

# **The Effects of Open Adoption Records on Adoptees' Health**

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SOC101-CC2: Introduction to Sociology

## *ABSTRACT*

Reviews available data in an attempt to answer the question: Does adoptees' access to birth family information increase their quality of life in terms of better physical and/or mental health?

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## **1. Introduction**

The question of whether adoptees whose adoption records have been sealed should be allowed access to information identifying their birthparents is an important topic, which draws arguments from both sides of the debate.

One strong argument in favor of opening these sealed records is that it would grant adoptees access to vital health information, which would allow them to live a healthier life, both physically and in terms of mental health.

## **2. Review of Available Data**

For a subject with the potential for significant sociological impact, there has been very little actual research done on the relationship between access to birth family information and adoptees' health in the general adoptee population. Most research has focused on specific adoptee populations, such as interracial and international adoptions. Evidence regarding the general population is largely anecdotal.

One notable piece of research is a 2002 survey, by Dr. Julia C. Rhodes, et. al., of Oregon adoptees after the state granted adoptees access to their birth records. With 123 adoptees surveyed, 29% responded that their primary motivation for requesting their birth records was to obtain medical information, while 55% identified this as a contributing factor [Rhodes, 468].

Several other articles also discuss the importance of access to family medical information. Numerous diseases—diabetes, cancer, heart disease, etc.—are now known to have genetic factors. Many have a greater chance of successful treatment if identified early. Clearly then, as supported by findings, an adoptee who has access to current information on their genetic history would be able to identify their health risks earlier and therefore reduce their risk of serious disease.

One example of the value of this medical knowledge is that of Linda, an adoptee who was able to locate information on her birthmother. She learned that she had died of a heart attack, and as a result took some precautions to prevent the same fate in herself [Linda].

Another common theme throughout most articles is the effect that being adopted can have on a person's sense of identity. Without knowledge of their birth parents, adoptees often struggle with questions about what makes them who they are, as well as questions surrounding why they were adopted. These questions can damage an adoptee's self-esteem over time, especially if adoptee is significantly different from his parents, either in terms of physical appearance or personal talents and abilities. In Linda's case, she explains, "Once you find your birth family, it answers so many questions,[sic] I remember having a feeling of peace, finally figuring out things that I had been wondering about almost all my life."

David Klinghoffer, in the American Jewish Committee *Commentary*, relates the impact some of these questions of background can have. Raised Jewish by Jewish parents, he learns that his birthmother is a Gentile and begins to question his identity as a

Jew [Klinghoffer, 50-51]. While the details of Klinghoffer's story are unique, there are many adoptees whose family history has been hidden from them because they have been prevented from accessing their birth information.

By allowing adoptees access to their birth information, it provides a way for the adoptees to quiet their minds by finding answers to these questions. In the Oregon survey, the main reasons for requesting birth records besides medical reasons were family history related: 71% responded that learning their family heritage was a contributing factor to their request, with 64% citing a desire to find one or both birthparents and 49% wanting to better understand the circumstances of their adoption [Rhodes, 468].

### **3. Concluding Remarks**

When the laws governing the sealing of adoption records were enacted, they were designed to protect adoptees from labels such as "illegitimate" or "bastard." Society has progressed since then and many—if not the majority—of children now come from non-traditional family structures. Also since that time, more has become known about the genetic nature of many serious, and often fatal, diseases. The laws that were designed to protect adoptees have now become laws that put adoptees' health at risk.

Ensuring the health and safety of its members has to be a major priority of any society if it is to survive. As the decision-making body of a society, the government must make laws to meet this priority. As a society evolves, so too must its laws. Opening adoption records would be beneficial to society, especially in terms of healthier adoptees,

and there is little reason\* to not bring the law up to date in New York State and across the country.

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\* It should be noted that the majority of birthmothers—those whom opponents of a law change claim it would harm—are actually *in favor* of such an amendment of the laws.

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