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## **ADOPTION Fostering families**

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MORE CHILDREN in the foster care system are finding permanent homes as a result of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, according to a study by researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The federal law provides financial incentives to states for moving children to permanent homes more quickly. In the past month, Missouri was awarded \$366,000 for doubling the number of adoptions in five years. Missouri's numbers jumped to 1,273 last year from an average of 557 adoptions a year during the three years before the law took effect. Illinois has more than tripled the number of adoptions of children in foster care, with 7,113 adoptions in 1999, compared to an average of 2,200 a year the three years before the law took effect.

In Illinois, adoptions peaked in 1999 and dropped to 3,585 by last year. That's been the pattern in more than half the states: Adoption rates rose rapidly right after the law was enacted, peaked in 2000 and 2001 then began to fall. That's one reason some child advocates say this law is not a permanent fix for the national foster care problem. Richard Wexler heads the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, a group that favors keeping children with their biological families and out of the foster care system entirely. He contests the study's statistics, and argues that the number of adoptions of children in foster care is not increasing. Adoptions shot up when the law first took effect, he said, because states handled the easy cases first; older, disabled and minority children, who are harder to adopt, still languish in the system.

Even so, this law has been beneficial, forcing states to hew to new timelines for moving children through the system, cutting red tape and prompting better cooperation between courts and caseworkers in helping children find permanent homes. A spokesman for the study says the researchers only sought to determine how well the new law was working. Researchers found that some 230,000 children have been adopted as a result of the law - more than the number adopted during the combined 10 years before the law was enacted.

Mr. Wexler says the study shows that even with more adoptions, the number of children in foster care since the law took effect has risen to 540,000 from 520,000.

Nevertheless, this law has made a difference. Without it, tens of thousands children would still be in foster care, waiting for families to call their own.