

# Pathways to permanence for black, Asian and mixed ethnicity children

This study is part of the Adoption Research Initiative (ARi), a group of major research projects commissioned by the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The dissemination of key messages from the initiative was funded by the Department for Education.

The research was led by Dr. Julie Selwyn at the University of Bristol<sup>1</sup>. Data was gathered between 2005 and 2007.

This summary is drawn from a longer research brief and the full report of the study<sup>2</sup>. It reviews the methodology and findings of the research and highlights key messages for all who work in Children's Services.

Information about other resources from the study is available at the [ARi website](#).

## 1. Background to the study

### **The policy context**

The Adoption and Children Act (2002) reflects the Children Act (1989) in requiring that the placing agency gives due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background.

At the same time, an overarching requirement of the Adoption and Children Act is that, whenever a court or an adoption agency is coming to a decision:

*The court or adoption agency must at all times bear in mind that, in general, any delay in coming to the decision is likely to prejudice the child's welfare.*

On the subject of matching, the National Minimum Standards<sup>3</sup> include the following requirement:

*Children are matched with adopters who best meet their assessed needs. Wherever possible, this will be with a family which reflects their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language...*

Where this cannot be done:

*...the adoption agency makes every effort to find an alternative suitable family within a realistic timescale to ensure the child is not left waiting indefinitely in the care system.*

### **The research context**

There is a shortage of data on looked after minority ethnic children, when and why they come into care, how decisions are made about their futures and what happens to them in their care careers. There have been debates about best practice in the placement of minority ethnic children and this remains an area of mixed opinions. This study was commissioned to begin to address this knowledge gap and help policy makers, managers and practitioners to achieve the best possible outcomes for this group of children.

## 2. Terminology used in the study

This summary reflects the terminology and definitions used by the researchers.

**Minority ethnic** refers to black, Asian and mixed ethnicity people as a group.

**Ethnic groups/ethnicity** refers to a sense of common historical origins that may also include religious beliefs, a similar language, 'way of life', practices and purposes.

**Culture** refers to 'meaning-making', i.e. the artefacts, norms, values, practices, rituals, symbols, ideologies and discourses that are held in common within groups.

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<sup>2</sup> This summary was drafted by Mary Beek, Professional Adviser to the Adoption Policy team, Department for Education, in consultation with the research team.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Health (2003) *National Minimum Standards for Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Local Authority Adoption Services in England and Wales*, London: The Stationery Office.

### 3. What was the purpose of the study?

The study aimed to explore minority ethnic children's care pathways, and to consider possible differences in decision-making and outcomes for minority ethnic children in comparison with white children.

### 4. How was the research done?

The children in this study came from three local authorities (LAs), all of which had large minority ethnic populations. The authorities were in London, the Midlands and the North of England. There were three main sources of information:

#### **A comparison sample**

This was a group of 102 white *and* minority ethnic children under the age of 10 who had started to be looked after during 2002–2003. Roughly half were white and half were of minority ethnicity.

This sample was used to explore differences between white and minority ethnic children in their characteristics, entry to care, service use, decision making and placement outcomes. Case files were read and data collected.

#### **An adoption recommended sample**

This was all the minority ethnic children (120 in total), within the three LAs who had a 'should be placed for adoption' decision made between 2005 and 2006.

The researchers examined whether or not there were differences between black, Asian and mixed ethnicity children in their characteristics and how plans for them were taken forward after the panel recommendation. Case files were read and data collected in the same way as for the comparison study.

#### **An interview sample**

This was a group of 49 social workers responsible for 50 minority ethnic children who were referred to the adoption panel between 2005 and 2006.

The researchers tracked the progress of the minority ethnic children once a 'should be placed for adoption' decision had been made, and investigated how social workers addressed ethnicity when making family finding and matching decisions.

The social workers were interviewed face to face before they presented their information to the panel and then at monthly intervals by telephone. Final telephone calls were made in July/August 2007 to ascertain the whereabouts of the children.

### 5. Mixed ethnicity children in the study

A striking feature of this study was the high proportion of mixed ethnicity children in all

three samples. In the comparison sample, 57% of the minority ethnic children were of mixed ethnicity, in the 'adoption recommended' sample, 69% and in the interview study, 74%.

The mixed ethnicity children in this study came from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and frequently had white mothers. They were likely to have siblings of a different ethnicity and to have a father who had never been part of their lives. Their mothers had had more adverse childhoods and their current circumstances were more unfavourable than all other groups, including white mothers of white children.

It is important to note that the mixed ethnicity children in this study came from a small and a very disadvantaged sub-group and the problems of this group do not reflect the lives of mixed ethnicity children in general.

### 6. Key findings

#### **Disparities in the care process and planning**

- The study did *not* find a systematic bias against, or mishandling of, minority ethnic children compared with white children from the time they came to the attention of Children's Services until they became looked after. The study did *not* find a tendency to take minority ethnic children into care more precipitately.
- However, the small sub-sample of black children came to the notice of Children's Services when they were older, compared to the white, Asian or mixed ethnicity children. This tended to be because they had been in private foster care and/or had been living in several different countries before the first referral was made. Their older age at referral affected their subsequent outcomes - they were much less likely to be adopted than the white or mixed ethnicity children.
- There were differences between white and minority ethnic children in the length of time taken to make an adoption recommendation with Asian and black children waiting the longest.
- The information gathered on many of the minority ethnic children was often rather inadequate and incomplete (although this was also true for some white children). For instance, there was a shortage of information about the parents' experiences of dislocation, harassment and racism and the family's cultural traditions. Assessments of children's health and emotional and behavioural needs were also poorly

articulated in the Child's Permanence Report. Adoption medicals were missing significantly more often from the files of black and Asian children.

- There had been some delays in taking cases to panel due to court decisions that there should be more kin assessments (often outside the UK). These kinship assessments often did not result in a placement. However, in a few cases children were placed very quickly with relatives who were strangers to the child. Matching by ethnicity was not a high priority in these kinship placements.

#### **Family finding for minority ethnic children.**

- Family finding activity was generally sequential. Workers looked first for prospective adopters from their own authority, then through their adoption consortium and then to other local authorities. Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) were approached for only a small number of children.
- Promoting a child through the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) publication was used for half the children. The likelihood of this was related to agency practice rather than the needs of the child. Where this did happen, more potential adopters were identified.
- Children's profiles often mentioned the specific requirement for the prospective adoptive parents to meet the child's cultural and identity needs, rather than also recognising the potential for these needs to be met in the prospective adopter's wider family and community.
- Minority ethnic children had fewer prospective adopters showing interest in them in comparison with white children. Even minority ethnic infants often had just one or two prospective adopters showing interest in them.

#### **Outcomes for minority ethnic children.**

For the 120 minority ethnic children who were tracked for at least 18 months after the panel recommendation for adoption, the outcomes were as follows:

- Seventy (58%) children had been placed for adoption and 15 were still waiting.
- For 35 children the plan had changed away from adoption. Often this had occurred if no adopters had been found within six months. In the comparison sample, efforts to place white children had continued for longer.

- Most mixed ethnicity children had been found a placement while most Asian children had not. Only very young black and Asian children had been placed.
- Most children were placed with a local authority adopter. VAAs were used for only 6% of children in the adoption recommended sample compared to 19% in the comparison sample.
- Most children were in placements matched or partially matched by ethnicity to at least one of the adopters. Eighty-one percent of the Muslim and 57% of the Christian children were in placements matched by faith, and all were matched by language.
- Of the 50 minority ethnic children whose social workers were interviewed, 19 (38%) were still waiting for a permanent family between one and two years after panel. There seemed little prospect of adoption for many of the waiting children, since they were not being promoted and their social workers were pessimistic about the likelihood of adoption.

#### **Practice issues**

A range of complex practice issues were raised:

- Social workers commonly used the term 'ethnicity' interchangeably with 'culture'. When talking about culture, they were often referring only to ethnic categorisations, even though ethnic labels did not necessarily help in understanding a child's cultural background. This position was also reflected in file recording.
- There was often insufficient information available regarding the child's cultural background. For instance, the part of the Assessment Framework which should have provided information about the child's earlier cultural experiences (for example, the types of food eaten, festivals celebrated and so on) was often blank or incomplete.
- Mixed ethnicity children in the sample were likely to have been living with a single white mother within a white community and to have a birth father who had not been part of their lives or whose ethnicity was unknown. Their social workers were often uncertain about whether they should be placing the child to preserve his or her present identity or to enable the development of another ethnic identity to which the child had a genetic connection.

- Some social workers were concerned about placing a mixed ethnicity child with white English adopters.
- Requests by foster carers (usually white English) to adopt minority ethnic children already in their care was often a source of professional dispute. There were often conflicting views, expressed in the Courts, about whether or not it would be in the child's best interests to be moved to an ethnically matched placement. In all of such cases in the sample, the judgment went in favour of the foster carer.
- In the cases described above, the 'battle' could be harmful to relationships between the carer and the LA and opportunities for specific support around ethnicity, culture and identity could be missed.
- Professional disagreements also arose over whether or not to separate half siblings of different ethnicities. These differences of opinion tended to be between children's social workers and the family finding teams.

## 7. Limitations and strengths of the study

### Limitations

- The study sample was taken from three LAs who were selected because they had high and contrasting minority ethnic populations. Policy and practice may well be different in other LAs.
- There were relatively low numbers of Asian and black children in the sample and that limits the ability to generalise from the findings for them.
- Most of the data comes from case files. Case files may not always accurately reflect services provided.

### Strengths

- The proposal for the study was independently and anonymously peer-reviewed before the work was commissioned.
- The report was independently and anonymously peer-reviewed before its publication.
- The data for the project was gathered from multiple sources. All data were cross checked within the research team.
- The project used a highly experienced research team which included researchers from diverse ethnic backgrounds and with significant experience of researching adoption.

- This was the first study in the UK to look in-depth into the pathways of minority ethnic children in the care system.

### Key messages

This research has highlighted the care pathways and outcomes for minority ethnic children. It suggests that some minority ethnic children are disadvantaged compared to their white counterparts since they are likely to wait longer for a permanent family or not to achieve permanence at all.

Agencies seeking to reduce delay and improve placement choice for minority ethnic children might consider the following steps:

- Target the recruitment of minority ethnic and mixed relationship adopters and foster carers who are able to consider older children, sibling groups and children with additional needs. Many fostering and adoption agencies have made huge strides in this area of recruitment, and there is much that can be learned from their experiences<sup>4</sup>.
- Increase the *national* pool of minority ethnic adopters by encouraging the recruitment of all minority ethnic applicants who have the capacity to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption. If a local match cannot be found for particular applicants, it is possible that they could be successfully matched with a child from another area.
- Ensure that assessments of *all* children include detailed consideration of their background history, the stories of their parents' migration, if applicable and their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious heritage as well as their current experiences.
- Promote a positive, 'can do' culture around family finding for minority ethnic children and encourage creative and flexible thinking about the range of family types that could potentially meet the needs of each child.
- Seek families approved by VAAs at an early stage of the family finding process in order to widen choice and minimise delay.

<sup>4</sup> Rule G. (2006) *Recruiting black and minority ethnic adopters and foster carers*, BAAF: London

### What else might help?

The UK population is becoming increasingly diverse. The greater complexity of mixed ethnicity relationships presents challenges for fostering and adoption services. The following suggestions for good practice support existing legislation and guidance. They have been developed from the research findings, in consultation with BAAF.

- Promote cultural competence throughout the organisation<sup>5</sup>.
- Ensure that assessments of both white and minority ethnic foster carers and adopters explore the following areas and seek evidence that applicants have strengths or willingness to develop strengths in each of them:
  - They can actively support and reinforce the development of children's positive ethnic or cultural identity at each stage of their development.
  - They can provide positive minority ethnic role models within their close and wider family, friendship groups or their wider community.
  - They can demonstrate awareness of racism, prejudice and discrimination, and can provide active support to a child to deal with this.
  - They understand how their own identities were formed and the importance of their role as parents in the formation of the child's ethnic and cultural identity.
  - They can integrate multicultural traditions into their lives and provide meaningful links to other ethnic groups.
- When family finding and matching for minority ethnic children, seek prospective adopters and foster carers who have clearly evidenced strengths in the above areas or are willing and able to respond to training and support in these areas.

- Provide flexible and creative support to prospective adopters and foster carers who can meet some but not all of a child's cultural and ethnic needs. The plan for adoption support might consider how children's understanding of their backgrounds and origins might be enhanced through friendships, mentoring and contacts within their local communities.
- Encourage all prospective adopters and foster carers to work with their social worker to prepare a support plan for addressing the child's cultural identity. This plan should be based on the understanding that children fare better when their caregivers acknowledge ethnic differences, communicate openly about ethnicity and culture, and offer opportunities for children to gain knowledge and experience related to their cultures and histories.

<sup>5</sup> Beesley, P, (2010) *Making Good Assessments*, BAAF: London.