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Federal law has boosted adoptions for children in foster care, study says  
By [MATTHEW FRANCK](#)

Even with a new federal law on her side, Leslie Lewis said she faced more than her share of hassles in adopting her daughter Patrice four years ago.

At the time, Patrice was Lewis' foster child, and efforts to adopt the child often were stalled by bureaucratic snags, hearings and disagreements with caseworkers.

But Lewis said those difficulties likely would have been compounded were it not for passage of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, which was designed, in part, to speed up adoptions from foster care.

Without the law, Lewis said there's no telling how long Patrice would have remained in foster care. "If they kept going through the motions, she may have lingered in the system," said Lewis, who lives in Affton.

A report released Thursday finds that adoptions like the one of Patrice have more than doubled nationwide in the five years since the federal law took effect. The study is based on an analysis of federal data by researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Missouri has mirrored the national trend, with 1,273 adoptions from foster care last year, compared to an average of 557 in the three years before the law.

Illinois, meanwhile, posted one of the five biggest increases in the nation, boosting adoptions to 7,113 in 1999, up from 2,200 before the law. Adoptions in the state have since slowed to 3,585 children last year.

The report credits the federal law with transforming how family courts handle foster care cases. The law established strict timelines aimed at returning children to their homes or finding an adoptive home after 15 months in foster care.

Supporters say the timelines forced states to act on cases that might have otherwise been ignored.

"These are kids who had been languishing in the system for a long time," said Melanie Scheetz, who heads the Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition in St. Louis.

Janeene Foley, who oversees adoption programs from the Missouri Children's Division, said boosting adoptions has required not only new timelines, but increased cooperation between the courts and state caseworkers to find permanent homes.

In the past month, Missouri was awarded \$366,000 from the federal government as a reward for doubling its adoption rate over five years.

In Illinois, the increase in adoptions occurred more suddenly, with the rate tripling in just three years.

Jess McDonald was director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family

Services when adoptions were skyrocketing in the state.

McDonald is now the co-director of Fostering Results, a research arm of the University of Illinois that prepared the national adoption study released Thursday.

McDonald credits the dramatic increase in adoptions in Illinois largely to a partnership with the Cook County Juvenile Court in Chicago aimed at identifying children eligible for adoption. He said the initial surge of adoptions were often of children who had been in foster care for years. In most cases, he said, relatives stepped forward to adopt the children.

More recently, McDonald said, Illinois has kept adoptions high by offering financial incentives to social service agencies that find permanent homes quickly for foster children.

But not all are applauding the increase in adoptions.

Deanna Gallagher of the Missouri Council for Children at Risk said the federal law has worthwhile goals, but operates within a system that too often places children in foster care needlessly.

As it is, she said, many children land in foster care for neglect when parents are simply too poor to provide for their children. Gallagher said she's like to see federal incentives not only for adoption, but also for keeping families together.

To an extent, that assessment is also contained in the adoption study, which criticizes the federal government for investing far more on long-term foster care than on efforts to keep kids out of state custody in the first place.

The study also raises concerns over the ability of states to continue supporting families after adoption, while still trying to recruit new foster and adoptive families.

The Fostering Results campaign is an extension of the University of Illinois' School of Social Work and is supported by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

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