states (24%) are county- or hybrid-administered child welfare systems. This study included adequate participation by APMs from both state- and county/hybrid-administered systems. Of the state-administered systems, 28 of the 38 states completed the adoption survey and 18 of the 28 with eligible guardianship programs completed the guardianship survey. Of the county- or hybrid-administered systems, eight of the 12 states completed the adoption survey and six of the 10 states with eligible guardianship programs completed the guardianship survey.

2.3.2 Key Informant Interviews

The study team invited six state agencies to participate in key informant interviews: four out six agreed. Of the two states that did not participate, one state agency reported that they were very interested, but determined that they did not have the time to participate after discussions with their leadership team. The other state did not respond to emails and phone calls requesting their participation. APMs and other relevant staff who provide (or supervise) services to adoptive and guardianship families within their state agencies participated in the interviews.

2.4 Analysis

2.4.1 Web Survey Analysis

The study team analyzed the agency web survey data using SAS 9.4. The study team ran frequencies with descriptive statistics, including sample sizes and percentages, to answer the research questions (see tables in **Section 3**). The small sample size precluded statistically generalizable findings; thus, no inferences should be made from these analyses to a larger population.

2.4.2 Key Informant Interview Analysis

The study team employed several strategies to ensure methodological integrity and qualitative data trustworthiness in the analysis of the key informant interviews. Either Dr. Nancy Rolock (Principal Investigator) or Dr. Kevin White (Co-Investigator) conducted interviews via Zoom. Two other members of the study team (doctoral students Rong Bai and Chelsea Flanigan) reviewed automated Zoom transcriptions. Ms. Bai and Ms. Flanigan read through each unedited interview transcription and referred to the Zoom recording as needed to ensure transcription clarity. Bai and Flanigan independently identified common themes within and across interviews and compared their independently developed themes. Drs. Rolock and White read the summaries and resolved any discrepancies in the identified themes through study team discussions. Finally, the study team shared

findings from preliminary data analyses with interviewees to validate the trustworthiness of the themes, a technique referred to as member checking or participant validation (Doyle, 2007). Edits were made to the summaries based on interviewee feedback.

3. Results

Results of this study are discussed in four major sections: *State Agency–Initiated Contact with Families after Adoption or Guardianship (Section 3.1)*, *Family-Initiated Contact after Adoption or Guardianship (Section 3.2)*, *Out-of-Home Events after Adoption (Section 3.3)*, and *Administrative Data Linkage for Children who Exit Foster Care through Adoption or Guardianship (Section 3.4)*. Each major section describes the web survey findings and key informant interview findings followed by a synthesis of findings from both the web surveys and key informant interviews (*Section 3.5*).

The web surveys include several items asked of all survey participants and other items asked only of participants who reported a particular state agency practice or policy. For example, all surveys asked whether state agencies send newsletters to adoptive or guardianship families, whereas only participants who indicated that their agency sent a newsletter were asked about the content of this newsletter or its intended audience. Throughout the web survey results tables in *Section 3*, a capital N signifies the full set of participants who completed each survey; a lower-case n signifies a subset of participants who offered responses to a specific item or item series. In addition, where state agencies indicated “Other” as a response to a survey question and entered text, we report those responses in *Section 3*.

When interpreting results tables, it is also important to note that not all state agency web survey participants completed every survey section. Therefore, the subsamples (n) reported in the tables below vary slightly depending on the underlying subsample of interest for each survey question. However, the characteristics of the subsamples are indicated in the titles and the footnotes of the tables. It should also be noted that the questions about whether state agencies were contacted about placement instability (in *Section 3.3*) were asked in the adoption survey only and not the guardianship survey.

In the key informant interview results sections, we provide direct quotes from the interviews (in italics) pertaining to the identified themes. References to the agency or program names were removed from quotes to preserve anonymity. We also include paraphrased text in some of the direct quotes to provide context; these are indicated by square bracket parentheses.

Overall, the results of this study describe the types of contact that state agencies have with families after adoption or guardianship and state agency post-permanency administrative data tracking. *Table 1* provides an overview of the web survey results around these main topics. As shown in *Table 1*, contact initiated by families is more common than contact initiated by state agencies. State agencies also differ in their post-permanency administrative data tracking procedures for adoption versus guardianship. For quick reference, *Table 1* also lists the report section in which each topic is discussed in more detail.

Table 1. Types of Post-Permanency Contact with Families and Administrative Data Tracking, Among All State Agencies that Completed the Surveys

Types of Post-Permanency Contact with Families and Administrative Data Tracking	Results Section where Findings are Discussed	Adoption Survey Participants (N = 36)	Guardianship Survey Participants (N = 24)
		n (%)	n (%)
State agencies initiate contact with families	3.1	20 (56%)	14 (58%)
Families initiate contact with the state agencies	3.2	35 (97%)	22 (92%)
State agencies are contacted about any type of post-permanency instability	3.3	34 (94%)	N/A
State agencies keep the same ID for children pre- and post-permanency	3.4	11 (31%)	22 (92%)
State agencies have linked IDs for children pre- and post-permanency	3.4	26 (72%)	15 (63%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 36 adoption and 24 guardianship survey participants who completed the entire surveys. Column percentages will not sum to 100 in this table because each row represents a separate survey question.

3.1 State Agency–Initiated Contact with Families After Adoption and Guardianship

This study’s first research question asks, “What contact do child welfare agencies initiate with families after adoption or guardianship and how does this contact provide information on the well-being of the child or youth?” The second research question asks, “How do child welfare agencies use the information gathered about families after adoption or guardianship?” First, we present findings from the web survey and then results from the key informant interviews. Each section summarizes the types of agency-initiated contact described by participants and then, for those describing certain types of contact, provides detail about how state agencies use various contacting methods and information gained about the well-being of children or youth.

3.1.1 Web Survey Findings

The web survey first asks participants about whether their agency initiates any contact with families after adoption or guardianship and whether their state provides services after adoption or guardianship. Having contact with and providing services to families after adoption or guardianship are critical components to being able to understand how well children are doing after their transition from foster care to adoption or guardianship. To better understand the various forms of state agency contact and their use for understanding instability outcomes, the survey asks about the state agency’s use of a newsletter or well-being outreach letter and agency contact after a service request, service completion, subsidy change request, or service change request. If an agency participant indicates their state uses a particular form of contact, the survey asks more detailed questions about that contact and how information gained through the contact is used by the agency.

State Agency–Initiated Contact and Post Adoption or Guardianship Services

If state agencies do not initiate contact with families after children exit foster care to adoption or guardianship, this limits how state agencies learn about post–adoption or guardianship child well-being. A little over half of states describe initiating contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Fifty-six percent of adoption survey participants (20 states) report that their state agency initiates contact with families after adoption. Similarly, 58% of guardianship survey participants (14 states) report initiating contact with families after guardianship.

Of the states that report agency-initiated contact with families, most provide services after adoption or guardianship. Sixty percent of adoption survey participants (12 of the 20 states who contact families) and 71% of guardianship participants (10 of the 14 states who contact families) report that both the state agency and contracted private agencies provide services to adoptive and guardianship families. One adoption survey participant and one guardianship survey participant say that only the state agency provides services. One adoption and one guardianship survey participant report that services are only provided by contracted private agencies.

State agency–initiated contact with families provides a platform for future outreach. However, families may move or lose contact with agencies over time. Only half of the adoption survey participants with state agency–initiated contact (10 states) report that they have a process for updating family addresses. Guardianship survey participants were not asked about their ability to update family addresses.

Type of State Agency–Initiated Contact

The web survey asks only those states who report agency-initiated contact to describe their types of contact with adoptive or guardianship families (e.g., newsletters, well-being letters, follow-up after a subsidy change or service request/receipt). The most common types of agency-initiated contacts occur when the state follows up with a family after a service-related or subsidy-related incident (see **Table 2**). This type of contact is the same for adoptive and guardianship families. As detailed in **Table 2**, the majority of states follow up with families after a subsidy change is requested (85% for adoption; 93% for guardianship), after a request for services or support (75% for adoption; 86% for guardianship), and after a change to services outlined in a subsidy agreement (70% for adoption; 86% for guardianship).

Less common types of state agency–initiated contact to adoptive or guardianship families include newsletters, well-being letters, and following up after service completion (see **Table 2**).

Participants reporting “other” types of contact say these activities include periodic phone calls to families for 2 years after adoption finalization. One state has a law that requires a check-in 1 year post adoption finalization. Another state requires that an annual letter be sent to each adoptive family verifying services and support. A different state reports that letters and forms are sent to families just prior to the child’s 18th birthday or when the state is notified that a child is living outside the adoptive home.

Table 2. Types of State Agency–Initiated Contact Among States Reporting Contact Initiated by the Agency

Types of State Agency–Initiated Contact	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 20)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 14)
	n (%)	n (%)
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%)
Newsletter	9 (45%)	4 (29%)
Well-being letter	9 (45%)	6 (43%)
Other	7 (35%)	3 (21%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 20 adoption and 14 guardianship survey participants who report that their agencies regularly initiate contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one type of state agency–initiated contact; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

To provide a richer understanding of the types of state agency–initiated contact, the next section of the report provides additional information about each type of contact. We begin the discussion about the states that send newsletters to adoptive and guardianship families. We follow with a discussion of the states that send well-being letters. Finally, we conclude this section with a discussion of each of the four types of agency follow-up (i.e., agency follow-up after a request for service or support, after service completion, after a subsidy change is requested, and after a change to services outlined in a subsidy agreement).

Newsletter

Nine adoption survey participants and four guardianship survey participants report that their agency sends out newsletters designed for adoptive or guardianship families. **Table 3** summarizes the intended audience for these states' newsletters. Newsletters are sent to a mix of adoptive parents or guardians. Some states send newsletters to all families receiving an adoption or guardianship subsidy, whereas others send them to all parents or guardians who have ever received services or supports. Two states also send adoption newsletters to children or youth. Three states describe "other" intended audiences, including all parents or guardians the agency is contact with or all kinship care providers (whether or not they receive a subsidy).

Table 3. Intended Newsletter Audience Among States Reporting Sending Newsletters

Intended Newsletter Audience	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 9)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 4)
	n (%)	n (%)
Parents or guardians who are currently receiving a subsidy	4 (44%)	3 (75%)

Intended Newsletter Audience	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 9)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 4)
	n (%)	n (%)
Parents or guardians who have ever adopted or assumed guardianship of a child in the state	4 (44%)	1 (25%)
Parents or guardians who have ever received post-permanency services	3 (33%)	3 (75%)
Children or youth who exited foster care through adoption or guardianship	2 (22%)	1 (25%)
Parents who have finalized within 10 years	1 (11%)	0 (0%)
Other	3 (33%)	0 (0%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the nine adoption and four guardianship survey participants who report using a newsletter as one form of their agency's regular contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one type of intended newsletter audience; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

The frequency of newsletters ranges from monthly to twice a year for both adoption and guardianship families (see **Table 4**).

Table 4. Newsletter Frequency, Among States Reporting Sending Newsletters

Frequency of Newsletter	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 9)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 4)
	n (%)	n (%)
Once a month	3 (33%)	1 (25%)
Once a quarter	3 (33%)	2 (50%)
Twice a year	2 (22%)	1 (25%)
Once a year	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Not yet established time frame (new procedure)	1 (11%)	0 (0%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the nine adoption and four guardianship survey participants who report using a newsletter as one form of their agency's regular contact with families after adoption or guardianship.

Well-being letter

Nine adoption survey participants and six guardianship survey participants report that their agency sends out a well-being letter to adoptive or guardianship families. In the adoption and guardianship web surveys, a "well-being letter" was defined as a letter or form sent to adoptive parents or guardians to ascertain the well-being of the child in their care or to check up on the status of the child. All tables in this section will report the states that reported sending well-being letters.

Most participants indicate that letters are typically sent at least once a year (78% for adoption; 100% for guardianship). Two adoption survey participants report that their state sends one letter to families one year after the adoption and does not send subsequent letters. Forty-four percent of adoption survey participants (four states) report that they follow up with families who do not respond to the well-being

letter. Three out of these four adoption survey participants report that their agency makes phone calls and sends emails to families who do not respond to their well-being letter. One adoption survey participant reports that their state agency considers making a home visit to families who do not respond to the letter.

States report collecting a variety of information from families in response to well-being letters (see **Table 5**). Most commonly, families are asked to update their contact information or to report on the child’s educational status, whether the parents or guardians are financially supporting the child, where the child is currently living, or the child’s mental health needs. In the “other” comments, one state adoption survey participant adds that they have an open-ended section for the family to share anything else they would like the state to know. Another state guardianship survey participant reports that their agency collects information related to health insurance coverage for children from guardianship families.

Table 5. Types of Information Collected from Families in Well-being Letters Among States Reporting Sending Well-being Letters

Type of Information Collected in Well-Being Letters	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 9)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 6)
	n (%)	n (%)
Family contact information	7 (78%)	6 (100%)
Educational status of the child	6 (67%)	4 (67%)
If the family is financially supporting the child	6 (67%)	6 (100%)
Where the child is currently living	5 (56%)	6 (100%)
Mental health status or needs of the child	5 (56%)	3 (50%)
Physical health status of the child	3 (33%)	2 (33%)
Caregivers’ demographics	2 (22%)	1 (17%)
Other	2 (22%)	1 (17%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the nine adoption and six guardianship survey participants who report using a well-being letter as one form of their agency’s regular contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one type of information collected in well-being letters; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

Information collected from the well-being letters may be used by state agencies to fulfill legislative or programmatic mandates or to determine subsidy eligibility. Fifty-six percent of adoption agencies (five states) and 100% of guardianship states (six states) that send well-being letters report using the well-being letter for this purpose (see **Table 6**). States also send letters to check in on the well-being of adopted children or to tailor outreach specific to the needs of the family (see **Table 6**).

Table 6. How States Use Collected Information Among States Reporting Sending Well-being Letters

How States Use Information Collected from Families	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 9)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 6)
	n (%)	n (%)
To plan tailored outreach to a family that is specific to their needs	3 (33%)	1 (17%)
To check in on the well-being (e.g., mental health, physical health, behavioral health) of children	5 (56%)	0 (0%)
To fulfill legislative or programmatic mandates or determine eligibility	5 (56%)	6 (100%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the nine adoption and four guardianship survey participants who report using a newsletter as one form of their agency's regular contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one way that they use the information collected in well-being letters; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

Adoption survey participants who use well-being letters describe how their state agencies store and receive information gathered in response to the letters. Items about well-being letter receipt and storage were not included in the more abbreviated Agency Web Survey on Guardianship; consequently, no results are reported here for guardianship survey participants. Eighty-nine percent of states (eight states) report that they maintain some record of receipt for the well-being letter. When reporting how responses to letters are received, 89% of adoption survey participants say responses are received via mail (eight states), 78% by email (seven states), and 56% by phone (five states). Some adoption survey participants report that their states maintain electronic or formal records, and a few maintain informal staff notes (see **Table 7**). Responses to well-being letters are typically stored for the life of the case (see **Table 7**).

Table 7. How States Store and Receive Information from Well-Being Letters Among States Reporting Sending Well-Being Letters

How States Receive and Store Responses to Well-Being Letters	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 9)
	n (%)
<i>How states receive responses to well-being letters</i>	
Email	7 (78%)
Phone	5 (56%)
Mail	8 (89%)
Online portal	1 (11%)
We do not request a response	1 (11%)
<i>How states store well-being letter records</i>	

How States Receive and Store Responses to Well-Being Letters	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 9)
	n (%)
Formal, structured record	4 (44%)
Electronic database	6 (67%)
Informal staff notes	3 (33%)
In eligibility files	1 (11%)
<i>How long states store well-being letters</i>	
A year	1 (11%)
For the life of the case	7 (78%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the nine adoption survey participants who report using a newsletter as one form of their agency's regular contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one way that they receive, or store, information collected in well-being letters; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100. This item series was not included in the Agency Web Survey on Guardianship, so no guardianship responses are included in this table.

Agency follow-up after a request for service or support

Fifteen adoption survey participants and 12 guardianship survey participants report that their agency follows up with families after a request for services or support. Following up with families after a service request offers an opportunity to learn if the services were received and to understand if families need additional support or services. This section of the report summarizes responses only for those agencies who follow up with adoptive or guardianship families after a request for services or support.

Eighty percent of adoption survey participants (12 out of 15 states) and 92% of guardianship survey participants (11 out of 12 states) who follow up after a family's service request report that they maintain a record of this request. The Agency Web Survey for Adoption asks state participants who follow up after a service request about how they maintain their records. This question is not asked of guardianship survey participants. Most (47%; seven states) adoption survey participants who maintain records do so in either a formal structured database or electronic database. A few states (33%; five states) record requests in more informal staff notes. Some (27%; four states) report that notes are maintained by private agencies that provide the service.

Table 8 summarizes the type of information that states maintain in records after an adoptive family requests agency services or support.

Table 8. Types of Information States Maintain in Records Among States Reporting Following up with Adoptive Families after a Request for Service or Support

Type of Information Maintained in State Agency Records after an Adoptive Family's Service Request	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 15)
	n (%)
Type of support or service requested	12 (80%)
If the support or service was provided	12 (80%)

Type of Information Maintained in State Agency Records after an Adoptive Family's Service Request	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 15)
	n (%)
Contact information for the family	11 (73%)
Where the child or youth is living	10 (67%)
Mental health status or needs of the child or youth	11 (73%)
Physical health status of the child, youth, or the family	8 (53%)
Educational status of the child or youth	8 (53%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 15 adoption survey participants who report following up with families after a request for services as one form of their agency's regular contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one type of information maintained in their records; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100. This item series was not included in the Agency Web Survey on Guardianship, so no guardianship responses are included in this table.

Agency follow-up after service completion

Ten adoption survey participants and five guardianship survey participants report that their agency follows up with families after they complete services. All tables in this section report findings only from those survey participants whose agencies follow up after service completion.

After completing services, states that follow up with families typically do so by phone (80% adoption; 60% guardianship) or email (70% adoption; 60% guardianship). Fewer states use mail (50% adoption; 80% guardianship). One adoption survey participant selected "other" in response to the question about follow-up after a family's service completion; this participant indicates that their state asks families to complete a survey after service completion.

Among state agencies that follow up after a family's service completion, 80% of adoption survey participants (eight states) report that their states maintain records after the completion of services. Sixty percent of guardianship survey participants whose states follow up after service completion report maintaining records (three states).

Adoption survey participants were asked about how formal records were maintained; this question was not asked of guardianship survey participants. According to adoption survey participants, 20% (two states) primarily maintain service completion records through a formal/structured record, 20% use an electronic database (two states), and 20% (two states) use reports from private agencies about the services provided. One adoption participant specified in their "other" response that their state records can be formal, structured records (e.g., in an electronic database) or informal records kept in staff notes, but these records are maintained by a contractual agency and not reported to the state agency.

Table 9 describes the types of information collected by the 10 states that follow up with families after service completion.

Table 9. Types of Information Collected Among States that Follow up with Families After Service Completion

Type of Information that States Maintain About Service Completion	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 10)
	n (%)
Type of support or service requested	8 (80%)
Whether the support or service was provided	8 (80%)
Length of services (e.g., number of months)	8 (80%)
Contact information for the family	8 (80%)
Where the child is living	7 (70%)
Physical health status of the child	6 (60%)
Educational status of the child	6 (60%)
Mental health status or needs of the child	6 (60%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 10 adoption survey participants who report following up with families after service completion as one form of their agency's regular contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one type of information maintained after service completion; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100. This item series was not included in the Agency Web Survey on Guardianship, so no guardianship responses are included in this table.

Agency follow-up after a subsidy change is requested

Seventeen adoption survey and 13 guardianship survey participants report following up with families after they receive a request from the family to change their subsidy. This section of the report describes findings only for those participants who report following up with families who request a subsidy change.

Web survey results show that states require various information from families to request a subsidy modification. Ninety-four percent of adoption survey participants (16 states) and 77% of guardianship survey participants (10 states) report that families must provide documentation about the child's needs or experiences from a medical or mental health professional to request a change in their adoption/guardianship subsidy. States often require a formal written description of the reason(s) for the adoption subsidy change request (see **Table 10**). For most states, families must provide documentation of the types of services that are needed, which are not already listed in the subsidy agreement (see **Table 10**). In the "other" responses, one state adoption survey participant reported that changes to the adoption subsidy require parents to provide a formal written request with an explanation of the change in a child's special needs. One state guardianship survey participant reported that guardians are required to notify the state when a guardianship is vacated; another state guardianship participant reported a need to inform the state when there is a change in the child's guardian.

Table 10. Information States Require to Request a Change to an Adoption or Guardianship Subsidy, Among States that Report Receiving Subsidy Change Requests

Type of Information Required for a Family to Request a Subsidy Change	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 17)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 13)
	n (%)	n (%)
Documentation about needs or experiences of the child or youth from a medical or mental health professional	16 (94%)	10 (77%)
Formal written description of the reason(s) for the adoption subsidy change request	15 (88%)	11 (85%)
Documentation of the types of services that are needed, which are not already listed in the subsidy agreement	13 (76%)	7 (54%)
Other	1 (6%)	3 (23%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 17 adoption survey participants and 13 guardianship survey participants who report following up with families after receiving subsidy change requests as one form of their agency's regular contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one type of information maintained after service completion; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

States typically maintain records regarding changes to the subsidy arrangements; this is true for 100% of the adoption survey participants who report follow-up with families after a subsidy change request (17 states) and 92% of guardianship survey participants (12 states). Adoption survey participants were asked about how records are maintained after an agency follows up on a subsidy change request.

Guardianship survey participants were not asked about how these records are maintained. Fifty-nine percent of adoption survey participants (10 states) report that records are maintained in an electronic database. An additional 12% maintain records in staff notes (two states) and one state reports the use of formal, structured records. Four state adoption survey participants describe "other" methods for maintaining records after subsidy change requests that included maintaining files for audit purposes. One adoption survey participant reports that it is difficult to respond to this question because records are stored at the county (and not state) level or by private contracted agencies.

Agency follow-up after a request to change services outlined in a subsidy agreement

Fourteen adoption survey participants and 12 guardianship survey participants report following up with families after they make a request to changes the services that are outlined in their adoption or guardianship subsidy agreement. This section reports results for only those participants that report following up with families who request a change in their subsidy agreement services.

All states (100% of adoption and guardianship participants) that follow up with families after a request to change subsidy agreement services maintain records about these requests. Adoption survey participants were asked to describe how these records are maintained. Guardianship survey participants were not asked about record maintenance. Adoption survey participants report that states store records for adoption subsidies through electronic databases (71%; 10 states), informal staff notes (14%; two states), formal records (7%; one state), or keeps records through any of these sources (electronic, informal or formal) (7%; one state).

Table 11 describes the types of information required by states for families to change the services described in an adoption or guardianship services agreement.

Table 11. Information Required to Change the Services in a Family’s Adoption or Guardianship Services Agreement Among States Reporting Follow-up after Receiving Subsidy Change Requests

Information Required to Change a Subsidy Agreement	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 14)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 12)
	n (%)	n (%)
Formal written description of the reason(s) for the adoption subsidy change request	6 (43%)	6 (50%)
Documentation about needs or experiences of the child or youth from a medical or mental health professional	4 (29%)	3 (25%)
Documentation of the types of services that are needed, which are not already listed in the subsidy agreement	2 (14%)	0 (0%)
County/local agency may record through any of options above	2 (14%)	3 (25%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 14 adoption survey participants and 12 guardianship survey participants who report following up with families after they request a change to services described in their adoption or guardianship services agreement. Survey participants can select more than one type of information maintained after service completion; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

3.1.2 Key Informant Interview Findings

The key informant interview asks agency participants to provide more detail about the routine contact that their agency initiates with families after adoption or guardianship. Agency participants describe how the contact is made, agency goals for contacting families, the types of outreach they find most successful for reaching families, and how their agencies use information gathered through this contact. Agency participants also discuss special considerations that their agency pays attention to when contacting families after adoption or guardianship.

Types of State Agency–Initiated Contact

Interview participants identify two common ways that their agencies initiate contacts with adoption and guardianship families: annual letters to adoptive and guardianship families (sometimes referred to as re-certification letters or well-being letters) and newsletters to families. The annual letters ask families to respond to the agency with information such as current address information and confirmation that the child is still in the home. The letters vary by agency but may also ask for information such as education or employment status. The letters may also provide contact information about available services. Agencies report that the letters can help maintain a minimum level of contact with families; they may serve as a conversation starter with adoptive and guardianship families about local supports and services available to them:

Every year we are contacted by adoptive and guardianship families because they have received those letters ... 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...

Besides these traditional channels for agency outreach, some child welfare agencies and the community-based agencies they work with also develop creative routes to contact families. The purpose of this outreach is to check in with families and see how they are doing and to make sure families are aware of services available to them in the community. Moreover, child welfare agencies want families to contact them when they need help. For example, one participant reported the following types of contacts:

We reach out to schools, we reach out to churches, we reach out to attorneys, courts, family resource centers, mental health providers, in the community...you name it...we do it all and it's not just like emails and sending brochures—we do a lot of [outreach] on footwork too ... we make it a point to partner with as many agencies and community providers as possible, just to increase the awareness of our services, and we do this monthly sometimes...we often do experience that [families] just don't want services, so we just give them our brochure and our contact information in hopes that they will call us when they need us.

One state agency sends an annual survey to adoptive parents and guardians that helps the agency maintain contact with families. The surveys provide a way for families to request that the agency contact them for needed services or supports. The state agency also uses the surveys to identify issues that might be going on in a specific region:

If we see a survey that ... [there is] a spike in concerns about adoption assistance... [We can] say, 'hey you guys talk to me about what's going on in your area.' Sometimes, it can be changing staff that they know the policy or the leadership decided that they're no longer going to do this, then it prompts us to then talk to our leadership to be like, 'hey, there needs to be a conversation between executive leadership about this funding for this service. It's showing up on our survey, and this is something that they should be providing.' It gives us that ability to drill down by area ... [and say to a specific regional staff] 'hey, your foster parents say y'all folks are not being customer service friendly.' We found new staff could come to a training on customer service.

Trainings are another way some agencies connect with families. Agency participants suggest that providing training pre-finalization, where honest discussion can occur about the challenges that might arise post-finalization, is critical. Participants say that their agency staff try to build connections to the adoption or guardianship families prior to finalization during these trainings. Agency staff in pre-finalization trainings stress the importance of parents or guardians reaching out for support and assistance when needed and before the situation becomes too difficult:

We want to make sure that from a pre-service standpoint when we're having those trainings and helping our families who are going down the process of wanting to be adoptive parents to reiterate that ... We want to make sure that our post adoption staff has a presence in that community, has a presence with that family ... If you can go prior to a finalization, introduce yourself, build that rapport to let them know that you're here to assist, to hear the good and the bad. At the end of the day when they just want to brag about their child, we want them to feel like they have someone that they can connect to.

It's not going to be easy. It's not easy with your own biological [children]. We try to find ways to insert that connection with families, but I do think it ultimately is some of it is what they inherit. Especially ... with our relative adoptions. They know a family member wasn't able to meet the child's needs and they don't want to be the one to say that they're not able to meet the needs.

Special Considerations for State Agency–Initiated Contact

Although all participants acknowledge the importance of staying in contact with families, they also describe a delicate balance for deciding when to contact families. For example, some participants stated the following:

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.

We would say it's that balance of when do we touch base on a statewide level. You know that, a year in, a lot of our families are still in the honeymoon phase, and so you know, although our [community agencies] continue to reach out, through the various newsletters and mechanisms that they have, it's that balance of when do we step in and then, when do we let them be a family? Because you don't want [child welfare agencies] involved in contacting and, for lack of a better word, interrupting your normal life schedule. But then we find we touch base with [families at] year one [after adoption or guardianship and] everything's good ... but then [if the family doesn't] reach back out to us until year seven when [the family is] past the point of [being able to accept services], no service will help. [Families are] past that point of us being able to [provide] ... wraparound services to help support whatever behavioral challenge or mental or physical need that the child may have. So ... Figuring out that balance of how much do we intrude versus how much do we step in to continue to show and assess [need for services or supports], so that we [can provide] help before [the family] gets to that point of no return.

3.1.3 Summary of Findings on Agency-Initiated Contact

Overall, slightly over half of states describe initiating contact with families after adoption or guardianship. Many agencies endorse the use of newsletters and well-being letters to maintain contact with adoptive and guardianship families. States initiate contact with families to provide, or follow up on, services requested from adoption and guardianship families. Select agencies also use annual surveys and trainings to build rapport and connect with families so that families feel comfortable reaching out to agency supports at the first sign of need. Respondents cautioned that a careful approach to agency-initiated contact is needed. Agencies need to be mindful not to interfere with families' rights to self-determination and privacy while ensuring that families have the support and services they need to ensure family well-being.

Many participants say their agencies would like to reach out to adoptive and guardianship families more, especially to make sure they are aware of available support services. However, they must be mindful not to interfere with families' rights to self-determination and privacy.

3.2 Family-Initiated Contact After Adoption or Guardianship

Section 3.2 presents study results related to the following research question: “What contact do families (parents or guardians, children, youth, and community members) initiate with child welfare agencies after adoption or guardianship?” First, we present findings from the web survey and then results from the key informant interviews. Each section summarizes the types of family-initiated contact described by participants. For those reporting family-initiated contact, state agencies provide details about how state agencies record these contacts. Understanding the ways that families contact agencies can help our understanding of children and families’ overall well-being after adoption and guardianship finalization.

3.2.1 Web Survey Findings

The web survey first asks survey participants whether families initiate contact with their agency after adoption or guardianship and if so, the methods families use to contact agencies. The survey also asks if former foster youth contact agencies after adoption or guardianship and if community members contact the agency regarding adoptive or guardianship families. For each type of contact, survey participants are asked if they maintain records of the contact from families. If a survey participant indicates their state maintains records, the survey asks more detailed questions about how records are maintained.

Adoptive and guardianship families may use methods beyond those asked about in the web survey to contact agencies after adoption or guardianship. For example, families may contact agencies to seek additional information, service referrals, or more comprehensive services or supports. Consequently, the results here likely portray only a portion of the ways that families may contact state agencies. According to the web survey, 97% of adoption survey participants (35 states) report that families contact them after adoption. Ninety-two percent of guardianship survey participants (22 states) report that families contact them after guardianship.

Types of Family-Initiated Contact

Of the states that report family-initiated contact, the most common ways families initiate contact is by phone. As detailed in **Table 12**, this includes phone calls to specific adoption or guardianship staff members at the agency (91% of adoption survey participants; 73% of guardianship survey participants), to a general number at the state agency (69% adoption of adoption survey participants; 82% of guardianship survey participants), and to specific adoption or guardianship staff members at a different agency that specifically serves adoptive families (66% of adoption survey participants; 59% of guardianship survey participants). Less common types of contact are through a state agency website and helplines for adoptive or guardianship families (see **Table 12**). One adoption survey participant indicated in the “other” category that some adoptive families contact the state through a contracted post-permanency service provider.

Table 12. Ways in Which Families Contact States Among States Reporting Contact Initiated by Families

Methods Used by Families to Contact States	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 35)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 22)
	n (%)	n (%)
Phone calls to specific adoption or guardianship staff members at the agency	32 (91%)	16 (73%)
Phone calls to a general number at the child welfare agency	24 (69%)	18 (82%)
Phone calls to specific adoption or guardianship staff members at a different (public or private) agency that specifically serves adoptive families	23 (66%)	13 (59%)
Through an agency website	22 (63%)	15 (68%)
Helpline for adoptive and/or guardianship families	17 (49%)	10 (46%)
Walk in or visit the office to request assistance	15 (43%)	9 (41%)
Other	3 (9%)	1 (5%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 35 adoption and 22 guardianship survey participants who report that families contact them after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one type of method for contact; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

After family-initiated contact with states, most adoption survey participants (83%; 29 states) and guardianship survey participants (77%; 17 states) report maintaining a record of requests. Of those who maintain a record of requests, using an electronic database is the most common way of maintaining the record (48% of adoption survey participants; 14 states and 41% of guardianship survey participants; seven states), followed by informal staff notes (28% of adoption survey participants; eight states and 24% of guardianship survey participants; four states) and using a formal, structured record (10% of adoption survey participants; three states and 12% of guardianship survey participants; two states). In addition, several survey participants report using multiple options for maintaining records after adoption or guardianship; a few mention that contracted agencies maintain these records.

Type of Contact Initiated by Former Foster Youth

Most state agency survey participants report that former foster youth contact their agencies. Among all adoption survey participants, 86% report contact from former foster youth (31 states). Among all guardianship survey participants, 83% report contact from former foster youth (20 states). Of those who report contact from former foster youth, **Table 13** shows the most common methods of contact are phone calls to a general number at the child welfare agency, followed by phone calls to specific adoption or guardianship agency staff, then walk-ins or visiting the office to request assistance. A relatively small percentage of survey participants report that their agencies are contacted through a helpline for adoptive or guardianship families. In addition, in the “other” category, survey participants report that former foster youth contact states via community-based programs or staff (e.g., “Independent Living” services), emails obtained through state websites, or contacts to previous caseworkers (see **Table 13**).

Table 13. How Former Foster Youth Contact States Among States Reporting Contact Initiated by Foster Youth

Methods of Contact by Former Foster Youth	Adoption Survey Participants (n=31)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n=20)
	n (%)	n (%)
Phone calls to a general number at the child welfare agency	28 (90%)	19 (95%)
Phone calls to specific adoption or guardianship agency staff	24 (77%)	15 (75%)
Walk in or visit the office and request assistance	20 (65%)	11 (55%)
Helpline for adoptive or guardianship families	13 (42%)	7 (35%)
Other	7 (23%)	2 (10%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 31 adoption and 20 guardianship survey participants who report that former foster youth contact them after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one type of method for contact; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

Of states that report that former foster youth contact them, the majority of adoption survey participants (68%; 21 states) and guardianship survey participants (70%; 14 states) report maintaining records of that contact. Among these states that maintain records of former foster youth-initiated contact, common ways of maintaining these records are electronic databases (33% of adoption survey participants; seven states and 36% of guardianship survey participants; five states), informal staff notes (33% of adoption survey participants; seven states and 21% of guardianship survey participants; three states), and formal, structural record (10% of adoption survey participants; two states and 7% of guardianship survey participants; one state). In the “other” category, two adoption survey participants report that their contracted community service agency keeps records of contact. Survey participants indicating “other” also report that they may use a combination of the strategies listed to maintain these records (e.g., a phone bank and an electronic database).

Type of Contact Initiated by Community Members

Most states report that community members contact them about adoptive or guardianship families. Among all adoption survey participants, 86% (31 states) report that community members contact them about adoptive families. Among all guardianship survey participants, 88% (21 states) report that community members contact them about guardianship families. Among states that report contact from community members, the most common type of contact is phone calls to a general number at the child welfare agency, followed by phone calls to specific adoption or guardianship agency staff (see **Table 14**). Some community members also contact the agency through a helpline (see **Table 14**).

Table 14. How Community Members Contact States Among States Reporting Contact Initiated by Community Members

Mode of contact for community members who contacted the state agency:	Adoption Survey Participants (n = 31)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n = 21)
	n (%)	n (%)
Phone calls to a general number at the child welfare agency	29 (94%)	19 (90%)
Phone calls to specific adoption or guardianship agency staff	22 (71%)	14 (67%)
Helpline for adoptive or guardianship families	11 (35%)	11 (52%)
Other	2 (6%)	1 (5%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 31 adoption and 21 guardianship survey participants who report that community members contact them after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants can select more than one type of method for contact; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

About half of the survey participants who report that community members contact them about families (55% of adoption survey participants, 17 states; 52% of guardianship survey participants, 11 states) also maintain records of community member-initiated contact. Of states that report maintaining records about community agency-initiated contact, the most common way of storing records is through informal notes (29% of adoption survey participants; five states and 45% of guardianship survey participants; five states) and through an electronic database (29% of adoption survey participants; five states and 18% of guardianship survey participants; two states). A few survey participants have formal, structured records (24% of adoption survey participants; four states and 9% of guardianship survey participants; one state). Moreover, in the “other” category, survey participants indicate maintaining records through their state administrative data system, informal staff notes, helpline call logs, or a combination of record types.

3.2.2 Key Informant Interview Findings

The key informant interview asks agency participants to provide more detail about the ways that families contact their agency after adoption or guardianship. Agency participants report that families typically contact them through a helpline or through the agency website and that the contact is initiated because the family has a service need. Agency participants describe barriers to families initiating agency contact and strategies agencies use to overcome these barriers. Finally, participants provide suggestions for improving how state agencies respond to family-initiated contact related to service requests. By improving system responses to these family-initiated contacts, participants hope to connect with families and provide them services prior to the escalation of severe needs. Furthermore, by providing timely adoption or guardianship-relevant services, agencies hope to better support adoptive and guardianship families and reduce post adoption and guardianship instability.

Types of Family-Initiated Contact

Agency participants report that adoptive and guardianship families usually reach out to their state agencies through helplines and agency websites. Some states have designated staff for families to contact directly when they have questions or concerns. Most families initiate contact with state agencies to request services and support. Agency participants report that the provision of services and

support is an important factor in preventing post-adoption and guardianship instability and improving child and family well-being.

Barriers to Family-Initiated Contact

Agency participants indicate that families are often reluctant to contact child welfare agencies when they need assistance or support because of stigma associated with child welfare involvement. Furthermore, families often reach out for help when they are in crisis, and it is too late for child welfare agencies to effectively intervene.

There's a stigma ... especially for families that adopted through foster care. They want a break from the foster care department, so when I meet with them immediately [after adoption] there's this ambivalence and uncertainty that 'I don't want social workers in my home right now, I need a break.' [There is] shame, embarrassment and guilt, but then a year [or several years] later, they do come to us. And they're in crisis and sometimes they want quick fixes and we're trying to gather the context of what the issue exactly is and link them to the most appropriate services to best support them.

Families begin to struggle and at first—they don't feel like they should make any contact [with the child welfare agency]. They don't really know that this may be a behavior or an issue that could get worse...And they don't make contact with us until they're kind of in that crisis mode...and are like, 'We can't do this anymore'.

Another potential barrier to services for guardianship families relates to terminology. Participants report that they commonly use the term “post adoption” (e.g., post adoption worker, post adoption services), yet the intent is to be inclusive of adoption and guardianship. One agency participant said that they were considering changing the name to include guardianship explicitly (e.g., post adoption and guardianship services). If states explicitly include both adoption and guardianship in their titles, guardianship families may feel more inclined to seek services.

Strategies to Overcome Barriers to Family-Initiated Contact

To address the barriers that families may have to initiating contact with state agencies, key informant interview participants report that their agencies make efforts to increase family engagement. One agency participant states that they try to prepare families considering adoption or guardianship for what they may encounter after adoption or guardianship. Furthermore, agencies try to reinforce that contacting the agency for help after adoption or guardianship can be a positive sign of strength:

Agency participants say their agencies prioritize engaging families. Prior to adoption or guardianship, agencies provide education to families to manage their expectations around adoption.

[The agency works to] ... encourage increased preparation for our caregivers about what life can look like, the reality of what life can look like, as opposed to the idealistic vision that a lot of caregivers have about what that finalization might look like the day after the Court decree signed...

[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.

... Whenever we're invited to speak, one of the ... most poignant pieces we love to share with our families is that ... seeking support is ... a show of strength, like you're ready to step forward and work at this ... we really hope that message gets across to our foster or adoptive families, and ... our kin-gap families as well.

To encourage families to reach out, agencies make themselves available at community events and leave materials in the community for families to read about how to get in contact if they need supports or services:

Every time that ... one of the social workers participates at a school event—an adoption conference—they are leaving their flyers. And we have posters that are posted in family court, so oftentimes families learn about us through their contact with ... flyers and posters in their facilities.

At the system level, child welfare agencies try to provide flexible services tailored to families' needs and encourage families to engage with services at an early stage:

Parents [sometimes] needed shorter term and occasional services ... So, it started with just saying, 'Hey these parents probably need some education, how do we make sure to have [necessary] services available?' So, we started promoting that a lot along with that saying you know that's the early and often thing - 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.

Family-Initiated Contact: Suggestions for Improving Services

When families reach out to agencies to seek services, they are not always satisfied with what they receive. Participants state that this is often due to a mismatch between services sought and those offered. Specifically, services are not always tailored to the needs and experiences of adoptive or guardianship families. Although the provision of services and support is an important factor in preventing post adoption and guardianship instability, it needs to be tailored to the unique needs and experiences of adoptive and guardianship families. Participants suggest that services and supports should be provided by staff with expertise in adoption and guardianship issues, and service providers should consider employing a diverse staff dedicated to support adoptive and guardianship families. For example, one participant noted:

State agency participants report that services could be improved by having dedicated staff with expertise in understanding the complex birth, adoptive, and kin relationships that children develop in adoptive and guardianship families. Many participants believe that it is essential to have staff who are specifically dedicated to working with adoptive and guardianship families and who have specialized expertise and experiences related to serving these families.

A dedicated position solely focused on that, you start to see better interactions with families ... I believe it is a different type of conversation [than one with a foster parent], because now they're realizing they are the parents and so you're talking to them as a parent [rather than a foster parent] ... you wouldn't want someone strictly therapeutic ... without having some adoption competency, that training or something to support their work with these families. They definitely have to have adoption experience.

There's a set of skills that someone who's providing [services and supports] to our adoptive and guardianship family needs to know and have. Then, if you're going to be providing those services to your family then please make sure that they have that background and the knowledge of trauma and adoption competency and attachment and all those other little areas that are specific to the special needs of this population is very important.

Besides having specific knowledge and experiences related to adoption and guardianship, participants also suggest that state agencies need to recruit staff from diverse backgrounds to help families relate to the staff:

You know it's something that a lot of us internally have worked on with regards to the thinking, 'I don't see my face there.' ... And that's the same for our children ... the reason that the families don't want to go to [a specific] agency because they're not comfortable. Letting them know that you understand from their perspective. If you don't see someone who works at your agency that looks like me, that speaks Spanish like me or speaks Vietnamese, then how can I feel that you know my perspective, and how you can best help me.

3.2.3 Summary of Findings on Family-Initiated Contact

Most states report that families, former foster youth, and community members contact them after adoption or guardianship. This contact most commonly occurs by phone (typically to a general number at the child welfare agency that is set up to serve adoptive and guardianship families). When a family has a service need, they usually reach out to specific adoption or guardianship staff members at the agency. Respondents report that having dedicated staff who understand the specific needs of adoptive and guardianship families is a key feature of effective post-permanency support and service delivery. They also suggest that finding ways to encourage families to reach out for support early on, prior to a crisis, is challenging, but an important aspect of providing support to adoptive and guardianship families.

3.3 Out-of-Home Events After Adoption

Section 3.3 presents study results related to the following research question: “To what extent do child welfare agencies track information about children post adoption and post guardianship?” To address this research question, the survey asks participants about events in the last year where the state agency was notified that a child or youth who had exited foster care through adoption was living outside their adoptive home (i.e., “out-of-home” events). The survey specifies that these could include events like homelessness, running away, and institutional or group care. These events could be symbolic of difficult life situations in which a child or youth’s safety, mental health, or overall well-being may be at risk. Child welfare agencies may become aware of these events if informed by family members, community or service providers, or others and may be able to provide support and services. However, not being

informed of these events precludes state agencies from being able to provide support and services to families who may be in need. Survey questions about out-of-home events are included only in the Agency Web Survey on Adoption. They are not included in the Agency Web Survey on Guardianship. Findings from the web survey are presented below, followed by the results from the key informant interviews.

3.3.1 Web Survey Findings

This section summarizes the type of out-of-home events reported by participants in the Agency Web Survey on Adoption and how frequently these events are reported during the past year. This is followed by a description of who typically informs survey participants of the out-of-home events and what options state agencies have to address out-of-home events.

Most adoption survey participants report that their agency receives notification of adopted children placed in institutional or residential care (89%; 32 states), placed in group home care (61%; 22 states), running away from home (72%; 26 states), becoming homeless (58%; 21 states), or living with friends or relatives (83%; 30 states) (see **Table 15**). It is unknown how many out-of-home events after adoption occur outside the knowledge of the child welfare system.

Table 15. Type of Out-of-Home Events Reported to Agencies After Adoption

Type of Out-of-Home Events	Adoption Survey Participants (N = 36)
	n (%)
Institutional or residential care	32 (89%)
Other situations where the child is living with friends or relatives	30 (83%)
Child or youth runs away from their adoptive	26 (72%)
Group home care	22 (61%)
Homelessness	21 (58%)

Note: This table represents responses for all 36 adoption survey participants. Survey participants can select more than one type of out-of-home event; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

There is variation in how frequently adoption survey participants report that their agencies receive notifications about out-of-home events. One-third (33%; 12 states) of adoption survey participants report receiving these notifications once a quarter, 19% once a month (seven states), and 11% twice a year (four states). Three states (8%) report not knowing how frequently these events are reported to their agency. One state in the “other” category reports that the agency is notified multiple times per week of out-of-home events.

Among all adoption survey participants, 83% (30 states) report being informed of out-of-home events most often by a parent or relative of the adopted child or youth experiencing the event. The next two most common informants were service providers (58% of adoption survey participants; 21 states) and the youth or child who experienced the event (56% of adoption survey participants; 20 states). States are less commonly informed of out-of-home events by other child welfare agency staff, community

members, and school personnel (see **Table 16**). The “other” category includes survey participants who report finding out through multiple reporters, including those listed in **Table 16**.

Table 16. State Informants of Out-of-Home Events After Adoption

Informants of Out-of-Home Events	Adoption Survey Participants (N = 36)
	n (%)
Parent or other relative of the child who is experiencing the event	30 (83%)
Service provider	21 (58%)
Youth or child who is experiencing the event	20 (56%)
Another child welfare agency staff	17 (47%)
Community member	15 (42%)
School personnel	10 (28%)
Other	6 (17%)

Note: This table represents responses for all 36 adoption survey participants. Survey participants can select more than one type of informant; thus, column percentages will not sum to 100.

States report various options to follow-up after learning of out-of-home events for adopted children or youth. Almost all adoption survey participants (92%; 33 states) indicate that they can contact the child’s adoptive parents after learning of an out-of-home event. Seventy-five percent of adoption survey participants (27 states) also commonly refer families for additional post adoption services; 53% (19 states) contact a private agency or service provider whereas 50% (18 states) contact the child directly. No adoption survey participants report having no options for follow-up after learning of post adoption out-of-home events.

3.3.2 Key Informant Interview Findings

The key informant interview asks agency participants to provide more information about out-of-home instability events that occur in adoptive and guardianship families. This includes information on who informs agencies of these events and how their agency handles these reports. During the key informant interviews, participants discuss challenges to responding effectively to reports of post adoption and guardianship instability, regardless of informant. These challenges often revolve around a desire to provide the family with autonomy, balanced against the need to ensure child and youth safety.

How Agencies are Informed of, and Respond to, Out-of-Home Events

Agencies may be informed of an out-of-home event by the youth who experienced that event or by an adoptive parent or guardian. In either situation, when these events occur, interview participants report that their responsibility is to understand the situation and determine “...the safety and well-being of the youth.” However, the lines of responsibility and the best and most appropriate response are not always clear.

Agency staff must consider each circumstance and decide whether actions should be the responsibility of the state agency or should be left to the family to sort out. In some situations, this means the agency supports the parent or guardian as they work to ensure the safety and well-being of the youth. For example, an agency may link a parent or guardian to supportive services, such as a residential treatment center. In other situations, the best response may mean the agency supports the youth directly. For instance, the agency may help the youth find the mental health services they need. However, with all decisions the agency needs to balance the safety and well-being needs of the youth with the legal autonomy of the adoptive parent or guardian to make decisions on the youth's behalf. Therefore, agency staff must listen to both sides of the story:

If a youth is calling ... it is our responsibility to find out what's going on for the safety and well-being of the youth, especially when they're a minor ... oftentimes we'll find it's one of those situations where we have, for example, young people who don't want to abide by the rules of their parents, they're going through the adolescent stage and possibly being influenced by some peers. We'll get more history, we'll try to provide the family with support, we'll talk to the young person. We also ... get them involved with the supports that are needed for counseling if that's in fact that's what they're needing.

We've had some very interesting calls where [the youth will say] 'my friend's mother lets them stay out till two in the morning.' We'll say, 'Well you know this is [city name]. Maybe, where you live that's not safe, and your parent wants you home for these reasons.' So ... helping them to understand the parameters ... for their safety and well-being.

If we have a parent out there or a guardian who's actively trying to ensure that their child is safe, we need to support that as well. So, when they call us, we try to help them through their growing pains as a youth, because sometimes that's what it is, but also if the youth is in crisis, and there are some issues because sometimes when we're not there, we don't know what the situation is and if it requires a hotline report we're going to make it.

Child welfare agencies are devoted to ensuring child and family well-being. If a child or youth reports that their needs are not being met, participants report that their agency will meet with the youth and parents or guardians separately to assess the situation, but they also note that the services and supports are voluntary, and therefore, the decision is up to the family on how to move forward:

[The] post adoption worker is going to schedule some time to discuss with the adoptive parents what's going on after their hearing, what the youth is stating, be that mediator, get them to a good point at least that we can implement services ... We want them to get to the point that they're receiving support and services through an adoption competent therapist. If we need to pull in, and we've had this in the past, prior Guardian-ad-Litem where the child builds a connection to them as well to help in supporting [the youth] ... it's all voluntary based.

Challenges for Effective Agency Response to Out-of-Home Events

In some cases, key informant interview agency participants report they cannot provide services because they are not informed of out-of-home events. Once adoptive parents or guardians are granted custody of children or youth, participants state that they have no way of knowing that out-of-home events have occurred unless someone contacts the agencies:

We are very clear that it is not the role of the state or local arms 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.

Another participant agrees with this assessment. Here, this participant describes what may happen when a child is reported missing or runs away from their adoptive or guardianship home:

The family will file a missing persons' report and they may contact the post adoption specialist, they may not. So that's our posture ... this is your child and you're not under the jurisdiction of the department, so you are not obligated to tell us when they have ran away. They often file a missing person's report. Some of those families do contact that post adoption specialist especially if they feel that they're invested in their process and they're at their wit's end at that moment, and they're like, 'I know I should have called sooner.'

The participants also report that despite their best efforts to provide support and services, it is not always in the best interest of the child to return to the adoptive or guardianship family:

That post adoption specialist is really trying to help mediate and get the family to a better position, a healthier position. Does that mean the youth may not return home? They may not return home, but we want to make sure that we're supporting that relationship as much as possible and getting in there and working with the family.

3.3.3 Summary of Findings Related Out-of-home Events After Adoption

Agencies report that they are notified of out-of-home events after adoption, including residential or institutional care, group home care, running away from home, homelessness, and other situations such as living with friends or relatives. Agencies are most often informed of these events by an adoptive parent, though sometimes youth will notify the agency as well. However, the lines of responsibility and the best and most appropriate response are not always clear. The agency needs to balance the safety and well-being of the youth with the legal autonomy of the adoptive parent or guardian to make decisions on the youth's behalf.

3.4 Administrative Data Linkage for Children who Exit Foster Care through Adoption or Guardianship

When a child exits foster care to adoption or guardianship, their administrative data identifier, or "child ID," might change in the state agency system. If the child subsequently re-enters foster care, a state agency worker may not know that this is the same child; thus, tracking this child through administrative data becomes challenging. **Section 3.4** presents results related to the following research question: "What challenges do child welfare agencies experience in tracking instability formally and systematically?" To address this question, the study team sought to understand agencies' ability to track and ultimately link administrative data for children who exit foster care through adoption or guardianship. The web surveys and key informant interviews ask participants questions related to two types of administrative data linkage: questions related to child IDs changing when permanency is

achieved, and questions related to the state agency's administrative data systems. Questions ask whether a "flag" (or field) exists within the state's administrative data to indicate that a child has re-entered foster care after adoption or guardianship. State agency tracking systems are critical for tracking instability after adoption or guardianship. This section of the report first summarizes findings from the web survey and then findings from the key informant interviews.

3.4.1 Web Survey Findings

This section presents findings on the number and proportion of web survey participants who report that child IDs change after adoption or guardianship. Survey participants also report if their agencies can link child IDs (i.e., foster care IDs to adoption or guardianship IDs), and if their agencies have performed that type of linkage. Finally, survey participants report if their agency's data system has a flag (or field) that indicates that a child was previously adopted or had exited foster care through guardianship. A state might use this flag to track instability after adoption or guardianship.

Both adoption and guardianship survey participants are asked about how states use administrative data systems to track children and youth who exit foster care to adoption or guardianship and to identify children and youth who return to foster care after adoption or guardianship.

Child IDs that Change After Adoption or Guardianship

Among all adoption survey participants, many (64%; 23 states) report that the child ID changes in their administrative data systems at the time of adoption. Of these states, most (91%; 21 states) also maintain a file that allows them to link data for children pre and post adoption. Furthermore, most adoption survey participants (89%; 32 states) indicate that their agencies can link pre and post adoption child IDs. Of the states that can link IDs, 26 state agency participants (81%) also report that their agencies have successfully conducted this linkage.

Among all guardianship survey participants, only one state (4%) reports that the child ID changes in their administrative data systems after guardianship. This state maintains a linking file for pre and post guardianship administrative records. Most guardianship survey participants (22 states, 92%) report that their agency can link pre and post guardianship IDs. Of the states that have the ability to link IDs, 15 state agency participants (68%) also report that their agencies have successfully conducted this linkage.

Data System Flag to Identify Children who Return to Foster Care after Adoption or Guardianship

Seventy-five percent of adoption survey participants (27 states) report a data system flag that indicates a child has returned to foster care after adoption. Of the states that report a foster care re-entry flag after adoption, 52% of adoption survey participants (14 states) report that the flag is mandatory.

Adoption survey participants who reported that their state has a flag (or field) for adoptive cases are asked who typically populates this data field. The most common person to populate the field is the child welfare caseworker (33% of adoption survey participants; nine states), followed by a child protection investigator (22% of adoption survey participants; six states) or a person at the state agency who initially came into contact with the family (22% of adoption survey participants; six states), and an "other" person (15% of adoption survey participants; four states). Those listed as "other" by adoption survey

participants include other caseworkers and staff at the department or some combination of them, including central abuse hotline staff as well as screening, investigation, and child welfare caseworkers.

Exactly half (12 states) of all guardianship survey participants report that their agency has a flag in the data system that indicates foster care re-entry after guardianship. Fifty-eight percent (seven states) of guardianship survey participants from states with a flag report that this flag is mandatory. The person who populates this flag for re-entry after guardianship at the state agency is most commonly the person who initially meets the family (33% of guardianship survey participants; four states), followed by a child welfare investigator or case worker (25% of guardianship survey participants; both three states), and “other” person (17% of guardianship survey participants; two states). “Other” persons reported by guardianship participants include staff from “central intake.”

When adoption and guardianship web survey participants indicate that their state data system has a flag to indicate foster care re-entry after adoption or guardianship, they are also asked to report on their level of confidence in that flag. **Table 17** shows participants’ level of confidence in the foster care re-entry flag for adoption and guardianship. Participants endorsed all levels of confidence from “extremely” to “not at all” confident. For adoption, 15% (four survey participants) were “extremely” confident and for guardianship, 25% (three survey participants) were “extremely” confident in their data system flags (see **Table 17**).

Table 17. Level of Confidence in the Data System Flag to Identify Children who Return to Foster Care after Adoption or Guardianship Among States that Report a Data Flag

	Adoption Survey Participants (n=27)	Guardianship Survey Participants (n=12)
State’s Level of Confidence in their Data Flag	n (%)	n (%)
How states rated their level of confidence in the flag:		
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%)

Note: This table represents responses only for the 17 adoption survey participants and 12 guardianship survey participants who reported that their state agencies have a flag for foster care re-entry in their administrative data.

3.4.2 Key Informant Interview Findings

The web survey results help portray the extent to which child welfare agencies track information about children after they exit foster care to adoption or guardianship, and the key informant interview asks agency participants to share more about why they do or do not track post adoption or guardianship instability. In particular, key informant interview questions are designed to help address this research question: “What challenges do child welfare agencies experience in tracking instability formally and systematically?”

Challenges to Tracking Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Events

Although most interview participants report that they are confident about their agency's ability to link pre adoption and post adoption child IDs in the survey, participants also consistently describe data linkage and tracking as a challenge. The process for linking IDs is not automated and takes specialized knowledge of the data systems and how child records fluctuate in the data systems. Participants report that detailed information is available, but the actual linking and report-making are arduous tasks. For instance, one participant states that linking child IDs requires a "real long turnaround process." Another participant discusses the challenge of identifying foster care re-entry cases after adoption in this way:

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...and if they go home, then the [adoption] case will remain the same number. But if they're re-adopted, they'll get a new [adoption] case that has a new number or if they emancipate, then they'll have a new code for emancipation. So that's how we track it. I think there needs to be ... something there 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].

Another participant brings up similar points:

Our dissolutions aren't like an automatic generated report in [the child welfare data system], what we do is we pull the list of adoption subsidies that ended in that year outside of the reason the child turns 18 ... From there we give them to our [regional agencies] that then outline the reason in which each of the subsidies ended and then [the APM] takes each of those reports, and then pulls out which ones we consider to be true dissolutions. So, for example, you don't include the death of a parent. So, for us a dissolution is those that the child came back into care and their parent rights termination. It's a circumstance, if it's a circumstance in which the parent passes away, [or] the child suddenly passes away, we would not consider those to be dissolutions.

They're very detailed reports. They are telling you what occurred and oftentimes it's either behavior in the child and their adoptive parent is unable to manage their behavior. A lot of those [cases] are when they were adopted as a baby and they are [now] teenagers ... It may be the adoptive parent, for some reason, whether it's a lockout or some other nature of an abuse that they refuse to take the child back into their home.

Suggestions to Improve Administrative Data Tracking

Participants make helpful suggestions for improving administrative data tracking and linkage. One participant suggests that agencies could make better use of electronic health records to link well-being information across agencies. Another suggests that agencies should consider collecting permanence and well-being information from families at critical time points after permanence (e.g., 1 year, 5 years, or when a child enters adolescence). An additional participant recommends that data linking could be improved by providing more guidance for data entry:

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 search a thorough search before you create someone new within the [administrative data] system', so you won't have these duplicates or confusion as to the linkage of the child to a case.

Finally, some state agencies use the re-certification letters returned by families to update subsidy-related information in case files, such as family addresses and whether a child has reached the age of majority. The re-certification process is one avenue through which agencies might develop a system to capture information that would allow them to track outcomes after adoption and guardianship. However, to do this, agencies would need to develop a systematic way of recording the information sent and received during the re-certification process.

3.4.3 Summary of Findings Related to Data Linkages

Most states report that the child ID changes in their administrative data system at the time of adoption, and these states maintain a file that allows them to link data for children pre and post adoption. States also report that IDs do not change for children who exit care through guardianship. Moreover, the majority of states report that they have a data system flag (or field) that indicates a child has returned to foster care after both adoption and guardianship. However, the level of confidence that the flag captures all incidents of instability varies considerably across states from not at all confident to extremely confident. In addition, states report that despite collecting this information about foster care re-entry after adoption or guardianship, many do not create reports on the frequency of post adoption or guardianship instability.

3.5 Findings Related to COVID-19

This work was conducted in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of the key informant interviews, participants were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on their ability to have contact with adoptive and guardianship families and how the pandemic has impacted other agency operations relevant to contact with families. Their responses reflect their broader concerns at the time and are therefore not limited to adoptive and guardianship families and include system-wide challenges.

Participants indicate difficulties for families to access needed services, particularly if a child needs in-person services. Children have to show that they are not COVID-19–positive before they can receive services, resulting in long wait times, even for families in the midst of a crisis:

A child, a family crisis, had to wait...two to three weeks to get that help because of COVID.

Another participant reports difficulties in both in the process of moving children to permanence and in writing adoption or guardianship subsidy agreements as a result of COVID-19:

There's [basic services]...like dentist, school collateral that we could not get in contact with people and the parents could not get to these appointments because they just weren't available. So, it did make those things, a lot more difficult to move along.

In addition to the services provided to families, agencies also adjusted to COVID-19 requirements for social distancing and quarantining by providing more services online. However, these online services

were sometimes intense, given that families were experiencing significant stress caused by the pandemic. One participant stated:

We really pivoted from the practices of providing home and community-based services to providing telehealth services. So, we did not lose contact with our families. In fact, we intensified our contact with our adoptive and kinship/guardianship families, because of just the enormous amount of anxiety and stress that everybody was experiencing from March 2020 on during the pandemic.

During this challenging time, some participants talk about how quickly they can adjust their programming and deliver services and supports online, through telehealth:

Some of our programs really got incredibly creative...while also battling virtual fatigue...So, we have one program that offered a virtual pizza party...and then they joined together and they also sent out Bingo cards and played a virtual game of Bingo or scavenger hunts for items...So, they have a van and driver and they were delivering food to families that couldn't get out of their homes or had lost employment or had people that had fallen ill or passed away.

3.5.1 Summary of Findings Related to the Impact of COVID-19

APMs express COVID-19–related challenges ranging from increased service waitlists to limited access to community resources. Agencies report adaptations in service delivery and funding allocations to allow providers to address the changing needs of the population because of COVID-19. Program staff report barriers to obtaining basic needs and difficulties for families who need to access online school-related or other appointments.

3.6 Synthesis from Web Survey and Key Informant Interview Findings

This study explores the experiences that agencies have with families after adoption and guardianship through two data collection efforts: a web survey of state APMs and key informant interviews with select state agency representatives. The study uses two different web surveys, one focused on adoption and the other focused on guardianship. The study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely impacted agency responses to the survey(s) and agency interactions with families. Despite these challenges, 36 APMs responded to the adoption survey and 24 responded to the guardianship survey. Four agencies participated in the key informant interviews.

The study addresses four research questions:

1. What contact do child welfare agencies initiate with families after adoption or guardianship, and how does this contact provide information on the well-being of the child or youth?
2. What contact do families (parents, or guardians, children, youth, and community members) initiate with child welfare agencies after adoption or guardianship?
3. How do child welfare agencies use the information gathered about families after adoption or guardianship?
4. To what extent do child welfare agencies track information about children post adoption and post guardianship? What challenges do child welfare agencies experience in tracking instability formally and systematically?

This section of the report synthesizes findings from both the web surveys and the key informant interviews. Findings in **Sections 3.6.1** through **Section 3.6.4** are organized by each research question and combine supporting information from both the web surveys and the key informant interviews. Then, **Section 3.6.5** discusses some differences in findings related to agency practices for adoption versus guardianship. Finally, **Section 3.6.6** summarizes a difference noted between the web survey and interview results.

3.6.1 What contact do child welfare agencies initiate with families after adoption or guardianship, and how does this contact provide information on the well-being of the child or youth?

Child welfare agencies initiate contact with families after adoption or guardianship in a little over half of responding states: 56% of adoption survey participants (20 states) and 58% of guardianship survey participants (14 states) report initiating contact with families after adoption or guardianship.

For both adoptive and guardianship families, the most common types of agency-initiated contacts occur when the state follows up with a family after a service-related or subsidy-related incident. The vast majority of states follow up with families after a subsidy change is requested (85% for adoption; 93% for guardianship), after a request for services or support (75% for adoption survey participants; 86% for guardianship survey participants), and after a change to services outlined in a subsidy agreement (70% for adoption survey participants; 86% for guardianship survey participants).

Agencies typically contact families through newsletters, letters, or a form to ascertain the well-being or whereabouts of the child. A less common outreach method is through periodic surveys or trainings from state agencies. Surveys and trainings offer a way for agencies to understand how families are doing. One suggestion raised in key informant interviews for improving contact with adoptive and guardianship families is to conduct trainings prior to adoption or guardianship finalization. Training prior to finalization offers an opportunity for honest discussions to occur about the challenges that might arise post-finalization. In doing this, agency–family relationships can be built so that families are aware of available services and supports offered by the agency and in the greater community:

We want to make sure that from a pre-service standpoint when we're having those trainings and helping our families who are going down the process of wanting to be adoptive parents to reiterate that ... our post adoption staff has a presence in that community, has a presence with that family ... If you can go prior to a finalization, introduce yourself, build that rapport to let them know that you're here to assist, to hear the good and the bad...

Agency staff stress how important it is for families to reach out for support and assistance when issues are emerging, rather than waiting until issues are overwhelming the family system. Staff report that it can be difficult when families reach out years after struggling to address family issues. At that point, family tensions may be high and relationships may be too strained for repair; therefore, services and supports may not be as effective. To get ahead of these issues, agency staff discuss the importance of letting families know that there may be difficulties that arise within their families, and they try to normalize reaching out for support and services early after issues begin to emerge:

It's not going to be easy. It's not easy with your own biological [children]. We try to find ways to insert that connection with families... Especially ... with our relative adoptions. They know a family member wasn't able to meet the child's needs and they don't want to be the one to say that they're not able to meet the needs.

Although all agency participants acknowledge the importance of staying in contact with families, they also describe a delicate balance they need to address. Although participants want to make sure families are aware of available support services, they also need to balance this with being mindful that they do not interfere with families' rights to self-determination and privacy. For example, participants said the following:

We are very clear that it is not the role of the state or local arms 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.

We would say it's that balance of when do we touch base ... Because you don't want [child welfare agencies]... interrupting your normal life schedule... but then [the family doesn't] reach back out to us until year seven when [the family is] past the point of [being able to accept services], no service will help. [Families are] passed that point of us being able to [provide] ... wraparound services to help support whatever behavioral challenge or mental or physical need that the child may have.

3.6.2 What contact do families (parents or guardians, children, youth, and community members) initiate with child welfare agencies after adoption or guardianship?

Families (typically caregivers) commonly contact agencies by calling specific adoption or guardianship staff members at a state agency (91% of adoption survey participants; 73% of guardianship survey participants), a general number at the child welfare agency (69% adoption of adoption survey participants; 82% of guardianship survey participants), or specific adoption or guardianship staff at a different agency that serves families (66% of adoption survey participants; 59% of guardianship survey participants) to ask for help. Families less commonly make contact through websites or helplines. Former foster youth also initiate contact with agencies in the same way as caregivers, although survey participants indicate that these youth frequently walk in to agencies to request assistance (65% of adoption survey participants; 55% of guardianship survey participants).

These findings for family-initiated contact are consistent with previous literature that suggests that adoption and guardianship caregivers frequently reach out to agencies when they need help, which may be years after finalization of the placement (Atkinson & Gonet, 2007; Liao & White, 2014). However, caregivers also may not feel confident about who to contact for any given need or know how to enroll in services specifically for adoptive or guardianship families (e.g., how to obtain mental health services; Rolock & Fong, 2019). Therefore, one strategy noted in key informant interviews that agencies may use to facilitate family contact is to make the process easier and more transparent for families and youth. For example, agencies can designate persons at the agency who specialize in responding to family needs after adoption and guardianship and who can create marketing materials online that caregivers and former foster youth can find easily when they decide to reach out for help. Furthermore, foster youth may be more likely to reach out to the agency if they have a long-term relationship with a caring,

effective adoption worker they can contact regarding post adoption and guardianship services. For example, participants said the following:

A dedicated position solely focused on that...you wouldn't want someone strictly therapeutic ... without having some adoption competency, that training or something to support their work with these families. They definitely have to have adoption experience.

There's a set of skills that someone who's providing [services and supports] to our adoptive and guardianship family needs to know and have. Then, if you're going to be providing those services to your family, then please make sure that they have that background and the knowledge of trauma and adoption competency and attachment and all those other little areas that are specific to the special needs of this population...

Several challenges for improving family-initiated contact are noted across both the

web survey and the interviews. First, families may be reluctant to contact child welfare agencies when they need assistance or support because of the stigma associated with child welfare involvement and child protective services in particular. The fear of stigma can prevent families from reaching out until they are in crisis, when it is too late for the agency to keep the child in the home or avoid other negative long-term consequences. Another potential challenge for family-initiated contact is agency use of field-specific jargon and confusing terminology. For instance, interview participants report that their agencies commonly use the term “post adoption” (e.g., post adoption worker, post adoption services), yet their intent is to be inclusive of adoption and guardianship. One agency participant said that they were considering changing the name to explicitly include guardianship (e.g., post adoption and guardianship services).

Key informant interview participants report that if states explicitly include both adoption and guardianship in their titles, guardianship families may feel more inclined to seek services. Thus, participants suggest that agencies may want to make terminology clear in their discussions with families and on their website.

Family-initiated contact may also be enhanced at the system level when child welfare agencies provide flexible services tailored to families’ needs, and encourage families to engage in services early:

We started promoting that a lot...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.

Finally, on the family level, prior to adoption or guardianship, key informant interview participants report that they provide education to families to manage their expectations about the permanency process and the behavior and development of the child. As noted in the literature, part of this process can involve providing the adoptive or guardianship parent and the child or youth sufficient information about the child’s medical, educational, dental, and educational history (Children’s Bureau, 2019; White, 2016). Survey participants report that they try to emphasize with families that contacting the agency for help after adoption or guardianship can be a positive sign of strength:

[The agency works to] ... encourage increased preparation for our caregivers about what life can look like, the reality of what life can look like, as opposed to the idealistic vision that a lot of caregivers have about what that finalization might look like the day after the Court decree signed...

[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...

3.6.3 How do child welfare agencies use the information gathered about families after adoption or guardianship?

Results across both the web survey and interviews indicate that child welfare agencies use the information gathered about families after adoption or guardianship for three purposes (each discussed below):

- Check in with families and understand what services and supports they need,
- Maintain contact with families over time, and
- Track when children re-enter state custody after adoption or guardianship.

Agencies initiate contact with families so that they can check in with them and understand what services and supports they may need. Outreach can serve as a conversation starter with adoptive and guardianship families about the availability of local supports and services:

Every year we are contacted by adoptive and guardianship families because they have received those letters ... 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...

In addition, one state agency sends an annual survey to adoptive parents and guardians that helps the agency maintain contact with families. The surveys provide a way for families to request that the agency contact them for needed services or supports. The state agency also uses the surveys to identify issues that might be going on in a specific region:

If we see a survey that ... [shows] a spike in concerns about adoption assistance... [We can] say, 'hey you guys talk to me about what's going on in your area.' Sometimes, it can be changing staff that they know the policy or the leadership decided that they're no longer going to do this, then it prompts us to then talk to our leadership...It gives us that ability to drill down by area ... [and say to a specific regional staff] 'hey, your foster parents say y'all folks are not being customer service friendly.' We found new staff could come to a training on customer service.

Agency participants also report attempts at tracking when children re-enter state custody after adoption or guardianship. Sometimes this is done to fulfill a state mandate or to understand the frequency of these types of events. However, the tracking of these events is challenging, as discussed in **Section 3.6.4**.

3.6.4 *To what extent do child welfare agencies track information about children post adoption and post guardianship? What challenges do child welfare agencies experience in tracking instability formally and systematically?*

Most adoption agencies report that they are notified when one of four types of post adoption instability occur: institutional, residential, or group home placement; running away from home; homelessness; or living with relatives or friends. However, it is unknown how many out-of-home events after adoption occur outside the knowledge of the child welfare system. Agencies may be informed of an out-of-home event by the youth who experienced that event or by an adoptive parent or guardian. In either situation, when these events occur, key informant interview participants report that their responsibility is to understand the situation and determine “...the safety and well-being of the youth.” However, the lines of responsibility and the best and most appropriate response are not always clear. Agencies need to balance the safety and well-being needs of the youth with the legal autonomy of the adoptive parent or guardian to make decisions on the youth’s behalf. Therefore, agency staff must listen to both sides of the story:

If a youth is calling ... it is our responsibility to find out what's going on for the safety and well-being of the youth, especially when they're a minor... for example, young people who don't want to abide by the rules of their parents, they're going through the adolescent stage and possibly being influenced by some peers. We'll get more history, we'll try to provide the family with support, we'll talk to the young person. We also ... get them involved with the supports that are needed for counseling if that's in fact that's what they're needing.

Participants also report that despite their best efforts to provide support and services, it is not always in the best interest of the child to return to the adoptive or guardianship family:

That post adoption specialist is really trying to help mediate and get the family to a better position, a healthier position. Does that mean the youth may not return home? They may not return home, but we want to make sure that we're supporting that relationship as much as possible and getting in there and working with the family.

Among all adoption survey participants, most report that the child ID changes in their administrative data systems at the time of adoption. Furthermore, almost all of these agencies also maintain a file that allows them to link data for children pre and post adoption. In contrast, among all guardianship survey participants, only one state reports that the child ID changes in their administrative data systems after guardianship. Although most interview participants report that they are confident about their agency’s ability to link pre adoption and post adoption child IDs in the survey, participants also consistently describe data linkage and tracking as a challenge. The process for linking IDs is not automated and takes specialized knowledge of the data systems and how child records fluctuate in the data systems. Participants report that detailed information is available, but the actual linking and report-making are arduous tasks. For instance, one participant states that linking a child ID’s requires a “*real long turnaround process.*” One participant discusses the challenge of identifying foster care re-entry cases after adoption in this way:

Our dissolutions aren't like an automatic generated report in [the child welfare data system], what we do is we pull the list of adoption subsidies that ended in that year outside of the reason the child turns 18 ... From there we give them to our [regional agencies] that then outline the reason in which each of the subsidies ended and then [the APM] takes each of those reports, and then pulls out which ones we consider to be true dissolutions.

They're very detailed reports. They are telling you what occurred and oftentimes it's either behavior in the child and their adoptive parent is unable to manage their behavior. A lot of those [cases] are when they were adopted as a baby and they are teenagers ...

The difficulties of using administrative data systems to track outcomes for families after adoption or guardianship are compounded by other challenges for post-permanence data tracking identified in previous studies, such as name changes, family moving to other child welfare districts, changes in administrative data systems, caregiver mortality, and confusion over terms and definitions of post-permanency placement moves (e.g., at what point in time does a temporary placement change become instability?) (Festinger & Maza, 2009; Rolock, 2015; White, 2016).

Key informant interview participants make helpful suggestions for improving administrative data tracking and linkage. One participant suggests that agencies could make better use of electronic health records to link well-being information across agencies. Another suggests that agencies should consider collecting permanence and well-being information from families at critical time points after permanence (e.g., 1 year, 5 years, or when a child enters adolescence). An additional participant recommends that data linking could be improved by providing more guidance for data entry:

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 search a thorough search before you create someone new within the [administrative data] system’ so you won't have these duplicates or confusion as to the linkage of the child to a case.

The re-certification process is one avenue through which agencies might develop a system to capture information that would allow them to track outcomes after adoption and guardianship. However, to do this, agencies would need to develop a systematic way of recording the information sent and received during the re-certification process.

3.6.5 Differences in Adoption versus Guardianship Findings

This study explored the experiences that agencies have with adoptive and guardianship families, being careful to ask explicitly about adoptive families and then about families formed through guardianship. The goal was to understand if agencies engage with adoptive families differently than how they engage with guardianship families. In states that serve both adoptive and guardianship families, there are few differences in how outreach or contact occurs or how information is used. However, one difference relates to the child IDs used to track children through administrative data systems. In sum, child IDs typically change when a child is adopted but do not typically change when a child exits care through guardianship. This is consistent with what the literature reports on tracking foster care re-entry for children after adoption or guardianship (Parolini et al., 2018; Rolock & White, 2017).

Another difference is a potential barrier to services for guardianship families that relates to terminology. Specifically, state agencies may use the term “post adoption” to describe post-permanency services and activities (e.g., post adoption worker, post adoption services), even if the intent is to be inclusive of both adoption and guardianship. Therefore, one suggestion is to consider explicitly including guardianship in titles (e.g., post adoption and guardianship services) to ensure guardianship families feel included.

3.6.6 Differences between Web Survey and Key Informant Interview Findings

Findings from the adoption and guardianship surveys are largely consistent with those obtained from key informant interviews regarding agency-initiated contact and family-initiated contact. However, one difference relates to administrative data tracking. Specifically, agencies consistently report in the surveys that they are capable of tracking post adoption and guardianship instability and that they are able to link data from pre- to post-permanence. However, interview participants reveal less certainty. Interview participants are less confident that the administrative data systems currently in place fully capture foster care re-entry after adoption and guardianship. An example of this disconnect is when information is collected about families through agency-initiated contact (e.g., well-being letters) or family-initiated contact (e.g., service requests). This information is not typically stored or tracked in administrative data systems. Therefore, some agencies may report in the web survey that they have an administrative data system for tracking families but then also indicate in interviews that the information in those administrative data systems is limited; they do not merge it with their larger administrative data systems so that it can be used for understanding service needs, instability, or well-being outcomes for families after adoption or guardianship.

3.7 Conclusion

Both the web survey and the key informant interviews show important and innovative ways that agencies are in contact with families after adoption and guardianship. They also highlight the need to develop supportive agency–family relationships that begin before adoption and guardianship are finalized and continue post-finalization. The hope is that with these established relationships, families will feel comfortable requesting services or supports when issues first arise rather than waiting for a crisis to reach out for assistance. Agencies also have ideas for how to improve agency–family interactions. Essential to improving these interactions is a delicate balance agencies must achieve when engaging adoptive and guardianship families. This begins with respecting family autonomy and privacy so families do not feel that agencies are asserting control over their family when they seek to engage them in services or provide support. Building from that premise, agencies have some ideas for improving interactions that are relatively low-cost, such as sending a letter or a newsletter, and other ideas that may require more system resources. These include 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. Systematic tracking of these experiences after adoption or guardianship will help improve post permanency services and supports. Ultimately, however, the goals for these activities are the same—to create (1) a service system that supports adoptive and guardianship families from foster care through adulthood and (2) a data system that allows the child welfare system to better understand who receives supports and services after adoption or guardianship and who may be struggling without support or services. With these goals in mind, future efforts can be better tailored to meet the emergent needs of adoptive parents, guardians, and the children and youth in their care.

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