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Breaking Forever Families

Carroll, Andrea B.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Adoption is forever, or so pop culture tells us. Long gone are the days when adoption served as a means of procuring cheap labor for working
families and children arrived at unscreened homes on the “orphan train.”

Rather, the adoption of the last half century is one that we are told is to closely mirror happily ever after. Lucky parents fulfill their dream of parenthood and children in need find a “forever family.”

Twenty years ago the idea of disturbing a finalized adoption would have been anathema, and arguably the same could be said today. But a change in the pool of available adoptees, a sharp rise in international adoption, and the existence of the Internet are developments which, oddly enough, have collided to present heretofore unseen problems when adoptions do not go as planned and happily ever after proves elusive.

The crux of the problem is that when adoptions go wrong, desperate parents find little help, either from the adoption agencies who so zealously worked on their behalf to place the child, or from the government. No matter how dire the situation becomes, no state-sanctioned method of undoing an adoption, or of otherwise relinquishing an adopted child, currently exists. Absent involuntary termination of parental rights for abuse or neglect, the parent–child relationship is indelibly forged. And while that is the very goal of adoption, the law must recognize that not every adoptive relationship should continue. Indeed, the child’s welfare may depend on its disruption.

Over the last few decades, courts and child welfare experts alike have been understandably unwilling to fashion a voluntary mechanism by which an adoptive family could disrupt a perfected adoption and relinquish the child

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5 See DOUGLAS E. ABRAMS ET AL., CONTEMPORARY FAMILY LAW 1104–05 (2d ed. 2009) (tracking international adoption statistics over the course of decades and concluding that international adoptions account for roughly fifteen percent of U.S. adoptions today).

6 See infra Part V.

7 Adoptive parents can petition the court to set aside an adoption decree, but they are almost always unsuccessful, given the view of adoption as a “permanent” transaction. See, e.g., Tiffany Woo, Comment, When the Forever Family Isn’t: Why State Laws Allowing Adoptive Parents to Voluntarily Rescind an Adoption Violate the Adopted Child’s Equal Protection Rights, 39 SW. L. REV. 569, 571–72 (2010) (chronicling rare cases in which adoptive parents have been successful in setting aside finalized adoptions).

8 Id. at 578–79.
into the existing state system. But times have changed dramatically, and the emergence of a disturbing private remedy for unsuccessful adoptions now gives us no choice but to reevaluate all options.

Part II of this Article describes the new reality of unsuccessful adoptions. In spite of the best efforts of child welfare workers, or maybe even because of them, the fact is that adoptions are sometimes simply unsuccessful, and suffer from some form of disruption. Part III describes the worst potential endings to unsuccessful adoptions, including abuse and neglect, and, as of the last few years, even private rehoming. The prevalence of those outcomes is highlighted and the harm of them explicad. Part IV explains that some biological parents who find themselves unequipped to parent and in dire situations are not as hamstrung as their adoptive parent counterparts. The emergence of safe haven legislation has provided a viable solution for their predicament. Finally, Part V argues for the creation of a state-approved and, more importantly, state-supervised method for disrupting adoptions, borrowing from the safe haven statutes which have garnered nationwide acceptance.

Scholars and child welfare authorities alike must begin to set aside their utter disdain for disruption and recognize that, sometimes, disruption is necessary and in the child’s best interests. Embracing, and controlling, disruption is the direction in which adoption advocates must now move.

II. ADOPTION CRISIS: THE NEW REALITY?

Before the 1970s, disruption of adoption was almost unheard of. In fact, a series of studies covering the period leading up to 1970 consistently concluded that less than two percent of adoptions suffered such a fate.

It is difficult to quantify precise rates of adoption disruption today, largely because no records are kept by any entity, governmental or private. And, far more importantly, no formal or state-run means of disrupting a finalized adoption currently exists.

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10 Discussions of adoption outcomes are nearly always complicated by the fact that there is not a settled nomenclature used consistently to describe various adoption outcomes. The phrase “failed adoption” has been retired, but its replacement with words like “disruption,” which frequently refers to prelegalization relinquishments, and “dissolution,” which usually refers to postlegalization relinquishments, has confused matters substantially. Still other terms, including “set-asides” are frequently used as well. This Article focuses primarily on postlegalization relinquishments of adopted children. But the word disruption is used here, as it is in the adoption industry, broadly as “a catch-all phrase . . . to indicate that any adoptive placement has ended.” Id. at 20.
11 Festinger, supra note 4, at 201–02.
12 See Woo, supra note 7, at 570. See generally Trudy Festinger, Necessary Risk: A Study of Adoptions and Disrupted Adoptive Placements (1986).
13 See Woo, supra note 7, at 570.
To the extent disruption occurs, it is largely done privately; adoption agencies, on occasion, help to place a child of disruption into the arms of a ready and waiting second set of adoptive parents. As a result, disrupted adoptions frequently go altogether unreported, and even those situations that do come to the attention of child welfare or judicial authorities are not collected for study. Even the most conservative estimates suggest a disruption rate of seven percent. But states which have briefly attempted to track disruption rates have reported them to be as high as twenty percent and adoption caseworker speculation has long run closer to fifty percent.

What is absolutely clear from the scant data available is that the percentage of children living outside the adoptive home after a finalized adoption has increased substantially in recent years, and has approached numbers that should be sufficient to provide a wakeup call to child welfare authorities and concerned adoption advocates alike. Adoption disruption has become nothing short of a twenty-first century crisis.

Rates of disruption aside, adoption advocates and scholars working in the area have undertaken, over the course of the last several decades, to determine why disruption rates seem more prevalent of late. The development seems counterintuitive, particularly in the wake of a shift from the model of adoption that found slave labor for needy families to a placement analysis focused almost exclusively on the best interest of the child to be adopted.

Unfortunately, the precise reasons for the growth of a new disruption crisis have remained as mysterious as the precise rates of disruption. Still, disruption research has confidently identified several contributors to increased disruption rates. The increase in adoption of older children and special needs children, for instance, has undoubtedly increased the frequency of disruption. Groups of children that used to languish in the foster care system and be branded “unadoptable” are finding adoptive homes with far greater frequency these days, thanks to a push away from the infant adoption market and toward finding homes for the children who are arguably most in need. That laudable effort comes at a cost though, as it is relatively well-accepted that older child

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14 Coakley, supra note 2, at 10 (finding that roughly twenty-four percent of disruptions are actually initiated by an adoption agency, rather than by an adoptive parent).
15 Id. at 11.
16 Id. at 4.
17 Festinger, supra note 4, at 204 (discussing Virginia’s brief attempt at tracking disruption); FESTINGER, supra note 12, at 1 (quoting a contemporary report as speculating that “the disruption rate may be 50 percent. For many challenging kids, particularly teenagers, I wouldn’t be surprised if the rate were 70 percent.”).
18 Coakley, supra note 2, at 1–2.
19 See BARTH & BERRY, supra note 9, at 8–11.
20 Id.
and special needs adoptions are more volatile, and therefore carry with them a significantly greater risk of disruption than do infant adoptions.\textsuperscript{21}

International adoption may have had an even more significant effect. In the last fifteen years alone, Americans have adopted hundreds of thousands of children from other nations, nearly double the number of children adopted internationally than the decade before.\textsuperscript{22} International adoption has been lauded as a positive and life-changing success for many, not the least of which are the orphaned children who have found permanent homes through the process.\textsuperscript{23} But the boom in intercountry adoptions has also contributed to the increased prevalence of unsuccessful adoptions.\textsuperscript{24} Experts assume that the vast majority of unsuccessful adoption outcomes are a result of international adoption.\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, something in the neighborhood of seventy percent of disrupted adoptions are said to be intercountry adoptions.\textsuperscript{26}

Precisely why international adoptions seem to be less successful than their domestic counterparts is not fully known. But most of the research centers around Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), an attachment disorder that prevents children from establishing healthy bonds with their caregivers, typically as a result of trauma or neglect in infancy.\textsuperscript{27} When a child’s attachments are disordered in infancy, the brain actually changes in a way that inhibits the child’s ability to establish appropriate attachments in the future.\textsuperscript{28} RAD is a lifelong condition for which therapy may provide some relief, but for which there is little hope of a “cure.”\textsuperscript{29} RAD children actively shun the very


\textsuperscript{22}See ABRAMS ET AL., supra note 5, at 1104–05.

\textsuperscript{23}See generally Gabriela Misca, The “Quiet Migration”: Is Intercountry Adoption a Successful Intervention in the Lives of Vulnerable Children?, 52 FAM. CT. REV. 60 (2014).


\textsuperscript{26}Id.

\textsuperscript{27}Christina Rainville, Working with Children Who Have Reactive Attachment Disorder, 32 ABA CHILD L. PRAC., no. 2, Feb. 2013, at 17, 17.

\textsuperscript{28}Id.

attachments that make adoption work, and therefore are much more likely to suffer a disrupted placement than are their non-RAD counterparts.30

Of course, both international and domestic adoptees alike may suffer from RAD, but its existence is most frequently documented in children who lack any semblance of an emotional bond with any person, whether it be a parent or even a relatively infrequent caregiver, during infancy.31 Newborn domestic adoptees typically bond with their adoptive parents, who are often a presence in their lives very shortly after birth.32 And even children adopted after spending time in the American foster care system generally form appropriate attachments to someone, be it a biological parent or foster parent. They are typically able to then transfer those attachments to a new parent in appropriate situations.33 International adoptees, in contrast, and particularly those reared in an orphanage system (rather than a foster home) rarely have any opportunity to form equivalent attachments.34 The horrors of Russian and Chinese orphanages are well-known, and international audiences have watched as child welfare workers document the thousands of infants in these countries who spend their entire lives in a crib with absolutely no mental or physical stimulation, frequently touched only once a day for changing or feeding.35 Attachment disorder is almost the rule in international adoption.36 And while prospective adoptive parents are well-warned of the risk, there is no doubt that RAD, whether parents are prepared for it or not, ultimately leads to the downfall of many international adoptions.37

Finally, some point to the speed with which children are being moved through the adoption system (both domestic and international) these days as a major contributor to the increased likelihood of adoption disruption.38 The cost of the child welfare system’s push toward finding adoptive homes for older and special needs children, in particular, has resulted in a softening of the historically rigorous standards for adoptive parents.39 Adoptive parents are older and less wealthy than they used to be, and attempts at “matching”

31 See Rainville, supra note 27, at 17.
33 Drury et al., supra note 30, at 40–41.
35 See id.; see also Gabriela Marquez, Comment, Transnational Adoption: The Creation and Ill Effects of an International Black Market Baby Trade, 21 J. JUV. L. 25, 29 (2000).
36 See Steltzner, supra note 34, at 130–31.
37 Drury et al., supra note 30, at 39–41.
38 Coakley, supra note 2, at 4.
39 BARTH & BERRY, supra note 9, at 8–11.
adoptive parents with children in terms of physical characteristics, religion, or even family compatibility have all but halted in this “quicker is better” world.40 In short, both “[p]ractitioners and policymakers are concerned that the effects of the more vigorous and less encumbered pursuit of adoptive placements may have decreased [the] stability” of adoptions.41

Whatever the reasons, a crisis point has emerged in adoption in this country. And while no one wishes to acknowledge it, least of all child welfare experts,42 the sheer volume of unsuccessful adoptions cries out for an evaluation of the current system and highlights the need for new solutions for adoptive families in crisis.

III. THE DARK UNDERBELLY OF UNSUCCESSFUL ADOPTION

Most adoption advocates consider disruption of a finalized adoption to be the worst possible horror that could befall a child. Disruption is “an affront to social workers.”43 It shakes the very “faith and foundation of child welfare service providers.”44 But as the last decade has demonstrated, far worse fates than disruption befall adopted children when their placements are unsuccessful.

A. Abuse, Neglect, and Even Homicide

Some adoptive children have paid the ultimate price for unsuccessful placements. Sadly, stories of abuse and neglect perpetrated at the hands of adoptive parents abound, and murder cases in the adoption context have become so frequent that they seem almost a staple of the nightly news.

Unsuccessful intercountry adoptions have garnered most of the attention. In the case of Peggy Hilt, for instance, the well-known adoptive mother of a Russian two-year-old, Nina, nearly two years of heartbreak and dismay finally erupted one tragic day when Peggy choked and beat Nina to death as they were packing for a family vacation.45 Peggy Hilt had been frustrated and at her wits’ end for months; she says she “snapped” when her daughter reached into

40 Id. at 11–22.
41 Id. at 20.
42 One scholar remarked that “if a list were made of issues that most disturb adoption workers, adoption ‘failure’ (or disruption) would be close to the top.” FESTINGER, supra note 12, at 1 (citation omitted).
43 BARTH & BERRY, supra note 9, at 4.
44 Id.
her diaper and smeared feces from it on the walls of the family home.\(^46\) Peggy and her husband had apparently successfully parented another (Ukrainian) adoptee for years before Nina’s adoption.\(^47\) But Nina’s placement, and Peggy’s desperation when it did not pan out as expected, sent Peggy into chaos, and ultimately, Peggy’s act of murder doomed the entire family to an awful fate.

More recently, in late 2013, a Washington couple was convicted of manslaughter for the death of Hana Williams, a thirteen-year-old girl they adopted from Ethiopia.\(^48\) Hana was starved, beaten, and left outside in sub-freezing temperatures as punishment for her alleged misdeeds.\(^49\) Two of the Williams’s six biological children were even sent by Hana’s parents to beat her on occasion.\(^50\) After a day of grueling punishment, Hana died of hypothermia and malnutrition.\(^51\)

Outcomes like those in the Hilt and Williams cases have become so prevalent that a number of countries with whom the United States has most frequently partnered to effectuate international adoptions have shut down adoptive placements to Americans.\(^52\) The result of these child murder cases, then, has been nothing short of destabilization of the entire institution of intercountry adoption.

But unfortunately, the problem is not one unique to international adoption. Similar fates have befallen the children of unsuccessful domestic adoptions. Texas charged Dallas adoptive dad Scott Garrett with capital murder after he allegedly beat one of his adopted twin toddlers to death.\(^53\) Garrett reported that he had been “rough-housing, tickling and playing ‘Superman’” with his child “and that he must have done something” accidental that resulted in the child’s death.\(^54\) But at least one witness reported that something always seemed to happen to the toddler boy when his adoptive mother was out of town.\(^55\)

\(^{46}\) Vargas, supra note 45; Wingert, supra note 45.


\(^{49}\) Id.

\(^{50}\) Id.

\(^{51}\) Id.

\(^{52}\) Vargas, supra note 45; Wingert, supra note 45.


\(^{54}\) Id.

\(^{55}\) Id.
child Garrett allegedly abused, and ultimately murdered, was adopted at roughly a year old in a private adoption.\(^{56}\) Stories of abuse and neglect coming out of the foster care system are even more prevalent.

In adoptions of all kinds, then, the last decade has proved the existence of an uglier monster than disruption. Suffering through a disruption is undoubtedly exceptionally harmful for an already-fragile adopted child. But it is a harm far preferable to that suffered by the Hilt, Williams, and Garrett children.

B. Private Rehoming

Of course, not all unsuccessful adoptions end with abuse, or worse. Desperate adoptive parents who can keep their wits about them in the midst of crisis have appropriately sought other ways out of spiraling, dangerous situations, whether in the wake of a domestic or international adoption. Historically, they had virtually no place to turn. A few private facilities around the country boasted relatively strong success rates in taking in and rehabilitating troubled adoptees, perhaps to be reunited with their adoptive families down the road, or perhaps to find a place for those adoptees to remain until they became majors.\(^{57}\) But those facilities are few and far between. Adoptive families that can afford to pay the staggering costs of such a placement represent a tiny minority of the adoptive population.\(^{58}\) And even when financial arrangements are feasible, wait lists stretch to years—time that families in crisis simply do not have.\(^{59}\) New solutions have long been needed, and absent a governmental intervention, the adoption community began to create its own solution, albeit informally, online.

\(^{56}\) Id.


\(^{58}\) The cost of care at Ranch for Kids, for instance, hovers around $3,000 per month. Rubin, supra note 57.

1. “Hey, Can I Have Your Baby?”

By 2013, the practice of informal “trading” of adopted children on the Internet had become relatively prevalent. Families interested in relinquishing adopted children flocked to bulletin boards and other online sources in search of help. Groups of parents sharing similar struggles began to be formed on Yahoo! and Facebook, and a well-entrenched online community began to take shape. One Facebook group—Way Stations of Love—boasted nearly three hundred members, all communicating to find solutions to unsuccessful adoptions. The bulletin boards contained “dozens of advertisements for children that appear to be posted by middlemen.” Concerned parents, typically those who had struggled with their own adoptions, sought to introduce parents seeking homes for unwanted children with others who might be willing to take them in. The practice grew to be called “private rehoming,” and through it, an unascertainable number of adopted children found new families.

The existence of an underground rehoming network brought hope to adoptive families, typically at their wits’ end with children they could not handle. And the informal process facilitated by the Internet “emerged as a do-it-yourself way for parents to quietly end adoptions. The groups not only attract parents, but also appeal to do-gooders . . . who delight in the chance to help find needy children better homes.” With governments and adoption agencies unwilling to acknowledge the realities of unsuccessful adoptions, or at least unwilling to help the families suffering in them, this “hey, can I have your baby?” approach seemed to cast a ray of light for all parties involved. Rehoming networks supported distressed parents, found permanent families for children, and represented an imperfect—but at least partial—solution for families in crisis.

The rehoming community grew relatively vast. The need for online rehoming networks has been described as a “reflection of society.” Indeed, the networks seemed to expose the steadfastly ignored reality that many adoptions do not have a happy ending. “Reuters analyzed 5,029 posts from a

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60 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 1, supra note 25 (image caption).
61 Id.
63 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 1, supra note 25.
64 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 3, supra note 62.
65 Id.
66 Id.
67 Id.
68 Id.
five-year period on one Internet message board, a Yahoo! group. On average, a child was advertised for rehoming there once a week. With dozens more rehoming networks populating the Internet, one can only guess how many children were rehomed through these private and wholly informal communities.

2. “Grave Danger” Finally Exposed

Because private rehomings remain just that—private—little scrutiny and no oversight had been directed towards rehoming networks. There are few legal safeguards against rehoming, and those that may exist are typically not enforced. State law requires a comprehensive and invasive process to be followed when families adopt a child. But quick, informal, and private custody transfers with no judicial oversight whatsoever are frequently permissible in the law, for many good reasons unrelated to unsuccessful adoptions. Moreover, a large minority of American states have yet to prohibit the advertisement of children for adoption, leaving rehoming forums essentially unchecked by the law.

The first official suggestion that any law may actually prohibit the practice of private rehoming came in 2011, when an administrator for the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) sent a letter of warning to other administrators in ICPC jurisdictions. That letter, prompted by reports of a child welfare worker in one state indicating that children were being sent to new parents without the approval of authorities, sought to raise awareness of the potential of an ICPC violation in rehoming situations. Now binding on

69 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 1, supra note 25.
70 Id.
72 Id.
73 Id.
77 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 1, supra note 25.
78 Id.
79 Id.
all fifty states, D.C., and the Virgin Islands, the ICPC requires that the parents of an adopted child who is to be transferred to a new and permanent home in a different state contact child welfare authorities in both states to alert them to the transfer. At that point, background checks, home studies, and other investigations are triggered to evaluate the propriety of the child’s placement. The 2011 letter warned that Internet rehoming networks flaunt the ICPC because they operate “without the involvement of a licensed adoption agency, or any other type of agency authorized to place children.” The official went on to note that private rehoming “puts children at substantial risk, primarily because the families to which they are sent have not been subject to background checks, a home study or any evaluation to assess their suitability to care for children.” The warnings fell on deaf ears, and rehomings have steadily plodded along, largely hidden from public view.

In late 2013, however, news of a rehoming case broke that brought with it a firestorm of scrutiny and dismay over the practice. Nicole Eason and her husband Calvin, a pair of thirty-somethings living in Illinois, responded to an ad posted on a Yahoo! chat group by Todd and Melissa Puchalla, a Wisconsin family that was struggling with sixteen-year-old Quita, a child they had adopted from Liberia. The Puchallas report that Quita was “unpredictable and violent” and had threatened her siblings such that the family was in severe crisis. Exhausted and terrified, the family looked to private rehoming and eventually concluded “[t]here was no other option.” Within just days, the Puchallas found the Easons, who seemed, at first, like a dream come true. The Easons assured Melissa Puchalla that they could handle Quita, even with severe health and behavioral problems, and even seemed excited about the opportunity. The Puchallas hoped that the Easons’ mixed-race family might make Quita feel more at ease. In the series of emails that followed, Nicole Eason convinced the Puchallas that the Easons were fantastic with children and could handle the challenges of parenting Quita. Just a few weeks later, the Puchallas made the six-hour drive from Illinois to Wisconsin, met the Easons, and turned Quita over to them that very day, without the presence or knowledge of a single child welfare official. “The Puchallas simply signed a

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80 Id.
81 See id.
82 Id. at image of 2011 ICPC letter, archived at http://perma.cc/QU4M-5RE5 (accessed by clicking on the words “the official wrote” within the text of the article).
83 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 1, supra note 25, at image of 2011 ICPC letter.
84 Id.
85 Id.
86 Id.
87 Id.
88 Id.
89 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 1, supra note 25.
90 Id.
91 Id.
92 Id.
notarized statement declaring these virtual strangers to be Quita’s guardians. The visit lasted just a few hours. It was the first and last time the couples would meet.”

Less than a week later, the Easons disappeared with Quita. They abandoned the disheveled trailer in which they were living, packed much of what they owned, and left Illinois. Nicole Eason suddenly stopped answering Melissa Puchalla’s calls and emails. When Melissa Puchalla finally alerted authorities, a search for Quita began.

That search process uncovered a shocking wealth of information about just who the Easons were. With Quita still missing, authorities learned that the Easons had taken in several other children through the underground rehoming network over the course of several years.

Just months before the Puchallas turned over Quita, the Easons had taken in thirteen-year-old Anna Barnes, a Russian adoptee living with her adoptive parents in Texas. Like the Puchallas, the Barnes family, desperate and unable to cope with Anna’s behavioral problems, turned Anna over to Nicole Eason after communicating with her on a Yahoo! chat board named “Respite-Rehoming.” Anna later reported that “puddles of urine and piles of feces spotted the floor” of the Eason home on the day she arrived, that pornographic videos were placed within her reach, and that “she had no bed of her own.” “The first night, she slept next to a naked Nicole, she recalls. The next morning, she says, Nicole asked Anna if she had felt Nicole kissing her during the night.” And from there, matters just got worse. The Barneses learned of problems in the Easons’ past, and discovered that a home study the Easons had presented to show that they had been appropriately vetted and approved by child welfare authorities was a forgery. Two days after the Barneses relinquished Anna, they reclaimed her.

As it turns out, Anna was one of the lucky ones. Several years before Quita and Anna, Nicole Eason and a man with whom she was living—Randy Winslow—took in a ten-year-old boy, again through private rehoming. The

93 Id.
94 Id.
95 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 1, supra note 25.
96 Id.
97 Id.
98 Id.
99 See id.
100 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 4, supra note 71.
101 Id.
102 Id.
103 Id.
104 Id.
105 Id.
boy’s adoptive mother turned him over after communicating with Eason on “ConsideringDisruptionAdoption, a Yahoo! group for parents struggling to raise the children they adopted.” The boy’s mother, who had adopted him out of the U.S. foster care system, could no longer handle the child’s tantrums and “wanted [him] gone.” The very day she first communicated with Eason, the child’s mother handed him over to Eason and Winslow. She “knew little about the couple,” and that would prove to be a tragic mistake. The boy eventually returned home to his adoptive mother, and reported spending nearly all of his time with Winslow, not Eason. Just two years later, Winslow was convicted of multiple counts of sending and receiving child pornography. An investigator with the Department of Homeland Security communicated with Winslow in a chat room, where Winslow reported having molested multiple children “in the family” without remorse. ‘Transcripts of that criminal chat show that Winslow referred to the ten-year-old he and Nicole took in as a “fun boy.” Winslow is now serving a sentence in federal prison for child pornography.

At least two other children the Easons took in through private rehoming had experiences similar to those reported by Anna Barnes. And authorities learned during the search for Quita that Nicole Eason’s biological daughter was removed from her home for abuse and neglect, and that a child she had once been babysitting died in her care.

Authorities finally caught up with the Easons in New York, Quita was with them. When she reported pornography in the house and having been forced to sleep with a naked Nicole—stories eerily similar to those Anna Barnes reported as well—Quita was sent back to the Puchallas. Sadly, “taking Quita from the Easons and returning her to the Puchallas was the extent of the response by authorities.” New York police did not believe that the Easons had committed any crimes in that state. And neither


107 Id.
108 Id.
109 Id.
110 Id.
111 Id.
112 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 2, supra note 106.
113 Id.
114 Id.
115 Id.
117 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 2, supra note 106.
118 Twohey, Child Exchange Part 1, supra note 25.
119 Id.
120 Id.
121 Id.
Illinois nor Wisconsin officials took any action either. Indeed, the Easons have never been charged with nor convicted of any crime relating to their rehoming or child-rearing activities. They are said to be in Arizona now, and less than a year ago, the Easons reported having kids they had taken in yet again.

Child welfare authorities have done nothing to stop the Easons, nor have law enforcement officials, most likely because (aside from, perhaps, the forged home study) it is questionable whether the Easons have violated any law. Indeed, the law has heretofore completely ignored the rehoming phenomenon, preferring not to acknowledge it, and staunchly sticking to the maintenance of the fantasy that adoptions must always be successful.

All that changed with the September 2013 Reuters series The Child Exchange: Inside America’s Underground Market for Adopted Children. The Reuters series profiled the Easons, painstakingly tracked posts on online rehoming networks, and brought hundreds of thousands of eyes to a problem previously ignored. That series will prove a game-changer in a number of ways. It has already become evident that The Child Exchange served as a call to arms to several legislatures to do something to address private rehoming and its dangers. But it is hoped that The Child Exchange will do more—namely that it will impart a realization to those concerned with adoption and child welfare that the current system is completely inadequate in dealing with the reality of failed adoptions. Rehoming, flawed as it may be, addresses a problem that can no longer be ignored.

3. Rehoming Prohibition Initiatives

In the wake of the Reuters report bringing new light to the horrors of the underground rehoming network, both federal and state lawmakers have called for sweeping change. At the federal level, Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon wrote to Attorney General Eric Holder and others requesting that federal resources be deployed to curb the practice of private rehoming. Wyden

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122 Id.
123 Id.
124 See Twohey, Child Exchange Part 4, supra note 71.
125 Id.
126 Id.
127 Id.
asked that the Department of Justice be tasked with reviewing federal law to
determine “whether existing protections [against rehoming adopted children]
are inadequate or unenforced.”\(^\text{130}\) Presumably referring to the notion that the
ICPC should curb, or at least place substantial limitations on, parents’ ability
to rehome adopted children without government intervention but simply is not
enforced, the letter requests that the Department of Health and Human
Services “make recommendations to Congress about ways to strengthen
enforcement of [the] law[], including a minimum federal standard for
enforcement.”\(^\text{131}\)

In a separate letter to the Chairman and Ranking Member of the House
Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources, eighteen congressional
leaders asked that Congress schedule public hearings for discussion by
“experts and state authorities [of] ways to prevent . . . dangerous [rehoming]
practices.”\(^\text{132}\) This letter even asks for a government-led investigation into
rehoming to be conducted by the Government Accountability Office.\(^\text{133}\) The
hope is that such an investigation will “review gaps in legal authority, both at
the national and state levels, related to the oversight and prosecution of wrong-
doers in the rehoming of children.”\(^\text{134}\) No federal response has coalesced yet,
but widespread support for a federal initiative seems likely to gain significant
traction in the upcoming years.

At the state level, several jurisdictions reacted swiftly to the exposed
horrors of rehoming. Wisconsin and Florida legislators, for instance,
introduced bills to regulate the practice in the 2014 legislative session.\(^\text{135}\)

The Wisconsin bill sought to address rehoming by broadening prohibitions
on the advertisement of children.\(^\text{136}\) Wisconsin law historically prohibited
persons from advertising Wisconsin children for adoption in newspaper, radio,
or television media.\(^\text{137}\) The Wisconsin rehoming bill sought to broaden the
prohibition to include Internet, e-mail, or any other similar media, and would
also broaden the prohibition to preclude advertisement of children for
permanent placement.\(^\text{138}\) The bill went on to shore up mechanisms for judicial

\(^{130}\) Id.
\(^{131}\) Id.
\(^{132}\) Letter From Eighteen Members of Congress to Dave Reichert, Chairman, H. Ways
& Means Subcomm. on Human Res. and Lloyd Doggett, Ranking Member, H. Ways &
media.msn.com/i/msnbc/sections/news/Re-Homing_Letter_To_WAM.pdf, archived at
http://perma.cc/23NL-J2PL.
\(^{133}\) Id.
\(^{134}\) Id.
\(^{137}\) Id.
\(^{138}\) Id.
oversight of previously unregulated temporary changes of custody that occur solely through the execution of a power of attorney.139

Perhaps most importantly, the Wisconsin bill sought to recognize that shutting down the private rehoming network may eliminate some of the abuses rehomed adoptees have been subjected to, including those detailed in the Reuters exposé, but that the bill will do nothing to help struggling adoptive families.140 Indeed, the shuttering of the rehoming network places desperate adoptive families in even greater jeopardy through the loss of at least one potential source of relief.141 For that reason, the bill requested that Wisconsin’s Joint Legislative Council “study [the extent of] adoption disruption and dissolution” in Wisconsin, to suggest legislation that would define, track, and avoid it, and to “consider legislative options to prepare prospective adoptive parents for adoption and to support adoptive parents after an adoption.”142

Florida’s bill failed to take such a long-term approach. The drafter of the bill publicly proclaimed the intent of her Florida Senate Bill 498 to be a crackdown on rehoming in the wake of the Reuters article.143 The bill attempted to accomplish an end to rehoming solely by beefing up criminal fines for parties who advertise children for adoption, and by informing families at the time of finalization that “[p]ostadoption services are available if the petitioner experiences difficulty in caring for the child.”144

Both bills passed, as did rehoming legislation in Colorado and Louisiana.145 Other states are quite likely to follow suit. The National Conference of State Legislatures has published documents addressing rehoming.146 And Illinois lawmakers have publicly questioned how their state could have allowed the Easons to operate as they did.147

In short, both state and federal responses to the Reuters investigation are forthcoming. And it seems clear that all eyes are focused on shutting down private rehoming as a means for adoptive families to respond to unsuccessful adoptions.

139 Id.
140 Id.
141 Id.
147 Twohey, supra note 128.
In this brave new world of crisis in adoption, where rehoming becomes a non-option, and where no other means of disrupting an adoption exist, we will leave adoptive parents with virtually no tools for remedying untenable situations. It should be of grave concern to policymakers that the very child abuse they zealously try to protect against may actually increase when adoptive parents find themselves struggling in unsuccessful adoptions with little practical means of digging themselves out.

IV. PROTECTION FOR BIOLOGICAL PARENTS IN CRISIS

Biological parents in crisis, surprisingly, are not left out in the cold to the same degree. A form of “disruption”—namely abandonment—it turns out, is available to them.

The crisis of unsuccessful adoption may be relatively new. But unwanted biological children have been mistreated and discarded as trash since the dawn of time. Indeed, in Roman times, abandonment was the presumptive fate of all newborns. When a child was born, the midwife placed the baby on the ground. Only if the paterfamilias picked the baby up would the child be considered part of the family. Many infants were not picked up. And even when they were, the paterfamilias had the legal authority to disown his children, sell them into slavery, or even murder them with impunity. Abandonment was a relatively common fate for children, and abandoned children were frequently gathered up and taken as slaves by other families.

Modern times have done little to improve the fortunes of those born to desperate and unprepared parents. Nearly 20,000 infants are abandoned in the United States each year and many of those children are found dead. The abandonment problem seems to have even grown worse, not better, over the course of the last several decades. In a media-saturated environment, the increased publicity of some particularly horrific stories has drawn awareness to the problem, and even spurred society to action.

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149 Id.
150 Id.
151 Id.
152 Id.
153 Id.
A. The Birth of Safe Havens

In 1997, a New Jersey teenager, later dubbed “the Prom Mom” by national media outlets, gave birth to a healthy baby boy in a bathroom stall at her senior prom.\textsuperscript{156} She cut the umbilical cord using the serrated edge of a sanitary napkin container she dislodged from the wall, choked the baby and suffocated him, and then discarded him in a plastic trash bag.\textsuperscript{157} The Prom Mom then returned to her party, ate a salad, and hit the dance floor with her boyfriend.\textsuperscript{158} A custodian later found the baby in the bathroom trash.\textsuperscript{159} The Prom Mom served a mere three-year sentence in prison, but sparked a national outrage.\textsuperscript{160}

Unfortunately, the Prom Mom wasn’t the only newborn murder debacle to resonate with national media outlets. In 1998, an Alabama mother and grandmother were convicted of drowning an hour-old infant in a toilet.\textsuperscript{161} Each was sentenced to a twenty-five-year prison term.\textsuperscript{162}

Together, these cases, though tragic, helped to spawn widespread acceptance of safe haven laws. But the initiation of the safe haven idea actually came through a community initiative and not a law at all.\textsuperscript{163} The prosecutor in the Alabama infant murder case was asked by a reporter whether he would have chosen to prosecute the defendants had the infant been left in a safe place, including, for instance, a hospital.\textsuperscript{164} The prosecutor believed the reporter’s idea was a good one, so he agreed to organize a meeting with Alabama health and hospital staff.\textsuperscript{165} Together the group developed the “Secret Safe Place for Newborns” initiative in late 1998.\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{157} Id.
\textsuperscript{158} Id.
\textsuperscript{159} Id.
\textsuperscript{162} Id.
\textsuperscript{164} Id.
\textsuperscript{165} Id.
\textsuperscript{166} Id.
Less than a year later, Texas picked up the torch in the form of legislation.167 Spurred on by the discovery of thirteen abandoned babies in the Houston area over the course of just ten months, the state became the first to sanction—and in fact legally favor—infant abandonment that had previously been criminalized and abhorred.168 The “Baby Moses” law, drawn from the ancient story of baby Moses who was placed in a wicker basket by his mother, allowed Texas mothers to relinquish custody of a child younger than sixty days old and in good health by leaving the child with a “designated infant care provider,” such as a fire station or hospital.169 The law renders the abandoning mother immune from prosecution for child abandonment and assures the relinquishing parents’ confidentiality.170

Other states quickly copied Texas’s work, and within just months, Louisiana and Alabama followed suit.171 Generally referred to as “safe haven” laws in other states, these legislative initiatives turned out to be wildly popular.172 “Conservatives liked the fact that the laws promised to save babies without spending money; liberals liked the idea that they were not punitive. Anti-abortion groups promoted them in their fight against abortion, and some Planned Parenthood affiliates latched on to promote contraception.”173

Less than a decade later, Nebraska became the final, and fiftieth, state to pass a safe haven statute, memorializing a “consensus not often seen in politics.”174 And while safe haven laws are not universally acclaimed, they are generally tolerated as a measure that, while not ideal, may help children and even save lives.


168 Bernstein, supra note 155.


173 Bernstein, supra note 155.

B. Policies that Have Swayed Legislators

In debating the adoption of safe haven laws around the country, advocates and legislators have articulated a number of different interests advanced by jettisoning the historical rule that child abandonment is wholly intolerable and moving towards protection of parents who choose to abandon under the ambit of a safe haven scheme. Those interests can be loosely placed into two categories: saving lives and fostering permanent family relationships.

1. Saving Lives: One Abandonment at a Time

The paramount interest argued to be advanced by the passage of safe haven legislation is nothing short of saving lives. Roughly a third of the babies abandoned every year die, in part because they are left in dangerous situations, exposed to the elements and unsuitably provided for. Hawaii’s safe haven legislation, for instance, strives to encourage parents to leave their newborns in a safe place, “and thus save the newborn infant’s life.”

Even beyond the content of a dangerous abandonment environment, safe haven legislation recognizes that parents “may be under severe emotional stress” and strives to provide them an alternative to parenting. Recognizing the potential for physical, mental, sexual, and emotional abuse, and also neglect by parents, the law sanctions the unthinkable as the lesser of two evils.

In essence, safe havens are child-focused, and serve as outgrowths of the ubiquitous best interest bent in family law. Kansas’s statute, for example, expressly notes that its provisions are designed to insure that “each child who comes within the provisions of the code . . . receive[s] the care, custody, guidance control and discipline that will best serve the child’s welfare and the interests of the state, preferably . . . recognizing . . . the child’s well-being.”

Removing children from homes with desperate parents, even when placed into the hands of the state, may, legislators have recognized, be preferable to forced parenting.

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175 See, e.g., Stenzel, supra note 163, at 1.
176 Pollet, supra note 154, at 71.
2. Fostering Permanent Families

States frequently articulate another policy behind safe haven legislation though, one far more remote than the immediate interest in child safety and well-being. Namely, many state statutes focus on safe haven legislation as advancing the perhaps otherwise unattainable interest of children in a “stable home life.”\(^{182}\) Nearly every safe haven statute is accompanied by an assumption of custody by the child welfare authority of the state in which the child is abandoned.\(^{183}\) States tolerate, and even enthusiastically pass, safe haven legislation because it frees children for adoption in the long term, and with an adoptive placement comes the hope that a child has found a “permanent family setting.”\(^{184}\) Of course, some states have recognized that the use of established adoption procedures from the start would be preferable to merely dropping a baby at a fire station.\(^{185}\) But knowing the desperation of parents in the face of the birth of an unwanted child and the likelihood that safely abandoned infants will enter and successfully navigate the state’s adoption process, states have largely satisfied themselves that safe haven legislation facilitates the creation of permanent homes for children through eventual adoption.\(^{186}\)

Whether either of these policies is actually advanced by safe haven legislation is debatable. Critics charge, as discussed in Part IV.D, that safe haven legislation is not shown to actually save any lives, and that the laws are so rarely used that they are having no effect at all.\(^{187}\) In reality, the true effectiveness of the provisions is not likely something that can be measured. Knowing that states believe they are saving lives and building “forever families,” however, aids in contextualizing and evaluating today’s safe haven schemes.

C. The State of the Safe Haven

The unanimity of state acceptance of safe haven legislation is, perhaps, deceiving. The adoption of safe havens in all fifty states\(^{188}\) masks a vast underbelly of disagreement, if not with the existence of the institution

\(^{183}\) Infant Safe Haven, \textit{supra} note 172, at 5.
\(^{188}\) Weixel, \textit{supra} note 174.
altogether, then at least with the particulars of the doctrine. States disagree as to precisely what happens after the drop. From state to state, the baby is necessarily welcomed into “safe arms,” but what happens next? Does the transfer necessarily include obtainment of important medical information about the child? Is the child to become available for adoption immediately? May the dropping adult regain custody of the child after a change of heart? Legislative attempts to answer these questions have produced little in the way of consistency. Moreover, substantial questions and divisions among states have arisen with respect to who may take advantage of safe haven legislation. And, perhaps most importantly, the age at which a child may be relinquished before safe haven confidentiality and anonymity is lifted varies rather dramatically among the states.

1. Life After Abandonment

One of the only universal truths of safe haven schemes is that they require the child’s physical transfer at a location presumed to be able to offer safe, albeit temporary, care. Hospitals, emergency medical service providers, health-care facilities, fire stations, some law enforcement agencies, and sometimes even churches are generally alternatives, depending on the particulars of state law.

Roughly half of the states require the receiving party to attempt to obtain some medical information about the child, including asking about major illnesses, diseases, and any “other information that might reasonably assist [child welfare authorities] in determining the best interests of the newborn child.” Many states even ask for identifying information, although the relinquishing party is generally not compelled to provide it. Confidentiality and anonymity have been deemed altogether essential to the success of the safe haven option. Doggedly pursuing too much information, and requiring that the relinquishing party provide it as a condition of the safe haven law’s application, would undermine the law entirely. One North Dakota leader articulated the problem as a “choice of two goods”—“the information from the adult versus the welfare of the child.” Of course, states have chosen to favor the latter and have “decided [that] the welfare of the child would be a superseding good” when compared with the information that perhaps could be gathered from relinquishing parents.

190 INFANT SAFE HAVEN, supra note 172, at 2–3.
191 Id. at 3.
193 INFANT SAFE HAVEN, supra note 172, at 3–4.
194 Id.
196 Id. at 5.
Regardless of the information obtained when the child is relinquished, the receiving party is required to immediately notify child welfare authorities of the relinquishment.\textsuperscript{197} Virtually every state statute then provides for assumption of custody by the child welfare authority of the state.\textsuperscript{198} The goal, thereafter, is to assimilate the child into the existing adoption process, and to provide a safe and suitable home for the child as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{199}

The potential for reunification, and whether that remains a goal after a safe haven drop, varies widely among jurisdictions. Some states require that safe arms personnel ask the relinquishing parent whether he “plan[s] on returning to seek custody of the child in the future.”\textsuperscript{200} In other states, the dropping party is even provided a copy of an infant identification bracelet that will assist in matching the parent and child at a later time if reunification is sought.\textsuperscript{201} The idea, of course, is to encourage use of the safe haven provisions by parents only after due deliberation; desperate, and temporary, desires on the part of parents to relinquish their children should not always be held against them in the event of a recovery of wits. What is clear, however, is that child welfare authorities are not required to “attempt to reunify the child with [his] parents, or . . . search for relatives of the child as a placement or permanency option.”\textsuperscript{202} State adoption schemes typically require precisely that.\textsuperscript{203} But in the face of an abandonment, regular adoption protocol is altered in the best interest of the child. Child welfare authorities are charged, now, to find a safe, loving and, hopefully, permanent new home for the relinquished child.

2. Stranger Drops and Paternal Protection

Among the most compelling and controversial questions surrounding the state of modern safe haven laws is just who can take advantage of them. The theory is that they should be used only by parents.\textsuperscript{204} But the very anonymity that safe haven statutes must provide to be effective raises questions about the person relinquishing. Insuring that a relinquishing party has some legal connection to and right over the child is an exceptionally difficult proposition. Many states have chosen not to wade into the morass, and have simply

\textsuperscript{197} INFANT SAFE HAVEN, supra note 172, at 5.
\textsuperscript{198} See, e.g., WYO. STAT. ANN. § 14-11-103 (2013) (“The local child protective agency shall assume care and custody of the child immediately upon notice from the hospital. After receiving custody, the local child protective agency shall assist in placement of the newborn child pursuant to W.S. 14-11-105(a).”).
\textsuperscript{199} INFANT SAFE HAVEN, supra note 172, at 5.
\textsuperscript{201} INFANT SAFE HAVEN, supra note 172, at 4.
\textsuperscript{202} Hearing on S.B. 2129 Before the H. Comm. on Human Servs., 2001 Leg., 57th Sess. 1 (N.D. 2001) (statement of Sandi Tabor, North Dakota Deputy Att’y Gen.).
\textsuperscript{203} Id.
\textsuperscript{204} See generally INFANT SAFE HAVEN, supra note 172, at 3.
remained silent on the question of who may relinquish.205 Others provide expressly that only a parent may relinquish, and sometimes that only a parent residing in a particular state may relinquish under the protection of that state’s safe haven laws.206 Of course, those requirements are virtually impossible to police, and there are well-documented cases of persons driving across multiple state lines to take advantage of more liberal safe haven provisions than those which exist in their home state.207

Recognizing the fear of parents who would relinquish under the statutes, some states even broaden their application to agents.208 Eleven states allow a person other than the parent to relinquish on the parent’s behalf.209 And still more allow relinquishment by a non-parent absent any agency relationship, but only if the relinquishing non-parent has legal custody of the child.210 The overwhelming consensus among state legislatures here is that safe haven legislation is a tool to be used by desperate parents only. No other person should drop a child and be favored with the acts’ protection.

The real meat of the controversy surrounding who may take advantage of safe haven legislation centers on the rights of fathers. All fifty states allow a unilateral relinquishment of a child by one parent, and four limit the law to allow relinquishment by a mother alone.211 The practical effect of safe haven laws, nationwide, then, is that mothers alone relinquish.212 And the anonymity guaranteed has been argued to “prevent[] states from effectively protecting the parental interest of the nonabandoning parent”—almost always the father.213 Mechanisms generally used to notify and protect fathers in the event a mother attempts to relinquish a child for adoption, including efforts to notify fathers and examination of the putative father registry, “are futile if there is no information about the mother or the baby.”214 States have generally chosen not to specifically address the due process rights of fathers under safe haven legislation, or to expressly articulate any notice requirements at all.215 As a result, a number of scholars have argued that safe haven legislation

\[\text{id. at 2.}\]
\[\text{id.}\]
\[\text{id. at 53.}\]
\[\text{Id. at 53–54.}\]
unconstitutionally deprives fathers of their due process rights. The rules, it is argued, “not only deprive fathers who do not know they have a child an opportunity to find out, but also deny men who know they are fathers and have taken affirmative steps to parent (such as providing prenatal financial and emotional support to the mother) their right to due process.”

Some states have responded to the call for greater paternal protection. South Carolina, for instance, requires publication in television and radio broadcasts and in print media of all safe haven relinquishments. “[A]ll known information about the infant and the circumstances surrounding the abandonment” are to be made available in an effort to provide fathers with the notice necessary to come in and seize the opportunity to parent. The very nature of the safe haven beast, however—particularly its concomitant confidentiality—leaves fathers at a disadvantage. No court has yet evaluated a paternal charge of due process violation under safe haven legislation. Until that happens, and likely beyond, questions as to the fairness of the legislation and its ability to protect fathers’ interests, while simultaneously serving desperate women and needy children, are likely to persist.

3. Age: The Elephant in the Room

By far the most challenging question faced by state legislators in crafting safe haven legislation has been the question of age. How old is too old? The articulated purpose of the legislation is to protect babies from desperate mothers who are unprepared to parent. And legislators no doubt forged ahead in adopting safe haven schemes with images like that of the Prom Mom in mind—troubled young women, perhaps even shocked by unexpected birth, find themselves wholly incapable of caring for a child, even temporarily, and look for a way to dispose of the evidence. Safe havens grew up, then, as a response to the perceived problem of immediate child murder after birth. And it is clear that some state legislators even connect safe haven rules with abortion. The idea, realistic or not, is that mothers with knowledge of the safe haven relinquishment option may “choose life” rather than pursuing an abortion.

216 Id.
217 Id. at 54.
219 Id. at 900–01.
220 Id. at 878.
221 See Tabor, supra note 202 (testifying before the North Dakota legislature and describing the bill as targeted at “young mothers, at their wits’ end, who may not know what else to do.”).
222 Id. at 2.
223 See, e.g., Sanger, supra note 187, at 753.
224 Id. at 779–80.
In any event, the paradigm is that of relinquishment of a newborn, typically just a matter of hours after birth. Roughly a quarter of the states have borne that paradigm out legislatively, frequently using a time limitation that mirrors adoptive surrenders. Specifically, twelve states limit the application of safe haven legislation to relinquishment of infants seventy-two hours old or younger. Approximately twenty more extend the period to thirty days. Still others choose slightly lengthier periods, generally hovering in the sixty-day range. North Dakota and Missouri stand alone in allowing a child up to the age of one year to be relinquished under the protection of the safe haven scheme.

Where an age limitation in the thirty- to sixty-day range has been selected, the articulated goal has been to give parents who might invoke the protections of the legislation the time to “evaluate all options and avenues available to them before” abandoning a child. The tumultuous and hormonal hours immediately following the birth of a child seemingly provide an insufficient window within which to truly, and logically, explore the possibilities. But lengthier periods concern child welfare experts, because of the likelihood that a greater bond between parent and child will be formed the longer the child remains in the parent’s care.

A bill introduced in Nebraska limiting safe haven protection to persons relinquishing infants up to seventy-two hours old initially provoked substantial concern from legislators not about the sense of the seventy-two-hour choice, as compared with some other maximum, but about “the ability of those receiving the infants to determine whether the infant dropped off was under [the] age limit.” Of course, no age limitation chosen by state legislators could be applied with any degree of certainty. But the lengthier the period, the more likely medical personnel are to be confident that the relinquished child is within the range of that contemplated by the statute.

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225 INFANT SAFE HAVEN, supra note 172, at 2.
226 Id.
227 Id.
228 Id.
229 Id. In Missouri, parents are guaranteed immunity from prosecution only if the child is under five days old at relinquishment. For children five days to one year old, relinquishing parents merely hold an affirmative defense to prosecution for child endangerment. MO. REV. STAT. § 210.950 (2014).
232 Donnelly, supra note 230, at 775.
233 Id.
Periods approaching a month have been thought by most state legislatures to appropriately strike the balance between the needs of the child and those of the relinquishing adult.\textsuperscript{234} With some minor variance, state legislatures have been able to coalesce around this window.\textsuperscript{235} Still, the age issue has proven itself exceptionally problematic and even led to a lengthy delay in some states’ acceptance of the whole theory of safe haven legislation.\textsuperscript{236}

The biggest, nationally-recognized debacle relating to safe haven legislation focused precisely on this issue. After more than seven years of debate on the topic, Nebraska found itself still unable to get a safe haven scheme enacted.\textsuperscript{237} Opposition was based on a wide array of complaints—from fathers’ rights to the utility of the legislative schemes at all—but ultimately became focused on the age limit.\textsuperscript{238} Seventy-two hour age limits and thirty-day age limits were both rejected, largely owing to previously-articulated enforcement concerns.\textsuperscript{239} After an intense debate, a compromise was drafted, and ultimately enacted into law, which provided that “[n]o person shall be prosecuted for any crime based solely upon the act of leaving a child in the custody of an employee on duty at a hospital licensed by the State of Nebraska.”\textsuperscript{240} All age limitations were eliminated altogether and the statute as enacted into law merely carried the requirement that the relinquishment be of a “child.”\textsuperscript{241} The bill became Nebraska law in 2008, and “[n]o one realized the magnitude of problems the seemingly innocuous compromise would create.”\textsuperscript{242}

Within weeks of the law’s effective date, dozens of children were dropped at Nebraska hospitals by parents invoking the act.\textsuperscript{243} In the most shocking case, Gary Staton, a single Nebraska father whose wife died roughly a year before, dropped off nine children, ranging in age from one to seventeen years old, at an Omaha hospital.\textsuperscript{244} Staton was not the only parent to abandon teenage children. Indeed, within three months of the legislation’s passage thirty-six children were left at safe haven drop-off sites.\textsuperscript{245} The vast majority

\textsuperscript{234} Infant Safe Haven, supra note 172, at 1–2.
\textsuperscript{235} Id.
\textsuperscript{236} Donnelly, supra note 230, at 774–75.
\textsuperscript{237} Id.
\textsuperscript{238} Id. at 775–76.
\textsuperscript{239} Id. at 776.
\textsuperscript{240} Id.
\textsuperscript{241} Id.
\textsuperscript{242} Donnelly, supra note 230, at 775.
\textsuperscript{243} Id.
\textsuperscript{245} Id.
of those children were teenagers.\footnote{Kevin O’Hanlon, 5 Years Later, Nebraska Patching Cracks Exposed by Safe-Haven Debacle, LINCOLN J. STAR (Jan. 21, 2013), http://journalstar.com/special-section/epilogue/years-later-nebraska-patching-cracks-exposed-by-safe-haven-debacle/article_d80d1454-1456-593b-9838-97d99314554f.html, archived at http://perma.cc/6J8P-S9GW.} Only one was younger than six years old.\footnote{Id.} None were babies.\footnote{Id.} Children were driven by parents, from Iowa, Michigan, and even Georgia, to be abandoned under the statute’s provisions.\footnote{Id.}

Both politicians and the public alike were shocked, and then-Governor Dave Heineman called lawmakers back into special session within months “to fix the law, saying he could wait no longer to address what had become a state embarrassment.”\footnote{Erik Eckholm, Nebraska Revises Child Safe Haven Law, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 21, 2008), http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/22/us/22nebraska.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, archived at http://perma.cc/G4CM-M5ZN.} After the announcement of the special session, one California mother drove more than 1,200 miles to drop a fourteen-year-old boy at a Nebraska hospital, just hours before the end of the no-age-limitation safe haven law.\footnote{Miller, supra note 244.}

“Parents who had used the law and children’s rights groups begged the Legislature not to lower the age limit, saying the safe-haven statute was the only resource for desperate families.”\footnote{O’Hanlon, supra note 246.} But in the end, the Nebraska legislature revised its safe haven provisions just over three months after they came into effect to include a thirty-day age limitation.\footnote{Id.}

The Nebraska experience highlighted serious problems with the availability of, and access to, social services for needy families.\footnote{Id.} Those relinquished aside, dozens more children were brought to safe haven locations and left after social workers offered “respite care, parenting classes and referrals” to parents instead.\footnote{Id.} Some legislators were sympathetic to the sheer dearth of help available for families with older children.\footnote{Id.} But the majority of legislators agreed with the need to modify safe haven legislation to return to its roots—the protection of infants.\footnote{Id.} And as the nation watched, a new need for a rule approaching uniformity began to be articulated. Governor Heineman, in describing the reasons for the law’s revision, particularly noted that a change was warranted to “prevent those outside the state from bringing their children
to [a state with a more liberal safe haven age limitation] in an attempt to secure services."258

Nebraska essentially served to shore up belief in the need for some avenue of relief for desperate parents, and simultaneously reinforced a view that such relief should be substantially limited in time. In the wake of the Nebraska revision, only one state has lengthened its safe haven age limitation—from thirty days to sixty days.259 And with North Dakota as the only remaining outlier, states have become rather firmly entrenched, though reluctantly so, in limitations of less than two weeks.260

D. All for Naught?

Nebraska’s safe haven legislation has been described as “one of the most well-intended laws ever passed . . . but it turned into one of the biggest messes state lawmakers ever created and exposed” problems the state still has not solved.261 Much the same may be said for safe haven laws nationwide. And worse still, many have begun to question whether the problems caused by safe haven legislation are all for naught. Are safe havens effective at curbing any of the problems they were designed to address? Or, in sanctioning child abandonment, have they simply created an additional set of societal ills?

Professor Carol Sanger, in her work exploring safe haven laws nationwide, has eloquently suggested that the question may be an impossible one to answer, “for it requires defining what counts as 'success' in the realm of baby-saving.”262 Advocates of safe haven provisions have long-advocated a modest “one baby” goal.263 And in the wake of relatively frequent use of safe havens nationwide, they have all but declared victory.

Hundreds of babies have been relinquished under safe haven legislation. Florida alone experienced more than a hundred safe haven relinquishments in just seven years.264 Some estimates suggest that safe havens save roughly forty babies each year, although definitive numbers don’t currently exist.265 What is absolutely clear is that women across the country have dropped children at

258 Id.
259 LA. CHILD CODE ANN. art. 1150.3 (2014) (extending Louisiana’s safe haven relinquishment age limitation from thirty days to sixty days, ten years after the legislation’s initial passage).
260 INFANT SAFE HAVEN, supra note 172, at 2 n.4; see also supra note 229 and accompanying text.
261 O’Hanlon, supra note 246.
262 Sanger, supra note 187, at 788.
263 Pollet, supra note 154, at 73 (stating that proponents of the legislation maintain that the legislation is worthwhile even if one baby is saved); see also Sanger, supra note 187, at 789.
265 Pollet, supra note 154, at 73.
safe haven locations under the protection of the acts. Proponents of the laws tend to assume that any baby dropped is a baby saved. But as experts point out, ascertaining the true effectiveness of safe haven legislation is actually quite complicated. The problem is that “we simply do not know what the fate of the babies would have been had [these] laws not been in place.”

Still, given that more than 20,000 infants are abandoned in the United States each year, and roughly a third of them are found dead, it requires little stretching to conclude that safe haven drops have prevented some infant deaths.

Sanger suggests that tradeoffs in terms of the lack of prenatal care and diversion of resources from other means of targeting infant murder may actually mean that safe havens fail to provide any net gain of life. The lives immediately saved at infant drop may cost others. In short, counting infant bodies is a relatively ineffective means of measuring safe havens’ effectiveness.

Moreover, mothers around the country continue to abandon their children in unsafe (and unapproved) locations, even in the wake of universal safe haven enactment. Florida’s safe haven program, for instance has seen almost fifty infants illegally dumped in “risky places including dumpsters, front porches, bushes, hotel trash cans, the beach, a canal, and a church.” More than half of those babies were found dead.

Many blame the failure of the attendant educational effort. The fiscal implications of safe haven bills have been exceptionally important to state legislatures, particularly in the midst of a recession. Safe haven advocates knew from the start that their bills were likely to be accepted only if the fiscal impact was minimal. As a result, most states signed safe havens into law “without formal attention to how women who might use it would find out

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266 Sanger, supra note 187, at 789.
267 Id.
268 Id.
269 Id.
270 Id.
271 Pollet, supra note 154, at 71.
273 Id. at 790.
274 Id. at 788.
275 Perez, supra note 264, at 263.
276 Id. at 263–64.
277 Id.
278 Sanger, supra note 187, at 792.
279 Id.
about it . . . . In Ohio, for example, the fiscal impact of proposed Safe Haven legislation was assessed at essentially zero.280 Not all states have acted with such disregard for the practicalities of the legislation’s success in achieving its articulated goals. New York invested $1 million in ensuring the effectiveness of its program, complete with publicity for the program and a toll-free information and referral hotline open around the clock.281 Florida markets its program with billboards, bus stop coverings, mall benches, and radio and television advertisements.282 Several states include safe haven education as part of the sex education curricula in both public and private schools.283 To be sure, though, the educational effort related to safe havens has been largely a failure.284 Far more could be done, and safe haven proponents argue that the potential to save those many newborns still abandoned in life-threatening situations is worth the cost of education.

Perhaps the most difficult question to answer in addressing the effectiveness of safe haven legislation, however, is whether any educational effort, no matter how robust, could ever make any meaningful change in rates of neonaticide. State legislatures pass safe havens with the Prom Mom, and others similarly situated, in mind.285 But there are substantial questions about whether desperate pregnant women “will give these [safe haven] benefits much thought, if they are thinking clearly at all.”286 Women who kill their infant children are generally very young (with an average age of nineteen), single, and living at home.287 Almost all have hidden their pregnancies, received no prenatal care, and delivered their babies at home.288 They frequently enter a state of deep denial and childbirth results in a “brief disassociative state,” which results in the child’s murder.289 No educational effort can reach these women, because they simply are not well and cannot process the message.290 They are “confused, upset, and in denial. These girls are extremely unlikely to drive or ask for a ride to a designated Safe Haven to legally relinquish their newborn, especially one that is staffed with authority figures.”291 With respect to this segment of the population, it may be that safe havens simply cannot effectively function.

280 Id.
281 Pollet, supra note 154, at 73–74.
282 Perez, supra note 264, at 261–62.
283 See, e.g., id. at 262; Sanger, supra note 187, at 792–94.
285 See, e.g., Tabor, supra note 202.
286 Sanger, supra note 187, at 797.
287 Id.
288 Id.
289 Id. at 799.
290 Id. at 800.
291 Perez, supra note 264, at 266 (footnote omitted).
Some argue, finally, that the efficacy of safe havens may never be quantified, but that the rules may be particularly useful nonetheless. Essentially, their utility is borne out in their hortatory nature.292 “[W]hether or not the laws accomplish very much in fact” they send a message.293 Here, that message is that child welfare and infant life is to be protected in the most vigorous manner possible.294 Such an expression is itself useful, even laudable. Critics charge that safe havens send other important messages as well—namely messages that discourage parental responsibility and provide an easy way out of a “‘less-than-dire’” situation.295

Essentially all that can be definitively concluded about the success of safe haven legislation, then, is that it is hotly debated by child welfare experts even ten years after its widespread acceptance. Regardless, there is little momentum in any state to do away with the scheme; indeed, recent modifications to safe haven legislation have seen them grow slightly more, not less, expansive.296 Measurable improvement aside, safe havens seem to be around for the long haul.

V. STATE-SANCTIONED DISRUPTION AS THE ONLY VIABLE SOLUTION TO ADOPTION CRISIS

Adoptions that simply are not positive for any of the parties involved are real, and very serious. Child welfare workers and policymakers alike have turned a blind eye on the reality that some families should not continue a placement, even after it has been finalized. We simply don’t want to believe that adoption is not forever, and we certainly don’t want to approve additional trauma to an already vulnerable child. But hard evidence of a substantial increase in unsuccessful adoption outcomes, including those involving tragic consequences, demonstrates that it is our duty to acknowledge the possibility that, on rare occasions, actually sanctioning some form of adoption disruption is the best possible solution.

To date, the rallying cry of experts and policymakers has been in the direction of increasing social services for adoptive families in crisis, or of better educating adoptive parents about the services that may be available to them. Indeed, every tragic story described in this piece—from the case of Hana Williams to the Prom Mom—shares one thing in common: they all

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292 Sanger, supra note 187, at 791.
293 Id.
294 Id.
296 See, e.g., LA. CHILD CODE ANN. art 1150.3 (2014) (extending Louisiana’s safe haven relinquishment age limitation from thirty days to sixty days, ten years after the legislation’s initial passage).
served as rallying cries for increased social services for adoptive families.\textsuperscript{297} It would be a simple solution, and it is one always proffered when it is needed to push aside the possibility of state-sanctioned relinquishment.\textsuperscript{298} As a solution, it just sounds better. Adoption is “forever,” and thinking in terms of how to make forever possible rather than making an exception to forever is the path most frequently chosen.

But the truth is that increased social service is a siren song. Focusing on it as the exclusive solution to the adoption crisis for so many years has not served society well, and it is time to recognize the shortcomings of social services as a solution.

In response to adoption crises, policymakers and child welfare experts have frequently called for increased education for adoptive parents about the challenges and pitfalls of adoption and parenting.\textsuperscript{299} But the vast majority of adoptive parents already undergo substantial education before a child’s placement. For parents adopting through the foster care system, the state provides useful and comprehensive education as to the challenges these families may face and as to the help that is available when they struggle.\textsuperscript{300} For parents adopting internationally, one of the essential features of the Hague Convention was to mandate more comprehensive education for adoptive parents.\textsuperscript{301} It requires at least ten hours of pre-placement education.\textsuperscript{302} Even for parents adopting internationally from non-Hague countries, and for those adopting domestically through agency adoption, hefty advance educational requirements are imposed not by any government, but by adoption agencies.


\textsuperscript{298} See, e.g., VICTOR GROZE, SUCCESSFUL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF SPECIAL NEEDS ADOPTION 113–16 (1996).


\textsuperscript{300} See, e.g., Lili Mostofi, How to Become a Foster Parent in San Diego County, 11 J. CONTEMP. LEGAL ISSUES 576, 577 (2000).


\textsuperscript{302} Id.
which, of course, have a strong interest in the success of their placements. Adoptive parents are generally better educated on the pitfalls of parenting than are their biological counterparts, and there is almost no adoptive parent who would report being unfamiliar with the special problems that face adoptive families in adjusting to a new family life. Focusing on education of adoptive families, then, as a means of solving adoption crisis is a feel-good, simple attempt at a solution that is likely to have no real-world impact.

Beefing up counseling services provided by adoption agencies or the state is a frequently articulated alternative. But even in the face of consistently reported crisis outcomes as a result of failing placements, neither adoption agencies nor states have been willing to provide the type of expensive and ongoing care that some families need. Changing the law to require them to provide this sort of care is not only likely to be politically untenable, but it is also an overly simplistic solution that is not likely to effect any real change.

For agencies, adoption is big business these days. Even for “non-profit,” charitable brokers of adoption, fees charged adoptive parents for the placement of a child are enormous. Counseling and other costs of adoption are already passed on to adoptive parents. Adoption agencies, in other words, are going to be unwilling to absorb the very high cost of extensive


307 See, e.g., Sandra Patton-Imani, Redefining the Ethics of Adoption, Race, Gender, and Class, 36 LAW & SOC’Y REV. 813, 827 (2002).


309 See UNIF. ADOPTION ACT § 7-103(a)(4), 9 U.L.A. 11 (1994); see also In re Adoption of Stephen, 645 N.Y.S.2d 1012, 1015 (N.Y. Fam. Ct. 1996) (finding that payment of counseling expenses was proper and reasonable).
They will, rather, pass that cost on to adoptive families. At first blush, that may not seem such a bad outcome, until one considers that adoption already drains staggering sums from adoptive parents. Indeed, the cost of many adoptions today hovers in the range of $40,000. Adding more expenses to that sum quickly prices quality parents out of the market. Required post-placement counseling that relies on adoption agency facilitation, then, is simply not likely to happen.

Counseling provided on the state’s dime is even less likely. State budgets are teetering on the brink nationwide, with social services frequently finding themselves as the first casualty of an economic downfall. Help for families is dwindling, not increasing, these days. And help for needy parents, even when the welfare of a child is at stake, is no exception. Any legislation that seeks to force states to bear the cost of post-placement counseling is best described as dead on arrival.

Finally, a huge portion of adoptive placements that are unsuccessful involve children with mental health issues. In order to continue in a family setting, adoptive parents need to access substantial and ongoing mental health services, both for their children and for themselves. Private insurance frequently brings substantial coverage gaps for children with mental health needs. Many state mental health institutions categorically refuse to treat children who remain under parental care rather than in state custody. And parents who have tried to obtain mental health services for their children under Medicaid, “after filling out extensive applications and sometimes waiting more than a month to have their application processed,” typically report dissatisfaction and very low levels of care received. The mental health services many adopted children need to cope in a new family environment simply are not there, and, given the economic crisis of the last decade, are not likely to materialize.

Adoptees remaining in intact placements have been failed for many years by the lack of availability of social services. We can dream of social services becoming bigger and better, but experience has shown the dream to be just that. The economic realities today do not indicate that expanding social

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310 See CHILD WELFARE INFO. GATEWAY, supra note 308.
312 Id.
314 Coakley, supra note 2, at 116–17.
315 Id. at 158–61.
316 Donnelly, supra note 230, at 798.
317 Id. at 798–99.
318 Id. at 799.
services in any meaningful way is a real possibility on which child welfare workers should focus their energies.

Rather, the focus should shift to providing for a regulated form of adoption disruption that allows adoptive parents to relinquish children into state custody, much like biological children relinquish under safe haven provisions. The failure to recognize the need for child abandonment under limited scenarios has perpetrated far more horrors than that which would likely be visited by a narrow and closely watched disruption mechanism.

Developing a state-sanctioned disruption mechanism, both philosophically and practically, would be rather simple. Safe haven schemes already acknowledge that the time-honored view of families as forever must admit of some exceptions. From a theoretical standpoint, then, extending existing safe haven legislation merely serves to equalize the treatment of desperate and needy adoptive parents with their biological parent counterparts considering terminating the parent–child relationship. Pragmatically speaking, the infrastructure in place in all fifty states for safe haven schemes is easily transported to adoption. Safe places to relinquish children, which are equipped to temporarily care for a child safely, are already designated. The process of making contact with child welfare authorities and processing children into the state system is already established. And once children are relinquished through the safe haven process, the state is involved at every subsequent step in the child’s journey. Extending safe havens to cover adoption could solve the problems private rehoming has exposed, and perhaps even provide some relief to adoptive parents who act dangerously in desperation and with no option for remedying a failing home situation.

Indeed, safe havens may be even more effective in actually saving lives, or in preventing lesser forms of child abuse, in the adoption context than they are for newborns. Some experts question the effectiveness of safe havens for biological newborns because they necessarily require some, albeit light, shedding of confidentiality. Mothers must get to the safe haven location, and they must there manifest an intent to abandon their child. All states allow mothers to do this without identifying themselves, but the very act of in-
person abandonment itself is likely to be perceived by mothers as a breach in confidentiality, particularly for those women who have hid their pregnancies from both family and friends. Because women may be reticent to lift the veil of secrecy shortly after the birth of an unwanted biological child, it has been argued that safe havens don’t actually save any newborn lives; the women who most need them won’t use them.

The same concerns are not present in the adoption context. These days, very few families keep the fact of child adoption a secret, so mothers who would relinquish their children into state care are not faced with the risk of foregoing secrecy if they relinquish under a safe haven provision. Of course, in the wake of relinquishment, adoptive parents may be questioned as to the fate of the child, and it is more likely that the adoptive parents’ community may learn of the disruption, which itself would be a useful deterrent to use of the safe haven mechanism. But the possibility of others ultimately learning of a disruption is one remote in time, and therefore not likely to prevent desperate adoptive parents from utilizing the safe haven mechanism during times of crisis. The utility of the safe haven in adoption is that it provides a desirable solution in an immediate crisis, precisely the scenario for which safe haven legislation was designed.

Minor modifications of safe haven legislation would be necessitated to accommodate adoptive surrenders. Specifically, existing time periods within which relinquishment is possible under safe haven legislation would have to be rephrased in terms of time elapsed since finalization, rather than since birth. And substantial questions should arise as to whether relatively short safe haven relinquishment windows can be effective in the adoptive context. Adoptive bonds necessarily take time to develop, and it may well be that the thirty or sixty-day period provided under most state safe haven schemes for biological parents is not a sufficiently lengthy window for the safe haven relinquishment option to be of any real utility in the adoptive context.

Of course, strong arguments can be made for lengthening safe haven windows in the biological context. No doubt, more cases of abuse and neglect

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324 Id. at 796.
325 Id. at 795–97.
326 Id. at 796.
327 BARTH & BERRY, supra note 9, at 183 (“One family described the conflict caused by the contradiction between the adulation and praise they received from friends, co-workers, and family for their magnanimous concern toward their adoptive daughter and their final decision to return her to the agency. . . . Families had some difficulty calling on the community to assist with the problems of parenting an adoptive child after so recently calling on them to welcome and accept the child as they were.”).
328 See Tabor, supra note 202 (testifying before the North Dakota legislature and describing the bill as targeted at “young mothers, at their wits’ end, who may not know what else to do”).
of biological children at the hands of their parents could be curbed if all states extended safe haven legislation to a year, as do North Dakota and Missouri. But the obvious cost is additional trauma to the child. Short safe haven windows strike the balance between the needs of parents and child trauma in a more child-centered way.

Whatever time period states have settled on for relinquishment in the biological context should be used in the adoptive context as well, with reevaluation frequently conducted to determine whether periods are lengthy enough, both in the biological and adoptive contexts, to address safe haven legislation’s intent. Adaptation is likely to be necessary as safe havens begin to be used by adoptive parents, and the need to adapt safe haven legislation for adoption will allow states to capitalize on the opportunity to make much-needed changes to safe havens, even in the biological context.

VI. CONCLUSION

The players in child welfare can go on brushing the reality of unsuccessful adoptive placements under the rug. But that attitude does nothing to address the realities of child abuse at the hands of adoptive parents, the horrors of private rehoming, and the fact that a coming criminalization of private rehoming will leave some adoptive parents more desperate than ever before. Burying our heads in the sand, and simultaneously calling for increased social services that will simply never come to pass, has only led to tragic consequences.

It is difficult for those who care for children to even conceive of the possibility of sanctioning disruption of a finalized adoption. It goes against every ideal held dear about the child welfare system in this country. But romanticizing the adoptive family is no longer a possibility. As one expert remarked, “[i]f you think love conquers all, you’re not paying attention.”

Some families are just not destined to be forever. It is time that states recognize the struggles of adoptive parents to the same degree they do for biological parents, and extend to them the possibility of a state-sanctioned and state-regulated disruption mechanism in the interest of children, adoptive parents, and all those concerned with the welfare of adopted children.
