International Migration, Family Formation, or Both: How Should We Measure International Adoption?

The adoption of foreign-born children by U.S. parents has increased substantially in recent years. After varying between 7,000 and 9,000 children per year in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number began a steady increase in 1995, and in 2002, United States citizens adopted over 20,000 children from abroad (Statistical Yearbook of the INS; Tarmann, 2003). While this number is small in comparison to the approximately four million children born each year in the United States, it represents a substantial proportion of the number of children adopted by non-relatives in this country, which has been estimated to be between 78,000 and 90,000 per year (Freundlich, 1998). Infants and young children arriving in the United States as adoptees also represent a high proportion of all children under age 5 immigrating to the United States. Indeed, in 2001, "immigrant orphans," as international adoptees are officially known, comprised almost 40 percent of children under age 5 arriving in the United States as immigrants.

This paper introduces alternative methods for measuring the incidence of international adoption and uses those methods to examine patterns of change in such adoptions to parents in the United States over the past 30 years. Although international adoption intersects with many issues of interest to demographers, including international migration, family formation (in receiving countries) and family limitation (in sending countries), as well as the construction of interracial or interethnic families, the subject has received little attention in the demographic literature. Using data on international and domestic adoptees, immigrant children, and U.S. fertility compiled from a variety of sources (including the INS, the NCHS, and state-level agencies, as well as survey data from the NSFG), we consider what the use of different denominators—including all live births, all adoptions or all non-relative adoptions, all child immigrants or child immigrants by age—can tell us about international adoption in the United States.

Background:

There are a number of possible reasons for the recent increase in international adoptions, including the declining supply of native-born infants available for adoption (Chandra, Abma, Maza & Bachrach, 1999), responses by adopting parents to changes in government policies regarding adoptions in both the United States and sending countries (Tarmann, 2003), changes in economic and political conditions in sending countries, and a growing network of organizations and adoption professionals who specialize in facilitating and promoting international adoptions. These factors suggest that international adoptions will continue to increase over the next several years and may eventually even come to represent the majority of non-relative adoptions in the United States. It is likely that even sooner, international adoptees will come to represent the majority of very young children immigrating to the United States. In order to understand this phenomenon, both as it relates to family formation and to migration, it is critical that we develop measures that allow for standardized comparisons between the various sending countries, between receiving countries, and across time within countries.

Currently, the social science literature on international adoption is dominated by qualitative and small-sample studies and critical essays. These include studies of the motivations and attitudes of adoptive parents (for example, Anagnost, 2000; Kruseiwicz and Wood, 2001; Manning, 2001), small-sample clinical studies of the social-psychological adjustment of earlier groups of adoptees (for example, Shapiro, Shapiro, and Paret, 2001; Huh and Reid, 2000; Meier, 1999; Kim, 1995), and

practice-oriented articles directed toward social workers and other adoption professionals (for example, Trolley, Wallin, and Hansen, 1995; Haradon, 2001). Indeed, as Selman (2002) notes, "child adoption is not usually seen as a matter of concern for demographers, but rather an issue of primary interest to social workers, lawyers and psychologists and of secondary interest to sociologists and anthropologists" (at 205).

Although a few previous scholars have articulated the importance of thinking of international adoption as a form of migration (Lovelock 2000; Weil 1984), these authors have focused their attention mainly on the history of accommodation of international adoption within various countries' immigration policy and have traced changes in the migration of "immigrant orphans" only in terms of absolute numbers of children moving across national borders from and to particular sending and receiving countries. Meanwhile, the demographic and sociological literature on immigrant children, which focuses on aspects of such children's health, language acquisition, educational attainment, and integration in receiving communities, has so far ignored the increasing proportion of children who migrate to the United States to be adopted (for example, Bankston and Zhou, 2002; Kim, 2002; Alba, Logan, Lutz and Stults, 2002; Brandon, 2002; Van Hook and Balistreri, 2002; and Rosenbaum and Friedman, 2001). Internationally adopted children may face substantial difficulties in each of these areas, stemming from poor health conditions in their countries of origin, spending months or years in low-quality institutional care, and having to learn a new language from adults who usually have no knowledge of the child's first language (see, e.g., McGuinness & Pallansch 2000).

As a first step in broadening the conceptualization of child migration to include the experience of adoptees, it is important to measure the changes over time in the proportion of all immigrants and the proportion of child immigrants who arrive in the United States as adoptees. In addition, because the extent of immigrant adoptees' exposure to various developmental risks (including malnutrition, poor health care, and neglect) prior to adoption differs depending on their age at adoption, it is important to develop age-specific measures and to track changes in the proportions of children of different ages being adopted, both overall and from different sending countries. Beyond serving as an indicator of the likely ease or difficulty of adjustment for the children themselves, a better understanding of variations over time in the ages of "immigrant orphans" from different sending countries may also help to illuminate the influence of supply vs. demand factors on the flow of children. For example, Lovelock (2000) has shown that although international outcry over the conditions facing older children in Romanian orphanages at the fall of the Ceausescu regime in 1989 initially prompted U.S. interest in adopting children from Romania, American adopting parents were largely reluctant to adopt the older orphanage children, many of whom had hepatitis B, HIV/AIDS, or severe developmental and behavioral problems. Instead, a "market" in healthy infants rapidly developed, and by the end of 1991, the majority of Romanian children who had been adopted into the United States "were infants or new-borns, and approximately half did not come out of orphanages" (Lovelock 2000 at 931).

As Selman (2002) has demonstrated, standardized measures are also crucial for an adequate understanding of international adoption as a mode of family formation in receiving countries and family limitation in sending countries. By standardizing international adoptions per year against overall annual population (which he calls a "Crude (Intercountry) Adoption Rate") and against annual live births (which he calls an "Adoption Ratio") in receiving countries, Selman showed that although the United States dominates as a receiving country in terms of absolute numbers, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Switzerland have over twice as many international adoptions per 100,000

population or per 1,000 live births. Selman's standardization is even more important for improving our understanding of international adoption from the perspective of sending countries. Although a number of commentators persist in portraying sending countries as war-torn, extremely poor, and high-fertility, standardization of the number of children migrating out for international adoption against either the population aged 0 to 5 or against live births produces the following list of the top four sending countries in 1998: Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, and South Korea. None of these countries was experiencing either war or famine, and all had total fertility rates well below replacement level (as well as below that of the United States). As Selman notes, such standardized measures make clear that "the major [sending countries] have not been the poorest or highest birth rate countries, that patterns persist long past the 'crisis' and that demand for children is also a key factor" (at 218).

While measures of international adoption standardized against overall population, population in young age groups, or against live births are useful for the kinds of cross-national comparisons for which Selman uses them, further refinement of such measures is needed for an understanding of the role of international adoptions in meeting the demand for children within the United States. To the extent that "a key motivation in receiving states is the demand for children by childless couples who have not been successful with infertility treatment and who have faced a diminishing availability of young children for domestic adoption" (Selman 2002 at 206), it is also important to measure changes in overall adoptions per live birth, in non-relative adoptions per live birth (since a high proportion of domestic adoptions in the United States are stepparent or relative adoptions) and in international adoptions per non-relative adoptions.

Data and Methods:

This paper draws on a variety of data sources to develop demographic measures of international adoption as international migration and as family formation.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service collects annual data on all legal immigrants to the United States with codes for class of admission that include a category for so-called immigrant orphans, and these data also include information on each immigrant's age and country of origin. Using these data, we first construct measures of adoptee immigration as it relates to overall immigration, child immigration, and child immigration by age and then examine variation in each of these measures over time.

Because consistent national-level data on adoption are not collected by the U.S. government, measures of international adoption as a method of family formation are more challenging to construct. We use a combination of state-level administrative data (where available) and survey data to generate annual estimates of all domestic adoptions and domestic non-relative adoptions, which, along with annual information on live births (from the National Center for Health Statistics) and annual information on international adoptions (from the INS data discussed above) are used to generate our estimates of overall adoptions per 1,000 live births, non-relative adoptions per 1,000 live births, and international adoptions per 100 non-relative adoptions.

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