



# Understanding Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care: Study Design Options

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# Overview

For children living in foster care, adoption and guardianship are important permanency outcomes when reunification with their biological family is not advisable. Most children living in adoptive or guardianship families do not reenter state custody after adoption or guardianship finalization. But five 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. Instability may be formal (when a child reenters foster care) or informal (when a child lives temporarily with another family member). The extent to which families experience both formal and informal post adoption and guardianship instability is uncertain, and the reasons for this instability are not always clear.

The *Understanding Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care* (PAGI) project seeks to support Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and child welfare professionals through research activities to gather accurate information about instability for children who exit foster care to adoption or guardianship. This report describes five research study design options to gather information on post adoption and guardianship instability. These options are designed to address the following research questions:

- What is the prevalence of post adoption and guardianship instability for children who exit foster care?
- What are the risk and protective factors for post adoption and guardianship instability at the individual child, caregiver, and family levels?
- What contact do child welfare agencies initiate with families after adoption or guardianship? How does this contact provide information on the well-being of the child or youth?

The study design options described in this report vary in their methods. Some leverage existing local, state, or national data. Others propose to collect new data to obtain information on post adoption and guardianship instability rates, agency capacity supports, and risk and protective factors associated with instability. For each option, this report describes rationale, methods, measurement strategies, analysis plans, and potential challenges. ACF expects to select one to two of these studies for implementation. Results will help inform future efforts to track the frequency of post adoption and guardianship instability and develop post-permanency supports for adoptive and guardianship families.

# Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to summarize design options for a group of studies to obtain 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. Instability may be formal (when a child reenters foster care) or informal (when a child lives temporarily with another family member).

This report describes five possible study design options. These study designs vary in their methods—some leverage existing local, state, or national data whereas others propose to collect new data to obtain information on post adoption and guardianship instability rates, agency capacity and services, and risk and protective factors associated with instability. Each study is designed to answer different research questions that are all grounded in further understanding post adoption and guardianship instability.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) funded this project. Under the task order, *Understanding Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care*, a project team was formed of three research organizations (RTI International, Case Western Reserve University, East Carolina University). This team developed the design options presented here with input from consultants and stakeholders in the child welfare field.

## ES.1 Guiding Research Questions

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The studies described in this report are designed to address the following research questions:

- What is the prevalence of post adoption and guardianship instability for children who exit foster care?
- What are the risk and protective factors for post adoption and guardianship instability at the individual child, caregiver, and family levels?
- What contact do child welfare agencies initiate with families after adoption or guardianship? How does this contact provide information on the well-being of the child or youth?

## ES.2 Research Study Design Options

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This report includes five chapters that each describe a separate research study design option. Here is a brief description of each study design option.

### ***National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) Primary Data Collection Study Design.***

The purpose of this study design is to understand instability that occurs in families that adopted children who have exited the foster care system. It proposes to examine the extent to which children adopted after time spent in foster care experience instability as well as risk and protective factors at the child, caregiver, and family levels for several types of formal and informal instability. This study design proposes to collect new data from approximately 542 adolescents (15–17 years old), young adults, and adults (18 and older) who participated in the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being

(NSCAW) I or II longitudinal study cohorts from 2001 to 2009 and were adopted at some point during the NSCAW I/II study period. This new interview data would be supplemented by existing data available about instability events and pre-permanency characteristics of these same NSCAW I/II participants.

***Child Welfare Agency Family Contact Activities Study Design.*** This design seeks to understand child welfare agency processes and procedures that can be leveraged to help build capacity in the child welfare field to obtain information on post adoption and guardianship instability. The study proposes to explore the intentional and unintentional ways public child welfare agencies are in contact with or receive information about the well-being of children and youth who have exited the foster care system through adoption or guardianship and, in particular, the experiences of these children and youth with instability. Additionally, this study proposes to investigate how child welfare agencies track children and youth who exited the foster care system to adoption or guardianship, and what information they collect. The study design would involve a web survey with state adoption managers and/or staff responsible for working with guardianship families. The design also includes a series of agency site visits designed to obtain in-depth knowledge of post adoption and guardianship operations and protocols.

***Family Voice Study Design.*** The purpose of this proposed study design is to understand and identify factors that may contribute to or prevent instability among adoptive and guardianship families. The study proposes to conduct extended qualitative interviews with both young adults and parents/guardians of young adults who have exited foster care through adoption or guardianship. The interviews will be designed to understand instability from the family's perspective, going beyond what administrative or survey data can capture.

***National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) I Secondary Data Analysis Design.*** The purpose of this study design is to examine associations between child and caregiver pre-permanency characteristics and instability among children who were adopted after involvement with the child welfare system. This design option proposes secondary data analysis of the NSCAW I dataset to examine child internalizing (anxiety, depression) and externalizing (ADHD, behavior disorders) mental health conditions as mediators of these associations. The study will use longitudinal data to shed light on the conditions under which this association is more and less likely to occur. Analyses will use existing data, covering five waves of NSCAW I data collection spaced over approximately 7 years.

***Comparison of Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Rates: Secondary Data Analysis Study Design.*** The purpose of this study design is to estimate the difference in instability rates for children discharged from foster care through adoption versus guardianship. The study design will also provide certain state-specific estimates of post adoption and guardianship instability. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) is the primary data source for type of permanence, post-permanency instability, and variables related to foster care experiences used in this design. This study design proposes to examine reentry to foster care after adoption or guardianship, the one type of post-permanency instability that can be tracked for both adoption and guardianship families using AFCARS.

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### ES.3 Conclusion and Next Steps

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, the rates and factors associated with these types of instability, as well as the strengths, supports, and resources that promote

post-permanency stability. The study designs described in this report are avenues to improve our understanding of post adoption and guardianship instability. ACF expects to select one to two of these studies for implementation. These studies would help inform future efforts to track the frequency of post adoption and guardianship instability and also inform the development of supports and resources for adoptive and guardianship families.



# 1. Introduction

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# 1. Introduction

For children living in foster care, adoption and guardianship are important permanency outcomes when reunification with their biological family is not advisable. Most children living in adoptive or guardianship families do not reenter state custody after adoption or guardianship finalization (Rolock & White, 2016). Living in a safe and stable family can promote children’s well-being, but without stability, children’s well-being can suffer. The extent to which families experience instability and the definition of instability used in research and practice is not well-defined—the reasons for this instability are not always clear. Research on post adoption and guardianship instability is critical to help the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) build the body of knowledge about the types of instability, the rates and factors associated with instability, as well as the strengths, supports, and resources that promote post-permanency stability.

Estimated rates of instability underscore the importance of this topic. An estimated 5% to 20% of children and youth who leave foster care for adoption or guardianship may experience instability (White et al., 2018). However, the lack of clear definitions of what constitutes instability, coupled with the difficulty in tracking instability, makes estimating the frequency of post adoption and guardianship instability difficult. Most empirical studies of post adoption or guardianship instability have relatively small sample sizes and are cross-sectional. Those studies that do follow children’s post-permanency outcomes over time have relatively short follow-up periods. Instability may occur many years after adoption or legal guardianship relationships are finalized (Rolock & White, 2016). Further, prior studies that rely exclusively on administrative data to track instability over time focus on rates of foster care reentry (or more formal instability events). These studies do not capture informal instability events such as homelessness, running away, being kicked out of a home, or temporarily living with relatives or other friends. Consequently, the frequency of both formal and informal post adoption and guardianship instability remains uncertain.

The literature identifies several risk and protective factors associated with post adoption and guardianship instability (CWIG, 2012a; Faulkner & Madden, 2012; Jones & LaLiberte, 2010; Rolock, Pérez, White, & Fong, 2017; White, 2016). Child, caregiver and family characteristics that existed before the permanency placement (also called pre-permanency characteristics)—such as older child age, child behavior problems, more severe types of maltreatment, caregiver mental health difficulties, low caregiver attachment, unrealistic caregiver expectations, and low family cohesion—are associated with post adoption and guardianship instability (White et al., 2018). Although less well researched, some evidence suggests protective factors may lessen the likelihood of instability, either directly, or indirectly. These factors are a kinship relationship between the caregiver (adoptive parent or guardian) and child, perceptions of caregiver religious calling, a higher sense of family duty, altruistic motivations of the caregiver, and the availability of informal supports (White et al., 2018). Several other factors may be associated with instability events, but the research is lacking. For example, little to no research examines the association between instability outcomes and caregiver motivations to engage in an adoption or guardianship relationship. Even less research examines the adopted or guardianship child’s perceptions of these adopted parent/guardian relationships, children’s own motivations to sustain these adoptive or guardianship relationships, and the influence of these child perceptions on instability. So, we have much

to learn about risk and protective factors associated with instability after a finalized adoption or guardianship arrangement.

In addition to limited information on definitions, rates of instability, and instability factors, no one knows the extent to which child welfare agencies serve as a key source of information about instability (because little research exists). This is particularly true with informal instability, where episodes of homelessness, for instance, go unreported to the child welfare agency. As such, we know little about the overall well-being of children who exit foster care to adoption or guardianship. Child welfare agencies play an important role in facilitating adoptions and guardianships. Staff often build relationships with families during the placement process, yet we know very little about the contact they have with families and the nature of that contact after placement. The literature reports on the variety of supports and services agencies provide for families who have adopted or assumed guardianship. These include financial subsidies, health insurance (e.g., Medicaid), mental health services, educational support, support groups, parent training, respite care, developmental assessment, informational programs (e.g., literature, websites, seminars, information and referral services), recreational activities (e.g., camps, heritage events), and, in the case of adoptions, openness, search, and reunion services (CWIG, 2012b). However, services and supports vary by location and by the level of training providers have about adoptive and guardianship families' unique experiences and needs of (CWIG, 2018). Despite the variety of potential services families can receive, most studies find that 50% or fewer of adoptive and guardianship families use post adoption or guardianship services (Dhami, Mandel, & Sothmann, 2007; Hartinger-Saunders, Trouteaud, & Matos Johnson, 2014a). Researchers know little about the type of contact families have with child welfare systems after adoption and guardianship finalization. We know even less about whether this information is collected in a manner that allows the child welfare system to systematically track outcomes for families, including instability or child well-being, after adoption or guardianship.

To address many gaps that the literature identified above, in 2017 ACF launched the Understanding Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care (PAGI) project. Ultimately, the project seeks to support ACF and child welfare professionals through various interrelated research activities aimed at building capacity at the federal, state, and local levels to get accurate information about instability for children who exit foster care to adoption or guardianship.

To date, the PAGI project team conducted a Literature Review (White et al., 2018) that identified knowledge gaps in the existing research and unanswered research questions that should be considered in designing studies to understand post adoption and guardianship instability. Drawing from the Literature Review (White et al., 2018), we developed a Conceptual Framework (White et al., 2018) (see **Appendix A**) to guide constructs for use throughout the PAGI project. This framework defines key pre- and post-permanency factors to be considered when attempting to understand post adoption and guardianship instability. The PAGI team then developed a Compendium of Policies and Practices (Stambaugh, Khoury, Domanico, & Ringeisen, 2018) that describes relevant post adoption and guardianship policies, procedures, and promising practices implemented across the United States. This activity culminated in a 50-State Administrative Data Summary that describes state policies and practices related to post adoption and guardianship instability. The Compendium of Policies and Practices (Stambaugh et al., 2018) and 50-State Administrative Data Summary established proposed PAGI project studies in the relevant post adoption and guardianship policy context. Finally, the PAGI team conducted a Secondary Dataset Scan, including national survey data as well as federal data. This

scan identified existing data sources that proposed study designs could use or capitalize on to provide a better understanding of the frequency of post adoption and guardianship instability as well as associated risk and protective factors.

This report summarizes work on one key project activity—developing design options for a group of studies to obtain information on post adoption and guardianship instability. This report describes five possible study design options, all informed by early project activities including the Literature Review (White et al., 2018), Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**), 50-State Administrative Data Summary, Compendium of Policies and Practices (White et al., 2018), and a Secondary Dataset Scan. These study designs vary in their methods—some leverage existing local, state, or national data while others propose to collect new data to obtain information on post adoption and guardianship instability rates, services, and risk and protective factors associated with instability. Each study is designed to answer different research questions that are all grounded in further understanding post adoption and guardianship instability. Stakeholder feedback and consultation with consultants outside the core PAGI team have informed PAGI project activities, including the proposed study design options.

## 1.1 Key Project Terms

Here we define several key terms used throughout the report’s chapters.

*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 reenter foster care or otherwise experience instability in their living arrangements. Post adoption and guardianship instability may not always be a negative event. For instance, if a child goes to live with her grandmother, it may be because it is the best choice for that family, and for that child, at that time. Furthermore, a child may enter foster care explicitly to access high-end services (e.g., residential treatment) that his parents cannot afford. In either of these examples, parental relationships may stay intact during these episodes, and the child may return to the care and custody of their adoptive parents or guardians after treatment, or at the end of an extended stay with extended family. In some cases, residing with another family member may create more stability depending on the quality of the relationships with the caregivers. Because the literature has not been able to examine informal events in a nuanced way, we are not sure which factors relate (positively and negatively) to various types of instability.

*Formal and informal instability.* Post adoption and guardianship instability events can be either formal or informal events. Examples of formal and informal instability events are:

- Formal instability
  - A legal termination of the adoption or guardianship relationship
  - Foster care reentry
- Informal instability: Temporary interruptions in care

### Post Adoption or Guardianship Instability:

A child or youth has exited foster care through an adoption or placement with a legal guardian and no longer resides with the adoptive parent or legal guardian.

- Child spends time in an emergency shelter
- Child spends time in a transitional living program
- Child resides overnight in a place of detention
- Informal instability: Informal separations
  - Child runs away
  - Child experiences some period of homelessness
  - Child leaves home prior to age of 18 years
  - Child lives temporarily with another relative or other caregiver
  - Child is abandoned by caregiver

*Guardianship.* For the purpose of the PAGI project, guardianship is defined as a child who has exited foster care to the care of a legal guardian who receives a federally funded, and/or state-funded, guardianship subsidy. The guardianship subsidy should be similar to the adoption subsidy available in the child welfare jurisdiction. The PAGI project does not focus on guardianships funded through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or other federal or state programs. It also does not focus on guardianships that occur without a foster care entry (where children are diverted from foster care to directly enter a kin placement).

*Permanence versus permanency.* This report uses permanence as a noun (e.g., achieving legal permanence) and includes both adoption and guardianship. We use permanency as an adjective (e.g., permanency goal or post-permanency outcomes).

## 1.2 Proposed PAGI Project Study Designs

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This report includes five chapters that each describe a separate study designed to answer research questions about post adoption and guardianship instability. Each chapter describes the study design’s rationale, research questions, overall design and methods, measurement strategies, analysis plan, and practical study considerations and challenges. These five study designs are:

- *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) Primary Data Collection Study Design.* This study design proposes to collect new data with approximately 542 adolescents (15–17 years old), young adults, and adults (18 and older) who participated in the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) I or II longitudinal study cohorts from 2001 to 2009 and who were adopted at some point during the NSCAW I/II study period. **Chapter 2** of this report discusses this study design.
- *Child Welfare Agency Family Contact Activities Study Design.* This design seeks to understand child welfare agency processes and procedures that can be leveraged to help build capacity in the child welfare field to obtain information on post adoption and guardianship instability. **Chapter 3** of this report discusses this study design.
- *Family Voice Study Design.* The study proposes to conduct extended qualitative interviews with both young adults and parents/guardians of young adults who have exited foster care through adoption or guardianship. **Chapter 4** of this report discusses this study design.

- *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) I Secondary Data Analysis Design.* This design option proposes secondary data analysis of the NSCAW I dataset to examine child internalizing (anxiety, depression) and externalizing (ADHD, behavior disorders) mental health conditions as mediators of these associations. **Chapter 5** of this report discusses this study design option.
- *Comparison of Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Rates: Secondary Data Analysis Study Design.* This study design proposes to examine reentry to foster care after adoption or guardianship, the one type of post-permanency instability that can be tracked for both adoption and guardianship families using secondary data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). **Chapter 6** of this report discusses this study design.

Collectively, these study designs are avenues to improve our understanding of the risks for post adoption and guardianship instability as well as the strengths, supports, and resources that promote post-permanency stability.

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## 2. National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) Primary Data Collection Study Design Option

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## 2. National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) Primary Data Collection Study Design Option

The purpose of this study design is to understand instability that occurs in families who have adopted children who have exited the foster care system. This study examines familial outcomes after a child's adoption. It examines the extent to which children who exit foster care to adoption experience instability as well as risk and protective factors for several types of formal and informal instability outcomes. The report emphasizes understanding the influence of a child's motivations to sustain adoption relationships, perceptions of the quality of these relationships, and contact with both adoptive and biological families several years after finalization of the adoption. The study also compares informal instability outcomes (e.g., running away, temporary time spent living with relatives) observed in adoptive families to informal instability outcomes observed in a similar group of vulnerable children who remained at home after a maltreatment investigation.

This study design option capitalizes on the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) I and II cohorts as a platform to understand post adoption instability. This design will collect data from approximately 542 adolescents (15–17 years old), young adults, and adults (18 and older) who participated in the NSCAW I or II longitudinal study cohorts from 2001 to 2009. We estimate that we will conduct 271 new interviews with adolescents, young adults, and adults who exited foster care into permanence through adoption. We will conduct another 135–271 interviews with NSCAW I and II adolescent, young adult, and adult study participants who remained at home after a maltreatment investigation during the NSCAW I or II study periods (to form a counterfactual comparison group for adoption cases). We will match these cases by key demographic characteristics to the adoption sample.

We will conduct interviews by telephone or via the internet. We plan to gather new adolescent, young adult, and adult self-report information about formal and informal instability. For this study we define formal instability primarily as a reentry into foster care after the adoption has been finalized, and before age 18. Informal instability refers to temporary interruptions in caregiving or informal separations—for instance, placement in a residential treatment center or group home (temporary interruption in care), as well as runaway or homeless periods, being locked out of home, or time spent living with relatives or other adults (informal separations). The proposed NSCAW I/II follow-up design option will allow the unique opportunity to acquire the self-reported views of older adolescents, young adults, and adults reflecting on their adoptive family experiences several years after their adoption. The study will focus on gathering information from the Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability (PAGI) project Conceptual Framework (White et al., 2018) not adequately captured by previous studies or administrative data. The PAGI Conceptual Framework summarizes key constructs associated with post adoption and guardianship instability at the child, family, and agency levels. New interviews will assess perceptions of family/caregiver commitment, self-reported love and closeness to caregivers, sense of family belonging, current relationships with adoptive parents/guardians, current relationships with birth families, and motivations to sustain the adoptive relationship, particularly during stressful or difficult times. Existing

data available from the NSCAW I and II datasets about instability events and pre-permanency characteristics of these same cases will supplement this new interview data.

## 2.1 Study Rationale

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Current estimates of post adoption and guardianship instability range from 5-20% (White et al., 2018). The estimates at the higher end of this range are for subgroups of children and youth who have risk factors identified in the literature (e.g., behavior difficulties, history of abuse). Adolescents also have a heightened risk for instability, even among children whose permanency occurred when they were very young. With post adoption and guardianship instability occurring in only a few cases, small samples seriously limit knowledge generation. Unfortunately, prior studies tend to include relatively small sample sizes and rely on administrative data to track instability over time (largely characterized as foster care reentry). This approach does not capture informal termination events such as homelessness, being kicked out of a home, or other less well-documented caregiver transitions (e.g., temporarily living with relatives or other friends).

The current study takes advantage of two rich longitudinal datasets, NSCAW I and NSCAW II, to examine instability events among a subsample of children who exited foster care to adoption. A comparison sample of similarly vulnerable children within the NSCAW samples who remained at home after a maltreatment report will also help to characterize the more “normative,” or typical, occurrence of informal instability events outside of an adoption. We will extract pre-permanency child and family characteristics from the NSCAW datasets and combine them with new data designed to enrich and expand upon this existing information.

New data collection instruments will gather information on instability events that occurred after the last wave of NSCAW I and II data collection. While NSCAW I included 5 waves of data collection, NSCAW II included only 3 waves. At most, the time period to observe post adoption and/or guardianship instability within the existing NSCAW II data would be 3 years (assuming a child was adopted almost immediately after being reported for maltreatment). For NSCAW I, the maximum period of observation is 5–7 years (similarly assuming a child was adopted almost immediately after being reported for maltreatment). The fifth wave of NSCAW I data collection occurred 5–7 years after baseline. The Wave 5 data collection period lasted 2 years because funding was received incrementally. Wave 5 data collection occurred first for the youngest cases (with data collection typically 5 years after baseline) and last for the oldest, young adult cases (up to 7 years after baseline). Longitudinal research using administrative data from Illinois found that approximately 2% of adoption and guardianship cases will experience post-permanency discontinuity (defined as foster care reentry) 2 years after adoption or guardianship finalization. Data from Illinois also found a cumulative 12% rate of post adoption and guardianship discontinuity 10 years after finalization (Rolock & White, 2016). Consequently, conducting supplemental interviews for NSCAW cases will substantially increase opportunities to observe the occurrence of instability events. The proposed NSCAW I/II follow-up design option will also allow a unique opportunity to get the self-reported views of older adolescents, young adults, and adults reflecting on their adoptive family experiences several years after the adoption relationship was established. Surveys will assess respondents’ perceptions of motivations for adoption, addressing a known research gap in understanding how motivations and relationships impact post adoption instability.

## 2.2 Priority Research Questions

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This design option will address 11 research questions (RQs):

- **RQ 1.** To what extent have adopted NSCAW participants experienced post adoption formal and informal instability?
- **RQ 2.** How do rates of informal instability compare between children who live at home after a maltreatment report (with no history of out-of-home placement observed during the NSCAW data collection period) and children who exit foster care and achieve permanency through adoption?
- **RQ 3.** What are the risk and protective factors for post adoption instability at the individual child, caregiver, and family levels?
- **RQ 4.** How are adolescent/young adult self-reported motivations to sustain the adoption and guardianship relationship (via retrospective self-report) associated with post adoption and guardianship instability outcomes?
- **RQ 5.** How are intermediate post adoption and guardianship instability outcomes (e.g., adolescent/young adult perceptions of love and family commitment, perceptions of parent-child relationship quality and satisfaction, expectations of the adoption/guardianship relationship) associated with both formal (e.g., foster care reentry) and informal (e.g., periods of homelessness, runaway events) post adoption and guardianship instability?
- **RQ 6.** How is the association between child/caregiver/family characteristics and instability outcomes moderated by young adult self-reported expectations, motivations, or perceptions of their adoption relationship?
- **RQ 7.** What is the quality of current parent-child relationships among children who exited foster care to permanency through adoption or guardianship?
- **RQ 8.** How do the current relationships of children and their adoptive parents differ from the relationships of children with their biological parents who lived at home after a maltreatment report (e.g., frequency of current contact, quality of parent-child relationship)?
- **RQ 9.** What support services such as peer support groups, individual or family counseling, or academic tutoring are accessible to children, youth, and young adults experiencing (or at risk of experiencing) post adoption instability?
- **RQ 10.** How do the support services reported by children post adoption differ from those reported to have been used by children who remained at home with biological parents after a maltreatment report?
- **RQ 11.** What are the facilitators and barriers to accessing support services for children who are adopted?

## 2.3 Overall Design and Methods

### 2.3.1 Key Design Elements

This study design option proposes to conduct a new data collection effort with approximately 542 adolescents (15 years and older), young adults, and adults who participated in the NSCAW I or II longitudinal study cohorts. We would conduct new interviews by telephone or via the internet and would design the interviews to assess both formal and informal instability events along with perceptions of adoptive relationships. We will use this information to augment existing secondary data available within the NSCAW I and II datasets to answer the proposed RQs.

### 2.3.2 The National Surveys of Child and Adolescent Well-Being

NSCAW I was a longitudinal survey of children and families who were investigated by child protective services. The NSCAW I cohort included 6,228 children, ages birth to 14 (at the time of sampling), who had contact with the child welfare system within a 15-month period that began in October 1999. In addition to the baseline interview, respondents were followed up over 4 waves with an overall weighted response rate of 77.6% at Wave 5. Data collection waves were approximately 12–18 months apart with Wave 5 interviews occurring between 2005 and 2007.

The NSCAW I sample included children who lived at home with biological parents, children who experienced out-of-home care, as well as children who moved to adoptive and guardianship homes. The sample drew data from reports from children, parents, and other caregivers, as well as reports from caseworkers, teachers, and agency administrators. The NSCAW I instrument included a broad set of modules including, but not limited to, child and caregiver physical and mental well-being, interactions with the service system, and both formal and informal movements across living situations.

NSCAW II was designed with the same core features of the first cohort. The NSCAW II cohort includes 5,800 children, ages birth to 17.5 years (at the time of sampling), who had contact with the child welfare system beginning in 2007. In addition to the baseline interview, the study followed up with respondents over 2 waves (18 months and 3 years after baseline). **Table 2.1** describes key characteristics of NSCAW I and II relevant to the current study.

**Table 2.1. NSCAW I and II Study Characteristics**

Characteristics	NSCAW I	NSCAW II
Dates of last NSCAW interview	Aug 2005–Dec 2007	June 2011–Dec 2012
Anticipated current age of children*	18–37 years	10–29 years
Number of waves of original data collection	5	3
Timing of last data collection wave	5–7 years after index maltreatment investigation	3 years after index maltreatment investigation

\*Estimated for the anticipated start of new data collection in approximately April 2020.

### 2.3.3 Use of Existing NSCAW I/II Data

NSCAW I and NSCAW II provide rich information on child, caregiver, and family characteristics as well as post adoption instability events. With this effort the **NSCAW Primary Data Collection Study Design** data will be combined with the existing NSCAW I and II longitudinal data from on an individual-case basis.

*Instability events.* The NSCAW I and II datasets have a unique benefit: they extend the definition of instability to include both formal instability and informal instability. In NSCAW, formal instability is largely characterized as foster care reentry. Informal instability is defined as both as temporary interruptions of care (e.g., stay at a residential treatment center or group home) and/or informal separations (e.g., runaway episode or living temporarily with another relative). We will analyze existing NSCAW I and II variables that establish the occurrence of various formal and informal instability events to establish the occurrence of various types of instability events observed during the original NSCAW I and II study periods. We will combine new reports of various instability events described during the new PAGI follow-up data collection with these secondary data observations to produce a richer and longer accounting period to establish the occurrence of instability following adoption. Event timing is critical in establishing post adoption instability and is especially important to consider within the longitudinal context of NSCAW datasets. Data indicating instability will only be characterized as an instability event when it occurs in the dataset *after* the date of adoption finalization and *prior to* a child turning 18 years of age.

NSCAW I and II have variables from caregiver, adolescent, caseworker, and administrative data (NSCAW II only) report to help establish the occurrence of instability. **Table 2.2** includes a list of the types of instability events included in the PAGI project's Conceptual Framework; they were identified in the existing empirical or conceptual literature. **Table 2.2** also describes availability of these indicators in the NSCAW I and II datasets as well as the reporter of this information (child, caregiver, caseworker).

**Table 2.2. NSCAW I and II Measures of Instability**

Type of Instability	NSCAW I Indicator	NSCAW I Reporter	NSCAW II Indicator	NSCAW II Reporter
<b>Formal instability</b>				
Legal termination of adoption relationship	--	--	--	--
Foster care placement	Child's current living situation	Caregiver and caseworker	Child's current living situation; AFCARS matched data through Wave 2	Caregiver, caseworker and administrative data
	Court hearing decisions	Caseworker	Court hearing decisions	Caseworker
<b>Informal instability: Temporary interruptions of care</b>				
Emergency shelter, place of detention, transitional living program or other change	Changes in living situation	Caseworker (both in-home and out-of-home placements); caregiver	Changes in living situation	Caseworker (both in-home and out-of-home placements); caregiver

(continued)

**Table 2.2. NSCAW I and II Measures of Instability (continued)**

Type of Instability	NSCAW I Indicator	NSCAW I Reporter	NSCAW II Indicator	NSCAW II Reporter
Residential treatment or group home stay	Child's current living situation; past year stay in residential treatment center or group home	Caregiver	Child's current living situation; past year stay in residential treatment center or group home	Caregiver
<b>Informal instability: Informal separations</b>				
Runaway	Child ran away from home in past 6 months; number of times	Adolescent	Child ran away from home in past 6 months; number of times, length of time away, reason for running away	Adolescent
Period of homelessness	--	--	History of homelessness in past 12 months	Young adult self-report only (respondents 18 years and older)
Lock-out from home	--	--	--	--
Child leaves home prior to age of majority	--	--	--	--
Child lives temporarily with another relative	Child's current living situation and any change in living situation	Caregiver	Child's current living situation and any change in living situation	Caregiver
Child abandoned by caregiver	--	--	Child abandoned by caregiver	Caseworker

AFCARS = Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System

In preliminary analyses of NSCAW I secondary data, we observed that most adoptions are finalized during Waves 4 and 5. For those cases adopted at Wave 5, we had little to no opportunity to observe post adoption instability from NSCAW secondary data analysis. And, for Wave 4 adoption cases, the observation period for documenting the occurrence of formal and informal instability events is short. Even so, preliminary NSCAW I analyses revealed that 81 of 689 adopted children<sup>1</sup> had experienced some type of post adoption instability event. We observed 154 events all together; these included observations of each type of formal and informal instability event within the PAGI project definition. These preliminary analyses revealed the importance of conducting new follow-up data collection that will allow a longer post adoption observation period.

*Child and caregiver characteristics.* We will use existing NSCAW I and II variables to describe the pre-permanency characteristics of cases selected for participation in the follow-up data collection effort. We will use this data in predictive models to explore risk/protective factors for instability, and also to examine differences in new follow-up interview responders and nonresponders to understand potential

<sup>1</sup> 731 children were identified as adopted as some point during the NSCAW I study. For these preliminary analyses we could only quantify a specific date of adoption for 689 cases. A date of adoption is necessary to determine that observed instability events occurred *post* adoption.

biases in the representativeness of our new data collection sample. Available pre-permanency characteristics available in NSCAW I and II include:

*Child*

- Child age at adoption finalization
- Race/ethnicity
- Maltreatment type and severity prior to placement
- Relatedness to caregiver (kinship)
- Child exposure to domestic violence
- Gender
- Sexual identity

*Adoptive Parent*

- Age
- Race/ethnicity
- Relatedness to child (kinship)
- Marital status

*Child-Parent*

- Child-adoptive parent racial match

*Capitalizing on NSCAW I proposed secondary data analysis.* The PAGI project has proposed conducting secondary data analysis of the existing NSCAW I sample (see **Chapter 5**). These analyses will examine the influence of the pre-permanency child and caregiver characteristics described in the previous section on observed instability events for adoption cases through Wave 5. This effort will require complex programming to establish the timed trajectory of both foster care to adoption as well as the timing of post-permanency instability events. Conducting these analyses before the proposed new data collection effort will have two specific benefits. First, this new data collection study can use the complex programming code established during analysis of the NSCAW I data as a basis for NSCAW II programming, which will substantially expedite this process using the NSCAW II sample. Fortunately, with only a few exceptions, the variables used to identify adoption/foster care living situations and instability events are very similar across NSCAW I and NSCAW II. In this new study, the **NSCAW Primary Data Collection Study Design**, we will apply the programming code developed from the **NSCAW I Secondary Data Analysis** to the NSCAW II data. We will also update codes to reflect NSCAW II variable names and will add additional instability events measured uniquely in NSCAW II.

The second benefit relates to the analytic models. The new **NSCAW Primary Data Collection Study Design** effort focuses on collecting information missing (or limited) within existing NSCAW I and II data—largely new instability events and critical PAGI conceptual model intermediate outcomes (e.g., adoption motivations, parent/guardian-child relationship qualities). In the proposed NSCAW I secondary data analyses we will examine the influence of pre-permanency characteristics on observed instability outcomes. The new statistical models proposed in this **NSCAW Primary Data Collection Study Design**

will thus be able to improve those models used in the **NSCAW I Secondary Data Analysis**. In new analyses we will examine how the significant influences of pre-permanency characteristic on instability outcomes observed during the NSCAW I secondary data analysis are or are not altered by including additional intermediate outcomes (derived from the new data collection). Thus, these two NSCAW efforts are complementary, but not duplicative—one will build on the other.

### **2.3.4 Sampling Plan**

NSCAW I and II participants with a history of out-of-home placement before adoption and identified as living with an adoptive parent or guardian will be eligible to participate in this follow-up study. Eligible adoption cases will include those who:

- Have a history of out-of-home placement (prior to adoption),
- Achieved adoption status prior to the end of NSCAW I or II, and
- Are 15 years or older as of April 2020 (the anticipated start of the new primary data collection effort).

We will also select a sample of eligible counterfactual cases to closely match the demographic characteristics of the adoption sample (see the **Selection of Counterfactual Cases** section). Eligible counterfactual cases will include those who:

- Remained at home after the index maltreatment report and never entered out-of-home care during the course of the NSCAW I or NSCAW II study period, and
- Are 15 years or older as of April 2020 (the anticipated start of the new primary data collection effort).

Sample eligibility included an age criterion (15 years and older) to ensure that all new data collection respondents experienced some portion of their adolescence prior to the timing of this new study's data collection effort. The Literature Review (White et al., 2018) established that adolescence is a period of high risk for instability events, regardless of the age of adoption finalization. All NSCAW I participants will be more than 18 years old when new data collection occurs. Our preliminary data analysis suggests that 25% of eligible NSCAW II cases will be 15–17 years old.

### **Case Identification**

*Adoption.* A derived variable in both the NSCAW I and NSCAW II datasets will identify eligible adoption cases from NSCAW I and II. This variable (“ever adopted”) is based on caregiver report that the current caregiver is an adoptive mother or father. If that information is missing, the derived adoption variable includes the caregiver or child instrument general variables from the case initiation database. This includes information from data collected during the sampling process from the designated child welfare agency liaison, that the caregiver or child interviews then confirmed. In the case of NSCAW II, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) files are available through Wave 2 to indicate that the child exited foster care to permanency through adoption. For cases identified as both adopted and legal guardianship status, the case was classified as adopted. **Appendix B** of this document provides the NSCAW I and NSCAW II items associated with this definition.

*Timing of out-of-home placement and adoption.* Establishing the timing of changes in living situation in NSCAW is complicated. NSCAW I and NSCAW II include information from the caregiver and caseworker about changes in the child's living situation as well as periods of out-of-home placement. NSCAW II also includes the availability of AFCARS data through Wave 2 to help establish the exit from foster care to permanency through adoption. The NSCAW instruments allow caregivers and caseworkers to report on multiple changes in the child's living environment since the last data collection period. The caregiver instrument allows up to 10 changes in living situation between waves of data collection. The caseworker instrument allows for up to 25 changes. For each change in living situation described by the caregiver or caseworker, the instrument is set up to establish the specific living situation location as well as both the beginning and ending date for that new location. This method allows a very detailed living situation timeline to be established. Consequently, we need a three-step process to establish the timing of adoption and guardianship as well as to demonstrate that the child exited foster care to adoption or guardianship:

1. Define adoption case eligibility (as described previously).
2. Establish specific dates for adoption and changes in placement.
3. Confirming that out-of-home placement dates precede the establishment of adoption.

**Appendix B** describes the variables associated with the three-step process.

### **Sample Size Estimates**

**Table 2.3** describes the number of adoption and candidate counterfactual cases that NSCAW I and II cohorts identify. According to the case definitions described in the **Case Identification** section, 952 adoption cases from NSCAW I and II are eligible for participation in this study. A total of 2,268 candidate counterfactual cases met the eligibility criteria for selection to participate in the study. The primary data collection sample will include all possible adoption cases for participation. Only a subsample of candidate counterfactual cases will be included. For NSCAW I participants, we anticipate a 25% response rate. This expectation takes into consideration the 13 years that have elapsed since the last contact with NSCAW I participants. We have not conducted sample maintenance activities with this group since 2007. This estimate is our best judgment; our study team could not identify a prior study example with a comparable long period from data collection period to another from which to estimate a reasonable response rate target.

For the NSCAW II participants, we anticipate a response rate of at least 40%. We based this assumption on our experience collecting longitudinal data for the Add Health sample. RTI achieved a 53% response rate for a web/mail survey during Wave 5 of the Add Health survey. Add Health Wave 5 data collection was conducted 8 years after Wave 4 with adults who at the time of Wave 5 were 31–42 years old. The Add Health survey offered a significantly higher incentive (\$55–\$100) than the \$30 incentive proposed for this PAPI study and so, for that reason, we reduced the PAPI anticipated response rate for NSCAW II candidate sample members. We also acknowledge that sample maintenance activities have not been conducted with the NSCAW II sample since 2012. That said, the NSCAW II group was contacted more recently (~8 years ago) than the NSCAW I sample, so fewer tracing resources and attempts to locate each NSCAW II sample member may be required. About 25% of the NSCAW II cases will require slightly more effort given the need to secure parental permission to approach minor children as well as efforts to gain cooperation from adolescents.

The proposed study involves a finite and not random sampling frame—those cases who were adopted by the end of the NSCAW I and II study periods. Consequently, we will set the maximum number of possible respondents at the beginning of data collection; new sample will not be eligible for release if response rates are lower than expected. For that reason, we have purposefully selected what we believe are reasonable response rate targets to guide our estimated sample size assumptions. However, incentives will be key in helping to secure the 25% NSCAW I and 40% NSCAW II estimated response rate targets. Response rates lower than these will jeopardize the study’s power to answer key RQs. Guided by these assumptions, we estimate that we could complete 271 telephone or web-based interviews with adolescents and young adults who were adopted during NSCAW I and II. **Table 2.3** provides details. With these estimated sample sizes, we estimate that the study will have enough power to answer key RQs (see **Power Analysis** section).

**Table 2.3. Sample Size Estimates**

Type of Case	Eligible Number of Cases	Expected Response Rate	Expected Number of Completed Interviews
NSCAW I Adoption	731	25%	183
NSCAW II Adoption	221*	40%	88
<b>Total NSCAW I and II Adoption Sample</b>	<b>952</b>	--	<b>271</b>
NSCAW I Counterfactual (no history of out-of-home placement)	1,272 eligible; 731 selected	25%	183
NSCAW II Counterfactual (no history of out-of-home placement)	996 eligible; 221 selected	40%	88
<b>Total NSCAW I and II Counterfactual</b>	<b>2,268 eligible; 952 selected</b>	--	<b>271**</b>

\*Note that 639 children adopted after foster care were excluded from the NSCAW II sample of candidate cases because they would be younger than 15 years at the time of the anticipated new primary data collection interview.

\*\*This figure represents the maximum possible number of counterfactual cases recommended for inclusion in this study. The selected numbers of cases in each row represent assumptions to reach this maximum sample size. With some impact to power, we could select approximately half this number of counterfactual cases (135 total cases) while still allowing adequate power to detect difference in assumed instability prevalence rates between 5–13%. If observed instability prevalence rates are lower than 5%, a counterfactual sample size less than 271 would detrimentally impact the study’s power to detect group differences. We recommend at least 135 cases for inclusion in the counterfactual sample.

### **Selection of Counterfactual Group Cases**

This study’s RQs proposed to compare adoption cases to a counterfactual group to help understand the frequency of instability outcomes outside of adoption and place instability in context. Many more NSCAW participants are available for inclusion in the counterfactual group than in the adoption group, and there are more cases than needed to power planned comparative analyses. We will use propensity score matching to restrict the potential counterfactual group to those with a similar range of propensity scores to those in the adoption group. This matching allows us to maximize study primary data collection resources to help detect group differences that are not biased by naturally occurring group differences in an adoption and never out-of-home sample. We will use a logistic regression model in which adopted (vs. never out-of-home) is the binary outcome. Predictors include characteristics that may be related to the likelihood of adoption including child age at baseline, child race, child gender, type of maltreatment (baseline), and caregiver age. We will use the logistic regression model to compute the

predicted probability of adoption. These probabilities are known as propensity scores. Candidates for the counterfactual groups must have propensity scores that are in the same range as the adoption group's propensity scores, a property called balance. To ensure that the balance observed in the two groups of potential participants is maintained, we will stratify the propensity scores and replace potential counterfactual respondents who reject the invitation with invitations to respondents in the same propensity score strata. To detect differences, especially small differences, in outcomes for the adoption versus counterfactual groups, we will achieve the strongest power by having an equally matched number of adoption and counterfactual cases. However, since comparisons to the counterfactual group are of secondary importance to ACF, ACF may want to consider an unequal counterfactual group (see discussion in **Power Analysis** section).

### **Power Analysis**

We conducted power analyses to compute the minimum detectable effect size (MDES) for the three types of analyses detailed in **Section 5 (Analysis Plan)**. Example MDES include margins of error and odds ratios (OR). An MDES is the smallest effect the proposed sample sizes can detect. We conducted all power analyses using PASS 14 (2015) assuming 0.8 power and a Type I error rate of  $\alpha = .05$ . We present results assuming no clustering effects are present in the data. The clustering variable is the NSCAW primary sampling unit (PSU). NSCAW I had 92 PSUs, or clusters, and NSCAW II had 82 clusters. Consequently, we expect very few children per cluster. With such a small sample size, very few participants will come from each original NSCAW PSU. Children within clusters are probably no more similar than children between clusters, which will result in trivially small clustering effects. Thus, the power analysis results assuming no clustering should hold.

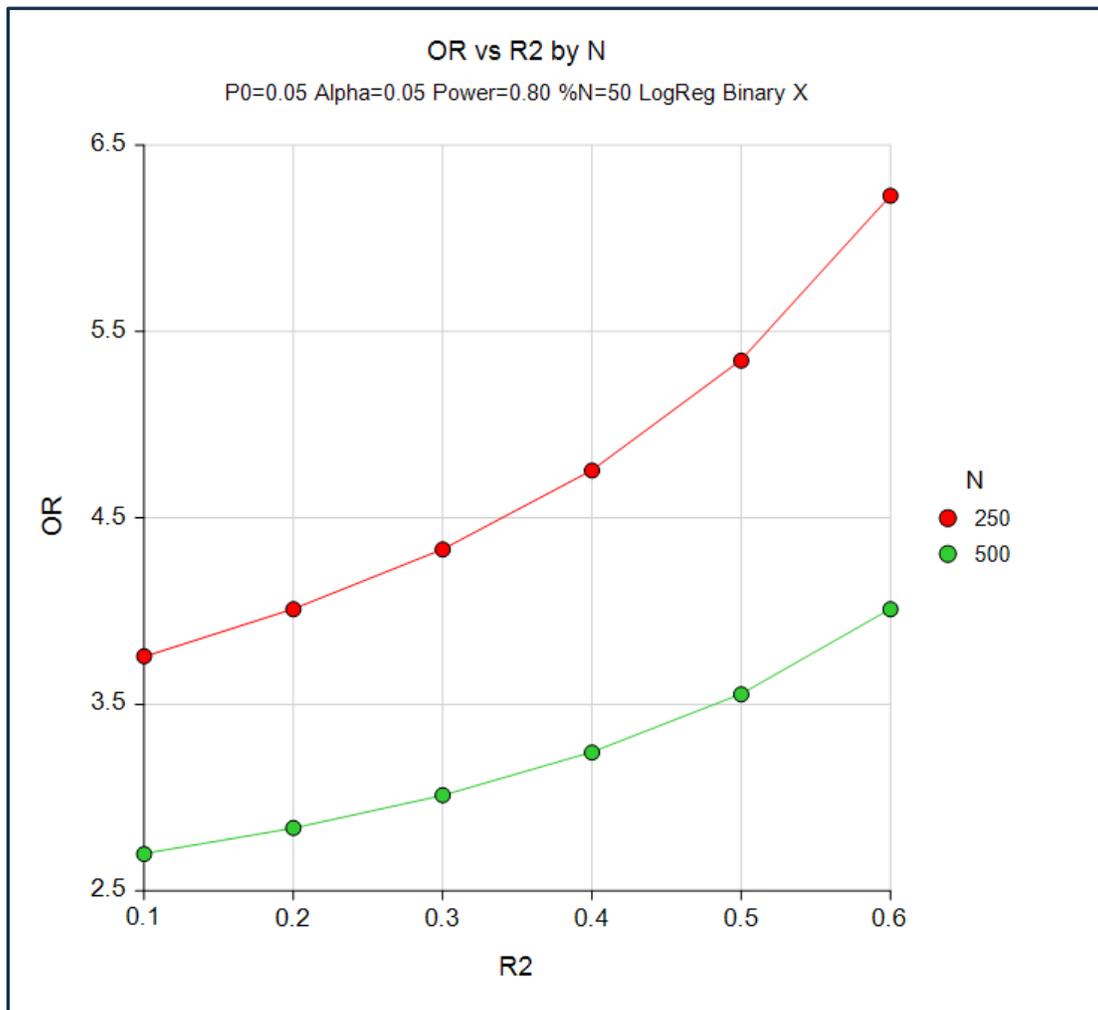
When we examined studies with large samples of population data for the PAGI Literature Review, we concluded that the cumulative incidence of post adoption and guardianship instability (over 10 years) was estimated to be 5–20% of children and youth who leave foster care for adoption or guardianship (Berry, Propp, & Martens, 2007; Hartinger-Saunders, Trouteaud, & Matos Johnson, 2014a; Rolock, 2015; Rolock & White, 2016; Testa, Snyder, Wu, Rolock, & Liao, 2015). The higher estimates were for groups of children who had high risk factors (e.g., older age, behavior difficulties). Consequently, for the power analysis we anticipated that approximately 5–13% of the NSCAW adoptee sample will experience instability (either formal or informal). Since some research questions propose to examine formal and informal instability separately, we also considered power to examine differences by these types of instability outcomes. Based on the literature, we expect that formal instability will occur in approximately 10% of all adoption cases when followed 10 years post adoption. We have no direct empirically based estimate of informal instability on which to base a power analysis; however, drawing from the literature, we assume that informal instability will occur in approximately 5% of the adoptee sample.

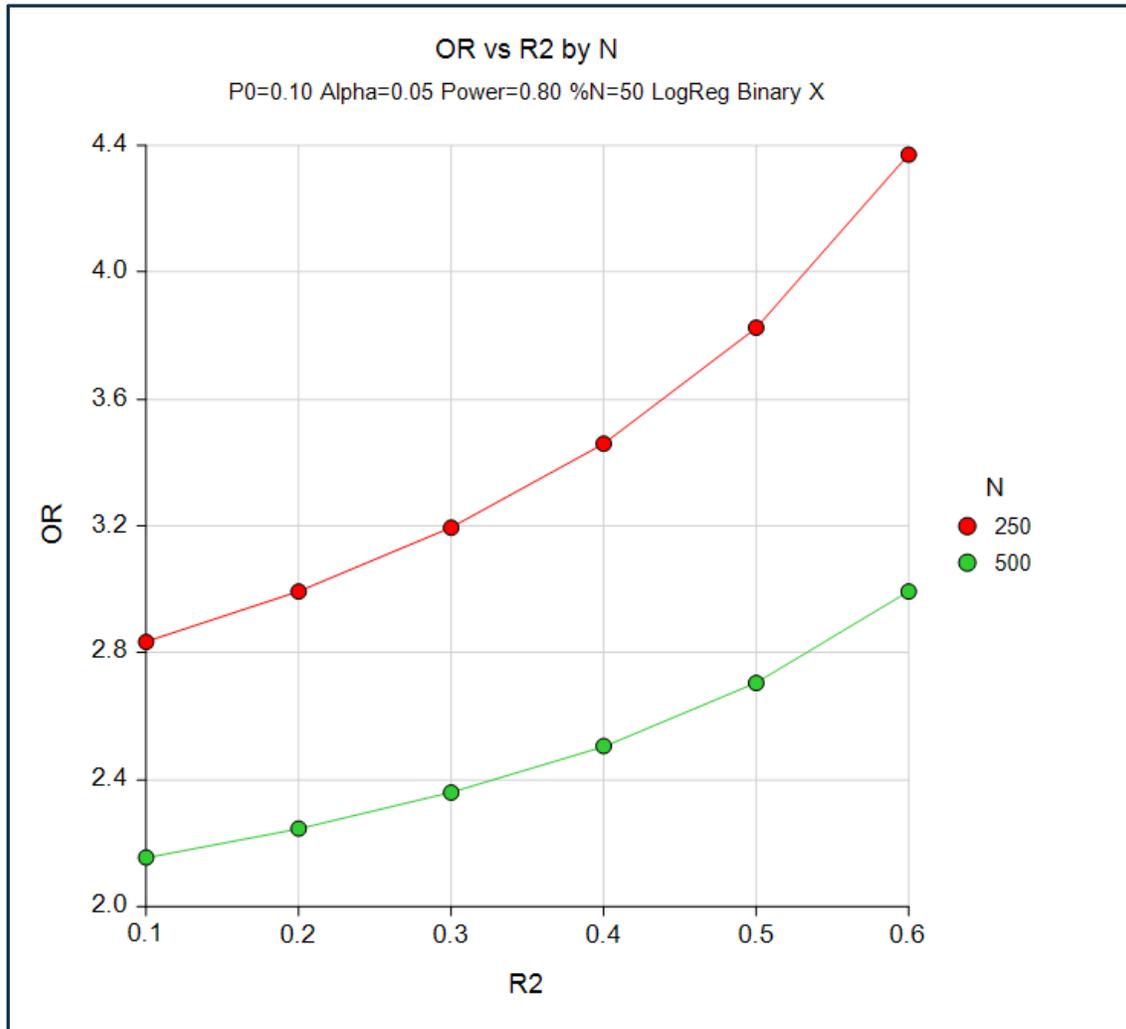
For estimating the frequency of either formal or informal instability, we can achieve an acceptable margin of error with a sample size of 250 adoption cases. When we estimate the frequency of instability in the adoptee group (RQ 1), with a sample size of 271, the size of the 95% confidence interval (similar to a margin of error) will be  $\pm 3\%$  to  $\pm 4\%$ .

For models designed to examine risk protective factors for instability among adoption cases (RQ 2), we should be able to detect medium effect sizes with a sample size of 250 cases for predictive models of formal instability. However, for models designed to predict informal instability (which we expect may

have a lower frequency), the study will require a sample size more comparable to 500 cases to detect medium effects. **Figures 2.1** and **2.2** depict power analysis results for predictive models. **Figure 2.1** plots informal instability; **Figure 2.2** plots formal instability. The x-axis represents the correlation between a target risk factor and any other risk factor. As the correlation goes down (i.e., more independence or unique information in the predictors), the smallest detectable effect size goes down. The vertical axis is the smallest detectable effect size. And, for point of reference, ORs=1.68, 3.47, and 6.71 are considered to represent small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively. For informal instability (**Figure 2.1**), with N=500 (green line) we can detect medium effects on instability, but with N=250 (red line) we'll only be able to detect large effects. For formal instability (**Figure 2.2**), we can detect medium effects with N=250 even if correlations between the predictors are small.

**Figure 2.1. Informal Instability: Odds Ratios Associated with Various Sample Size Assumptions**



**Figure 2.2. Formal Instability: Odds Ratios Associated with Various Sample Size Assumptions**

When we examine risk and protective factor effects on instability between the adoptees (N=271) and the counterfactual group (N=135), we will be able to detect medium effects (OR=2.7 to OR=4) for instability outcomes with a frequency greater than or equal to 10% (total instability, formal instability), and large effects (OR=4.5 or greater) for instability outcomes with a frequency smaller than 10% (informal instability). If observed instability outcomes are less than 10% (as they are expected to be for informal instability), we will have to use the larger counterfactual group size (N=271). We recommend at least 135 counterfactual cases for inclusion in the final sample.

### 2.3.5 Data Collection Plan

This study proposes to collect new data via telephone or web-based interviews with 542 NSCAW I and II participants. This sample will include 271 adoption cases and an equal number of counterfactual (pending ACF recommendation), for a total estimated sample size of 542. We describe methods for contacting these respondents and collecting the new follow-up interviews in the following sections.

### **Consent to Contact**

We asked NSCAW I and II participants if we could contact them in the future about new research opportunities. With the ACF Contracting Officer's Representative permission and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the RTI team will attempt to locate and seek consent from NSCAW I/II participants to participate in a follow-up wave of data collection. All NSCAW I cases will now be adults (18 or older) since their last participation in the study. About 75% of NSCAW II child participants will now also be adults; approximately 25% of the eligible NSCAW II sample will be 15–17 years old at the expected time of new data collection. We will directly contact individuals who have aged into adulthood to gain cooperation and complete the interview. We will contact minor children through their caregiver or legal guardian.

We will develop two versions of the advance mailing, one for minor children where the letter will be addressed to the parent or the child's legal guardian, and a different version for adults who were children at the time of the study. The letter will remind sample members of their past participation and include information about the new research opportunity, including the study's purposes, procedures, and key information. To maximize respondents' understanding of the research, we will score advance letters and consent language to ensure the reading grade level is appropriate for all ages.

### **Locating Respondents**

To successfully locate NSCAW I and II sample members, RTI will rely on a combination of proven techniques, including direct contact with sample members via mail, email, or telephone, batch tracing services for addresses and telephone numbers, and interactive tracing databases.

To maximize tracing rates, RTI will first combine available information from all existing sources. RTI has access to all existing contact information from prior rounds of data collection and sample maintenance, including addresses, telephone numbers, alternate telephone numbers, email addresses, and named contacts including family and friends who always knew how to reach the sample member. Children who were 16 years and older during the last contact also provided contact information in addition to information their caregiver or legal guardian provided.

*Sample maintenance.* We plan to initiate tracing activities 3 months before the start of data collection. After we integrate and prioritize location information for the list of sample members, RTI will send this information through batch tracing to confirm or identify contact information. This service matches a person's previous contact information with their current contact information.

Following batch tracing, we will send a panel maintenance package to each sample member. Panel maintenance packages allow respondents to update contact information and they inform sample members about the upcoming schedule for data collection. This package will include a letter and a postage-paid address update card. The letter will also contain a toll-free number and a project email address for sample members to use if they would prefer to supply contact information via those methods. Each mailer will contain RTI's return address along with text specifying "Forwarding and Address Service Requested" to obtain address updates from the Postal Service. We will send a new panel maintenance package to any address/mail returned with new forwarding information.

*Concurrent tracing.* Because of the anticipated difficulties in locating sample members, we identified several tracing resources to optimize tracing efforts once data collection begins. In instances where the

sample member's telephone number(s) are disconnected or unreliable, interviewers will also receive contact information collected during the previous waves for friends and family who would likely know how to reach them. We collected up to three names and contact information for family members or friends. Most sample members provided at least one other named contact during their last interview and many provided names and telephone numbers for three other contacts. After these resources have been used, interviewers will submit information to RTI's in-house tracing unit for intensive locating. Our tracing specialists will access databases containing consumer records, business records, deceased records, and public records to identify new potential leads.

### **Data Collection**

*Advance mailing.* Using the updated information from our tracing efforts, we will send all sample members and families an advance mailing announcing the launch of data collection. The letter will provide information on the background of the research effort, sponsorship, and contact information for the study team should respondents have questions about participation or prefer to complete the survey by telephone. The letter will also include instructions for accessing the web version of the survey for parents and young adults. To boost the effectiveness of this mailing, we recommend using a greeting card-like envelope to attract the sample member's attention.

*Parental consent and minor assent procedures.* For minors, RTI will telephone parents first to get their permission for their child to participate in the survey. We will inform parents about the study's purpose, procedures, and other key information. The consent will also stress the importance of providing the adolescent with privacy during the completion of the survey. Upon securing parental permission, RTI will acquire the adolescents' verbal assent. This process may require multiple telephone calls to the household to reach both the parent and adolescent.

To assess the adolescent's comprehension of the study's objectives, interviewers will use the teach-back method. After reading the assent form verbatim, the interviewer will ask adolescents to respond to some follow-up questions in their own words to check their understanding of the material, and if needed, to re-explain what participation entails. If the child is unable to respond correctly, the interviewer will administer the assent form again. Before launching the survey, interviewers will describe the need for a private setting to the adolescent and options to consider if a private setting cannot be achieved. For example, the interviewer may offer to schedule the interview at another time when a private setting can be established.

*Young adult consent procedures.* We will directly contact children who have aged into adulthood. A telephone interviewer will read the consent form to the young adult verbatim, to remind them about how they were selected, to emphasize the confidentiality of the data collected, and to make sure they understand that participation is voluntary and that they have the right to refuse to answer any questions in the survey.

*Interviews.* After advance letters have been mailed, RTI will make telephone contact attempts at different times of day and days of week until contact is reached. We will provide a dedicated toll-free hotline for support to sample members who have questions about the research or want to verify the legitimacy of the survey. Calls received on the toll-free hotline will route automatically to interviewers who are available and trained on the project. Our weekday, weeknight, and weekend staff coverage will

allow sample members to quickly reach a person familiar with the study. Interviewers will also provide the toll-free number when leaving voicemail messages during call attempts.

Because survey respondents often have concerns about the length of a telephone survey, telephone interviewers will provide options for respondents to consider, including the web version of the survey. Telephone interviewers will offer to complete the interview across multiple phone calls if necessary. For sample members expressing concerns about privacy or a preference to complete the survey online, telephone interviewers will provide unique login credentials and serve as a helpline for those with questions. We will customize voicemail messages to include this offer for any sample members screening phone calls.

We will conduct this survey in English. We offered NSCAW I and II interviews in either English or Spanish; however, very few child, adolescent, and young adult respondents elected to have the interview administered in Spanish. For example, out of 4,143 completed interviews at NSCAW II, Wave 3, only 72 were completed in Spanish. All of these were for children 2–6 years old; no completed interviews with older children were conducted in Spanish (although 2 incomplete cases were coded as a language barrier). NSCAW I, Wave 5 had 4,314 completed child interviews, 15 of which were conducted in Spanish. Of the 15, 2 were young adults and all others were with children 12 years and younger. Given our target sample age (15 years and older) and our experience with both the NSCAW I and II samples, we do not feel that Spanish language interviews will be necessary.

The survey will take 30 minutes to complete and respondents will receive a \$30 incentive for completing the survey. We will request that respondents contribute time and thought in responding to survey requests, and we will emphasize that incentives are meant to convey appreciation for their contributions to the research. Respondents will also likely expect some type of incentive given their prior participation in NSCAW where they were compensated for each wave of their input.

For respondents between the ages of 15 and 17, we will offer only the option to complete the interview by telephone, not via the web. We recommend this method to help ensure that adolescent respondents are participating in the interview in a private location and to be sure that telephone interviewers can more readily monitor any signs of adolescent respondent distress or discomfort.

Over the course of data collection, we will prompt those who have not responded with a series of reminder mailings encouraging participation. We will implement several protocols to address caregivers or young adults who are hesitant or refuse to participate. Such protocols include sending a customized refusal letter and direct contact by a refusal conversion specialist or project supervisor.

*Distressed respondent protocol.* Because some questions are sensitive, the IRB is likely to scrutinize data collection procedures and require protocols for distressed respondents. We will train telephone interviewers specifically on how to handle respondents who become upset by a question or a series of questions and how to offer the appropriate support. Support includes offering breaks, allowing respondents to refuse questions they are uncomfortable answering, and connecting them to professional assistance when needed. We also offer support resources, like helplines, via the web version as onscreen prompts or include them as part of the introductory text for sections including sensitive questions.

To assess the sensitivity of the questions or measure the level of respondent distress, we can add debriefing questions to the survey to collect respondent feedback on their experiences in completing the survey. For example, debriefing questions could ask about the respondent’s level of comfort in answering the questions, any difficulties in answering survey questions, or any privacy concerns. We can use responses to these questions to identify respondents who might benefit from receiving additional information on support resources. To encourage participation or address any concerns from respondents, research staff will contact (directly) any respondents who choose the web option and break off before completing the entire survey. The purpose of this call will be to discuss reasons for the break-off and trouble-shoot to encourage full completion of the survey.

We will provide all study participants with information in the advanced mailing and in the web survey to address how to get help and support for emotional or behavioral health issues. This information will list 1-800 helpline resources that we have used in past studies. These helplines are positioned to manage behavioral health crises and direct callers to local service resources. If possible, resources will also include descriptions of available adoption support services (when case appropriate). The PAGI team, in consultation with ACF and outside expert consultants, will develop these materials. Expert consultants could include members of the 2018 in-person PAGI technical expert meeting panel and new consultants with specialized expertise in adoption services and supports. The PAGI team will ensure that expert consultants (who are familiar with conducting data collection efforts with this vulnerable population) review all study procedures, including the distressed respondent protocol.

*Data collection schedule.* We anticipate that the period of performance for this study would be approximately 2 years (see **Table 2.4**). This includes an expected 9-month period waiting for OMB approval during which time instruments will be programmed and data collection protocols finalized. During the last 3 months of this period, we will begin respondent tracing activities. We assume that data collection will last 6 months. Further, we assume that data quality checks, variable derivation, analysis and reporting activities (along with ACF comment and review) will take approximately 6–8 months. Data cleaning, delivery, and archiving should occur in the last 2 months of the period of performance.

**Table 2.4. NSCAW Study Proposed Data Collection and Analysis Timeline**

Year 1				Year 2			
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
OMB approval				Data collection			
Instrument programming; instrument pretest; data collection protocols finalized		Respondent tracing and locating			Data quality checks, variable deviation, analysis and reporting		
						Data delivery and archiving	

We propose a 6-month data collection period to achieve a higher response rate. We expect that many cases in the sample will have multiple telephone numbers to try and then rule out during data collection. In our experience, a 6-month data collection period allows ample time to pursue new leads

generated from batch and interactive tracing sources as well as leads acquired from other contact sources including named contacts. Telephone interviewers will also need time to rotate contact attempts through different days of the week at varying times to connect with caregivers, adolescents, and young adults.

## 2.4 Measurement Strategies

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Respondents will need approximately 30 minutes to complete the telephone or web-based interview. A 30-minute long interview will ensure the respondent's attention to a web survey; respondents are more likely to refuse a web survey or leave it incomplete when the survey takes longer than 30 minutes to complete. We will develop the instrument to include following constructs: instability outcomes (retrospective self-report of events when the young adult was under age 18), current relationship with adoptive parent/guardian and memories of the relationship during adolescence, current contact with biological parents, motivations to initiate or sustain adoptive relationship, and access to and use of informal and formal services and supports. Where possible, we will model or draw on items directly from existing study instruments. We will develop items for web or telephone administration and, consequently, we will structure items to be as simple as possible with mostly close-ended and forced-choice response options.

### 2.4.1 New Primary Data Collection Instrument Content

*Instability outcomes.* Post adoption instability outcomes assessed will include formal terminations, foster care reentry, temporary interruptions of care, and informal changes in caregiver or housing status. Specific items will assess:

- Formal instability
  - Formal terminations: Whether adoptive parents' parental rights were terminated
  - Foster care reentry
- Informal instability
  - Temporary interruptions of care: Time spent in residential treatment/group home, emergency shelters, detention facilities
  - Informal changes in caregivers or housing status: Runaway attempts, periods of homelessness, memories of being kicked out of home, living with other relatives/individuals informally

The interview will ask adolescents, young adults, and adults to report on the occurrence of these events during their childhood (before turning 18 years). Since instability outcomes will also be pulled from existing NSCAW I and II data, where possible, the new items will mirror items to assess similar constructs in NSCAW I and II. Table 4.2 describes how instability events are measured within the NSCAW I and II studies and by what type of reporter. We will develop similar items to those included in NSCAW I and II for adolescent, young adult, and adult self-report. As illustrated in Table 4.2, NSCAW did not specifically include items to assess the following types of instability events: legal termination of adoption (formal termination), periods of homelessness during adolescence (informal separation), being locked out/kicked out of home (informal separation), child leaving home prior to age of majority (informal

separation). Consequently, we will develop new items to measure the occurrence of these instability events. We will also ask young adults and adults about instability events from the past year (periods of homelessness, living with other relatives/adults). We will not consider this information to be a post adoption instability event but will instead use it to help to establish living situation stability during adulthood.

Counterfactual group interviews will only include items to assess experience with informal separations and temporary interruptions of care (not formal/legal terminations to adoption since that construct does not apply to this group).

*Current relationship with caregiver/family.* We will ask all adolescent, young adult, and adult respondents about their current relationship with their caregiver(s) as well as their relationship with the caregiver(s) during adolescence (if the respondent is a young adult/adult). Caregivers will include adoptive parents, guardians, and biological parents (for counterfactual cases). Interview items will assess constructs such as sense of love for and closeness to caregiver, perceived sense of caregiver's love and commitment, sense of belonging to the family, level of engagement/activity with caregiver, and satisfaction with caregiver relationship. Items will also assess perceived family cohesion and functioning.

*Current and previous contact with biological parents.* For adoption cases (not counterfactual), the instrument will include items that assess relationship with biological parents (both now and during adolescence). Items will assess perceived quality of the relationship and frequency of contact with biological parents and siblings.

*Motivations to initiate or sustain adoptive relationship.* For adoption cases, new instrument items will ask selected adolescent, young adult, and adult respondents to reflect upon their childhood and current motivations to initiate or sustain the adoptive relationship. Items will ask about motivations such as a perceived sense of family obligation (duty), connections with caregiver (affinity, loyalty), as well as perceived psychological and social benefits or disadvantages of the adoptive relationship (rewards, reciprocity).

*Access to and use of informal and formal services and supports.* We will ask all selected adolescent, young adult, and adult respondents about use of several services and supports during adolescence and in the past year (current). Example informal services and supports will include peer and friendship groups, programs through faith/church community, social clubs, and social networks. Formal services and support items will ask about clinical (mental health) services, educational/employment services, family counseling, and peer support groups for adoptive youth. We will ask respondents about barriers to receiving services and the degree to which they perceived services as helpful.

#### **2.4.2 Existing Studies and Scales and Their Utility for New Item Development**

RTI will review relevant existing study instruments to help identify items that match study goals to include in the new PEGI NSCAW follow-up instrument or as candidate items for adaptation. Very few studies are an immediate fit with the intent of the current study design, particularly when considering the development of items about adoptive relationship quality, motivations to sustain adoption or perceptions of adoptive family love and commitment. Most studies in this area focus on assessing caregiver motivations and perceptions and, consequently, items are not readily transferable to assess the perspectives of an adopted adolescent, young adult, or adult. Meanwhile, studies conducted with

former adopted youth are often qualitative and we will need to carefully adapt existing items for a web/telephone survey context. **Table 2.5** offers a preliminary list of candidate studies and scales to be reviewed and their potential relevance to this study’s measurement strategy. If ACF selects this study for implementation, we will conduct a more exhaustive instrument search to identify promising scales and items.

**Table 2.5. Candidate Studies or Existing Scales for Instrument Review**

Candidate Study or Scale Name	Description	Relevance to NSCAW Follow-Up Interview Development	Caveat/Challenge
Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Courtney et al., 2010)	Highly structured longitudinal surveys administered to youth who exited foster care to independent living	Designed for young adults; comparable survey method; items assess relationships with biological parents, items on instability events (homelessness, runaway attempts, living with other relatives/adults) and various types of support services	Designed for foster but not adoptive youth
NSCAW II	Broad and structured field-based interviews that included an adoption module for both adoptive parents and adopted youth	Some items designed for youth and young adult report; comparable survey method; many instability items to replicate; child self-report items on sense of belonging to adoptive family; caregiver items on adoption motivations, rewards/benefits, struggles and perceptions of adopted child; items to assess thoughts of ending adoption relationship; also includes social support questionnaire and lengthy services and support items	Caregiver items need to be adapted for administration to youth/young adults; child items may need to be adapted for older target population administration
Beyond the Adoption Order (Selwyn et al., 2014)	Mixed-method design with interviews to adoptive parents, adopted children, and adoption managers	Qualitative interviews are the most relevant because surveys were designed to identify candidate sample; interview items about child “fit,” sense of belonging, motivations to adopt, closeness, affinity, behavior challenges	Qualitative questions
National Survey of Adoptive Parents	Highly structured telephone interview with adoptive parents	Similar survey method; items assess motivations to adopt and informal supports	Only designed for adoptive parents; items would need to be adapted for youth/young adult report
National Adoptive Families Study	Online survey of adoptive parents who adopted children from U.S. foster care system	Web item format; includes measures of post adoption services, barriers to assessing services	Only designed for adoptive parents
Adoption Satisfaction Questionnaire (Pinderhughes, 1998)	8-item, 4-point scale self-report Likert scale designed for adoptive parent, child, and caseworker	Items to assess satisfaction with adoption relationship—adoptive parent’s role, satisfaction with the adoption experience and adopted child’s role	Format conducive to current study; adoptee self-report version available
Belonging and Emotional Security Scale (BEST)	25 Likert-scale items designed to be administered to foster parents and foster youth	Examines foster youth’s sense of belong and the family’s level of commitment to the youth	Focused on foster youth, but could be adapted to assess adoptive relationships

(continued)

**Table 2.5. Candidate Studies or Existing Scales for Instrument Review (continued)**

Candidate Study or Scale Name	Description	Relevance to NSCAW Follow-Up Interview Development	Caveat/Challenge
Protective Factors Survey (PFS)	20 item, 7-point Likert scale to assess protective factors among caregivers involved with the child welfare system	Items to assess social supports, family functioning/resilience, formal supports and parental attachment	Designed for caregivers, not youth

## 2.5 Analysis Plan

The **NSCAW Primary Data Collection Study Design** is poised to answer four originally proposed PAGI project RQs and six supplemental questions specific to this study design. Prior to data analysis, the RTI team will derive instability variables. These variables will combine case-specific information from existing NSCAW I and II data with instability outcomes collected through the new, recently conducted interview. We will carefully review for duplicative reports so as not to overestimate the frequency of instability events (e.g., a young adult reporting a runaway attempt in adolescence that was already captured by that same youth’s report during the NSCAW study period). Variables will be derived for each type of instability event separately—formal instability/foster care reentry, informal instability (homelessness, runaway, parental lock-outs), periods living with other adults/relatives, and other temporary interruptions of care (residential treatment center, group home).

Because we expect a relatively low response rate for the selected primary data collection participants, our analysis will begin with an examination of potential nonresponse bias to understand the representation of our new primary data collection sample. We will compare responders to nonresponders on baseline child and family demographic characteristics. Several demographic characteristics are associated with heightened risk for post adoption instability (e.g., older age). Consequently, these statistical comparisons will help us to identify any potential nonresponse bias adjustments that we might need to make in final core research question analyses.

To determine the extent to which the sample has experienced formal and informal post adoption instability (**RQ 1**), the PAGI team will provide descriptive information about the timing of instability (e.g., % after 1 year, 2 years, etc.). We will then derive percentages and standard errors for each individual type of instability event and all instability events combined for cases who exited foster care to adoption. For the counterfactual group, we will also calculate percentages and standard errors for informal instability events. To examine how rates of informal instability compare between children who lived at home after a maltreatment report (counterfactual group) and children who exited foster care to adoption (**RQ 2**), we will use tests for two proportions. The primary predictor will be group (i.e., the never out-of-home counterfactual group vs. adopted). We will control for group differences by weighting the analyses with the propensity score weights described in ***Selection of Counterfactual Group Cases*** section. We will report the proportions of instability in each group and their standard errors, as well as the OR and its confidence interval.

The PAGI team could possibly use instability event information to generate nationally representative estimates of instability for this longer post-NSCAW I and II study observation period. Obtaining nationally representative estimates of instability would require updating the existing NSCAW survey weights. First, we would adjust weights for the probability of being invited to participate in the current study, followed by adjustments for nonresponse (i.e., refusal to participate). Then we would have to update the calibration weights (the weights that make analysis with both NSCAW I and NSCAW II possible) with the updated weights within each NSCAW cohort. Finally, we would use these updated calibration weights to produce nationally representative weighted prevalence estimates for each type of instability. The PAGI team could explore this strategy if ACF requests.

We will use logistic regressions to assess the risk and protective factors for post adoption instability (**RQ 3**). The instability indicators will serve as outcome variables, and risk and protective factors will be predictor variables. We will first assess the risk and protective factors for collinearity and then estimate both unadjusted and adjusted risk and protective factor effects. We will transform the coefficients from the logistic regression to ORs to demonstrate unadjusted and adjusted effect sizes for the risk and protective factors. We will also compute the confidence intervals for these ORs.

The PAGI project Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**) suggests that child and caregiver motivations to sustain the relationship as well as the caregiver-child relationship quality may moderate the influence of child, caregiver, and family characteristics on post adoption instability. We will use similar logistic regression models to assess the influence of adolescent/young adult/adult self-reported motivations to sustain the adoption relationship (via retrospective self-report) associated with post adoption instability outcomes (**RQ 4**). And, we will use logistic regression models to determine the degree to which the association between child/caregiver/family characteristics and instability outcomes can be impacted (or moderated) by young adult self-reported expectations, motivations, or perceptions of their adoption relationship (**RQ 5** and **RQ 6**). For example, these models will test whether an observed positive association between child age at the time of adoption and post adoption instability is weakened by a young adult's self-reported memory of strong adoptive/guardian caregiver love and commitment.

Next, we will produce descriptive statistics (percentages and standard errors) to describe the self-reported quality of current parent-child relationships among children who exited foster care to permanency through adoption (**RQ 7**). We will compare these through tests for two proportions with the self-reported parent-child relationship qualities among children who remained at home with biological parents after a maltreatment report (**RQ 8**). Through descriptive statistics (percentages and standard errors), we will summarize the frequency of self-reported support service use. And, we will use tests for two proportions to examine differences in reported service needs by adopted cases compared to counterfactual cases (**RQ 10**).

None of these analyses will use the NSCAW I or II weights because this data is being generated for a truly different sample. We will combine cases from NSCAW I and II for these analyses, so a variable will be created to mark cohort of origin for each case. We will use this variable as a control in analyses to help account for any cross-cutting cohort differences. However, if ACF decides that weights for nationally representative prevalence estimates should be derived, we could use those weights with the logistic regression analyses if a weight test determines they impact the parameter estimates (Bollen, Biemer, Karr, Tueller, & Berzofsky, 2016).

## 2.6 Practical Considerations and Challenges

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*Outdated NSCAW participant contact information.* The last year of contact with NSCAW I participants was 2007, and the last year of contact with NSCAW II participants was 2012. The locating information available for children who were under age 18 at the last follow-up would be for the caregiver's home at that time. Locating information available for child cases who were 18 years or older at the time of the last interview will be for the young adult. Given the length of time that has passed since last contact with these respondents, we anticipate that locating respondents will be challenging. Consequently, we expect a relatively low response rate for completed interviews (25% for NSCAW I and 40% for NSCAW II). Fortunately, the secondary data from NSCAW I and II provide rich case information about child, caregiver, and family characteristics to help examine differences between follow-up survey respondents and nonrespondents.

*Retrospective reporting by respondents.* Late adolescents', young adults', or adults' memories of adoption experiences may be biased with the passage of time. The amount of time that passed since the child's adoption status as well as the amount of time passed since the child first met his or her adoptive parent or legal guardian likely influences the degree of this bias. Study results will need to consider that information on instability events or perceptions of family relationships will be based on late adolescents' and young adults' memories of their childhood/adolescence. Although they will represent valid perceptions, these retrospective self-reports may or may not be technically accurate. To account statistically for this bias, all analyses will consider time passage since adoption as a covariate. We will ask national experts to consult on the design of the study instruments, i.e., review proposed questions to help ensure that questions are drafted to maximize the accuracy of retrospective reporting.

*Ensuring sensitive data collection procedures.* Answering questions about instability events or difficult parent/guardian-child relationships may create distress in study respondents; consequently, we will handle data collection sensitively. We will conduct all adolescent interviews by telephone instead of the web to allow interviewers opportunities to monitor and directly respond to adolescent respondents' distress. We will make sure all study participants have the information included in the advanced mailing and in the web survey to address how to get help and support for emotional or behavioral health issues. Telephone interviewers will also share this information directly with study respondents as needed. These resources will include descriptions of available adoption support services. Expert consultants familiar with the issues this vulnerable population faces will review all study materials and procedures, including a distressed respondent protocol. Expert consultants could include members of the 2018 in-person PAGI technical expert meeting panel as well as new consultants with specialized expertise in adoption services and supports, such as Debbie Riley, Director of the Center on Adoption Support and Education.

Another sensitive data collection issue is whether participants know that they are adopted. Sensitive data collection procedures should ensure that participants do not discover this information for the first time during participation in a research study. This issue occurred in both NSCAW I and II where adoption-specific modules were designed to be administered to adopted youth. Both NSCAW I and NSCAW II included a question administered to the parents of adopted children (in the caregiver AO module) that asked "Does [name of child] know that he/she is adopted?" If a caregiver answered "no," that child was not administered the NSCAW I/II child instrument adoption module. The PAGI study team

will similarly be able to use this information from NSCAW I and II to determine an approach for each adopted case. If the candidate child case did not know that he/she was adopted during the NSCAW study period, study instruments and materials will not reference the child's adopted status. Instead, materials for these cases will resemble those used with counterfactual cases (who are not adopted).

*Limitations of defining guardianship in NSCAW.* Although ACF is interested in guardianship, this study does not propose to examine post guardianship instability. Identifying guardianship status using NSCAW data is complicated because the variables within NSCAW cannot specifically identify guardians who receive a federal or state guardianship subsidy. And, as a result, any definition will likely overestimate guardianship cases. Guardianship as defined in NSCAW includes caregivers who label themselves as guardians. This category may include a relative who is informally and temporarily caring for a relative child, a relative who has been formally asked by the child welfare system to care for a relative child, fictive kin (an adult unrelated to the child, but with an emotional relationship to the child that is similar to a family relationship), or foster parents who feel they have legal guardianship for the child because they take the child to school, appointments, and enact other caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, NSCAW guardianship cases do not explicitly represent those with court-documented legal guardianship status and is not limited to include only guardians who receive a federal subsidy. In NSCAW I, researchers could derive guardianship from information that caseworker and caregiver reports provided, but caregivers may assume legality and perceive themselves to be legal guardians (and respond "yes" to survey questions asking about it) even when they may not meet a court definition of guardians. Only caregivers defined as nonpermanent by the NSCAW interviewers get questions about legal guardianship. In NSCAW, field interviewers made the distinction between permanent and nonpermanent caregivers. Biological parents are considered permanent, whereas foster caregivers are considered nonpermanent. Meanwhile, kinship caregivers may be either permanent and nonpermanent, based on whether the interviewer perceived that child's living situation was a long-term and likely permanent option. Timing caveats are also associated with the NSCAW variables used to derive guardianship. The NSCAW I interview module for nonpermanent caregivers included questions about legal guardianship only at Waves 4 and 5 (not at baseline, Wave 2, or Wave 3). The NSCAW II interview module for nonpermanent caregivers included questions about legal guardianship only at Wave 3 (not at baseline or Wave 2).

Guardianship assistance programs or subsidized guardianship assistance typically define a guardian as someone who cares for a child as a foster parent (including as a relative foster parent) and goes to court to obtain legal guardianship. If this process occurs through a state or county system, this caregiver may be eligible for some financial assistance. The ASPE brief, "Title IV-E GAP Programs: A Work in Progress" (ASPE, 2018) states the following: "The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provided states with the option to operate guardianship assistance programs (GAP) as part of their child welfare permanency continuum under title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The first of these programs began operating in 2010, though some states had operated guardianship programs under title IV-E waiver demonstrations years earlier. GAP programs provide financial support for children exiting foster care to permanent guardianships with kin." Unfortunately, the available items within NSCAW cannot confirm the receipt of a specific state/county-provided guardianship subsidy and so would be overly inclusive.

The timing of the NSCAW I and II studies is a further complication related to guardianship. Both studies largely occurred before GAP (which started with the passage of Fostering Connections), and when only a

few states offered guardianship as a legally permanent foster care discharge option. The NSCAW participating states were primarily those involved with the Subsidized Guardianship Waiver Demonstration projects. Due to these complications, we do not recommend using the NSCAW studies to define a guardianship sample.

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### 3. Child Welfare Agency Family Contact Activities Study Design Option

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# 3. Child Welfare Agency Family Contact Activities Study Design Option

This design option will explore the intentional and unintentional ways public<sup>2</sup> child welfare agencies are in contact with or receive information about the well-being of children and youth who have exited the foster care system through adoption or guardianship—in particular, the experiences of these children and youth with instability. Additionally, this study will investigate how and what information a child welfare agency tracks about children and youth who have exited the foster care system to adoption or guardianship. Child welfare agencies may have formal and/or informal procedures in place to identify children and youth who have reentered foster care after adoption or guardianship or experienced other forms of instability. For instance, a child welfare agency that uses formal procedures may be able to identify in its administrative data system a previously adopted child who has returned to foster care. An informal procedure may include the child welfare agency checking in with families when services are requested and/or received, a family member reporting that a youth is homeless, or seeing a service record indicating that a child has been placed in a residential treatment facility. These formal and informal systems can help identify post adoption or guardianship instability or risk for instability.

This design option will describe (1) the type of contact child welfare agencies have with families after they have adopted or assumed guardianship of children formerly in foster care; (2) the ways in which families who are struggling, or need service(s), are in contact with child welfare agencies; (3) the mechanisms child welfare agencies have to track information on children’s well-being, such as occurrence of instability after adoption or guardianship or post-permanency services requested and received; and (4) the type of information gathered when a jurisdiction is in contact with families after they have adopted or assumed guardianship of children formerly in foster care. **Chapters 2, 4, 5, and 6** of this report discuss design options that focus primarily on understanding rates of instability and factors at the child, family, and agency level that might relate to instability. This design option, Child Welfare Agency Family Contact Activities, does not address rates of instability; rather, it seeks to gather information on child welfare agency processes and procedures that professionals can use to identify risks for instability (both actual and potential) for children and youth who exit foster care to adoption or guardianship.

The PAGI study team will conduct a multimode data collection effort that will include a web survey with state adoption managers and/or staff responsible for guardianship families and visiting case study sites to obtain in-depth knowledge of operations and protocols. The PAGI study team may then use study findings to:

- Help develop a toolkit to help states know more about families who are in contact with the child welfare system after adoption or guardianship and the nature of that contact;

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this study, we are only referring to public agencies. The primary scope does not include private agencies. The only time where private agencies may be relevant is within the site visits. Public child welfare agencies may describe contractual relationships with private providers and recommend some private provider representatives for stakeholder interviews.

- Track information regarding children’s well-being after adoption or guardianship, such as requests for, and receipt of, post-permanency support services and what those services are; and
- Identify children who may be at risk for, or who have experienced, post adoption and guardianship instability.

### 3.1 Study Rationale

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Researchers know little about how many families struggle to care for the children and youth they have adopted or assumed guardianship of, the nature of those struggles, and how often formal or informal instability occurs. Furthermore, we do not have information on the well-being of children and youth who exited foster care to adoption and guardianship. Those who work in the child welfare field have expressed concern (often through anecdotal reports) that some subsidy payments intended for care of children who have exited foster care through adoption or guardianship go to families no longer caring for the children or youth they are intended to help. Finally, anecdotal reports also describe children and youth in adoptive and guardianship homes who contact child welfare agencies, reporting that they do not have a place to stay. Yet, we have little to no information on how often these events occur.

Knowing what type of contact families and children have with child welfare systems could provide information about children and families’ overall well-being after adoption and guardianship finalization. Because research is limited, we do not know much about contact between child welfare agencies and families after adoption or guardianship finalization, including how frequently families have contact with child welfare systems and why. For instance, we don’t know how often child welfare agencies initiate the contact (e.g., some agencies may initiate contact that stems from practices or policies related to the monitoring of adoption or guardianship subsidies) or whether families initiate it (e.g., some families may initiate contact to access services). We also need to know about data collected in these contacts and if that information is used in ways that allow the system to track outcomes routinely and systematically for families, including instability, after adoption or guardianship.

Furthermore, child welfare agencies may have various practices and policies about monitoring, adjustment, or suspension of adoption or guardianship subsidy payments, which hinder our understanding of how many families are struggling after adoption or guardianship. Definitions, practices, and policies for adoption and guardianship vary among welfare agencies and differ based on the subsidy’s source (e.g., state vs federal funds), the state that initiates the subsidy, and the state that reviews it. Furthermore, subsidies can vary based on the type of legal permanence (adoption or guardianship). For instance, some subsidies pay for services for children who are adopted, but do not pay for the same services for children who exit foster care through guardianship. As such, this study will need to gather information specific to both types of legal permanence. It is important to understand these nuances and to articulate them in our findings. This study will also gather information about when and under what circumstances subsidies are suspended or modified and whether these changes are tracked and can be used to estimate rates of adoption and guardianship instability.

### 3.2 Priority Research Questions

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This section describes the broad research questions (RQs) that this study design option will address. We also list subquestions below. **Appendixes A** and **B** of this chapter, respectively, present specific examples

of the types of questions considered for inclusion in the proposed web survey and child welfare agency staff interviews.

- **RQ 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?
  - What type of contact do child welfare agencies initiate? How is information gathered? What type of information is gathered? How frequently is this information obtained?
  - How do non-child welfare agencies that come in contact with families following adoption or guardianship coordinate with child welfare agencies to provide information about the well-being of these children and families?
  - What are the challenges associated with child welfare agency efforts to contact families after adoption or guardianship?
  - What type of contact activities seem to reach the most families successfully?
  - How does contact differ for families receiving federal, state, and/or county subsidies versus those not receiving subsidies?
- **RQ 2:** What contact do families (children, youth, parents, or guardians) initiate with child welfare agencies after adoption or guardianship?
  - How is this information received (e.g., hotlines, direct telephone calls to specific adoption/guardianship staff, general call to child welfare agencies)?
  - To what extent do child welfare agencies publicize how and where adoptive and guardianship families should contact them?
  - How do child welfare agencies receive information about adoptive and guardianship families from community members (e.g., neighbors, schools, community organizations, other agencies)?
- **RQ 3:** How do child welfare agencies use the information gathered about families after adoption or guardianship?
  - To what extent do child welfare agencies adjust the financial assistance portion of an adoption or guardianship subsidy based on information received directly from the family? Is this ever adjusted based on information received from other informants? Who are the other informants?
  - To what extent do child welfare agencies adjust post adoption or guardianship services available to a family based on information received from the family? Is this ever adjusted based on information received from other informants? Who are the other informants?
  - What mechanisms do child welfare agencies have to follow up on a need expressed by a parent, guardian, neighbor, school, or community member about an adopted child or child living with a legal guardian? What mechanisms do child welfare agencies have to follow up on the needs expressed by the child or youth who was adopted or for whom guardianship was granted by the courts?

- **RQ 4:** To what extent do child welfare agencies track information about families post adoption and guardianship?
  - Do agencies track identifying information (e.g., names and foster care IDs) that would allow them to link back to the child welfare record and systematically track which adoptive and guardianship families are contacting the child welfare agency? If so, what type of information is tracked? If not, and if resources or tools were made available to them, would they do this?
  - What challenges do child welfare agencies experience in tracking instability formally and systematically?

### 3.3 Overall Design and Methods

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#### 3.3.1 Key Design Elements

In this design option we propose a multimode approach that includes a web survey and site visits to certain child welfare agency locations. On June 18, 2019 the PAGI study team held a teleconference with stakeholders and expert consultants about the conceptualization of this study design. These individuals reacted to proposed study aims, RQs, methods, and topics considered for inclusion in study interviews. This section introduces methods proposed for the web survey and site visits, **Sections 4.2 (Sampling Plan)** and **4.3 (Data Collection Plan)** provide more details.

We will develop a structured web survey to gather information on child welfare agency operations and protocols on the interactions between agencies and adoptive and guardianship families. This survey will integrate feedback from stakeholders and expert consultants on important constructs, terminology, policies, and practices to ensure that most respondents understand the instrument and find it relevant. Child welfare agency contact associated with families who have adopted may be different from contact for families who have assumed guardianship. For example, in some states the financial subsidy amount differs for families who adopt or assume guardianship. Also, the rules and procedures for adjusting the financial subsidy, and the services available to families who adopt versus those who assume guardianship differ across states. Recognizing these differences, the web survey will ask separate questions for the two types of legal permanence. To avoid confusion or misunderstanding, we will highlight the PAGI project definition of guardianship<sup>3</sup> at the beginning of the web survey. Additionally, we will note that the survey may use other terms with the same meaning to describe guardianship,<sup>4</sup> such as “custodianship,” but for the purpose of this survey we use the term “guardianship.” **Section 5.1** provides additional details on the web survey.

Once the web survey data collection is complete, we will use the survey responses as a basis for nominating candidate state or local agencies for site visits (discussed in **Section 5.2**). We will develop a discussion guide for in-person staff interviews to be conducted during the site visits. Additionally, we will

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<sup>3</sup> For the PAGI project, we define guardianship as “a child who has exited foster care to the care of a legal guardian who receives a federally-funded, and/or state-funded, guardianship subsidy. The guardianship subsidy should be similar to the adoption subsidy available in the child welfare agency. This project does not focus on guardianship funded through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or other federal or state programs. Nor does this project focus on guardianships that serve to divert children from foster care.

<sup>4</sup> Terms used to describe guardianship may differ by location.

develop a data tracking system review protocol and a document review protocol<sup>5</sup> to assist with the site visit data collection.

### **3.3.2 Sampling Plan**

The PAGI study team will identify individual respondents to participate in a web survey and in-person site visits. **Sections 4.2.1** and **4.2.2**, respectively, describe sample selection processes for the web survey and case study/site visits.

#### **Web Survey**

The PAGI study team will identify candidate web survey respondents via existing lists of state adoption managers, child welfare agency website scans, and snowball sampling. First, the PAGI study team will use the list of those invited to participate in the Children’s Bureau adoption manager outreach and coordination or conference calls. Second, we will ask the Children’s Bureau if a list of state and county-level adoption managers exists and whether they have any guardianship contacts. PAGI study team members will also scan state and county websites for possible contacts. We plan to sample one adoption manager for each state-run child welfare system and identify two counties in every county-run or hybrid system to participate in the web survey. The result will be 63 potential respondents (including adoption managers from 39 state-run agencies and 12 county or hybrid agencies). Based on our experience with other projects, and with the assistance and support of the Children’s Bureau, we expect to obtain a 70% response rate (see, for example, Fuller, Bruhn, Cohen, Lis, Rolock, & Sheridan, 2006).

Where possible, we will survey state guardianship staff who do not also fill the role of an adoption manager. Unfortunately, there is no publicly available information to suggest how many states or counties may have child welfare agency staff devoted exclusively to working with guardianship families. The PAGI project 50-State Administrative Data Summary (Stambaugh, Khoury, Domanico, & Ringeisen, 2018) showed 28 states reporting children receiving guardianship assistance payments in 2016; five of these states reported fewer than 100 children receiving monthly guardianship assistance. Based on the number of states processing more than 100 guardianship subsidy payments monthly, we estimate that we may survey approximately 20 guardianship-focused agency staff. As with the adoption managers, we expect a 70% response rate. We will use snowball sampling to recruit staff who work with guardianship families. We will ask if the adoption manager point of contact is also responsible for guardianship post-permanency support/services within their child welfare agency; if not, we will request a point of contact.

#### **Case Study/Site Visits**

Once the web survey is complete, the PAGI study team will select locations for the case study/site visits. The first step in selecting the case study/site visit locations is to share the results from the web survey with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Children’s Bureau partners. Results will include a summary of agency contact practices (based on the web survey results) from child welfare agencies’ description of their post adoption and/or guardianship contact processes. We will include child welfare agencies whose survey responses indicated one or more of the following: (1) specific post-permanency contact procedures, (2) post-permanency administrative data tracking and linkage capabilities, (3) a unique outreach or service program that specifically targets adoptive or guardianship

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<sup>5</sup> We will use document review protocols before and after site visits.

families, or (4) site-specific information that suggests the child welfare agency has some unique contribution that other agencies could use (e.g., a newly implemented policy that might impact the tracking that the child welfare agency can do; a creative post-permanency service where additional information would be informative). These child welfare agencies would be candidate locations for case studies. In collaboration with OPRE and the Children’s Bureau, the PAGI study team will select six locations within which to conduct a case study. The PAGI study team will also consider geographic diversity in case study site selections.

### **3.3.3 Data Collection Plan**

After the PAGI study team identifies web survey respondents, they will send all potential respondents email survey invitations from a project-specific email address RTI created. The email invitation will include a short infographic explaining the purpose of the survey, a link to the web survey, and a phone number to call for any questions or concerns.<sup>6</sup> This preliminary email will also include a message from the Children’s Bureau acknowledging the importance of the survey and urging adoption managers to respond. We will send follow-up reminder emails every week for 1 month. We begin follow-up calls after 1 month, to continue weekly for a month. The PAGI study team will use RTI’s Survey Management System to manage and control all aspects of the web survey data collection, including instrument authoring, tracing, and case management. Our Survey Management System uses a standardized process to implement the web survey and track response outcomes through a unified list of events and status codes. We will use the Voxco platform for the web survey, which will help to create a single instrument, no matter what device respondents use to complete the survey. Voxco automatically detects the device (e.g., laptop, phone, tablet) a respondent is using and adapts the survey display to the device. This improves the survey experience for the respondent and can lead to higher response rates.

Respondents will have 4 weeks to complete the survey. They will be able to start the survey and complete it later. Once they start, the system will send reminders to respondents who have not completed it. Throughout the web survey data collection period, an RTI staff member will be available to answer emails and phone calls and respond in a timely manner. Once data collection for the web survey concludes, web survey access will cease, but the call-in number and email will remain open for several months to address any additional questions or concerns. According to stakeholders who participated in the June 2019 teleconference, state child welfare agency personnel will not be allowed to accept an incentive for completing the web survey. Consequently, we have assumed that web survey respondents will not receive any incentive for participating in the web survey.

After web survey data collection is complete, we will start the case study/site visit data collection phase. We will conduct six case study site visits. Each site visit will be 2 days and 1 night; two members of the PAGI study team, one senior and one junior, will conduct the site visits. The senior PAGI study team member will lead site visit activities. The junior member will help to record notes associated with the visit. Both members will assist with document, website and database review. The site visits will include the following:

- Document review. Prior to the site visit, the PAGI study team will ask child welfare agency staff to provide supporting documentation associated with their post adoption or guardianship contact procedures. This could include procedure manuals, recertification letters/forms,

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<sup>6</sup> The phone number will direct to an RTI member of the PAGI study team.

staff/provider training guides, or example child welfare agency communications (e.g., recent newsletters, outreach letters, summarizing available services). For instance, we may ask a site that conducts routine outreach to families to provide examples of the outreach materials, and information related to response rates. Or we might ask a site that tracks every call from a family to the post adoption office to provide a list of data elements collected in their data system. The PAGI study team will accept these documents in any format (e.g., word documents, pdfs, links to websites with procedures).

- In-person staff interviews. The PAGI study team might conduct interviews with data managers, services coordinators, post adoption/guardianship case managers, and/or service providers. Other interviews might include non-child welfare agency staff (i.e., contracted service providers) who come in contact with families that have adopted children from foster care or entered into a legal guardianship relationship.
- Tracking database review (where applicable). If agencies were selected from administrative tracking database reports, site visits will include a review of this database and system. During this review, PAGI study team staff will ask child welfare agency staff to demonstrate how data is collected and what data elements are maintained. A key factor here is documenting if the database with post adoption and guardianship information can be reliably linked to the child welfare administrative data systems. The child welfare agency would demonstrate this link, and the PAGI study team would document it.
- Review of websites (where applicable). If agencies selected use any websites for post adoption/guardianship support, site visits will include a review of these tools.

We will identify a point of contact at each site. The PAGI study team and the identified site point of contact will collaborate to coordinate and schedule site visits. Once we identify a point of contact for each site, the PAGI study team will host telephone meetings with this individual to plan the site visit agenda, identify key child welfare agency staff to participate in interviews, consider candidate websites or tracking databases for review, and coordinate the submission of documents for PAGI study team review. We will develop a final list of child welfare agency staff to be interviewed, and the point of contact will help the PAGI study team schedule interviews with these individuals. The number of staff interviews will vary from site to site at the discretion of the site point of contact. We plan to interview two to five staff at each site. If certain key staff members are not available for interviews during the site visit dates, we will arrange telephone interviews on an alternative date.

We will audio record all site visit discussions to facilitate note-taking after the visit. Each child welfare agency staff must verbally consent to being interviewed before any audio recording takes place. The PAGI study team will take detailed notes for all staff interviews, which and will form the basis of the case study. Two members of the PAGI study team will write each summary. The PAGI study team will use their notes and the recordings of the interviews to ensure the summaries are accurate. In addition, they will ask the site to review the summary before submitting the draft report to ensure the accuracy of the information.

This information may also appear as part of an appendix for the individual site report. For example, we could include templates for contact letters sent to families from multiple sites in the site-specific reports, provided sites consent to having their documents included in the report.

**Synthesis Report.** We will produce a synthesis report summarizing findings across site visits and integrating these with information gathered from the web survey. We will use information gathered from site visits to supplement the quantitative results from the web survey and include a synthesis of the lessons learned and themes across all types of information gathered.

## 3.4 Measurement Strategies

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### 3.4.1 Web Survey

This section describes the purpose, question format, and topics proposed for the web survey. The purpose of the web survey is to acquire across-child welfare agency general information about post adoption and guardianship contacts (initiated by agencies and families), types of information received, and capacity to track or record these contacts. The PAGI study team will design the web survey to gather information about post-permanency contacting procedures that national child welfare agencies use. Additionally, the web survey will be used to select certain sites for the case study/site visits. We will ensure that survey questions are highly structured and designed with close-ended response options. To minimize respondent burden and encourage maximum participation, we will design the survey so respondents can complete it in 15–20 minutes. The survey will begin by asking respondents a broad question about the types of family contact their child welfare agency has. This will include a list of nine different types of possible contact (see **Appendix A** of this chapter for additional information). If respondents indicate they use a certain type of child welfare agency contact, the web survey will direct them to answer follow-up questions about that specific type of contact. Survey topics will include routine contact agencies initiate after adoption or guardianship, contact made by families, and tracking procedures. The first questions will ask about adoption, then similar questions will ask about guardianship.<sup>7</sup> The survey will ask respondents to answer first about federally subsidized adoptive and guardianship families and then about how procedures for these families may be different from/similar to procedures for state or nonsubsidized families. The web survey will cover the following topic areas:

- Routine child welfare agency contact with families post adoption and guardianship (e.g., annual recertification process or outreach regarding available services or supports)
- Family-initiated contact (e.g., request for services or subsidy adjustment)
- Administrative data tracking and linkage (e.g., the ability to report the frequency with which the child welfare agency is in contact with families after adoption or guardianship, and the ability to link families who are in contact with the child welfare agency back to their child welfare record)

**Appendix A** (of this chapter) includes example questions to be considered in these three topic areas.

### 3.4.2 Case Study/Site Visits

We will structure site visits to complement the general information the web survey gathers. Expanding on the content gathered in the web survey, the visits will be more in-depth and gather child welfare agency-specific details about post adoption and guardianship contact procedures, information gathered,

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<sup>7</sup> Since terminology may differ by location, the beginning of the web survey will include text that clarifies the use of the term “guardianship,” which includes terms such as “custodianship.”

and tracking capacity. Interviewers will use a discussion guide at the site visits and accompanying staff interviews. The PAGI study team will develop additional review guides, including a document review, tracking system review, and website review guides, and include these in the OMB package. The discussion guide will explore topics, as relevant to that site, in more detail using open-ended questions. We will coordinate site visits via telephone calls before visits. During these calls, the PAGI study team will ask agency staff to provide any available documentation (e.g., relevant websites, outreach materials, tracking spreadsheets, data coding manuals) that might be helpful for them to review prior to the in-person visit. The PAGI study team may also review these documents on site during the in-person visit.

Interviewers will use web survey responses to tailor the discussion guide questions to the individual child welfare agency staff. For example, rather than asking generally “does your child welfare agency routinely contact families...,” site visit staff will be trained to tailor questions based on information gained from the participating site’s web survey response. For example, an interviewer might start the discussion by saying, “We understand your child welfare agency has [X] routine process for contacting families after adoption. We’d like to learn more about that process.” Similar to the web survey, interviewers will ask discussion questions separately for adoption and guardianship. The discussion guides will cover the following topics:

- Child welfare agency-initiated routine contact with or outreach to families post adoption and guardianship
- Family-initiated child welfare agency contact
- Administrative data linkage (if indicated in child welfare agency web survey)
- Interest in tracking post adoption and guardianship well-being outcomes

**Appendix B** of this chapter provides example questions to be considered for inclusion in the discussion guide.

### 3.5 Analysis Plan

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The child welfare agency-level study design is poised to answer four RQs and a series of subquestions (**Section 3**). These RQs describe types of contact that child welfare agencies have made after adoption or guardianship (**RQ 1**), types of contact families made after adoption or guardianship (**RQ 2**), how child welfare agencies use post adoption or guardianship information gathered (**RQ 3**), and child welfare agency procedures for tracking post adoption and guardianship outcomes (**RQ 4**). The web survey will provide data designed for quantitative analyses in response to these RQs, while the site visit discussion guides will provide data designed for descriptive qualitative analysis and to generate site visit reports with more in-depth information about site practices.

The PAGI study team will analyze web survey data to reflect upon the proportion of web survey respondents who endorse various types of contact (child welfare agency and family-initiated) as well as various procedures for using or tracking post adoption or guardianship information. We will analyze responses separately to determine adoption versus guardianship-relevant procedures. We will produce descriptive statistics (including percentages and standard errors) to describe the reported frequencies of procedures and processes that web survey respondents endorse. We will also provide percentages of respondents who endorse various challenges to post adoption/guardianship contact. For example, in

response to **RQ 1**, we will describe the proportion (and associated standard error) of respondents who indicated that their child welfare agency conducts annual check-ins, formal letter requests to families, and/or formal service request follow-up outreach. For agencies that endorse a specific contact procedure, we will then provide the average frequency of this contact, the percentage of this contact that is tracked systematically (**RQ 4**), and the percentage of various ways that agencies report using the information that results from this type of contact (**RQ 3**). Where possible, we will use bivariate tests (chi-square and t-tests) to examine differences in reported procedures for adoption versus guardianship families. These tests will allow us to determine, for example, whether formal annual check-ins are more likely to be reported for post adoption contact than post guardianship contact.

The PAGI study team will also review web survey responses to help identify candidate agencies for site visits. We will invite child welfare agency respondents who endorse certain types of contact, outreach, or information-gathering procedures of interest to ACF to participate in site visits. Sites could be selected for different reasons. For example, the PAGI study team may select one site because of its unique database tracking system, whereas we may choose another site because of its innovative outreach effort designed for guardianship families. Using the standard discussion guide as a basis (see **Appendix B** (of this chapter) for example standard discussion guide questions), the PAGI study team will tailor the guide so that we ask only appropriate and relevant questions of the child welfare agency staff. For example, if a child welfare agency indicates in their web survey that they track certain instability measures, we will ask site staff those questions within the standard discussion guide about tracking (see **Section D of Appendix B** of this chapter). If a site does no tracking, we will not use the tracking questions in the discussion guide. Rather, we will ask what the challenges are with tracking to understand why the site does not track contact with families. Child welfare agency staff interviews will gather in-depth information about the innovative practices at that site. Hence, the “outreach”-oriented site may not have a tracking database to reflect upon, and similarly the “tracking system” site may not be equipped to answer detailed questions about post guardianship contact.

The purpose of the site visits is to collect specific and detailed information from the selected sites about their practices related to:

1. Child welfare agency-initiated routine contact with, or outreach to, families post adoption and guardianship
2. Family-initiated child welfare agency contact
3. Administrative data linkage (if indicated in child welfare agency web survey)
4. Interest in tracking post adoption and guardianship well-being outcomes

The site selection protocol will seek to select a diverse set of sites, each of which will be highlighted for their unique contributions, and we will present specific details on site practices in the final report. Based on what we learn in each site, we may describe and delineate specific procedures and tools that other sites could replicate and use. For instance, more than one site may have a unique outreach program and associated data tracking system. If so, in a cross-site summary section of the final report we will describe any themes across the sites. However, the specific site case study report will describe each program and tracking system individually.

The site-specific case studies will follow the following steps:

1. **Documentation.** Based on the responses to the web survey, we will ask staff at the site to provide documentation of their procedures, processes, or innovative program(s) (depending on why they were selected). The PAGI study team will review this information before the site visit to help understand the site system. We will also use this information to individualize the site's discussion guide for use during the site visit.
2. **Site visit and staff interviews.** Based on the information collected during the web survey and the review of the documentation listed in point 1, we will interview child welfare agency staff about their practices and procedures related to child welfare agency-initiated routine contact, family-initiated child welfare agency contact, administrative data linkage, or tracking post adoption and guardianship outcomes. The PAGI study team will use site visit discussion guides for these interviews, which will include common open-ended questions designed to provide in-depth information about specific child welfare agency/site practices regarding the four items listed above.
3. **Individual site (case study) reports.** We will produce a summary for each site, which follows the outline above in that it will report on each of the four items listed (1 – 4). For example, some sites may have only agency-initiated contact (1) to report on, and other sites may have only administrative data linkage to report on (3).
4. **Synthesis Report.** Finally, we will produce a synthesis report summarizing findings across site visits and integrating these with information gathered from the web survey. We will use information gathered from site visits to supplement the quantitative results from the web survey and include a synthesis of the lessons learned and themes across all types of information gathered.

Interviews in different sites are intended to help describe the “why” behind certain web survey results. For instance, the web survey may find that very few respondents endorse the use of post adoption or guardianship tracking procedures. Information from site visit interviews may describe the challenges in implementing such tracking procedures or how the procedures may have been tried in the past (and why they failed). In other words, site visit interview data will supplement the results of the web survey with detailed examples of various practices.

### **3.5.1 Practical Considerations and Challenges**

This design option presents the following practical challenges:

1. We will not be able to determine prevalence estimates of instability based on this study design. This study is an exploratory effort to inform a child welfare agency toolkit to better understand post adoption and guardianship contact between agencies and families.
2. The case studies are intended to gather rich detail about select child welfare agencies' experiences with post-permanency outreach and family contacts. This information will not be generalizable beyond the child welfare agencies selected.
3. County-run state child welfare agencies may not have a central statewide adoption or guardianship manager. In these cases, a state representative may suggest that a county-level respondent complete the web survey about practices specific to their county's child welfare agency. We will restrict the number of county-specific responses per state to just two respondents. The web survey will also identify respondents by their child welfare agency (state and county agencies). We plan to send 63 surveys (39 to adoption managers in state-run

agencies, and 24 to adoption managers in 12 county or hybrid agencies). We expect a 70% response rate for the web survey. We estimate also sending the survey to approximately 20 guardianship-focused agency staff. In analyzing the aggregate web survey data, the PEGI study team will clearly detail the respondents, in terms of state, county, or hybrid child welfare agency responses. In addition, the PEGI study team will summarize responses related to the two types of permanency separately, clearly delineating the number of respondents for each group.

4. The PEGI study team will need to understand state policy and definition issues related to guardianship for individual states. For example, not every state participates in the federal Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP), and GAP participation may or may not affect the availability of guardianship subsidies. Some states may have private guardianship opportunities without state assistance. This study will ask about guardianship subsidies regardless of GAP participation. States define and enact guardianship very differently across the country. Therefore, all study materials and communication regarding guardianship will include the PEGI study's definition of guardianship, which best parallels adoption as a permanency option and can be applied consistently across states.

### 3.6 References

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## Appendix 3.A: Web Survey Topics and Example Questions

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### A. *Routine Child Welfare Agency Contact with Families Post Adoption and Guardianship*

1. Does your child welfare agency have an annual or biannual, or otherwise regular, means to check in on families or request information about families that have adopted/assumed guardianship? (select all that apply from the list below)
  - a. Newsletter designed for adoptive/guardianship families
    - i. If yes, how often is this sent? (*forced-choice response options*)
    - ii. Who is on the mailing list?
      1. All parents who have ever adopted/assumed guardianship
      2. Parents who have adopted/assumed guardianship within a certain number of past years (*specify*)
      3. Youth who were adopted or living with legal guardian over a certain age (*specify*)
      4. Other
  - b. Letter or form requesting information from adoptive/guardianship families
    - i. If yes, what type of information is requested? (*forced-choice response options, including specific examples of well-being or instability outcomes*)
    - ii. How often is this requested? (*forced-choice response options*)
    - iii. How many families were sent letters in the past year (if you have multiple mailings per year, please count families only once)? (*specify*)
    - iv. How many responses did you receive? (*specify*) How many were returned unanswered? (*specify*)
    - v. How are responses received? (Please select all that apply)
      1. Mail
      2. Phone
      3. Letter
      4. Other (*specify*)
    - vi. Are responses tracked systematically? (*yes/no*)
      1. If yes, how?
        - a. Formal, structured call record
        - b. Electronic database
        - c. Informal staff notes
        - d. Other (*specify*)
    - vii. Are processes or protocols in place to handle nonresponses? (*yes/no*) if yes, please explain:

- viii. Are processes or protocols in place to update family addresses? (*yes/no*)
  - 1. If yes, does your child welfare agency ever remove contacts from the system? For example, if their information is outdated.
  - 2. If yes, are updated addresses added to your administrative database (e.g., SACWIS)?
- ix. How are responses to this letter or form used?
  - 1. To sustain or suspend adoption/guardianship subsidy payments
  - 2. To check in on the well-being of children
  - 3. For some other purpose (*specify*)
- c. Agency follow-up after a family's request for service or support
  - i. Is this activity and information gathered tracked systematically? (*yes/no*)
    - 1. If yes, how?
      - a. Formal, structured call record
      - b. Electronic database
      - c. Informal staff notes
      - d. Other (*specify*)
  - d. Agency follow-up after family or child has completed their receipt of services
    - i. Is this activity and information gathered tracked systematically? (*yes/no*)
      - 1. If yes, how?
        - a. Formal, structured call record
        - b. Electronic database Informal staff notes
        - c. Other (*specify*)
  - e. Family requests for amendments to their adoption agreements
    - i. What information is required for an amendment request? (*forced-choice response options*)
    - ii. Is this information tracked systematically? (*yes/no*)
      - 1. If yes, what type?
        - a. Call record
        - b. Administrative dataset
        - c. Informal staff notes
        - d. Other (*specify*)
  - f. Are there routine child or family assessments after adoption or guardianship (e.g., Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths) (*yes/no*)? If yes, are these assessments in response to specific requests or related to subsidy qualification (*yes/no*)?

**B. Family-initiated Contact**

1. How do adoptive/guardianship (queried separately) families that are struggling or in need of services typically contact your child welfare agency to ask for help? *(select all that apply)*
  - a. General child welfare agency hotline
  - b. Helpline set up for adoptive/guardianship families
  - c. Child abuse and neglect hotline
  - d. Call to a unit that specifically serves adoptive or guardianship families
  - e. General phone calls to the child welfare agency
  - f. Direct calls to specific staff members
  - g. Multidisciplinary teams/case coordinating councils
  - h. Other *(specify)* \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do community member contact your agency about a child's service needs or instability risk (yes/no)? If yes, how do community members (school personnel, neighbors, faith community representatives, etc.) contact you about a child's service needs or instability risk? *(select all that apply)*
  - a. General child welfare agency hotline
  - b. Hotline set up for adoptive families
  - c. Child abuse and neglect hotline
  - d. General phone calls to the child welfare agency
  - e. Direct calls to specific staff members
  - f. Other *(specify)* \_\_\_\_\_
3. Does your child welfare agency have a system to track when services are requested by adoption/guardianship families? *(yes/no)*
4. Does your child welfare agency have a system to track when services are received by adoption/guardianship families? *(yes/no)*

**C. Administrative Data Linkage (asked about both adoption and guardianship)**

1. When a child is adopted through the foster care system, does the child ID change in your state data systems? *(yes/no)* If yes, does your child welfare agency keep a file that links the old and new IDs? *(yes/no)*
2. If a child who was previously adopted from foster care comes back into the child welfare system, would you be able to connect to the child's old foster care records? *(yes/no)*
3. When a child reenters foster care after an adoption, is there a flag in your system that indicates this? *(yes/no)* If yes, is the field mandatory to complete? *(yes/no)*
4. When a child exits foster care through guardianship, does the child ID change? *(yes/no)* If yes, does your child welfare agency keep a file that links the old and new IDs? *(yes/no)*

5. Does your state or child welfare agency currently track outcomes, such as instability, for youth who were adopted or living with a legal guardian? *(yes/no)*
6. When a child reenters foster care after a guardianship, is there a flag in your system that indicates this? *(yes/no)* If yes, is the field mandatory to complete? *(yes/no)*

## Appendix B: Case Study/Site Visit Topics and Example Questions

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### ***A. Child Welfare Agency-initiated Routine Contact with or Outreach to Families Post Adoption and Guardianship***

In an earlier web survey that our study team conducted, a representative from your agency mentioned that you initiate routine contact with families after adoption or guardianship. We would like to learn more detailed information about contact.

1. Please describe the types of routine contact your child welfare agency has with adoptive/guardianship families after adoption/guardianship has occurred.
2. At what intervals do you contact them? What is the nature of the contact? What do you do with the results of contact? For example, are results kept in a database or recorded in any other way? What are the challenges associated with the efforts to contact families after adoption/guardianship has occurred?
3. Does your child welfare agency have a formal way to identify children and youth who have reentered foster care after adoption or guardianship? What does that system look like?
4. Does your child welfare agency have a formal way to track when parents, guardians, children, and youth contact you after adoption or guardianship? What does that system look like?
5. Does your child welfare agency have any way to track instability after adoption or guardianship that does not involve foster care reentry? For example, does your child welfare agency have any way of knowing whether an adopted or guardianship youth has run away from home, is homeless, or has been placed in a residential treatment facility or group home? What does that system look like? What supports would be helpful in building your child welfare agency's ability to track instability outcomes after adoption or guardianship?
6. What ability do child welfare agencies have to provide changes to services or subsidies based on families' needs? What mechanisms do child welfare agencies have to follow up on a need expressed by a parent, neighbor community member, etc., about the target child?
7. How many families did your system reach out to (i.e., each year over the past 5 years)? How many families responded? What happens if a family does not respond?
8. How are responses to regular outreach used?

### ***B. Family-initiated Child Welfare Agency Contact***

In a recent web survey that our study team conducted, a representative from your agency indicated that families contact your agency for post adoption or guardianship services. The representative also mentioned that your agency has a way to track when post adoption or guardianship services are requested by families after adoption or guardianship. We would like to learn more detailed information about this family-initiated contact and your agency's mechanisms to track family outcomes.

1. What is the most typical way in which adoptive/guardianship families who are struggling or in need of services contact your state/local agencies to ask for help? Does your child welfare agency disseminate information to families about how and why they might contact the child welfare agency for help? If so, how?
2. Tell us more about the system that your child welfare agency has to track when services are requested or received by adoption/guardianship families? What does that system look like?
3. What type of services and supports are available in your child welfare agency to families that have adopted or assumed guardianship of children who exited foster care?

### ***C. Administrative Data Linkage (if indicated in child welfare agency web survey)***

In a web survey that our study team conducted, a representative from your agency mentioned that your agency uses administrative data to monitor or track children and families after adoption or guardianship. We would like to learn more about the way in which your agency uses administrative data.

1. When a child is adopted through the foster care system, does the child ID change?
  - a. If yes, does your child welfare agency keep a file that links the old and new IDs? Could a member of our team review this file? We would be interested in seeing what types of variables and outcomes are included in the file.
  - b. If yes, when did this begin? How is this link used currently?
2. If a child reenters state custody after an adoption, what type of child identifier (or ID) is used within state data systems to help track when the child reenters foster care?
3. If a child who was previously adopted from foster care comes back into the child welfare system, would you be able to connect to the child's old foster care records?
4. How recently have you done this linkage? Have you done this linkage in the past year?
5. When a child exits foster care through guardianship, does the child ID change? If yes, does your child welfare agency keep a file that links the old and new IDs? Could you show us this file?
6. Could you give us a demonstration of the system that your agency uses to track outcomes for post adoptive or guardianship families?

### ***D. Interest in Tracking Post Adoption and Guardianship Well-Being Outcomes***

1. How interested would your child welfare agency be in being able to track information about child and family well-being post adoption and guardianship?

2. How interested would your child welfare agency be in specifically tracking post adoption and guardianship instability outcomes?
3. What are the barriers to tracking this type of information?
4. What would be helpful for your child welfare agency to help facilitate tracking this type of information?



## 4. Family Voice Study Design Option

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## 4. Family Voice Study Design Option

Researchers know very little about the experiences of adoptive and guardianship families who may be at risk of instability. Specifically, information about the risk and protective factors that promote or deter instability is limited. Further, few rigorous studies to date have explored how adopted children experience instability differently than children who achieve permanence through guardianship.

The purpose of this study is to understand and identify factors that may contribute to or prevent instability among adoptive and guardianship families. We will attain this understanding from extended interviews with both young adults and parents/guardians of young adults who have exited foster care through adoption or guardianship. The interviews will provide a unique opportunity to understand instability from the family's perspective, going beyond what is captured in administrative or survey data.

In the interviews we will ask young adults (defined as over the age of 18) to reflect on their transition to their adoptive or guardianship family, any experiences of living away from home (e.g., runaway, seeking mental health services), and experiences of foster care reentry. We will ask them specifically about:

- What services and relationships were important to their successes, and what supports they wish they would have received.
- What helped them when difficulties occurred within the family, and where they went for support or services during difficult times.
- Their relationships with their adoptive or guardianship family, and about the high and low points of their life.
- Their familial relationships, what motivates them to maintain (or what motivated them to end) the relationship with their parents or guardians.
- Why they thought their parents/guardians made the decision to adopt or assume guardianship of them and how that may have impacted the stability of their adoption or guardianship.

In the interviews with parents/guardians we will ask about their experiences of adoption and guardianship, struggles their families faced, and what they did to try to address those issues. We will ask them specifically about:

- What services and supports they accessed or wished they could have accessed, including both formal services and informal social supports.
- What motivated them to adopt or assume guardianship, and what motivated them to sustain (or end) their relationship with the young adults.
- What were the turning points in their relationships with their caregivers, and what helped them sustain the relationship, particularly during difficult times.

## 4.1 Study Rationale

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Achieving legal permanence, through adoption or guardianship, for children in foster care is a primary goal of the child welfare system. Once legal permanence is achieved, the system assumes that families will live happily ever after (Hanna, Tokarski, Matera, & Fong, 2011). Yet, we know very little about how the families who have adopted or assume guardianship of children formerly in foster care fared after formal oversight from the foster care system ends. Although legal permanence is achieved when a child exits foster care through adoption or guardianship, we don't know whether this legal relationship translates into long-lasting relationships that endure into adulthood.

Some studies in the literature indicate that *relational permanence*—the mutual, long-term relationships that help a person feel loved and connected, rather than formal legal permanence—matters most to children in adoptive and guardianship homes (Rolock & Pérez, 2016). Relational permanence can occur in relationships with siblings, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, extended family, former foster family members, and others who serve as significant relationships. For example, a seminal research study of young adults with foster care histories found that the young adults did not always report a strong emotional relationship with their adoptive parents (Samuels, 2008). Young adults in this study talked about the importance of having “a sense of home” or a person who can be there during difficult moments in life. The respondents reported that they often shared life experiences and history in their closest relationships but those experiences did not guarantee a strong bond. These characteristics that former foster youth described are the ingredients for relational permanence, a construct linked to positive outcomes among youth, including higher levels of psychological well-being (Samuels, 2008). In addition, although research is lacking, youth may be less likely to experience instability, or at least the negative psychosocial correlates of instability such as behavior difficulties (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; White, 2016), if they establish long-term relational permanence with a stable adult. Taking a family-centered approach, this study aims to fill a gap in our understanding of familial relationships by asking parents, guardians, and young adults about what has promoted or deterred strong, stable relationships within their families.

Currently, researchers have limited knowledge on how families perceive their adoption or guardianship experience and the factors that contribute to instability for adopted or guardianship children over time. Existing studies, for instance, indicate that some families face difficulties after adoption and guardianship that do not necessarily result in a reported, or formal, reentry into foster care. These challenges may include behavioral issues, mental health problems, or limited trust between children and parents (AdoptUsKids, 2007; Liao & White, 2014; Lloyd & Barth, 2011; Mariscal, Akin, Lieberman, & Washington, 2015), which may be proximal variables to instability, or indicators that instability may occur in the future.

Research has found that issues related to parents'/guardians' motivations to enter into an adoptive or guardianship relationship may increase understanding of the stability of these relationships (Fiske, 1991; Fiske & Haslam, 1996; Testa, 2010). In addition, research has found that commitments made at the time of finalization may wane over time, resulting in discontinuity of care for youth in adoptive or guardianship homes (Faulkner, Adkins, Fong, & Rolock, 2017; Mariscal et al., 2015; Testa, Snyder, Wu, Rolock, & Liao, 2015; White, 2016). Yet, very few studies help us understand—from the family's perspective—what facilitates or hinders sustained, stable adoptive and guardianship families. We need

research about these motivations to better understand which families are at most risk for post adoption and guardianship instability and what protective factors may assist families who are struggling. To understand these complex relationships, we need to understand the motivations, strengths, and weaknesses of these relationships from both the young adults' and the parents'/guardians' perspectives.

#### **4.1.1 How Potential Findings Will Be Useful for Federal and State Agencies and Staff**

Discussions with stakeholders suggested that obtaining the voices of those impacted by adoption or guardianship (young adults and parents/guardians) is critical to understanding post adoption and guardianship instability. Deliberately focusing on learning from the experiences of those most intimately involved in adoption and guardianship will give us valuable information on how families are doing and the risk and protective factors for post adoption and guardianship instability, including caregiver motivations to enter into and sustain adoptions and guardianships. Specifically, study results are expected to help federal and state agency staff in the following ways:

- Results are expected to provide information that will identify unmet needs of families that could increase risk for placement instability—from the parents'/guardians' and young adults' perspectives. This information can assist leaders and staff of new and existing programs as they strive to adapt to meet the emerging needs of families who have adopted or assumed guardianship. Furthermore, findings from families about what supports and services families found useful—or not useful—can bolster existing programs to continue to provide services, or adapt to meet familial needs.
- Results on turning points in child and family development may provide a rich source of information about how and when to engage families after adoption or guardianship to prevent placement instability. Turning points are significant events the family identifies that led to changes in family dynamics. Such events could include formal social cues (e.g., high school graduation; a death in the family that brought out difficult issues) or more informal social cues (e.g., recognition that maturity brought with it improved family dynamics; improved relationships after a period of living with grandparents) that parents/guardians or young adults identify as shifts in their familial relationships. Turning points might result in improved, or diminished, family cohesion or relations, which in turn, may indicate future risk for instability. Support systems and programs may struggle with knowing when or how to reach out to families. By gathering information from parents, guardians, and young adults, this study could create recommendations for each group that might help staff in programs better understand these issues.
- This study will gather information about formal and informal instability, that is reports of foster care reentry (formal instability), and informal instability incidents that may not be reported to the formal child welfare system (e.g., temporary stays in a relative's home, homelessness, runaway episodes, residential treatment stays). Results may help federal and state agencies understand how and when informal instability occurs, and how they might design systems to meet these families' needs. Along these same lines, results might help to identify struggling families at risk for post adoption and guardianship instability before they actually experience formal instability. Previous studies have suggested that, although only a minority of children who have transitioned from foster care to adoption or guardianship experience reentry into foster care, more children and families experience post-permanency adjustment difficulties and

challenges, such as increased child behavior problems and diminished family cohesion (White et al., 2018).

- We have very little information about how young adults or parents/guardians define instability, which might be very different from how child welfare agents and administrators define instability (Rolock & Pérez, 2016). For example, imagine a teenager's extended stay at a grandparent's house. This stay could be viewed as a positive move, in which the teen can take advantage of resources at the grandparent's home that were not available in their own home. Conversely, such a stay could be a needed separation due to difficult teen behaviors. Thus, we might assess this move in different ways depending upon who is being asked. This proposed study will highlight the types of informal instability that occur in adoptive and guardianship families, and how families assess the impact of instability. Findings from this study may help the field develop a more nuanced and broader understanding of instability.
- One previous study of young adults with foster care histories revealed that they may have different perceptions of why and how they achieved legal permanence as compared to their caregivers' perceptions (Pérez, 2017). Pérez reported that young adults provided reasons their parents/guardians may have entered into legal permanence, including intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. For example, one young adult said she believed her parent adopted her so that the parent could maintain a relationship with someone recently released from jail; the parent would have been prohibited from allowing that person to live with the family if the young adult was a foster child. Another young adult reported that she was required to give her parent 75% of her income—she felt that the parent wanted to adopt her for financial reasons rather than out of love or concern for her. This proposed study will extend prior research by exploring the relationships that help (or hinder) a feeling of stability and familial connectedness (or disconnectedness) for young adults. It will also help those in the field understand how motivations to enter into, or maintain, the adoption or guardianship relationship impact the long-term stability of these relationships.
- Finally, this study will suggest future research needs, based upon discussions with parents, guardians, and youth. These results can help inform federal and state research priorities related to post adoption and guardianship instability.

## 4.2 Priority Research Questions

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This study will help us understand specifically, how young adults, and their parents or guardians, experience their familial relationships. Do they feel that they have permanent relationships within their family? In addition, we seek to understand the protective and risk factors (such as child behavior problems, family cohesion, child-caregiver relationship quality, open vs. closed adoption, etc.) that could predict family difficulties and potential instability.

Proximal factors, such as those listed just above, both predict, and result from post adoption and guardianship instability (e.g., child behavior difficulties, diminished family cohesion). As a hypothetical example, if a biological sibling in an adoptive home had trouble adjusting to the adopted child and started exhibiting challenging negative behaviors, family cohesion may be diminished and be a risk factor for instability. Then, if the adopted child was returned to foster care, the stress of that instability could cause the biological parents to withdraw further from their relationship with the biological child. In this way, reduced family cohesion would both predict instability (as a proximal outcome) and occur as

a result of instability. Many proximal outcomes have complex relationships with post-permanency placement instability over time, including child behavior problems (Newton et al., 2000). Thus, this qualitative study is designed to illuminate these complex relationships in ways that quantitative studies using administrative or even survey data cannot.

To understand these complex relationships, we first want to understand the current primary child-caregiver relationship. We will focus on relational permanence in adoptive and guardianship families from the perspective of young adults who left foster care via adoption or guardianship. We also want to understand relational permanence from the perspectives of adoptive parents and guardians.

Our primary research questions (RQs) are:

- **RQ 1.** How many study participants report having attained relational permanence?
- **RQ 2.** How do study participants define relational permanence?
- **RQ 3.** Who do study participants identify as their strongest relationships?
- **RQ 4.** To what extent did participants experience formal and informal instability?
- **RQ 5.** Do participants wish their permanency relationship was different? Why? How?
- **RQ 6.** What risk and protective factors are associated with achieving relational permanence or not? (These could be individual, family, and agency or service levels.)
  - Did pivotal turning points contribute to this outcome? What could have helped?
  - Did difficult times occur? How did participants get through those difficult times?

## 4.3 Overall Design and Methods

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### 4.3.1 Key Design Elements

We developed a sampling plan intentionally to address conceptual and logistical concerns related to this sample. Key considerations (described in detail below) included:

- Sample size that allows an in-depth understanding of familial relationships in families formed through adoption or guardianship.
- Deliberate focus on a sample of young adults as they transition to adulthood, and their parents or guardians.
- Need to select a subgroup of families with respondents who are highly likely to have experienced formal and informal instability. To accomplish this, we recognize that: (1) formal instability is a fairly rare event (i.e., up to 15–20% of adoptions and guardianships) (White et al., 2018), and may occur several years after legal permanence has been achieved; and (2) we know little about the incidence or prevalence of informal instability.
- Data sources, availability and location: the opportunity to build upon the strengths of two unique sources of data.
- Need to sequence interviews for dyads.

### 4.3.2 Sample Identification and Composition

*Sample size.* This project aims to answer the RQs through an in-depth examination of the questions, rather than a broad understanding. We aim to interview 30 young adults and 30 parents or guardians. Our first choice will be to interview dyads—that is, study respondents who are related pairs from the same family. However, we do not know how successful the team will be in contacting both young adults and parents or guardians. As discussed below, using the source data may make it easier to contact young adults or parents or guardians. If the team has trouble reaching dyads, we will interview young adults and parents or guardians separately. We expect the interviews to last up to 2 hours each (per person, not per dyad).

*Transition to adulthood and young adulthood.* Developmental theorists stress the unique difficulties that many young adults face as they transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2015). Increased attention and research over the past several decades has highlighted the unique needs of young adults as they make this transition. Young adults from advantaged backgrounds often receive financial and emotional support during this developmental phase that facilitates their successful transition to adulthood (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). For young adults with foster care histories, these challenges can be more complicated (e.g., Samuels, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), and often associated with negative outcomes for young adults who transition without the necessary supports and services (e.g., Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez, & Keller, 2007). As such, the successful transition to adulthood for youth who age out of foster care is critical. Unlike other studies that focused only on young adults' perspective on this transition time, this study will also gather their parents'/guardian's perspectives on the transition. The information that they and their parents or guardians give us about the risk and protective factors associated with this transition will help inform the child welfare field and could better position agency staff to help families successfully make this transition.

*Subgroup focus.* This design calls for a focus on subgroups to maximize our ability to obtain perspectives from youth and caregivers on placement instability. The subgroups targeted in this design are based on several findings from previous research:

1. Formal instability is rare in the adoptive and guardianship population (less than 20% overall).
2. Formal instability is least likely to occur with children whose adoption or guardianship happened before age 5.
3. Instability is more likely to occur during a child's teenage years, typically several years (Rolock & White, 2016); after the adoption or guardianship has been finalized.

Thus, given the project goal of understanding post adoption and guardianship instability, the research team would like to increase the likelihood that some of the families interviewed in this study will have experienced instability. Therefore, we will emphasize the following points in the target population:

- Because formal instability is rare and a relatively small sample is proposed, we will focus on adoption and guardianship after age 5 to increase the likelihood that we contact families who experienced instability.
- Similarly, our focus on adoption and guardianship that occurred at least 5 years ago helps assure us that, if instability is going to occur, it would have already happened. Our previous research

indicates that instability among adoptive and guardianship families is more likely to occur 5 or more years after legal permanence (Rolock & White, 2016).

Gaining access to administrative data that will allow us to quickly analyze the data to identify these subgroups will be critically important to the PAGI project timeline.

*Data sources, availability, and location.* This study is designed to occur in a few select locations (to be determined) specific to the research team's location and access to data. This decision is fiscally and logistically driven, and based on conceptual considerations about the deliberate sampling strategy to be used in this study. Specific factors that will help determine locations from which to draw the sample include:

- The expert consultants have previously argued that face-to-face interviews are important for this study. Having local staff available to conduct interviews over several months is critical since we expect to schedule and reschedule interviews multiple times and be flexible about location of the interviews. We will select interview sites that allow minimal travel time to potential study participants.
- We will select locations that offer the opportunity to examine post adoption and guardianship instability. As such, selecting a site that has provided guardianship as a permanency option for a long time would be ideal.
- We may deliberately position selected locations to leverage the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) data and state administrative data. The NSCAW sample varies based on location, where some locations have more NSCAW participants, and therefore a larger sample to draw from, than others. For NSCAW participants who were young adults at the last time of the follow-up interview, the NSCAW project team has access to contact information for the young adult. The NSCAW primary data collection study (see **Chapter 2**) plans to update contact information through tracing and locating efforts. We will share this latest contact information with the Family Voice Study team. We will also use **NSCAW I Secondary Data Analysis** (see **Chapter 5**) activities to identify children who were adopted or living with a legal guardian at the age of 5 or older (which will help the Family Voice Study team identify cases at higher risk of instability). As noted above, post adoption and guardianship instability is a low-incidence event, so we will make every effort to identify a sample that includes youth and families who experienced instability.
- The selected locations should allow the study team immediate access to a target population of focus. With the short PAGI data collection period, getting into the field quickly (and with no delay) to conduct interviews will be essential.
- In addition, if the project's research team has access to and familiarity with the child welfare administrative data before the study begins, the team can begin working with the administrative data immediately, and can identify selected subgroups of the adoption and guardianship population that are the focus of this study. With this administrative data in hand, the research team can focus on a subgroup of adoptive or guardianship families most at risk for post adoption and guardianship instability, described in more detail in the **Subgroup Focus** section.
- The location will not result in generalizable knowledge. Regardless of the number of locations selected, our sample size will be too small for generalizability because of the intense focus needed for in-depth interviews with individual participants. However, the study's primary

purpose is not generalizability. Instead, the purpose is to gather information on the deeper story of instability that might help explain findings from the primary data collected as part of the study outlined in **Chapter 2**).

As mentioned above, we have access to two sources of data for this study to support participant selection: data from the NSCAW study and child welfare administrative data. In current work with the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG), and other projects that involve contacting adoptive or guardianship families, interviewers found that contacting these families can be challenging. By leveraging these two sources of data, the research team will increase the likelihood that they can successfully contact study participants.

We will select study participants from these data sources:

- **State/county child welfare administrative data.** Administrative data will allow the research team to identify subgroups (listed above) so that outreach will deliberately focus on families with a higher risk for post adoption and guardianship instability. The PAGI research team has a strong relationship with the public child welfare system, and currently has access to child welfare administrative data for other projects. The team expects a smooth process in gaining access to these data for the PAGI project.

Contact information from the state or county child welfare departments is kept for the adults (parents or guardians), but not young adults. Thus, the PAGI research team will first need to contact the parents/guardians of these young adults to get their contact information. This also provides a feasible route for parents'/guardians' interviews. However, for families experiencing conflict, accessing young adults through their parents/guardians may be more difficult.

- **NSCAW Primary Data Collection Study Design** (see **Chapter 2**). Young adults will be the initial point of contact with the NSCAW sample for the proposed **NSCAW Primary Data Collection Study** option. NSCAW respondents have given the NSCAW project team information that allows direct contact with them. Although locating the young adult population will be a challenge, having direct access to their contact information will facilitate this process. We will ask the young adults to put us in contact with their parents/guardians. However, for those with strained relationships, contacting parents/guardians via the young adults may be difficult.

*Sequencing interviews.* The source data will determine the primary contact. For instance, if administrative data is used, we will first contact the primary caregiver. In the NSCAW sample the contact person will be the young adult. Regardless of the source of the information, we will attempt to interview the full dyad (parents/guardians and young adults). However, some dyads may no longer have contact with one another and may not know the contact information for their relative. In these cases, the team will interview only one part of the dyad. Thus, we may have more young adults interviewed through the NSCAW sample, and more parents/guardians through the administrative data.

We will interview young adults and parents/guardians separately. In some cases, the research team may visit the dyad and conduct the interviews simultaneously in different spaces. In other situations, the research team will begin with the member of the dyad who is easier to contact, while simultaneously attempting to make contact with the other member(s) of the dyad.

Members of the research team will work from different source material. For example, one team member will work from the NSCAW list, another from the administrative data list. Before they begin any

interviews, the research team will compare the lists to ensure the same family does not appear on multiple lists.

### **4.3.3 Data Collection Plan**

We will conduct data collection slightly differently for the two data sources. When differences will occur, we note them below.

*Location of interviews.* We will conduct interviews at the participant's home or at a venue the participant chooses, including via Skype or other type of video conferencing. Our expert panel members discussed the need for the interview to take place in the home. However, for this study, we propose keeping the location of the interview flexible. Young adults may not have a place in which they feel comfortable meeting with an interviewer. Although coffee shops and restaurants are convenient and may be conducive to conversation, the background noise in these settings typically makes audio recording difficult and perhaps distracting to participants. Libraries are generally good locations, because they are typically quiet, easy to get to, have good parking, and are safe, neutral locations (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

*Length of interviews.* We expect the interviews to last up to 2 hours each (per person, not per dyad).

*Interviews with young adults and parents/guardians will occur separately.* One previous study of young adults with foster care histories revealed that young adults have varying perceptions of why and how they achieved legal permanence compared to their caregivers (Pérez, 2017). Articulating these motivations may impede interviews if young adults and parents/guardians are interviewed together because the young adults may not feel they can be authentic and honest about their experiences and perceptions.

#### **Locating Participants**

*Participants located through administrative data.* We will request contact information for adoptive parents and guardians from the child welfare administrative data, after Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and data sharing agreements are established.

*NSCAW participants.* When we interviewed NSCAW participants, we asked permission to contact them in the future about new research opportunities. The PAGI team will seek permission from the NSCAW Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) to share contact information with the project principal investigator and co-investigator. With ACF COR's permission and IRB approval, the PAGI team can attempt to locate and seek consent from NSCAW participants who are at least 18 years old to participate in a new round of data collection.

To successfully locate the sample, the PAGI team will rely on a combination of proven techniques, including direct contact with sample members via mail or telephone, and batch tracing services for addresses and telephone numbers.

#### **Sample Maintenance**

We plan to initiate tracing activities 3 months prior to the start of data collection. After we integrate and prioritize location information for the list of sample members, the PAGI team will send this information

through batch tracing to confirm or identify contact information. This service matches people's previous contact information with their current contact information.

Following batch tracing, we will send an information package to each sample member. This package will allow participants to update contact information and tells them about the upcoming schedule for data collection. This package will include a letter and a postage-paid address update card. The letter will contain a toll-free number for sample members who would rather supply contact information via telephone.

### **Data Collection**

*Advance mailing.* Using the updated information from our tracing efforts, the PAGI team will send all sample members an advance mailing notifying them of our upcoming interview. The letter will provide information on the background of the research effort, sponsorship, and contact information for the study team should participants have questions about participation. To boost the effectiveness of this mailing, we recommend using a greeting card-like envelope to attract the sample member's attention.

*Consent procedures.* We will inform participants about the study's purpose, procedures, and other key information. In the consent we will stress the importance of providing all members (parent, guardian, and young adult) with privacy during completion of the interview. This process may require multiple telephone calls to the household to reach study participants.

*Interviews.* After advance letters are mailed, the PAGI team will make telephone contact attempts at different times of day and days of week until contact is achieved. Then the PAGI staff person will set a time to meet with the participant in person to conduct the interview. The interviews will take up to 2 hours to complete and participants will get a \$50 incentive after they complete the survey. We are asking participants to contribute a significant amount of time for the interview. In addition, this population is difficult to reach, even with current contact information. As an example, for the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption or Guardianship Support and Preservation, a recent federally funded project reaching out to adoptive and guardianship families currently receiving subsidies from the public child welfare system, that project team successfully contacted about half the population. The contact information for this proposed study will be older, and families will not be actively receiving subsidies from the state; thus, this population is difficult to reach. Further, child welfare jurisdictions may have no formal contact with adoptive or guardianship families after the children reach the age of majority, which could have been a decade prior to this study. Finally, for families who have struggled, the interview material for this study may be emotionally difficult. Incentives are meant to convey appreciation for their contributions to the research.

Over the course of data collection, we will prompt those that have not responded with a series of reminder mailings encouraging participation. We will implement several protocols to address participants who are hesitant or refuse to participate.

*Distressed respondent protocol.* Because the questions are sensitive, we will train interviewers specifically on how to handle respondents who become upset by a question or a series of questions and how to offer the appropriate support. We will offer breaks, allowing respondents to refuse questions they are uncomfortable answering, and connect them to professional assistance when needed.

To assess the sensitivity of the questions or measure the level of respondent distress, we can add debriefing questions to the interview to collect participants' feedback on their experiences completing the interview. For example, we could ask debriefing questions about participants' level of comfort in answering the questions, any difficulties in answering interview questions, or any privacy concerns. We could use responses to these questions to identify participants who might benefit from receiving additional information on support resources.

We will give all study participants information on how to get help and support for emotional or behavioral health issues, and about specific services available for adoptive and guardianship families. The PAGI team will develop these materials through consultation with ACF and outside expert consultants. The PAGI team will have all study procedures, including the distressed respondent protocol, reviewed by expert consultants familiar with conducting data collection efforts with this vulnerable population.

*Data collection schedule and timeline.* We anticipate that the period of performance for this study will be approximately 2 years. We expect a 9-month period waiting for OMB approval during which time instruments will be tested and data collection protocols finalized. During the last 3 months of this period, we will begin respondent tracing activities. We assume that data collection will last 9 months. Data transcription, analysis and reporting activities (along with ACF comment and review) will take approximately 6–9 months. We expect data cleaning, delivery, and archiving to occur in the last 3 months of the period of performance (see **Table 4.1**).

We selected the planned 9-month data collection period to achieve a higher response rate. We expect many of the cases in the sample will have multiple telephone numbers to try and then rule out during data collection. In our experience, a 9-month data collection period allows ample time to pursue new leads generated from batch and interactive tracing sources as well as leads acquired from other contact sources including named contacts. Interviewers will also need time to rotate contact attempts through different days of the week at varying times to connect with caregivers and young adults.

**Table 4.1. Family Voice Design Data Collection and Analysis Timeline**

Year 1				Year 2			
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
OMB approval				Data collection			
Instruments tested; data collection protocols finalized		Respondent tracking			Data transcription, analysis, and reporting		
						Data delivery and archiving	

## 4.4 Measurement Strategies

Taking time to develop high-quality original measures is time consuming and costly because developing reliable and valid scales typically involves a process of research, question design, expert feedback,

testing, and revise/repeat (as needed). The research team will explore a range of existing, validated scales and measures that can be adapted for use with this study sample. This section focuses on measures used in two highly relevant studies, but during the exploration phase of this study, the team will explore other scales, measures, and interview guides.

Key measurement issues for the Family Voice Study are:

- The PAGI team will conduct interviews at the participants' homes or a venue of their choosing, including via Skype or other type of video conferencing. We expect the interviews to take up to 2 hours per person.
- The PAGI team proposes the use of an a priori interview guide (a guide that has predetermined questions, based on existing theory), coupled with a set of scales, administered at the time of the interview to study participants.
- In interviews (including scales and survey questions) interviewers will ask participants to both reflect on their past experiences (e.g., previous relationships within their family of origin, satisfaction with foster care) and provide information related to their current well-being (e.g., current living arrangement, level of education).
- Interviewers will give participants a packet of printed scales and survey questions and ask them to complete the packet at the time of the interview. This will assist the research team in contextualizing the results of the interviews and assessing the well-being of participants (e.g., the quality of their relationships). We estimate this portion will take approximately 20 minutes.
- The PAGI team will plan to pretest instruments with 9 or fewer participants prior to beginning the study. The instruments will have been adapted for use with our study population. Thus, testing may reveal that slight changes in terminology, or other adjustments are needed to make sure the instruments are reliable and valid (i.e., they consistently measure the constructs they are intended to measure and are age and context-appropriate). This pretesting includes the interview protocol and the debriefing questions.

Two large previous studies examined post-permanency adjustment for older children and youth and their families. These studies, the Midwest Study (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010) and the Beyond the Adoption Order study (Selwyn, Wijedasa, & Meakings, 2014), developed a wide array of measures. In addition, they are extensively referenced, discussed, and cited in the literature. These studies examined many of the same constructs that interest us for the Family Voice Study, including:

- social support (informal supports and formal systems; parents/guardians or young adults)
- parent-child relationship quality (parents/guardians or young adults)
- connection with the child (affinity; parents/guardians)
- connection with the caregiver (affinity; young adults)
- level of commitment to the adoption or guardianship relationship (parents/guardians or young adults)
- marital status and other intimate partner relationships (parents/guardians or young adults)
- trauma experiences (e.g., maltreatment, exposure to domestic violence; young adults)

Given the relevant constructs identified in two large-scale studies that examined permanence and well-being for former foster youth (Courtney et al., 2010; Selwyn et al., 2014), we propose to design instruments that align with items and measures used in these studies. Borrowing or adapting measures from these studies would build knowledge in the field about how families who have adopted or assumed guardianship understand these constructs. This design will also allow us to put our results in context, by comparing them with previous findings. To use or adapt questions from these previous two studies, the research team will obtain permission from the authors to use or adapt their survey instrument and/or scales. We discuss these two studies, and relevant constructs, in more detail below.

**The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth** (Courtney et al., 2010) is applicable to the Family Voice Study because the participants were young adults transitioning to adulthood. Thus, many of the questions from the interview guides in this study apply to young adults recruited for the Family Voice Study (with revisions, such as for differences related to the respondent, cultural setting, or scope).

The Midwest Study was conducted to understand the long-term experiences of youth who exited the foster care system to independent living. Many questions in the Midwest Study were also part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Thus, replicating some of these measures allows us to compare our results to those of other studies (see **Table 4.2**).

**The Beyond the Adoption Order Study** (Selwyn et al., 2014) examined information on relationships within adoptive families, and we would adapt it to include families who have assumed guardianship. This study examined the experiences of youth who were adopted from foster care in England and Wales and their caregivers (see **Table 4.2**).

Asking parallel questions to both the young adults and parents/guardians will allow us to obtain both perspectives and develop a deeper understanding of instability that takes into account how relationships evolve and interact over time. Furthermore, by utilizing existing (or adapted) interview questions, we will be able to understand how our study participants are similar (or different) to other studies who asked similar question of different populations.

#### **4.4.1 Additional Scales and Measures**

One critical point is that previous post adoption and guardianship research lacks standardized scales and psychometrically-sound survey measures. For example, many previous studies relied on single-item survey questions (e.g., *Would you recommend adopting a child from the U.S. foster care system to a close friend (yes, maybe, no)?*) to obtain information about complicated and often multifaceted constructs in post-permanency research, such as instability, commitment, satisfaction, attachment, or bonding; (Gillum & O'Brien, 2010; Groza & Ryan, 2002; Hartinger-Saunders, Trouteaud, & Matos Johnson, 2014b; Houston & Kramer, 2008; Lavner, Waterman, & Peplau, 2014; Nalavany, Glidden, & Ryan, 2009; Reilly & Platz, 2004; Ryan, Hinterlong, Hegar, & Johnson, 2010; Schwartz, Cody, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Fong, 2014; Smith-McKeever, 2006; Testa et al., 2015). Although previous studies do indicate that single-item indicators or limited scales can be effective in uncovering associations between variables associated with post adoption and guardianship instability, this is a key limitation and research gap in the field. The current study could help fill this gap by providing deeper information about which measures and questions are associated with positive or negative experiences after adoption or guardianship to develop standardized scales for research in the future.

**Table 4.2. Interview Topics and Possible Measurement Sources**

Topic	Primary Source to Adapt from (Others Possible)	Example Potential Interview Question(s)	Example Standardized Scale(s) to Use or Adapt	Potential Reporter(s)
Adoptive/Guardianship parent-child relationship permanence	Beyond the Adoption Order	<i>When you took family photos, did you include your adopted child? (Caregiver)</i> <i>When your family took family photos, were you included? (Young adult)</i>	Belonging and Emotional Security Tool (BEST-AG; Casey; used in QIC-AG project)	Young adult, Caregiver
Biological parent-child relationship quality (if applicable)	Beyond the Adoption Order	<i>How close do you currently feel to your biological mother? (Young adult)</i>	Belonging and Emotional Security Tool (BEST-AG; Casey; used in QIC-AG project)	Young adult
Level of commitment to the adoption or guardianship	QIC-AG	<i>Overall, how would you rate the impact of your child's adoption/guardianship on your family? (Caregiver)</i> <i>Overall, how would you rate the impact of your adoption/guardianship on your family? (Young adult)</i> <i>If you knew everything about your child before the adoption or guardianship that you now know, do you think you would still have adopted or assumed guardianship of him/her? (Caregiver)</i>	Commitment Scale (used in post-permanency studies conducted by the Children and Family Research Center at UIUC and in the QIC-AG project)	Young adult, Caregiver
		<i>If you knew everything about your adoption or guardianship that you now know, would you support the decision to be adopted or assumed guardianship? (Young adult)</i>		
Parenting Competence/Skill	Beyond the Adoption Order	<i>Sometimes when I'm supposed to be the one in control, I feel more like the one being manipulated.</i>	Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (Beyond the Adoption Order)	
Trauma/ACES	QIC-AG	<i>Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs? (Young adult)</i>	ACES scale (Felitti et al., 1998); Revised post-traumatic growth inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Beyond the Adoption Order)	Young adult
Marital relationship quality	Midwest Study	<i>What type of intimate partner relationship are you involved in (if any)? (Young adult or Caregiver)</i>	Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1990; Midwest Study)	Young adult (if applicable), Caregiver
Social support	Beyond the Adoption Order	<i>How often do you have someone to listen to you when you need to talk? (Young adult)</i>	Medical Outcomes Study (MOS) Social Support Survey (Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991; Midwest Study)	Young adult, Caregiver

(continued)

**Table 4.2. Interview Topics and Possible Measurement Sources (continued)**

Topic	Primary Source to Adapt from (Others Possible)	Example Potential Interview Question(s)	Example Standardized Scale(s) to Use or Adapt	Potential Reporter(s)
Social support	Midwest Study	<i>Can you describe any mental health services you received in the past year? (Young adult or Caregiver)</i>	Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI); World Health Organization, 1998; The Midwest Study)	Young adult, Caregiver
Health status	Midwest Study	<i>Do you have a health condition or disability that limits daily activities? (Young adult or Caregiver)</i>		Young adult, Caregiver
Mental health status	Beyond the Adoption Order	<i>How often do you get a sort of frightened feeling like 'butterflies' in the stomach? (Young adult or Caregiver)</i>	Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (Zigmond & Snaith, 1983); Assessment Checklist for Adolescents short form (Tarren-Sweeney, 2007); Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985): all from Beyond the Adoption Order	Young adult, Caregiver
Educational status/involvement	Midwest Study	<i>For your current friends, how important is graduating from college? (Young adult)</i>		Young adult, Caregiver
Socioeconomic status: income, employment, and living situation	Midwest Study	<i>Have you experienced a period of joblessness during the past 12 months? (Young adult or Caregiver)</i>	Food Security Composite Score (Blumberg, Bialostosky, Hamilton, & Briefel, 1999; The Midwest Study)	Young adult, Caregiver
Previous youth behavior difficulties	QIC-AG	<i>To what extent did you struggle to manage the young adults' behavior? (Caregiver)</i>	Behavior Problems Index (BPI; QIC-AG); Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman & Goodman, 2012; Beyond the Adoption Order)	Young adult, Caregiver
Relationship strength	QIC-AG	<i>Which phrase best describes your relationship with your young adult (your parent or guardian)? (Extremely warm to Not at all warm) (Caregiver)</i> <i>Which phrase best describes your relationship with your parent or guardian? (Extremely warm to Not at all warm) (Young adult)</i>	Relationship Scale (used in the QIC-AG project); Child Parent Conflict Tactics Scale ((Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998; Midwest Study)	Young adult, Caregiver

Questions will be adapted from scales and survey questions that originated from: The Midwest Study (Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011; Courtney et al., 2010); Beyond the Adoption Order (Selwyn et al., 2014); and surveys of adoptive parents and guardians conducted by the Children and Family Research Center at the University of Illinois, which were adapted for use in surveys by the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation [QIC-AG]).

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## 4.5 Analysis Plan

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### 4.5.1 Contextual Data

The research team will ask participants to complete a set of scales and survey questions that will help contextualize the interview data. As noted above, several applicable measures and instruments have already been developed that can either be used or adapted for use with this study's target population. The research team will analyze survey data using quantitative approaches that summarize results for individual questions and scale measures using descriptive statistics (e.g., the mean and standard deviation of a question that relates to marital adjustment, on a scale of 1–5). Then researchers may be able to explore relationships between survey items using bivariate and multivariate statistical tests. As an example, it may be useful to examine measures related to child well-being (behavioral, health, or mental health) and explore their relationships to caregiver and family well-being (such a measure of family cohesion). In contrast, we will analyze interview data separately using qualitative analysis detailed below, intended to develop themes about post adoption and guardianship instability.

### 4.5.2 Qualitative Analysis Using a Thematic Approach

The research team will use a thematic approach to collect and analyze data. This approach allows researchers to identify, organize, analyze, and report important themes (i.e., patterns) found in the data that describe a phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Daly, Kellehear, Gliksmann, & Daly, 1997). A thematic approach is ideal for understanding individuals' lived experiences in a deep, meaningful way and the meaning they ascribe to that lived experience (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Based on this understanding, researchers can extrapolate different kinds of knowledge (i.e., inductive, deductive, semantic, latent, realist, and constructionist) that describe the phenomenon being studied (Braun & Clarke, 2006; McLeod, 2001).

A thematic approach is ideal for this study because the RQs contain broad themes (e.g., risk and protective factors) that require an in-depth understanding of their meaning for a specific population (e.g., young adults who exited foster care through adoption or guardianship and their parents/guardians). This approach will allow us to obtain a richer, fuller picture of existing knowledge as well as generate new knowledge. According to Braun & Clarke (2012), a thematic approach can generate six types of codes:

1. **Inductive** codes and themes emerge from the data, allowing new themes or more detailed information about existing themes to emerge.
2. **Deductive** codes and themes emerge from existing concepts and ideas, which allows reconfirmation of codes and ideas.
3. **Semantic** codes and theme development identify specific ways or language participants use to describe their experiences.
4. **Latent** codes and theme development reveal concepts and assumptions that are present in the data.
5. **Realist** codes and theme development focus on an assumed reality that participants report.

- 6. Constructionist** codes and themes development highlights certain realities that are prevalent in the data.

Data analysis consists of six key steps: (1) preparing the data; (2) becoming familiar with the data, (3) identifying themes, (4) reviewing themes within and across cases, (5) refining themes, and (6) interpreting the data and themes. Data analysis is not linear; rather, it is an iterative process whereby results are reached by repeating rounds of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**1. Step 1 – Preparing the data.**

- a. A transcription service will transcribe the semi-structured interviews verbatim. The transcriptionist will note in the transcript which participant said what words or statements. The transcriptionist can clearly delineate the interviewer from the interviewees, even if multiple people are speaking.
- b. Staff will check the accuracy of the transcripts against the audio recording.
- c. All identifying information in the transcripts will be changed, and all participants will be getting a pseudonym.
- d. Staff will load the de-identified transcripts into qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo, Atlas.ti, Dedoose, or MAXQDA.

**2. Step 2 – Becoming familiar with the data.**

Members of the PAGI team will review the transcripts to identify themes or patterns that begin to answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Becoming familiar with the data involves the following:

- a. Reading the transcript in its entirety.
- b. Coding the data with the potential that all six types of codes could emerge from the analysis. The team creates codes by reading each sentence and identifying a code or word that describes that sentence.
- c. Once the transcript is coded, the team reviews the codes. Reviewing the codes consists of looking at the passages under each code and determining whether the passage accurately captures the code, should be merged into another code, or whether a new one needs to be created.
- d. At least two people will code all the data from the same interview. After we code the interview, we will review the codes and decide on a final codebook that will be used to code the remaining interviews. After we code two interviews, we will review our codes and highlight any new codes we created. We will then revise our codebook. After we code five interviews, we will repeat the process. Thereafter, we will review codes in increments of five until all the interviews have been coded.

**3. Step 3 – Identifying the themes.**

We will analyze data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process primarily will generate deductive and inductive themes. Deductive themes are a priori themes that previous studies identified. In addition, researchers will explore inductive themes—novel themes, new information that will deepen our understanding of the phenomenon or identify

new information altogether. This will help us to identify themes not identified in previous studies.

#### **4. Step 4 – Reviewing themes within and across cases.**

Once a theme is identified, we review the interviews to understand details and nuances of each theme.

#### **5. Step 5 – Refining themes.**

Refining themes involves reviewing them to understand alternative explanations or conditions under which each theme may not be relevant. The theme is modified slightly to take these variations into account.

#### **6. Step 6 – Interpreting.**

Themes describe aspects of a phenomenon. Nonetheless, the primary goal of analysis is to move “from description, where the data have simply been organized to show patterns in semantic content, and summarized, to interpretation, where there is an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications” (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **4.6 Practical Considerations and Challenges**

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*Outdated contact information.* Current contact information from administrative data sources may be outdated for children who exited foster care many years ago. The PAGI team will need to engage a tracking service to update contact information.

*Ensuring privacy and sensitivity.* Addressing adoptive and guardianship families’ unique needs is essential. A key element in this study design is to ensure that the research team is aware of, and considers, the unique needs and experiences of families who have adopted or assumed guardianship of children formerly in foster care. For example, young adults may not know their permanency status, because they may have never been told they were adopted or they exited to guardianship. In the QIC-AG project stakeholders warned us to be careful with materials sent to the home because young persons may be distressed to find out that they were adopted (or in guardianship) if their parent or guardian had not told them. Young adults may assume that their relative adopted them, but they actually aged out of foster care or exited foster care through guardianship (Pérez, 2017). Considerations for outreach to families include ensuring mailed study materials do not use the terms *adoption* or *guardianship* on the outside, or possibly even the inside, to ensure privacy, particularly when adoptive and guardianship status is not widely known.

*Respondent distress.* Study respondents may be distressed by answering questions about adoptive or guardianship family dynamics; consequently, interviewers must handle data collection sensitively. The PAGI team will give all study participants information on seeking assistance and support for emotional or behavioral health issues. These resources will include descriptions of available adoption and guardianship support services. The PAGI team will ask expert consultants (familiar with the issues this vulnerable population faces) to review study materials and procedures, including a distressed respondent protocol. Expert consultants could include members of the 2018 in-person PAGI technical expert meeting panel as well as new consultants with specialized expertise in adoption services and

supports and service providers with expertise in working with families who have adopted or assumed legal guardianship of children formerly in foster care.

*Involving adult adoptees.* During the stakeholder engagement section of this study we propose to involve adult adoptees—ideally, with diverse experiences—who are researchers and can provide guidance on outreach, review research protocols, and discuss issues that may come up during the course of the study.

*Service resources.* Per IRB and human subjects’ protections, the research team will have resources available for parents/guardians or young adults who may find the experience of the interview process distressing. The research team will connect with appropriate area service providers to ensure the referrals are experienced with adoption, kinship, and guardianship issues.

*Data collection timing.* We plan to start data collection a few months after OMB approval and expect to complete it in about 9 months. The time frame is tight, and this population may be difficult to reach. The contact information may not be current, and we expect that setting up the interviews may take a long time. Interviews will be conducted in person, via video conference, or over the phone, based on the interviewee’s preferences. Despite these attempts to conduct the interviews in a timely manner, collecting data may take longer, such as an additional 3–6 months. If the project has some flexibility to expand the timeline and budget, we may need additional time.

*Family contact.* Will families who are struggling be willing to talk with the research team? Feedback from Dr. Selwyn suggests that interviewers may need to make several attempts before they make successful contact. During the next phase of this study, we will reach out to Dr. Selwyn and others to gather suggestions on how they successfully navigated these situations.

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## 5. National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) I Secondary Data Analysis Study Design Option

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# 5. National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) I Secondary Data Analysis Study Design Option

The purpose of this study design is to examine associations between child and caregiver pre-permanency characteristics and instability among children who were adopted after involvement with the child welfare system. In addition, the study examines child internalizing (anxiety, depression) and externalizing (ADHD, behavior disorders) mental health conditions as mediators of these associations. This study design recognizes the strong evidence base for the association between child mental health problems and the stability of permanent caregiver-child relationships among children involved with child welfare. The study will use longitudinal data to shed light on the conditions under which this association is more and less likely to occur. The research team will conduct analyses using existing data, covering five waves of data collection spaced over an approximately 7-year period, allowing the most in-depth look to date at these critical associations in a longitudinal cohort.

## 5.1 Study Rationale

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The research literature on post adoption and guardianship instability links many factors that existed prior to adoption or guardianship to subsequent instability. In the Pagi Conceptual Framework, these variables are measured at the time of legal permanence (or prior to adoption or guardianship), and do not change over time. Some variables are at the child level, such as the child's race or ethnicity, the age of the child at the time of legal permanence, or the young person's perceptions and involvement in the permanency decision. Other variables are at the caregiver level, such as marital status at the time of adoption, as well as caregiver age and race). The main aim of this study design is to examine pre-permanency characteristics in the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) I dataset related to post adoption and guardianship instability.

A secondary aim is to examine child mental health as a potential moderator of the associations between pre-permanency characteristics and post adoption and guardianship instability. Child mental health, including both internalizing and externalizing disorders, is a strong predictor of instability following permanent placement (AdoptUsKids, 2007; Barth & Miller, 2000; Egbert, 2015; Faulkner, Adkins, Fong, & Rolock, 2017; Mariscal, Akin, Lieberman, & Washington, 2015; Schwartz, Cody, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Fong, 2014; Testa, Snyder, Wu, Rolock, & Liao, 2015; White, 2016). One aspect that researchers have not studied very well is the extent to which internalizing and externalizing problems interact with other established predictors, such as child demographics and history of maltreatment.

The NSCAW I dataset has a unique benefit: it extends the definition of instability to include both formal and informal types of instability (defined in the opening paragraph of this document). In addition, the NSCAW I dataset offers a unique opportunity to study these issues longitudinally. The specific questions of this proposed, secondary analysis are as follows:

1. What child and caregiver pre-permanency characteristics predict post adoption and guardianship instability?
2. Do child mental health problems moderate the association between child and caregiver pre-permanency characteristics and instability (formal and informal) over time?

### **5.1.1 Associations Between Pre-Permanency Child Characteristics and Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability**

The Literature Review (White et al., 2018) conducted as part of the PAGI project summarized child characteristics that were strongly associated with instability that occurred after permanent placement. The proposed study will examine which child characteristics known at the time of adoption or guardianship are associated with post adoption and guardianship instability. One such characteristic is **child age** at the time of adoption or guardianship. Formal instability (foster care reentry) is least likely for children whose adoption or guardianship occurred before age 5 (Rolock & White, 2016; Rolock, White, Ocasio, Zhang, MacKenzie, & Fong, 2019). **Child gender** is another characteristic that previous research has thoroughly examined, but a direct link between gender and post adoption and guardianship instability was not firmly established. A fair amount of research has examined relationships between child gender and negative child behaviors, which are thought to be strongly related to instability. Gender may be associated with instability through its associations to child externalizing behaviors. The literature on child development shows that boys are more likely to exhibit externalizing behavior problems than girls (Averett, Nalavany, & Ryan, 2009; Liu, 2004), and some adoption studies report that boys are at higher risk for post adoption difficulties (Goerge, Howard, Yu, & Radomsky, 1997; Goldman & Ryan, 2011; Simmel, Barth, & Brooks, 2007). For **child race and ethnicity**, previous research on post adoption and guardianship instability provides few firm conclusions about the relationship between race and post adoption and guardianship instability. Although rates of instability seem to be somewhat higher for African-American children in some studies (Rolock & White, 2016), in other studies this finding was inconclusive (Rolock et al., 2019), or suggested that African-American child race may protect against instability if children are placed with culturally competent caregivers (Belanger, Cheung, & Cordova, 2012; Gillum & O'Brien, 2010; Rosenthal & Groze, 1990; Smith-McKeever, 2006). Also, Hispanic children may face higher risk for post adoption difficulties and instability (Goerge et al., 1997; Orsi, 2015). The association between race and post adoption and guardianship instability is likely correlated with other factors that impact instability; thus, it is important for any study focused on identifying unique predictors of instability to account for related contextual factors and other covariates.

**Type of maltreatment** is an important child-level characteristic to consider. Children who have experienced sexual abuse are at high risk for instability after adoption or guardianship compared to children who have experienced physical abuse or multiple forms of abuse (Averett et al., 2009; Erich & Leung, 2002; Groza & Ryan, 2002; Nalavany, Glidden, & Ryan, 2009; Rosenthal & Groze, 1990; White, 2016). Although more evidence is needed, the trauma children experience as a result of abuse most likely has negative effects that can potentially persist for years after legal permanency.

The relationship between a **child's disabilities** and instability outcomes has also garnered significant attention in the post adoption and guardianship literature. Findings on the impact of child disabilities on instability are mixed and difficult to interpret, in part because disabilities are often combined with other "special needs" in the adoption literature, which may include characteristics that states must consider when making decisions about adoption subsidies, such as minority race, older childhood age, or having

siblings also awaiting adoption (White, 2016). Thus, findings in the literature about disabilities are a bit mixed, but evidence shows that some disabilities may place a higher burden on their parents or guardians, and these families need more access to supportive services to ensure successful outcomes. Families may be willing and able to take on the challenge of providing care for adopted or guardianship children with mild disabilities, such as learning difficulties or ADHD, but more reluctant to provide long-term care for children with severe physical disabilities or multiple disabilities (AdoptUsKids, 2007). However, the exact relationship between a child's special needs and risk for post adoption and guardianship instability likely depends on the type of disability or need, the parent's expectations and coping resources, the services available to parents, and the proximal outcome under consideration.

The impact of **adopting or assuming guardianship of sibling groups** has garnered interest and research for decades (Faulkner et al., 2017; Jones & LaLiberte, 2010; Rolock & White, 2016; White, 2016). Only a few studies have examined the impact of sibling placement on post adoption and guardianship instability directly, and most focused on outcomes thought to be related to post adoption and guardianship instability (i.e., child behavior problems, family functioning). A recent study using a large population of adoptive and guardianship children (Rolock & White, 2016) is an exception. In this study the authors concluded that children adopted with at least one sibling had 15% lower risk of discontinuity compared to children adopted with no siblings or other sibling arrangements (Rolock & White, 2016). Most studies that have found significant effects for sibling adoption reported more negative outcomes after adoption or guardianship compared to non-sibling adoption. Other studies found mixed results. Specifically, sibling adoption was associated with worse child behavior problems after adoption (Averett et al., 2009; Reilly & Platz, 2003), more post adoption adjustment challenges, particularly if siblings were treated differently (Mariscal et al., 2015); lower adoptive parent relationship satisfaction (Ryan, Hinterlong, Hegar, & Johnson, 2010), lower family functioning (Leung & Erich, 2002; Leung, Erich, & Kanenberg, 2005), and less nurturing attitudes toward parenting (Reilly & Platz, 2003) However, Erich and Leung (Erich & Leung, 2002) reported mixed results: according to caregivers, sibling adoption was associated with lower family functioning but also fewer externalizing behaviors of children.

Previous studies often examined the **biological relatedness** between a child or youth and the caregiver, and kinship was generally found to protect against instability in substitute care arrangements (Courtney & Prophet, 2011; Koh, 2010; Radcliff, Bramlett, & Waters, 2010; Testa & Shook, 2002; Winokur, Crawford, Longobardi, & Valentine, 2008). However, the level of relatedness complicates this relationship; Testa, Snyder, Wu, Rolock, and Liao (2015) found that close relatives (e.g., grandparents, aunts and uncles) provided greater stability than more distant relatives (e.g., cousins).

The PAGI Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**) includes other theorized, child-level variables that potentially contribute to post adoption and guardianship instability, although the research base on these factors is not well-developed. For example, the **child's sexual identity** or **exposure to domestic violence** may place the child at risk for internalizing or externalizing symptoms, which may impact the stability of permanent placements. In addition, the status of the **biological parent's parental rights** at the time of finalization may impact the stability of permanent placements in guardianship cases. These factors may not have strong empirical support, yet they provide important context, and their existence in the NSCAW I dataset will allow their inclusion in risk and protective models for this predictive study.

### 5.1.2 Associations Between Pre-Permanency Caregiver Characteristics and Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability

The PAGI Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**) includes both caregiver demographics and variables likely to be related to post adoption and guardianship instability. The evidence about **caregiver education** level is not entirely clear. Most research suggested that higher levels of education for caregivers were associated with less positive outcomes in adoption and guardianship (consistent with research on adoption disruptions (Barth & Miller, 2000). However, like many risk and protective factors, other, moderating variables, such as caregiver income (Testa et al., 2015), may influence the specific impact of education level on post adoption and guardianship instability.

A few studies also examined the relationship between **caregiver employment** and post adoption and guardianship outcomes related to instability. In one literature review, the authors concluded that the reviewed research weakly supported the finding that having an adoptive or guardianship caregiver who works full-time increases the risk for poor post adoption or guardianship outcomes (Faulkner et al., 2017). Further, another study found that adopted children whose parents who worked full-time were at higher risk for placement discontinuity at 6 and 12 months after the adoption was finalized as compared to adopted children whose parents did not work full-time (Berry, Propp, & Martens, 2007).

Some research suggests that a relationship exists between **caregiver age** and post adoption or guardianship outcomes. One study found that older caregivers were more likely to seek services, suggesting that they experienced more difficulties in their relationship with the child (Liao & White, 2014). In other studies death of a caregiver was associated with older caregiver age and higher risk for post adoption and guardianship instability because children often had to be placed in a different home with another caregiver (Bergeron & Pennington, 2013; Faulkner et al., 2017).

Researchers have also studied **caregiver-child racial match** in relation to instability outcomes; the overall findings were inconclusive. Neither racial or transracial adoptions nor guardianships were inherently disadvantaged compared to adoptions or guardianships within the same race. However, racial identity may complicate post adoption and guardianship adjustment of children and youth—and the literature has emphasized how important it is for caregivers to be culturally competent and accept a child's racial identity and cultural heritage (Belanger et al., 2012; Samuels, 2009). Orsi (2015) used administrative data gathered on children placed for adoption in Colorado to predict post adoption child protective services (CPS) referrals and assessments. The results suggested complicated associations among a child's ethnicity, ethnic match between adoptive parent and child, adoptive parent's relationship to the child, and post adoption involvement with the child welfare system. For example, findings suggested that relative adoptions with an ethnic match had significantly lower risk for CPS referral or assessment than foster care adoptions with an ethnic match. Overall, the author concluded that children need not be ethnically matched with adoptive caregivers to be successful (Orsi, 2015). Isolating the unique effect caregiver-child racial match will require controlling for other, correlated variables.

Finally, the involvement of adoptive parents and guardians **in permanency decisions** may impact post adoption and guardianship instability, so the PAGI Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**) included it as a pre-permanency characteristic. This concept has not been well researched because studies do not typically ask caregivers about their involvement with child placement decisions. Since the NSCAW I study asked caregivers about this characteristic, we include it as a potential predictor in this study design.

Similarly, our analytic model includes caregiver marital status because it is part of the PGI Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**) as a theoretical predictor of instability, even though it has not been a subject of research in past literature.

The PGI Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**) includes the child and caregiver variables mentioned above as pre-permanency characteristics that may impact post adoption and guardianship instability. This proposed study design will focus on analyzing the impact of these factors as fixed predictors, not accounting for change in these variables over time. Additionally, we will examine child mental health as a potential moderator of the associations between these fixed variables and instability.

### **5.1.3 Associations Between Child Mental Health and Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability**

Research indicates that children who spend time in foster care tend to experience higher rates of mental health disorders than their same-age peers who have not spent time in foster care (Bruskas, 2008; Simmel et al., 2007). Child behavior problems are also one of the most frequently identified risk factors for post adoption or guardianship instability (AdoptUsKids, 2007; Barth & Miller, 2000; Egbert, 2015; Faulkner et al., 2017; Mariscal et al., 2015; Schwartz et al., 2014; Testa et al., 2015). Externalizing behaviors, or behaviors defined as those directed toward others, such as aggression, hyperactivity, sexual activities, and oppositional behaviors (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001), seem to place children and families at most risk. However, internalizing behaviors defined as those directed toward the self, such as depression, anxiety, and self-harm (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001), may also increase risk for post adoption or guardianship adjustment difficulties (Faulkner et al., 2017; Hinterlong & Ryan, 2008; White, 2016). Moreover, previous studies found that children in foster care generally exhibit both externalizing and internalizing behaviors at much higher rates than the general population (Groze, 1996; Simmel, 2016; Simmel et al., 2007).

The prior review pointed out child and caregiver factors that appear, from past research, to be significantly associated with post adoption and guardianship instability. This research gave little attention to potential interactions among established predictor variables. Given that child mental health problems (internalizing such as depression and anxiety, and externalizing such as ADHD and conduct disorder) represent one of the most robust predictors of instability that has been found across studies, a natural next step for the field is to examine whether child mental health problems influence the effects of other established predictors. Because certain predictors (e.g., child gender) are correlated with child mental health (e.g., behavior problems), understanding the various ways multiple, related predictors may contribute to instability, is important. For example, one could hypothesize that child externalizing disorders may have stronger impact on instability when the adoptive parent or guardian is older or perhaps was less involved in the permanency decision. Because of NSCAW's thorough measurement of child mental health disorders across childhood and adolescence, data from the study provide an opportunity to examine this question and thus advance our understanding of the most salient factors that put children at risk for post adoption and guardianship instability.

### **5.1.4 Advantages of the NSCAW I Dataset for Examining These Issues**

Perhaps the primary advantage of the NSCAW I dataset for studying the issues covered in this report is the comprehensive coverage of pre-permanency characteristics in the survey instrument. Because NSCAW involved multiple reporters for each child (caregiver, caseworker, child), we have in-depth

information on a wide range of well-being measures covering the familial, social, and neighborhood ecology of each child.

Prior empirical studies of post adoption or guardianship instability had small sample sizes and short follow-up periods. Meanwhile, we know that instability may occur many years after adoption or legal guardianship is finalized. For instance, adolescents have a heightened risk for instability, even among children adopted when very young. Because post adoption and guardianship formal instability (foster care reentry) occurs in approximately 2–15% of cases (White, 2016), small samples and limited follow-up periods substantially limit knowledge generation. The large sample size of NSCAW I, along with 5 waves of longitudinal data for observing instability events, are considerable strengths for examining the impact of pre-permanency characteristics on instability outcomes.

In addition to these assets, the NSCAW I dataset includes information about both formal and informal instability events. Prior studies that relied exclusively on administrative data to track instability over time (largely characterized as foster care reentry) did not capture informal termination events reported by youth, caregivers, and caseworkers. For example, administrative data system would not capture runaway events or other temporary changes in residence, such as moving in with a relative for a few months. NSCAW I asked specifically about these types of events at each follow-up wave, so that these more informal changes in residence were captured.

Finally, NSCAW I is well positioned to examine these questions because it includes robust measures of child and adolescent mental health symptoms and disorders. At each wave, the NSCAW I survey instrument includes validated measures of emotional and behavioral disorders, developmentally calibrated for infants and toddlers, childhood, and adolescence. Some examples include the Bayley Infant Neurodevelopmental Screener, the Childhood Depression Inventory, the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist, and the Youth Self-Report. These scales yield high-quality data on child mental health symptoms and disorders, allowing a rigorous analysis of the impact of these variables over time on post adoption and guardianship instability. We also considered NSCAW II<sup>8</sup> for this study design but did not ultimately include it because the follow-up period (2 waves, covering 18 months to 3 years) was deemed too short to identify enough cases of post adoption and guardianship instability to adequately power the inferential analyses proposed in this study design.

## 5.2 Priority Research Questions

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This design option will address two research questions (RQs):

- **RQ 1.** What child and caregiver pre-permanency characteristics predict post adoption instability?
- **RQ 2.** Do child mental health problems (internalizing and externalizing disorders) intensify or ameliorate (moderate) the association between child and caregiver pre-permanency characteristics and instability (formal and informal) over time?

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<sup>8</sup> The second cohort of NSCAW, launched in 2008 and including more than 5,000 children.

## 5.3 Overall Design and Methods

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### 5.3.1 NSCAW I Dataset Description

NSCAW I was a longitudinal survey of children and families who were subject to CPS investigation. The NSCAW I cohort included 6,228 children, ages birth to 14 (at the time of sampling), who had contact with the child welfare system within a 15-month period that began in October 1999. In addition to the baseline interview, respondents were followed up over 4 waves with an overall weighted response rate of 77.6% at Wave 5. Data collection waves were spaced approximately 12–18 months apart; Wave 5 interviews occurred between 2005 and 2007. Overall, the follow-up period ranged from 6 to 8 years across the sample.

The NSCAW I sample included children who were living at home with biological parents, children who experienced out-of-home care, as well as children who moved to adoptive and guardianship homes after the baseline NSCAW assessment. Data came from reports from children, parents, and other caregivers, as well as reports from caseworkers, teachers, and agency administrators. The NSCAW I instrument included a broad set of modules including, but not limited to, child and caregiver physical and mental well-being, interactions with the service system, and both formal and informal movements across living situations. These data provide a unique opportunity to examine longitudinal predictors of post adoption and guardianship instability, controlling for a range of contextual factors.

### 5.3.2 Relevant NSCAW I Variables and Constructs

The NSCAW I public use data files include derived variables that can be used to designate whether a child was adopted during NSCAW I. The following section describes the derivation of these variables as well as the derivation of instability variables in NSCAW I.

#### **Adoption**

We identified eligible adoption cases from NSCAW I by a derived variable. This variable (“ever adopted”) is based on caregiver report that the current caregiver is an adoptive mother or father. If that information was missing, we determined whether the respondent was the adoptive mother or father through information collected from the NSCAW study-designated CWS agency liaison. This includes information from data collected during the sampling process from the designated child welfare agency liaison, that was then confirmed during the caregiver or child interviews. **Appendix B** of this document includes the items associated with this definition.

For this **NSCAW I Secondary Data Analysis Design option**, we estimated the number of children in NSCAW I who were adopted at any wave. We separately estimated the number of children who experienced an instability event after the date of adoption. These numbers (shown in **Table 5.1**) give an estimated sample size for the proposed analyses. During these preliminary analyses, we observed that most adoptions were finalized at dates occurring by NSCAW I Waves 4 and 5. For those cases adopted by Wave 4 or Wave 5, we had little to no opportunity to observe post adoption instability from NSCAW secondary data analysis. For these cases, the post adoption observation period is likely just too short to adequately allow for the occurrence of formal and informal instability events. Even so, preliminary

NSCAW I analyses revealed that 81 of 689 adopted children<sup>9</sup> had experienced some type of post adoption instability event (see **Table 5.1**). Later parts of this section provide additional information on the definition of formal and informal instability events as defined within the NSCAW I dataset.

**Table 5.1. Number of Cases for NSCAW I Secondary Analysis**

Event	Sample Size	Number of Children with Instability Events after Adoption
Adopted by Wave 5	689	81
Formal Instability	n/a	19 (2.7%, unweighted)
Informal Instability	n/a	62 (9.0%, unweighted)

Note: The number of children adopted by Wave 5 described in this table differs from the number described in **Chapter 2** for the NSCAW Primary Data Collection Study Design option (there, 731 adopted cases in NSCAW I). For the secondary analyses represented by data here in **Table 5.1**, it was necessary to determine a date of adoption. Some NSCAW I cases were identified as having been adopted but were missing data on the date of adoption. Those cases were not eligible to be included in these analyses.

### **Timing of Out-of-Home Placement and Adoption**

Establishing the timing of changes in living situations in NSCAW is complicated. NSCAW I includes information from the caregiver and caseworker about changes in the child’s living situation as well as periods of out-of-home placement. The NSCAW instruments allow caregivers and caseworkers to report on multiple changes in the child’s living environment since the last data collection period. The caregiver instrument allows up to 10 changes in living situation between waves of data collection. The caseworker instrument allows up to 25 changes. For each change in living situation the caregiver or caseworker described, the instrument is set up to establish the specific living situation location and both the beginning and ending date for that new location. Thus, we can establish a very detailed living situation timeline. To establish the timing of adoption and to demonstrate that the child exited foster care to adoption, we used a three-step process:

1. Define adoption case eligibility (as described previously).
2. Establish specific dates for adoption and changes in placement.
3. Establish that the dates of out-of-home placement into foster care precede the establishment of adoption.

**Appendix B** includes the variables associated with the three-step process.

### **Instability Outcomes**

In the NSCAW I dataset, we can examine both formal and informal instability. Formal instability is defined as foster care reentry after adoption has been finalized for the first time. Informal instability is indicated by temporary interruptions of care such as a stay at a residential treatment center or group home, moving in with a relative temporarily, running away, or other outcomes noted below. The same

<sup>9</sup> 731 children were identified as adopted as some point during the NSCAW I study. For these preliminary analyses we could only quantify a specific date of adoption for 689 cases. A date of adoption is necessary to determine that observed instability events occurred *post* adoption.

ability to report on multiple changes in living situation (described in the previous paragraph) applies to instability outcomes.

A unique benefit of the NSCAW I dataset is that it extends the definition of instability to include both formal instability and informal instability. Event timing is critical in establishing post adoption and guardianship instability and is especially important to consider within the longitudinal context of NSCAW datasets. Data indicating instability will only be characterized as an *instability event* when it occurs temporally in the dataset *after* the date of adoption and *prior to* a child turning 18.

**Table 5.2** shows the specific information used to derive these variables:

- Formal instability—Reentry to foster care
- Informal instability—Change in living situation since last wave, from the permanent caregiver’s home to any of the following settings displayed in **Table 5.2**.

Instability analysis results showed that 81 adopted children from NSCAW I experienced 154 different instability events after their adoption. **Table 5.2** describes the number of adopted children who experienced each type of instability events. Children could experience multiple post adoption instability events of the same type.

**Table 5.2. Number of Children in NSCAW I who Reported Specific Types of Instability at any Wave Following Adoption**

Instability Events	Adoption (n)
<b>Formal Instability</b>	
Foster care or therapeutic foster care	19
<b>Informal Instability</b>	
Emergency shelter	13
Residential treatment or group home	13
Place of detention	6
Ran away	14
Emancipated youth	3
Temporarily with another caregiver	8
Informal, other	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>

### **Sequencing of Permanency Events and Instability Events**

As part of the secondary data analysis, the research team derived new variables to specify the timing of instability events. That is, each instability event was designated as occurring *after* an adoption was reported. Each wave of NSCAW I captured movements in and out of homes, and in many cases multiple movements occurred between waves. The sequencing of these events required computation of new

variables accounting for dates of key events that were extrapolated from information such as the child's age or birth date and the date of the interview.

### ***Pre-Permanency Child Characteristics***

As **Table 5.3** shows, pre-permanency child characteristics examined in NSCAW I are:

- Child age at finalization
- Child gender
- Child race/ethnicity
- Maltreatment type and severity prior to placement
- Child disabilities (developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral problems, cognitive disabilities)
- Child temperament (age 0–3)
- Sibling adoption
- Relatedness to caregiver (grandchild, niece/nephew)
- Sexual identity (age 11 and older)
- Exposure to domestic violence
- Whether the biological parents' rights have been terminated (for guardianship cases).

Researchers measured each variable at baseline in NSCAW I and at subsequent waves as applicable for variables that might change over time. For example, if a change in custody occurred at Wave 3 whereby a new caregiver became the respondent, interviewers would have asked questions about relatedness to caregiver; otherwise this information would have been retained from the prior wave. A combination of child, caregiver, and caseworker reports provided these variables.

### ***Pre-Permanency Caregiver Characteristics***

Also shown in **Table 5.3**, the pre-permanency caregiver characteristics to be examined as predictor models in the NSCAW I analysis include:

- Education/employment
- Age
- Adoptive parent racial match to adopted child
- Marital status

### ***Child Mental Health Issues***

**Table 5.3** shows all NSCAW I child mental health variables. The instruments used to measure child mental health in NSCAW I cover ages 2 to 18 years. The respondent for each instrument varied depending on the child's age. When the child was old enough to self-report, researchers used the child's

report as the source. When the child was not old enough to report, researchers relied on the caregiver report. **Table 5.3** also shows the instruments used to measure presence of child mental health problems. The disorders measured by age were as follows:

- Ages 2–3: anxiety, depression, sleep problems, aggressive behavior, withdrawn behavior, somatic problems, destructive behavior
- Ages 4–18: anxiety, attention problems, delinquent behavior, aggressive behavior, depression, post-traumatic stress

Researchers will compile data across all age ranges on these disorders and categorize them into derived variables for internalizing and externalizing disorders. Each child will have a positive or negative indication for an internalizing disorder and the same for presence of an externalizing disorder.

**Table 5.3. Pre-Permanency and Child Mental Health Variables for NSCAW I Secondary Analysis**

Pre-Permanency Variables	NSCAW I Informant	NSCAW I item or Scale
<b>Child</b>		
Type of maltreatment	Caseworker	List of types of maltreatment a child could have experienced, including physical, sexual, emotional, abandonment, etc.
Child temperament	Caregiver	Infant Behavior Questionnaire – Temperament Module (administered to children ages 0–3 years).
Relatedness to caregiver (kinship)	Caregiver <sup>10</sup>	What is your relationship to the child? Are you related to the child?
Race, ethnicity	Caseworker	Is the child Hispanic or Latino? What is the child’s race?
Child gender	Caregiver	Is the child a boy or girl?
Child disabilities	Caseworker + Parent	Does the child have major special needs/behavioral problems? What special needs have you been told that your child has?
Age at placement and permanency	Caregiver	Derived from birth date of child and date of placement.
Sexual identity	Child (age 11+)	Do you think of yourself as: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, something else?
Termination of parental rights (guardianship cases only)	Caseworker, using DCF case records	Have the parental rights of the child’s mother/father been terminated?
Exposure to domestic violence	Caseworker	Was there a history of domestic violence against the caregiver?
Sibling group adoption	Caregiver	What is this person’s [other child who lives in the home] relationship to you?
<b>Caregiver</b>		
Age	Caregiver	In what month, date, and year were you born?
Race/ethnicity	Caregiver	Are you Spanish/Hispanic/Latino? What is your race?

(continued)

<sup>10</sup> Interviewers asked both children and their caregivers this item. When the two reports disagreed or when child data was missing, we will use caregiver data for this variable.

**Table 5.3. Pre-Permanency and Child Mental Health Variables for NSCAW I Secondary Analysis (continued)**

Pre-Permanency Variables	NSCAW I Informant	NSCAW I Instrument
Relatedness to child (kinship)	Caregiver	What is your relationship to the child? Are you related to the child?
Marital status	Caregiver	What is this person's [other adult living in the home] relationship to you? Spouse?
Education and employment	Caregiver	What is your highest educational degree? Which category best describes your employment situation?
Involvement in permanency decision	Caregiver	Do you feel you were given essential information about child when he/she was placed?
Child emotional and behavioral health	Caregiver	Child Behavior Checklist Ages 2–3: Anxious/Depressed, Sleep Problems, Aggressive Behavior, Withdraw, Somatic Problems, & Destructive Behavior) & 3 compiled Internalizing (I), Externalizing (E), & Total Problems (TP) Ages 4–18: Behavior problem scales: 2 broad problem scales— Externalizing and Internalizing; also, Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints, Anxious/Depressed, Social Problems, Thought Problems, Attention Problems, Delinquent Behavior, Aggressive Behavior, and Sex Problems
Youth emotional and behavioral health	Youth	Youth Self-Report (ages 11–18): Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints, Anxious/Depressed, Social Problems, Thought Disorder, Attention Problems, Delinquent Behavior, Aggressive Behavior); and 3 compiled (Internalizing, Externalizing, and Total Problems
Child and youth emotional and behavioral health	Child's teacher	Teacher Report Form (ages 5–18): Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints, Anxious/Depressed, Social Problems, Thought Problems, Attention Problems, Delinquent Behavior, and Aggressive Behavior; also Internalizing, Externalizing, and Mixed Scales
Child and youth depression	Youth/Caregiver	Children's Depression Inventory (ages 7–18)
Child and youth anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress	Youth/Caregiver	Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC) (ages 8–18)

## 5.4 Analysis Plan

### 5.4.1 Overview

Analyses for this project will examine the relationship between child and parent pre-permanency characteristics and post adoption instability. Analyses will also examine how children's mental health problems moderate the association between child and parent pre-permanency characteristics and instability over time. The analyses will isolate significant predictors of formal and informal stability. Once

we identify significant predictors, we will use further analyses to assess interactions between predictors in the model and child mental health.

#### **5.4.2 Analysis of Pre-Permanency Predictors and Interactions with Child Mental Health**

##### **Descriptive Analyses**

Since the adoption subsample is small and it is unclear what population the subsample represents, we will conduct descriptive and predictive analyses without sampling weights. However, we will compute weighted descriptive statistics on all analysis variables estimating whether there are differences between the adoption subsample and the NSCAW full data. This analysis will provide us an assessment of whether and how the subsample differs from the NSCAW population.

As a first step in the analytic plan, we will run descriptive analyses for all predictor variables as well as instability variables. We will examine variable distributions to specify the logistic regression model described below. For example, some variables may be scaled continuously and others may be scaled categorically based on their frequency distributions (e.g., Likert-type items). Note: we will not produce national estimates from this descriptive data because the sample will not be of an adequate size to produce reliable estimates. Rather, the purpose of our proposed analysis is to examine relationships between variables in the available sample which will be described thoroughly in terms of its differences from the full NSCAW sample.

In addition to univariate descriptive analyses, we will run bivariate correlations to identify significant correlations among predictors, moderators, and instability variables to assess direction of associations and inform the subsequent logistic model.

##### **Predictive Analyses**

Following descriptive analyses, we will fit logistic regression models to assess whether predefined risk and protective factors predict a binary outcome indicating instability in post adoption living situations (yes/no). We will run separate models to predict informal and formal instability, as power allows (see statistical power section). Predictive variables will include the child and caregiver pre-permanency characteristics shown in **Table 4-3**. Data for these variables will come from the NSCAW I baseline assessment for variables that are fixed over time. For other variables subject to change at the point of permanent placement, we will take from the wave at which the permanent placement occurred. For example, if a child is adopted at Wave 2, we would take data on whether the child is biologically related to the adoptive parent from Wave 2 instead of baseline.

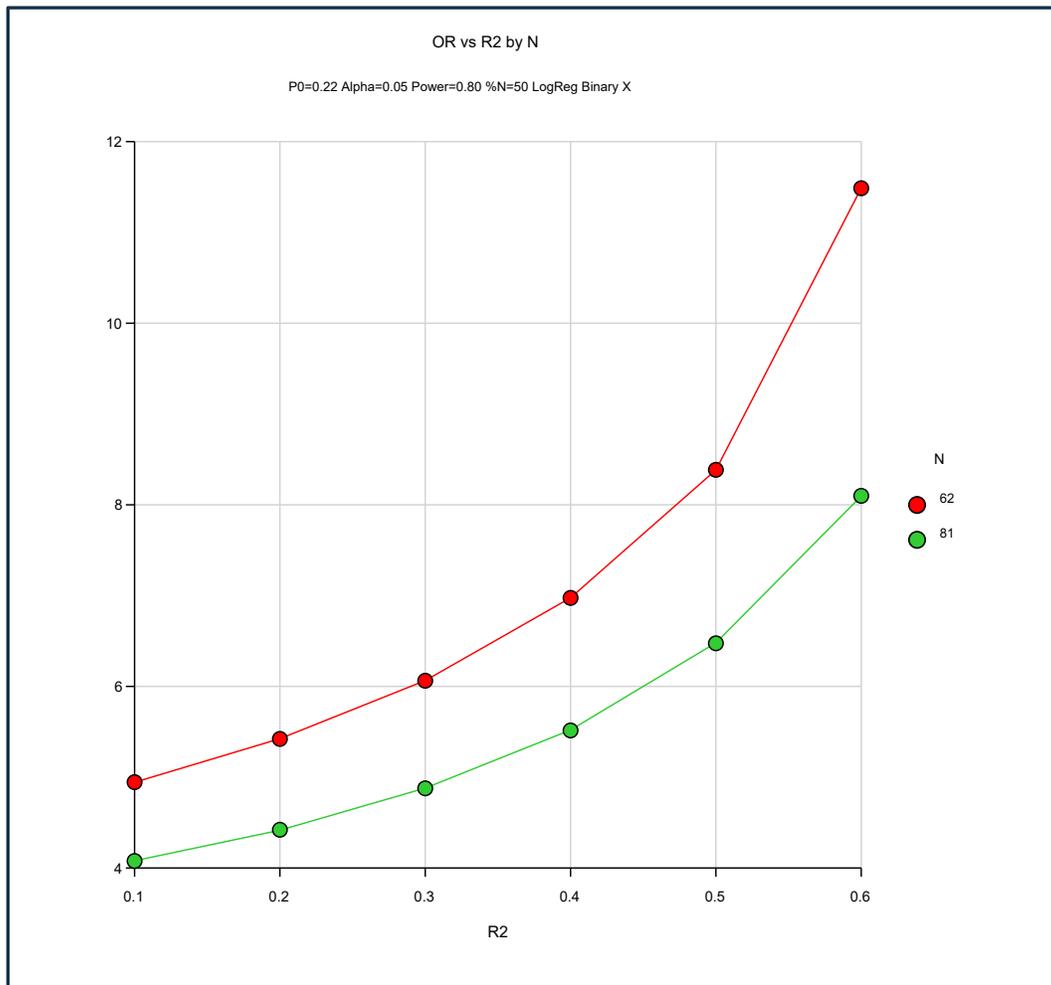
To compare the relative size of risk and protective factor effects, we will calculate odds ratio (OR) (and its 95% confidence interval) for each predictor in the logistic regression model. After these initial models, we will add interaction terms to explore whether significant predictors moderate the effect of variables showing the presence of internalizing and externalizing mental health disorders at the wave during which the instability event was reported. We will create internalizing and externalizing indicator variables from the mental health measures listed earlier in **Table 5.3**. These indicators will be developed based on thresholds recommended by the scale developers. Each child will have either a positive or negative designation for a disorder at the wave during which instability occurred. We will run separate models for externalizing and internalizing disorders because we expect the moderating effects of these two types of disorders to differ. After we drop nonsignificant terms, moderation analyses will expand

the model in Equation 1 to include the interaction between the remaining predictors and the disorder indicators.

We define the sample as any child adopted prior to or during the NSCAW I study. When timing is associated with risk or protective factors, the sample will be further constrained to include only cases for which it can be determined that information on the risk and protective factors were collected after the start of adoption but prior to the experience of instability. We will achieve this inclusion by comparing adoption start dates and instability event dates to the timing of the surveys where the risk and protective factors were collected. The project team has experience manipulating the dates associated with instability in prior work (Casanueva et al., 2014; Ringeisen, Tueller, Testa, Dolan, & Smith, 2013; Rolock & White, 2016).

### **5.4.3 Statistical Power**

For any given target predictor (including interaction terms) in a regression model, the power to conclude the target predictor has a significant effect on instability depends on the size of its effect on the outcome and its correlation with the other predictors in the model. **Figure 5.1** shows the correlation between the target predictor and any other predictors on the x-axis and the smallest detectable OR on the y-axis for 0.8 power for 81 children (green line; the combined formal and informal instability sample) and 62 children (red line; informal instability sample alone). Power analyses indicate the formal instability sample is too small to conduct analyses in this subsample. The OR ranges from 4 to 12, meaning that these sample sizes give adequate power to detect medium (OR=3.47) to large (OR=6.71; (Chen, Cohen, & Chen, 2010)) effects when correlations among the predictors are 0.35 or smaller.

**Figure 5.1. Assessment of Statistical Power for the Proposed Logistical Regression Model**

#### 5.4.4 Handling Missing Data in the NSCAW I Dataset

We will examine missing data patterns before analyses and may exclude variables with an excessive amount of missingness. We propose using full information maximum likelihood (FIML), which deals with missingness by estimating each parameter with all available data during optimization. This method retains all participants in the analysis even if they have missing data, and has been shown to produce estimates that are less biased than using listwise deletion. If FIML fails to converge (which can happen with a large number of categorical predictors), we will use multiple imputation (MI). The MI solution approaches the FIML solution as the number of imputed datasets gets larger (Enders, 2010). The project team has experience using both FIML and MI with the NSCAW data.

## 5.5 Practical Considerations and Challenges

*Limited observation period for instability.* The period to observe instability events will not cover the entire range of childhood and adolescence, because of NSCAW I's limited period of performance. At most, we will have 8 years of data for any respondent. Moreover, NSCAW I cases ranged from 0 to 14

years at baseline; therefore, the follow-up period for some cases involved infancy through early childhood, whereas the follow-up period for other cases involved later developmental stages. And, for children adopted late in the study period, the observation period for instability is very short. Nevertheless, all variables for the study were measured using age-calibrated instruments, and the total NSCAW sample includes all age groups 0–18, and will allow us to examine age at permanency placement as a potential predictor of instability.

*Complexity of deriving and sequencing instability variables.* The NSCAW I items used to derive the instability variables will come from multiple sources (caregivers, youth, and caseworkers). In addition, all variables will be present in 5 waves of data collection. The analysis team will need to ensure that all relevant NSCAW I items are included in the derived variables and that instability events are identified only when they occur after the adoption/guardianship relationship was finalized. Careful derivation of these variables is fundamental to answering all of the PAGI research questions using NSCAW data. Although this process is complex, the team will learn much about these cases to inform processes for modeling efforts as well as the primary data case sampling/selection.

*Limitations of defining guardianship in NSCAW.* This study does not propose to examine post guardianship instability. Identifying guardianship status using NSCAW data is complicated because the variables within NSCAW cannot specifically identify guardians who receive a federal or state guardianship subsidy. And, as a result, any definition will likely result in overestimation of guardianship cases. Guardianship as defined in NSCAW includes caregivers who label themselves as guardians. This category may include a relative who is informally and temporarily caring for a relative child, a relative who has been formally asked by the child welfare system to care for a relative child, fictive kin (an adult unrelated to the child, but with an emotional relationship to the child that is similar to a family relationship), or foster parents who feel they have legal guardianship for the child because they take the child to school, appointments, and enact other caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, NSCAW guardianship cases do not explicitly represent those with court-documented legal guardianship status and are not limited to include only guardians who receive a federal subsidy. In NSCAW I, guardianship could be derived from information provided by caseworker and caregiver reports, but caregivers may assume legality and perceive themselves to be legal guardians (and respond “yes” to survey questions asking about it) even when they may not meet a court definition of guardians.

Only caregivers that NSCAW interviewers define as nonpermanent are administered questions about legal guardianship. In NSCAW, field interviewers distinguished between permanent and nonpermanent caregivers. Biological parents are considered permanent, whereas foster caregivers are considered nonpermanent. Meanwhile, kinship caregivers may be perceived as either permanent and nonpermanent, based on whether the interviewer perceived that child’s living situation was a long-term and likely permanent option. Timing caveats are also associated with the NSCAW variables used to derive guardianship. The NSCAW I interview module for nonpermanent caregivers included questions about legal guardianship only at Waves 4 and 5 (not at baseline, Wave 2, or Wave 3). The NSCAW II interview module for nonpermanent caregivers included questions about legal guardianship only at Wave 3 (not at baseline or Wave 2).

For guardianship assistance programs or subsidized guardianship assistance, a guardian is typically defined as someone who cares for a child as a foster parent (including as a relative foster parent) and goes to court to obtain legal guardianship. If this process occurs through a state or county system, this

caregiver may be eligible for some financial assistance. The ASPE brief, “Title IV-E GAP Programs: A Work in Progress” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018) states the following: “The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provided states with the option to operate guardianship assistance programs (GAP) as part of their child welfare permanency continuum under title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The first of these programs began operating in 2010, though some states had operated guardianship programs under title IV-E waiver demonstrations years earlier. GAP programs provide financial support for children exiting foster care to permanent guardianships with kin.” Unfortunately, the available items within NSCAW cannot confirm the receipt of a specific state/county-provided guardianship subsidy and so would be overly inclusive.

The timing of the NSCAW I and II studies is a further complication for guardianship in NSCAW. Both studies largely occurred before GAP (which started with the passage of Fostering Connections) and when only a few states offered guardianship as a legally permanent foster care discharge option. The NSCAW participating states were primarily those involved with the Subsidized Guardianship Waiver Demonstration projects. Due to all of these complications, we do not recommend using NSCAW I to define a guardianship sample.

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## 6. Comparison of Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Rates: Secondary Data Analysis Study Design Option

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## 6. Comparison of Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Rates: Secondary Data Analysis Study Design Option

The purpose of this study design is to estimate the difference in instability rates for children discharged from foster care through adoption versus guardianship. Estimates of post adoption and guardianship instability rates will be additional byproducts of this design in a subset of states.<sup>11</sup> The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) is the primary data source for type of permanence, post-permanency instability, and variables related to foster care experiences used in this design. Only one type of post-permanency instability can be tracked using AFCARS: reentry to foster care.<sup>12</sup>

This design option will use a quasi-experimental method with roots in the propensity scoring (PS) approach of Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983). In this design we will compare reentry rates from two cohorts: (1) children exiting foster care to guardianship, and (2) children exiting foster care to adoption. We will use the AFCARS records, augmented from other datasets,<sup>13</sup> to find predictor variables<sup>14</sup> that are strongly associated with both the type of foster care discharge (adoption or guardianship) and the outcome (foster care reentry). We will use the predictor variables to weight a counterfactual adopted comparison group to a cohort of children discharged through guardianship.<sup>15</sup> In other words, we will produce (through record weighting) a cohort of **adoption discharges** that approximates the same likelihood of discharge **to guardianship** and reentry to foster care as the **guardianship cohort** based on variables observed prior to the date of discharge from foster care.

### 6.1 Study Rationale

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Our review of the existing literature found few studies that compared the incidence of post adoption instability to post guardianship instability. The few available studies found small to moderate differences in estimates of instability for adoptive and guardianship families (White, 2016). However, studies also suggested that the differences in instability rates for these two types of permanence may be partly, or even largely, due to characteristics that make adoption and guardianship families different (Rolock & White, 2017). Guardianships do not require termination of a parent's rights, a reorganization of natural family relationships, and are easier to legally dissolve than adoption (Testa, 2004). Families who become guardians rather than adopt tend to have different demographic, social, and case history characteristics unrelated to a child's placement in the home. For example, children in guardianship placements tend to be older, are more likely African-American, and more often have a kinship relationship with their caregiver than children in adoptive placements (Testa, 2010). Furthermore, guardians also tend to be

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<sup>11</sup> See below for state selection rationale.

<sup>12</sup> We will propose rules to distinguish, using AFCARS data, between long-term dissolutions and temporary disruptions (e.g., when a child has a short reentry episode followed by a return to the adoptive parent or guardian).

<sup>13</sup> Primarily via linking on county and state identifiers in AFCARS records. See this report for lists of potential external datasets and variables.

<sup>14</sup> Information from the Compendium of Policies and Practices (Stambaugh, Khoury, Domanico, & Ringeisen, 2018), a database the PAGI project created, that examines key policies related to adoption and guardianship.

<sup>15</sup> The two study arms (adoption and guardianship) are interchangeable in this design.

older, have lower incomes, and possibly be less aware of services available to families than adoptive parents (Corman & Coon, 2007; Testa, 2010). Variables in the existing literature that were strongly associated with reentry to foster care are especially relevant to this study design. To the extent that those variables can be approximated from the data sources in this study, they will contribute to the weighting of the counterfactual.

Ethical, legal, and practical constraints preclude all types of experimental studies that directly compare post adoption instability to post guardianship instability. Randomly assigning children to adoption versus legal guardianship to understand instability outcomes is not feasible. Similarly, selection bias and confounders (e.g., families' preference for guardianship rather than adoption; the legal and casework prerequisites, many of them lengthy processes, including termination of both parents' legal rights) make a direct comparison of adoption and guardianship outcomes a biased analysis. A quasi-experimental design can adjust for both types of bias and allow the average treatment effect (ATE) to be estimated. The ATE in this design is an estimate of the difference in instability rates between adoption and guardianship. Using a quasi-experimental design with publicly available data sources is both feasible and the strongest design option for understanding the difference in instability rates for adoption and guardianship.

The proposed PS method will identify factors that most strongly predict likelihood for adoption and guardianship permanency status. The PS method will also quantify observed confounding factors that are strongly associated with both adoption and guardianship as well as instability. Using the Literature Review (White et al., 2018) and Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**) developed by the Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability (PAGI) project, during the analysis phase, we will examine confounders and will mitigate their impact. Examples of potential confounders include:

1. *Kinship care*. A child living with a relative might positively influence a caregiver to choose guardianship over adoption. That same kinship relationship might protect against the child reentering foster care.
2. *Instability in foster care*. One associated confounder for children experiencing multiple moves in foster care is that they may develop issues that make a caregiver hesitant to adopt; such caregivers may be more prone to opt for guardianship instead. In addition, when children have moved multiple times, they may be at higher risk for reentry to foster care after the guardianship.
3. *Financial incentives*. A caregiver might be attracted by the financial incentives associated with adoption, but later decide that the incentives are insufficient, causing reentry to foster care.

## 6.2 Priority Research Questions

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This design option could assist with understanding the following research questions (RQs):

- **RQ 1.** Do children discharged to guardianship reenter foster care at higher rates than children with similar risk factors discharged to adoption?
- **RQ 2.** What is the cumulative reentry rate by county and state (for a subset of states) among children discharged:

- To adoption?
- To guardianship?

### 6.3 Overall Design and Methods

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We will use publicly available datasets in this study. Each dataset provides specific information that will help us understand factors associated with the discharge type (adoption or guardianship), reentry to foster care (the outcome), and contextual information related to both of these conditions. The foundation of this analysis comes from the AFCARS data. In the simplest terms, we will link child-level AFCARS data to NCANDS (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System) data, and at a geographic level code (e.g., county, state or FIPS [Federal Information Processing Standards]) to data collected in the Compendium of Policies and Practices (Stambaugh, Khoury, Domanico, & Ringeisen, 2018) that are relevant to post adoption and guardianship instability (i.e., the 50-State Administrative Data Summary from the PAGI Compendium of Policies and Practices). The specific datasets are listed below and described in more detail.

- AFCARS foster care records
  - 12-month files (FFY1995–2017)
  - 6-month files (FFY2010–2016)
- AFCARS adoption records (FFY1995–2016, adoptive family characteristics)
- NCANDS data (FFY1995–2016, maltreatment reports)
- 50-State Administrative Data Summary from the PAGI Compendium of Policies and Practices (Stambaugh et al., 2018) provides detailed information about policies and practices relevant to adoption and guardianship. This is an internal project document.
- U.S. Census data (environmental and community information)

#### 6.3.1 AFCARS Datasets

We will use AFCARS data for three primary purposes: (1) provide information on the experiences in foster care, (2) provide information on characteristics of adoptive families, (3) track reentry into foster care after adoption or guardianship. AFCARS, with the other data sources, will be the source data for models built to predict the outcome (reentry) and assignment (adoption or guardianship).

#### ***AFCARS—Foster Care Records Provide Information on Children’s Experiences in Foster Care***

Our review of existing literature found that children’s experiences in foster care (such as the age at discharge, length of time in foster care prior to permanence and placement with kin) are associated with both the discharge type and the likelihood of foster care reentry after permanence (Akin, 2011; Rolock & White, 2016; Rolock, White, Ocasio, Zhang, MacKenzie, & Fong, 2019).

Linking AFCARS files, across years, and between the foster care records and the adoption records, is not straightforward. The National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) provides two types of AFCARS foster care datasets:

1. 12-month AFCARS datasets: Covering FFY1995 through FFY2017 (23 files). States submit AFCARS files every 6 months. The Children’s Bureau merges those 6-month files into 12-month files. During this process the data undergo significant processing that removes and changes information. The research team analyzed the critical fields used to link records over time to determine the utility of these datasets in this design. We excluded the pre-1998 datasets from consideration because fewer than 20 states submitted them, the codes used to record race changed in 1998,<sup>16</sup> and they were more heavily impacted by missing discharge dates than post-1997 records. Preliminary analyses indicate that the 12-month datasets covering FFY1998 through FFY2017 in up to 16 states appear to contain sufficient information to detect reentry to foster care following adoption discharges (Trackable IDs below).
2. 6-month AFCARS dataset: Covering FFY2010 through FFY2016 in a single file, these data are closest to the raw data that states submit every 6 months. Compared to the 12-month AFCARS datasets, these data contain twice as many samples of fields that change over time such as placement setting and case plan goal. The NDACAN imposes a rule requiring that the FIPS codes of counties that submit fewer than 1,000 records in a dataset are set to an invalid FIPS code (008). Because the 6-month AFCARS covers 7 full years in a single dataset with twice as many records per year, 90% of records meet the threshold of 1,000 records per FIPS code versus about 50% in 12-month AFCARS. Thus, many small, rural counties are identified in the 6-month AFCARS dataset but not in the 12-month AFCARS dataset. The NDACAN does not provide these 6-month files before FFY2010 or after FFY2016.

### ***AFCARS—Adoption Records Provide Demographic Information about the Adoptive Parent(s)***

This information includes items like date of birth, race, gender, relationship to child, and marital status. We will link the AFCARS foster care and adoption records together at the child level, using a combination of child identifiers and discharge dates.

### ***AFCARS Data Will be Used to Track Reentries into Foster Care***

Each AFCARS record contains a single field (an ID) intended to identify a child uniquely across all submissions. The integrity of this field is critical to identifying reentries to foster care, because the same child ID should be used for reentering children in two AFCARS removal records: (1) a removal leading to discharge (the discharge record) and (2) a second removal following that discharge (the reentry record). If the same ID is not used in both records, the removal following the previous discharge will be incorrectly classified as a new removal instead of a reentry (a false-negative error). For this study, we identified two circumstances under which we can track reentries following adoption discharges: (1) trackable IDs that do not change pre and post adoption, and (2) linkable IDs that can be resolved using additional data not in AFCARS, but maintained by some states to allow pre and post adoption IDs to be linked. Adoption reentries cannot be tracked in most states using AFCARS alone, because adopted children are frequently assigned new IDs. When children are discharged to guardianship and other permanency categories, their AFCARS IDs do not change, so guardianship reentries can be tracked using AFCARS. The following 19 states (a preliminary list) have either trackable or linkable adoption IDs. In some states the PAGI team learned of this information during conversations with state stakeholders, whereas for other states, project staff did preliminary analysis of existing AFCARS data. The specific

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<sup>16</sup> AFCARS originally recorded a single race per person from four categories, but changed in 1998 to record multiple races per person from six categories.

information that we gathered through project team discussions with stakeholders is noted below. The sites with trackable and linkable IDs are:

- Trackable ID: Arizona, Florida (confirmed in stakeholder discussion); Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas (confirmed in stakeholder discussion); Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska (only for families receiving an adoption subsidy, per stakeholder discussion); New York, Oregon, Texas, and Vermont
- Linkable ID: Illinois, New Jersey, and Tennessee

This design option will blend records from both 12-month and 6-month AFCARS datasets. Project staff will develop methods to maximize the time periods in each state during which identifiers linking adoption discharges to reentries conform to theoretical assumptions.<sup>17</sup> An example method might use a set of fields from each record as an alternate identifier (an alternate ID) to estimate the likelihood of errors in the ID fields that do not link adoption discharges to reentries. For example, this alternate ID might be a series of interconnected variables including state, child's sex, child's month and year of birth, caretaker year of birth, dates of termination of parental rights, and discharge date. These fields are all available in AFCARS foster care and adoption records, as well as child IDs. We expect that this alternate ID would result in many false-positive errors by linking adoption discharges to reentries with differing IDs. From states with the highest-quality linkable IDs, we could estimate statistics related to agreement (and discord) between the alternate IDs and the true IDs. Chi-squared is one such statistic, among many others. We could then use the distributions of those statistics from a few states with high-quality linkable IDs to set acceptable limits on the same statistics from states with trackable IDs.

Preliminary analyses indicate that the 16 states with trackable IDs reported 5,869 post adoption reentries and 11,573 post guardianship reentries during state-specific times (8 to 18 years) in which records appear by inspection to link well. **Table 6.1** shows preliminary counts of discharges and reentries by state to give a general idea of the counts potentially available; however, due to the uneven mix of follow-up times,<sup>18</sup> we should not infer rates from these counts.

**Table 6.1. Preliminary Raw Counts of Adoption/Guardianship Discharges Linked to Reentries by State and Period**

State	Period	Adoption Discharges	Reentries from Adoption	Guardian Discharges	Reentries from Guardianship
AZ	FFY2010–2017	22,999	35	4,648	317
FL	FFY2002–2017	51,003	410	43,665	6,454
HI	FFY2003–2017	3,358	178	1,523	116
IN	FFY2004–2017	14,854	216	7,125	377
KS	FFY2002–2017	10,434	649	3,700	390
KY	FFY2010–2017	7,284	128	292	46

(continued)

<sup>17</sup> For details, see Adoption Reentry Bias section.

<sup>18</sup> See the Adoption Reentry Bias section for explanation of the different reporting periods in the table.

**Table 6.1. Preliminary Raw Counts of Adoption/Guardianship Discharges Linked to Reentries by State and Period (continued)**

State	Period	Adoption Discharges	Reentries from Adoption	Guardian Discharges	Reentries from Guardianship
LA	FFY2000–2017	10,371	394	1,824	135
MN	FFY2003–2017	10,276	224	7,937	1,171
MO	FFY2004–2017	17,034	526	10,698	574
MS	FFY2010–2017	2,933	72	1,363	43
MT	FFY2000–2017	4,169	103	1,480	91
NE	FFY2000–2017	7,257	218	4,082	652
NY	FFY2000–2017	41,351	364	1,640	15
OR	FFY2003–2017	13,172	324	4,226	286
TX	FFY2002–2017	68,630	1,839	25,337	875
VT	FFY2000–2017	3,007	189	313	31
	Sum	288,132	5,869	119,853	11,573

### 6.3.2 NCANDS Data

NCANDS data provide information related to maltreatment reports. We will also link the AFCARS foster care records to the NCANDS report records using a combination of child identifiers, report dates, removal dates, and disposition.

### 6.3.3 Data from PAGI Project Summary of State Policies and Practices

Information on state policies, gathered for another phase of the PAGI project (Compendium of Policies and Practice; Stambaugh et al., 2018), will provide contextual information. We will link these data to the child-level records in the child welfare datasets using the smallest spatial level (usually county), time (usually year), and other units available. Data will include information such as the year that the guardianship assistance program started in a specific state, the proportion of children discharged in the state who are discharged to adoption, and the proportion discharged to guardianship.

### 6.3.4 U.S. Census Data

To help further understand the impact of contextual moderators, we will include data from the U.S. Census Bureau. We will link U.S. Census data to the child-level records using the smallest spatial (county or FIPS code) level. Data will include items such as the proportion of families in the community who rent housing, the proportion of families in the community who are living in poverty, and the educational level of the adults in the community.

## 6.4 Analysis Plan

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This study design will use PS methods to compare the ATE on reentry to foster care between two cohorts: (1) guardianship discharges, and (2) adoption discharges. In treatment-control terms, the guardianship cohort will act as the treatment arm and the adoption cohort will act as the control arm in this study. We will refer to the two study arms as guardianship and adoption. We will refer to the process of selection into one of the study arms (discharge type) as assignment. We will refer to reentry to foster care as the instability outcome. We will refer to the individual subjects' dates of discharge from foster care collectively as the baseline.

We will proceed with this analysis by tackling the most significant challenges to validity in this order: adoption reentry bias, confounding, baseline covariates, covariate exclusions, and finally outcome estimates.

### 6.4.1 Adoption Reentry Bias

To varying degrees, tracking reentry after adoption for children formerly in foster care has errors; not all reentry after adoption is captured in the existing data systems. For example, when a child reenters foster care after an adoption and this child is not accurately identified as a reentry (treated as a child entering care for the first time), a new identifier is assigned to a child who was previously in foster care. This process occurs to varying degrees in all states. These are failures to detect an instability event. If, on the day of the instability event, the system falsely recorded the child as stable, we term this a “false-negative.” Such false-negatives reduce reentry rate estimates, causing a bias toward lower reporting in the measured percentage of children reentering. Logic and evidence (e.g., no reentries from large numbers of adoption recorded in many states over many years) that we have compiled thus far indicate this problem is far more severe among reentries following adoptions than for other types of permanence, including guardianship.

The primary variables used to uniquely resolve a child's identity are first name, last name, date of birth, social security number (SSN) and relationships to other persons, though sophisticated systems<sup>19</sup> use many more, along with expert human judgment. Because a child's name and SSN often change at adoption, the probability of a false-negative person-identifier is far higher for an adopted child at reentry than for other former foster children. That probability will depend heavily on each jurisdiction's ability and efforts to search and connect pre-adoption and post adoption identifying information.

Most states cannot track adoption reentries through an ID field. All states can track reentries from other types of permanence using IDs. Among the states that can track adoption reentries, 10 states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Oregon, and Pennsylvania) reported very low rates of reentry (1–2% at 15 years) post adoption.

For example, producing a count of reentries reported by a child welfare agency following adoptions, guardianships, and any type of discharge from foster care is easy to do from raw AFCARS records. They might be useful for visual inspection of reporting variations that could be related to false-negative reentries and other data quality issues. For this report, we conducted a count for several states (results

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<sup>19</sup> Entity resolution systems ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Record\\_linkage#Entity\\_resolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Record_linkage#Entity_resolution)) for example, might use temporal, spatial and social network proximity to identify relationships that are not obvious.

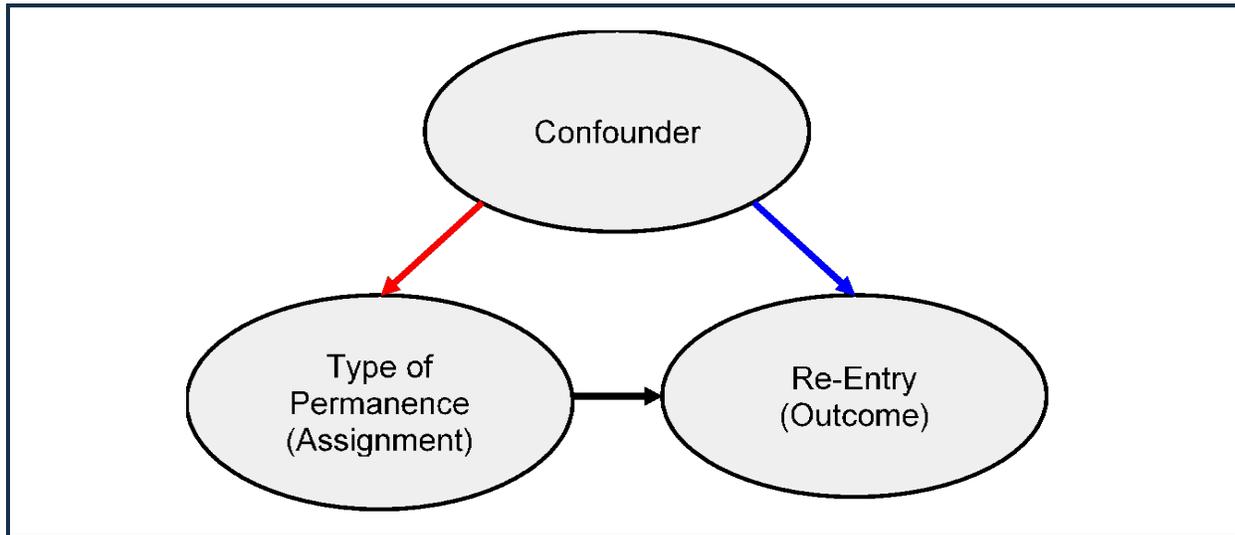
not included). Visual checks may lead to useful explanations of each state’s capacity to track reentries, especially from adoption, during specific time periods. We will attempt to develop an objective set of rules to select states and time periods that balance the requirements of lengthy follow-up times for adoption reentries while minimizing the bias due to false-negative adoption reentries. We will carefully compare the reporting patterns in the selected states and time periods to those in the three states with linkable IDs (Illinois, New Jersey, and Tennessee), where we expect minimal false-negative adoption reentry bias. Linkable IDs in these three states are more likely to be correct because the states have a deliberate system for specifically tracking adoption IDs across time. This, however, is an assumption that we will validate through the course of conducting this study.

This design carries risk of bias due to misclassified or false-negative reentries from adoption. We do not have a certain remedy for this bias that will substantially mitigate that risk and fit within the scope of this project.

### 6.4.2 Confounding

Many of the concepts in the PAGI Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**) might operate as confounders through causal mechanisms acting on both the assignment and outcome of this study. **Figure 6.1** illustrates this challenge.

**Figure 6.1. Confounding Digraph**



If a covariate has no direct or indirect cause-effect relationship to the type of permanence or to reentry, that covariate is not a confounder. Examples of potential confounders include:

- **Kinship:** e.g., a child living with a relative might positively influence a caregiver to choose guardianship over adoption, and ultimately protect against the child reentering foster care.
- **Instability in foster care:** e.g., a child who has experienced multiple moves in foster care may develop issues that make a caregiver hesitant to adopt; such caregivers may be more prone to

opt for guardianship instead. In addition, when children have moved multiple times, they may be at higher risk for reentry to foster care after the guardianship.

**Financial incentives:** e.g., a caregiver might be attracted by the financial incentives for adoption, but decide later that the incentives are insufficient, causing reentry to foster care. Random assignment breaks the red and blue causal paths in **Figure 6.1**. The confounder remains, but its influence is distributed uniformly across the two arms, making it independent of the type of permanence, allowing us to infer that the ATE results from the difference in permanence alone. However, as discussed above, random assignment is not an option in this study.

PS methods can create a synthetic sample (using weights or matching) in which the confounder is forced to be independent of the type of permanence. The scores in PS are estimates from a statistical model of the probability of a subject's discharge to guardianship given the subject's covariates. The ideal PS model includes all confounders to avoid bias and all covariates that predict the outcome for efficiency, while excluding covariates not associated with the outcome. A recently developed method attributed to Benkeser (2019) called Collaborative Targeted Minimum Loss Estimation (CTMLE) appears to offer the best, simplest, current state-of-the-art method to combat confounding while preserving statistical efficiency in causal inference. CTMLE builds on the Outcome-Adaptive Lasso (OAL)<sup>20</sup> method attributed to Shortreed and Ertefaie (2017). Both methods optimize the specification of causal models by incorporating information about the outcome-covariate associations into the model that estimates the PS probability of assignment using per-covariate penalties derived from the strengths of association in the outcome model. CTMLE extends OAL beyond linear models to use machine-learning techniques that are more adept at modeling complex interactions and functional relationships.

### 6.4.3 Baseline Covariates

In the presence of confounders, CTMLE (and all PS approaches) depend on the available baseline covariates with associations to both the assignment and the outcome. Adjusting for strong confounders operating through multiple mechanisms requires the broadest possible set of covariates and strong methods for finding many associations.

Using the information gathered in the Literature Review (White et al., 2018) and summarized in the Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**), we will select baseline covariates. Some of this information will relate to risk and protective factors identified in the literature. We will augment it by contextual information (from the data scan and the U.S. Census) that will be the basis for the PS. This study design will draw from approximately 200–300 variables, both raw and constructed, from child welfare data (AFCARS and NCANDS), census data, and information gathered from the PAGI project Compendium of Policies and Practice (Stambaugh et al., 2018).

At this point in planning, specificity is difficult because we have not conducted the preliminary analysis. The following example illustrates the issue and presents one solution. Assume that in states where we are confident about the accuracy of the instability outcome indicator, our machine-learning models search all combinations of up to six variables. The search finds that children over 12 years old were most at risk for reentry into foster care if they lived in counties with high income inequality, where over 70% of families rented (rather than owned) their homes, and the majority of residents did not complete

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<sup>20</sup> Least Absolute Shrinkage and Selection Operator, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lasso\\_\(statistics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lasso_(statistics)) 

college. That might be one pattern of covariates among hundreds of covariate combinations that the machine-learning algorithms searched. The relative strength of each variable found by the machine-learning algorithms will be summarized using a variable importance metric to give some insight into the mechanisms at work.<sup>21</sup> To estimate instability rates in Nebraska, where we have incomplete information about who experiences instability, we would refit a reduced model of, say, the variables with the 20 highest importance values. The result would be a more general, parsimonious model<sup>22</sup> that we could use to predict instability in all states.

#### 6.4.4 Covariate Exclusions

Covariates that draw upon or supply post-discharge information or have values determinative (probability=1 or 0) of the assignment or outcome must be excluded in the CTMLE procedure. Examples of covariates that will be excluded are discharge type, adoption or guardianship subsidy information, termination of parental rights, plan goal of adoption or guardianship, and pre-adoptive placement types.

#### 6.4.5 Outcome Estimates

We will use propensity scores from the CTMLE model to form weights for each subject. This widely used approach, called inverse probability of treatment weighting (Austin, 2011; Rosenbaum, 1987), assigns the highest weights to subjects who are most underrepresented in the guardianship arm of the study, while subjects who are highly represented in the guardianship arm are assigned lower weights. Applying those weights to the records in the two arms of the study results in a synthetic sample that, if PS theory holds, contains a balanced set of the covariates that are most likely to bias the ATE. We will test for balance across the arms by checking that weighted summary statistics of covariates in the two arms (guardianship and adoption) do not differ significantly. For SD 1, we will calculate the study arm ATE (the difference in foster care reentry rates) from the weighted records' reentry outcomes. For SD 2, we will provide estimates of the cumulative reentry rates in each study arm in the states and counties identified in the weighted records.

### 6.5 Practical Considerations and Challenges

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*Quasi-experimental design.* This design is quasi-experimental, so we can draw no causal conclusions from the results.

*Unobserved covariates.* We anticipate many confounders. We will include a broad set of covariates, but with estimates across many states, over very long time periods based on data from systems not designed for this purpose, there will always be unobserved covariates associated with confounders. We will use the "treatSens" package (dual-parameter sensitivity analysis) for the R statistical language to estimate the sensitivity of the ATE to a range of confounding strengths (Carnegie, Harada, & Hill, 2018).

*Convenience sample.* This study design will depend on a sample of states that is not representative of other states or the nation. Although an adjusted estimate of the national ATE based on this convenience

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<sup>21</sup> The Permutation Importance algorithm (see [https://eli5.readthedocs.io/en/latest/blackbox/permutation\\_importance.html](https://eli5.readthedocs.io/en/latest/blackbox/permutation_importance.html)) is a promising model-agnostic method.

<sup>22</sup> In statistics, this would be a model that errs on the side of underfitting or bias in the "bias-variance" tradeoff. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bias-variance\\_tradeoff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bias-variance_tradeoff): "High bias can cause an algorithm to miss the relevant relations between features and target outputs (underfitting)."

sample of states is theoretically possible, in the context of the considerations cited above, we recommend against it.

*No examination of state policy or practice.* The PAGI project in-person expert consultant meeting included recommendations to consider using secondary data to examine state policy or practice differences to address one of the original PAGI study RQs: *How are federal, state and/or local-level policies related to adoption and guardianship associated with post adoption and guardianship instability rates?* The research team considered this option; however, we elected not to include this question as primary or secondary research for several reasons. First, with only a subset of states available to examine instability outcomes, we are pessimistic about the degree of meaningful policy/practice variation available to test differences across states. Second, consistent with our Conceptual Framework (see **Appendix A**), we hypothesize that many environmental factors influence post adoption and guardianship instability. For example, poverty (environment) and financial incentives (policy) might influence permanency and instability independently and together in a complex interaction separable only through techniques such as multifactor modeling (which we determined to be outside the scope of a circumscribed secondary data analysis study). Finally, findings from the subset of states would not be nationally representative, limiting the conclusions drawn from these analyses. We will include elements from the Compendium of Policies and Practices (Stambaugh et al., 2018) in our propensity models to test the impact of policies in the subset of states. If ACF would like us to develop an exploratory research question specifically related to policies, the research team will accommodate this request.

## 6.6 Conclusion

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This report summarizes work to develop design options for a group of studies that aim to gather information on post adoption and guardianship instability. This report describes five possible study design options. Each study is designed to answer different research questions that are all grounded in further understanding post adoption and guardianship instability. The Administration for Children and Families may select a subset of these studies for implementation in the future.

## 6.7 References

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# Appendix A. PEGI Project Conceptual Framework

The PEGI project literature review (White et al., 2018) led to the development of the conceptual framework depicted in **Exhibit A.1**. The primary outcome of interest, post adoption and guardianship instability, is depicted on the far right of the framework; it includes the various types of instability, and differences between children who exit foster care through adoption compared to guardianship. The intermediate outcomes affect this primary distal outcome; the other constructs depicted in the conceptual framework also mediate and moderate post adoption and guardianship instability.

Attention to time is an important feature of the conceptual framework. It is displayed across the top of the framework with the periods of pre- and post-permanence noted. Some constructs (e.g., motivations across the top and characteristics across the bottom) are important to consider as they change over time. Therefore, these constructs cross time periods in the framework.

The conceptual framework shows how the individual variables could be included in each core construct as indicated by the literature. In the conceptual framework, model constructs and pathways are assumed to function similarly for adoptive versus guardianship families. However, research has found that, in examining differences between adoption and guardianship, it is critical to control for key characteristics between these two groups. These characteristics include, for example, the age of the caregiver and kinship adoption or guardianship, as these factors are important to consider when examining what would have occurred if a guardianship relationship was not available. Furthermore, specific constructs may be more or less relevant, or function somewhat differently within the framework, for these two different permanency arrangements. For example, the relationship motivator of family duty may operate more strongly in guardianship than adoption families because kin caregivers often select guardianship as a permanency option.

**Motivations to initiate and sustain the adoptive or guardianship relationship** are depicted at the top of the framework. These motivations are examined from the perspectives of both the child and the caregiver. The motivations that underlie a caregiver's decision to adopt or become a guardian are key to understanding post adoption and guardianship instability. Social scientists from a variety of disciplines agree on a common core of relationship motivators that structure most human relationships (England, Folbre, & Carrie, 2012; Fiske & Haslam, 1996). These motivators are about the relationships between people, and how and why they interact, rather than individual characteristics. For example, a person may be motivated to initiate and maintain a relationship to a child based on whether that person is the child's grandparent or the child's foster parent. A grandparent may be motivated by a sense of family duty (e.g., "She is my granddaughter, so I will provide care for her") while a foster parent may be motivated by a religious calling. These motivators are instrumental in initiating a relationship between a child and her caregiver. It can also impact the child's or caregiver's decision to maintain the relationship. These relationship motivators have important implications for understanding post adoption and guardianship instability. Caregivers may transition to a permanent caregiver role out of a compelling sense of duty or obligation, because of social or economic rewards or perceived reciprocity, a feeling of affinity or compassion, or because of a calling to a higher purpose. These motivators may shift over time and may enhance or diminish a caregiver's motivation to sustain the relationship. Similarly, while a child

may not have as much say in the initiation of an adoptive or guardianship relationship, his or her motivations affect the longevity of that relationship.

**Child, caregiver, and family characteristics.** Key among the risk and protective factors that influence post adoption and guardianship instability are child, caregiver, and family characteristics. These include items like the child's experiences in foster care and biological relatedness of the child and caregiver that are set (unmodifiable) and known at the time of permanence. There are also other factors that change over time (e.g., current age of the child and caregiver, level of expectations of self and of the adoptive or guardianship relationship).

**Pre-permanency characteristics** are depicted at the far left of the framework. These include items related to a child or youth, such as the child's race or ethnicity, the age of the child at the time of legal permanence, or the young person's perceptions and involvement in the permanency decision. This category also involves caregiver characteristics, such as parenting competencies, the biological relatedness between the child and caregiver, and demographic characteristics (e.g., marital status, age, race).

**Characteristics that change over time** are depicted at the bottom of the framework, and noted at the child, caregiver, and family levels. These are characteristics such as age, expectations of self, and the adoptive or guardianship relationship that change as the relationship grows through developmental stages.

Child, caregiver, and family characteristics can directly affect post adoption and guardianship instability (e.g., the robust finding that the age of the child is a key predictor of post adoption and guardianship instability). Child and caregiver characteristics can be diminished or enhanced by the relationship qualities in the family. For example, the biological relationship (kinship) can strengthen or diminish the familial bonds when a caregiver adopts a child.

These constructs are complex, and concepts may overlap in certain areas. Therefore, constructs and variables were placed in the conceptual framework where they fit the best, understanding that the framework is simply a model of the real world, intended to describe post adoption and guardianship instability and inspire future research. Constructs in the conceptual framework are frequently discussed in multiple areas of this literature review (e.g., kinship), and the constructs in the conceptual model may influence, or moderate the effects of other constructs, in complex ways over time. For example, consider the robust finding that child behavioral problems are associated with post adoption and guardianship instability. Although this finding is fairly clear in the literature, how a caregiver addresses difficult child behaviors can be understood by examining the kinship relationship between the child and caregiver (e.g., Does the caregiver use different methods of discipline with the child because they are kin?). Finally, an adoptive parent or guardian's decision to seek assistance for difficult child behaviors may be moderated by the level of informal support she or he has in the family, and by the availability of formal services in the geographic area where the caregiver lives.

**Intermediate outcomes.** Key intermediate outcomes examined in the existing literature are listed in the middle section of the framework. Most studies examine these outcomes rather than directly examining post adoption and guardianship instability. These intermediate outcomes are assumed to be related to instability, either according to theory or previous empirical literature.

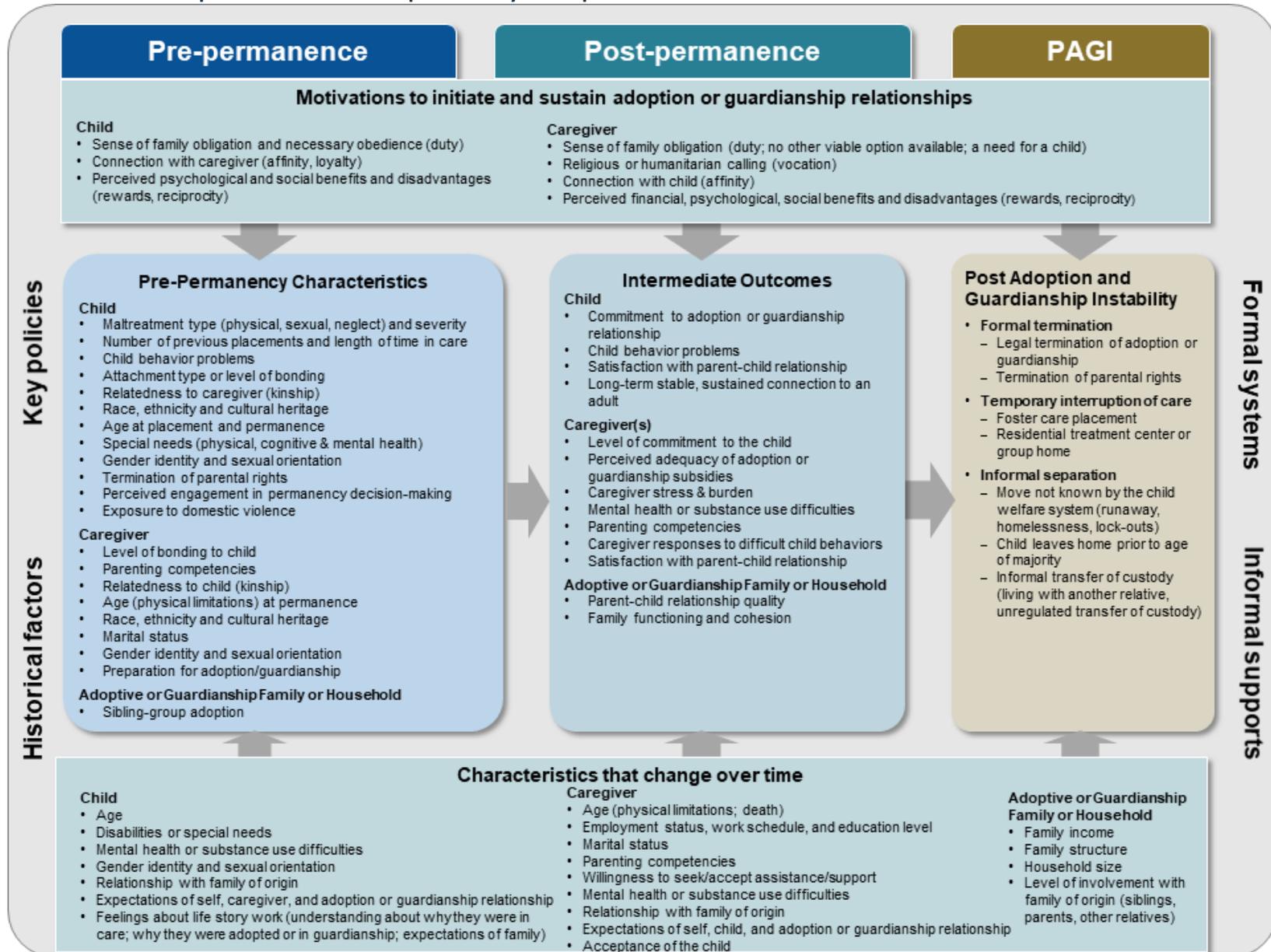
Research that examines only proximal (or intermediate) outcomes, rather than instability itself, has significant limitations. Foremost is that families who experience worse proximal outcomes will not automatically also experience instability; there is really no way to tell the difference between those families who will experience instability and those who will not. A related limitation is that studies may suffer from endogenous selection bias which occurs when families are selected in a non-random way after the intervention and the outcome have already occurred (Elwert & Winship, 2014). This bias results in participants not being representative of the population in a way that may impact the intermediate outcome of interest, because, for instance, they only include samples of families that are intact. Thus, families who actually have experienced the worse outcomes related to instability are not included in study samples, which can lead to positive bias in results (i.e., families may seem to be doing better than they really are if those who struggled most have already dropped out).

**Contextual moderators.** Adoptive and guardianship family relationships are impacted by outside forces such as informal systems of support that, if activated, can diminish caregiver burden, for instance, and reduce the risk of post adoption and guardianship instability. Availability of formal services also affects familial relationships. A family in need of mental health services may experience post adoption and guardianship instability if the caregiver feels that the only way for their child to receive needed services (e.g., psychiatric hospitalization) is by relinquishing custody to the state to allow state-funded payment for services. On the other hand, if mental health services are available, and provided by a therapist experienced in adoption and trauma, a family may have a higher level of commitment that allows stability.

Policies also impact post adoption and guardianship instability, through direct and indirect relationships. For example, differential rates of instability across states may occur depending on how difficult or easy ending the guardianship is. In addition, this policy could moderate the relationship between the level of caregiver commitment and post adoption and guardianship instability. Caregivers with a strong level of commitment, for instance, may not be impacted by the ease at which they can legally end their relationship with their grandchild.

Historical factors and relationship qualities also affect policies and practices. Consider, for instance, the reasons and norms parents adopt. When adoption was widened beyond infertile couples, this opening altered the relationship quality or *calling*. That calling can impact parents' sense of duty, their willingness to seek formal and informal supports, and ultimately, their ability to maintain a child in their home when faced with difficult familial relationships.

Exhibit A.1. Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Conceptual Framework



A-4

## A.1 References

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# Appendix B. Pagi Adoption Case Identification Procedures for NSCAW I and NSCAW II

## B.1 Adoption

**Summary:** Adoption is based on the derived variable in the NSCAW datasets that are based on caregiver report that the child mother or father is the adoptive parent (PHH6a or PRTOC). If that information is missing, adoption is based on the caregiver (PCGAREL and PCGBREL) or child instruments (YCGAREL and YCGBREL). This includes information from data collected during the sampling process from the designated child welfare agency liaison, which was then confirmed during the caregiver or child interviews. In the case of NSCAW II, the information was expanded to use information from the AFCARS file indicating that the case was adopted. For cases identified as both adopted and legal guardianship, the case was classified as adopted.

**NSCAW I:** Adopted cases were identified based on the across waves summary derived variable available in the dataset: DEVRADPT

*N (15 years or older by April 2020) = 731*

NSCAW I Variable	Description	Source Variables	Definition
DEVRADPT	This variable indicates if the child was adopted across waves. It is based on the wave-specific adoption flag CHdAdopt that indicates if the child was adopted at the time of the interview based on the caregiver and child instruments.	PCgarel and PCGBREL:  PCGAREL CG Relationship Code -CG Inst  PCGBREL Other CG Rel. Code (RELAT1T) -CG Inst  1 = BIOLOGICAL MOTHER 2 = STEP-MOTHER 3 = ADOPTIVE MOTHER 4 = FOSTER MOTHER 5 = SISTER 6 = AUNT 7 = GRANDMOTHER 8 = BIOLOGICAL FATHER 9 = STEP-FATHER 10 = ADOPTIVE FATHER  p_hh6a:  PRTOC_1 HH member 1 rel to ch-code(RELAT1T)  2 = MOTHER (BIOLOGICAL) 3 = FATHER (BIOLOGICAL) 4 = STEP-MOTHER 5 = STEP-FATHER 6 = ADOPTIVE MOTHER 7 = ADOPTIVE FATHER	The variable was initially set to '2' (No) and set to '1' (Yes) if one or more of the following conditions are met from that wave:  1) if the caregiver interview is complete and the caregiver reported relationship to child is adopted mother or father [pcgarel in (3,10) or pcgbrel in (3,10) or p_hh6a in (6,7)]  2) if the child interview is complete and the caregiver reported relationship to child is adopted mother or father [ycgarel in (3,10) or ycgbrel in (3,10)]  3) if a manual review of case folder indicates child was adopted  4) if no interviews are completed but the CID indicates child adopted

(continued)

NSCAW I Variable	Description	Source Variables	Definition
		YCGAREL: CG Relationship YCGAREL Code (RELAT1T) -CH Inst  YCGBREL: YCGBREL Other CG Rel. Code (RELAT1T) -CH Inst  3 = ADOPTIVE MOTHER 10 = ADOPTIVE FATHER	

**NSCAW II:** Adopted cases were identified based on the across waves summary derived variable available in the dataset: DEVRADPT

*N (15 years or older by April 2020) = 221*

NSCAW II Variable	Description	Source Variables	Definition
DEVRADPT	This variable indicates if the child was adopted at the time of the interview across waves. It is based on the wave-specific adoption flag CHdAdopt that indicates if the child was adopted at the time of the interview based on the caregiver and child instruments, and the AFCARS files.	PCGBREL: Other CG Rel. Code -CG Inst  p_hh6ax: PHH6AX Rs relationship to CH  YCGAREL: YCGAREL CG Relationship Code -CH Inst ycgbrel YCGBREL Other CG Rel. Code -CH Inst  FXSEVERADPT FXSEVERADPT Child Adopted	The variable was initially set to '2' (No) and set to '1' (Yes) if one or more of the following conditions are met from that wave: 1) if the caregiver Interview is complete and the caregiver reported relationship to child is adopted mother or father [pcgarel in (3,10) or pcgbrel in (3,10) or p_hh6ax in (6,7)] 2) if the child Interview is complete and the caregiver reported relationship to child is adopted mother or father [ycgarel in (3,10) or ycgbrel in (3,10)] 3) if a manual review of case folder indicates child was adopted 4) if the AFCARS files indicate the case was adopted based on FXSEVERADPT 5) if no interviews are completed but the CID indicates child adopted

## B.2 Timing of Out-of-Home Placement and Adoption

### NSCAW I:

- **Step 1:** Define the subpopulation of cases across the time of the study identified as adopted or in guardianship.
- **Step 2:** Establish dates for adoption and changes in placement.
  - a) Establish date of **adoption** based on:

Instrument	Date variables	
Caregiver Permanency Planning Module for foster and adoptive parents at Wave 4	PP42M	Month legally adopted CH
	PP42Y	Year legally adopted CH
Caregiver Permanency Planning Module for foster and adoptive parents at Wave 5	PP52M	Month legally adopted CH
	PP52Y	Year legally adopted CH
Caseworker Permanency Planning Module at Wave 4	PO41BM	CH legally adopted month
	PO41BD	CH legally adopted day
	PO41BY	CH legally adopted year
Caseworker Permanency Planning Module at Wave 5	PO51BM	CH legally adopted month
	PO51BD	CH legally adopted day
	PO51BY	CH legally adopted year
Caseworker Court Hearings Module at Waves 2 to 5 plus hearing result recommended adoption	CT221DT	Date of 1st hearing
	CT2ATG_4	CHs adoption being set aside

b) Identify all **changes in placement** based on:

Instrument	Date variables
Caseworker Living Environments Module Waves 1 to 5	D01LN6 Place ch previously lived(1st) To D25LN6 Place ch previously lived(25th)  D01LN11 Date arrangement began(1st) To D25LN11 Date arrangement began(25th)
Caregiver Placement Variables Module Waves 1 to 5	D01LE11M Month ch start live w/R (1st) D01LE11Y Year ch start live w/R (1st)  D01LE25M M of chnge in ch liv sit(pcntdte)(1st) D01LE25Y Y of chnge in ch liv sit(pcntdte)(1st)  To D10LE25M M of change in ch liv sit(10th) D10LE25Y Y of change in ch liv sit(10th)

- **Step 3:** Identify changes in placement before date of adoption by comparing dates in (a) being after at least one of the changes in placement at (b).

**NSCAW II:**

- **Step 1:** Define the subpopulation of cases across the time of the study identified as adopted.
- **Step 2:** Establish dates for adoption and changes in placement.
  - a) Establish date of adoption based on:

Instrument	Date variables	
Caregiver Permanency Planning Module for foster and adoptive parents at Wave 2	PP22M	Month R legally adopted CH
	PP22Y	Year R legally adopted CH
Caregiver Permanency Planning Module for foster and adoptive parents at Wave 3	PP32M	Month R legally adopted CH
	PP32Y	Year R legally adopted CH
AFCARS Adoption summary data: date adoption legalize or, discharged reason=3 (adoption)	AXSFINALDATE	Date Adoption Legalized
	FXSDODDT	Discharge Date
	FXSDISREASN	Discharge Reason
Caseworker Permanency Planning Module at Wave 2	PO21BM	CH legally adopted - M
	PO21BD	CH legally adopted - D
	PO21BY	CH legally adopted - Y
Caseworker Permanency Planning Module at Wave 3	PO31BM	CH legally adopted - M
	PO31BD	CH legally adopted - D
	PO31BY	CH legally adopted - Y
Caseworker Court Hearings Module at Wave 2 plus hearing result recommended adoption	CT22M_1	Date court hearings for CH since ref date 1 - M
	CT22D_1	Date court hearings for CH since ref date 1 - D
	CT22Y_1	Date court hearings for CH since ref date 1 - Y
	CT24AT8	CWA recommend @ hrng1-Rfr to interstate compact on adoption
Caseworker Court Hearings Module at Wave 3 plus hearing result recommended adoption	CT32M_1	Date court hearings for CH since ref date 1 - M
	CT32D_1	Date court hearings for CH since ref date 1 - D
	CT32Y_1	Date court hearings for CH since ref date 1 - Y
	CT34AT7	CWA recommend @ hrng1-Rfr to state/county adoption prog
	CT34AT8	CWA recommend @ hrng1-Rfr to interstate compact on adoption

b) Identify all changes in placement based on:

Instrument	Date variables
Caseworker Living Environments Module Waves 1 to 3	D01LN6 Place ch originally lived(1st) To D25LN6 Place ch originally lived(25th)  D01LN11E Date arrangement ended(1st) D01LN11S Date arrangement began(1st) To D25LN11E Date arrangement ended(25th) D25LN11S Date arrangement began(25th)

- **Step 3:** Identify changes in placement before date of adoption by comparing dates in (a) being after at least one of the changes in placement at (b).