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## The rise and fall of intercountry adoption in the 21st century

● Peter Selman

This article focuses on the remarkable changes in the number of intercountry adoptions (ICAs) in the first decade of the new millennium (Table 1). In the 50 years or so following the initiation of transracial international adoption from Korea in 1953, global numbers of children moving for ICA had steadily increased to an estimated total worldwide of over 45,000 a year in 2004 (Selman, 2006). At that stage there seemed to be an assumption that growth would continue, and the number of applicants in receiving states continued to rise. However, the number of adoptions worldwide fell by 17 percent between 2004 and 2007 (see Table 3 later). At the time of writing less than half the receiving states had published statistics for 2008. The total number of USA ‘orphan visas’ issued in 2008<sup>1</sup> was 17,438, 2000 less than in 2007, and 24 percent below the highest recorded number of 22,884 in 2004 (Office of Children’s Issues, 2009). Numbers have also fallen in the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Australia. In contrast, the number of ICAs to Italy rose by 16 percent to 3977, which was 550 more than in 2007, and a small increase was also recorded in Belgium and France.

The article will review trends in receiving states and states of origin from 2001 to 2007, with a detailed study of selected countries between 2003 and 2007. The global and regional totals cited are based on an aggregation of data from over 20 countries which are primarily receiving states. Problems of data are discussed elsewhere (Selman, 2002, 2006).

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**Key words** ● adoption trends ● children ● intercountry adoption ● numbers  
● receiving states ● states of origin

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**Table 1** Intercountry adoption to selected receiving countries, 1998–2007, by rank in 2004 (peak year in bold)

Country	1998	2001	2003	2004	2006	2007
USA	15,774	19,237	21,616	22,884	20,679	19,613
Spain	1487	3428	3951	5541	472	3648
France	3777	3094	3995	4079	3977	3162
Italy	2233	1797	2772	3402	3188	3420
Canada	2222	1874	2180	1955	1535	1713
<b>Subtotal for 5 top countries</b>	<b>25,493</b>	<b>29,430</b>	<b>34,514</b>	<b>37,861</b>	<b>33,851</b>	<b>31,556</b>
Netherlands	825	1122	1154	<b>1307</b>	816	778
Sweden	928	1044	1046	<b>1109</b>	879	800
Norway	643	713	714	<b>706</b>	448	426
Denmark	624	631	523	<b>528</b>	447	429
Australia	245	289	278	<b>370</b>	421	405
<b>Total<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>31,710</b>	<b>36,379</b>	<b>41,530</b>	<b>45,288</b>	<b>39,742</b>	<b>37,526</b>
<b>(to 23 states)</b>	<b>(21)</b>	<b>(23)</b>	<b>(23)</b>	<b>(23)</b>	<b>(22)<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>(23)</b>
<b>% to top 5</b>	80	81	83	84	85	84
<b>% to USA</b>	49	53	52	51	52	52

*Notes:*

<sup>a</sup> 13 other countries are included in the overall totals: Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Luxembourg, Malta, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland and the UK with the addition of Andorra and Israel from 2001.

<sup>b</sup> Data for Cyprus 2006 not available.

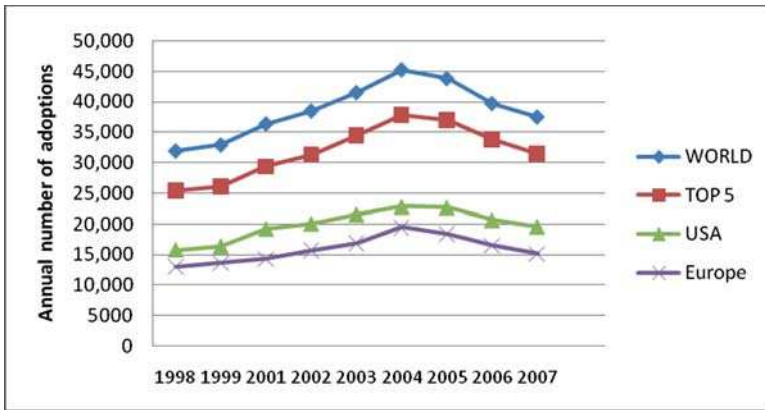
*Source:* Statistics provided by central authorities of the 23 receiving states.

The article ends with a consideration of the implications of the current changes, for example the growing numbers of ‘approved’ potential adoptive parents, many of whom may never receive a child, and the potential for further marketization of ICA leading to an increase in child trafficking.

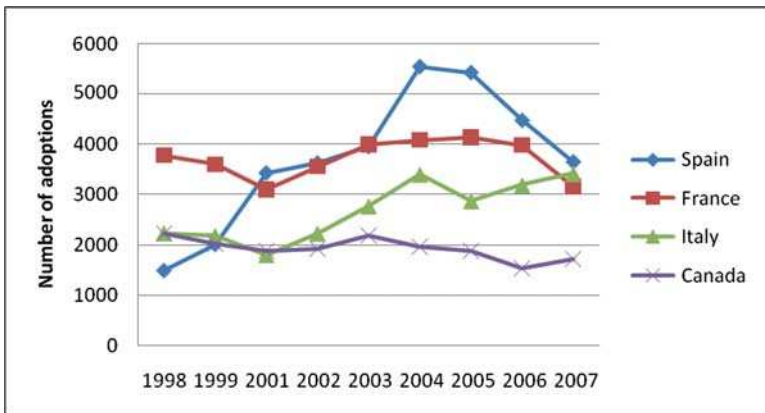
### ICA in the 21st century

The fall in adoptions since 2004 has brought global numbers back to the level of 2001 but they are still higher than in the late 1990s. Figure 1 shows trends from 1998 to 2007 for 23 receiving states (World), the top five, the USA and Europe (18 European states).

Figure 2 shows the changes in numbers in the four receiving states taking most children after the USA.



**Figure 1** Trends in intercountry adoptions to 23 receiving countries; top five receiving countries; USA and Europe, 1998–2007



**Figure 2** Countries receiving most children after the USA, 1998–2007

*Trends in ICA in receiving states*

The total number of children received by all countries increased by 15 percent between 1998 and 2001. During this period some countries, for example Canada, France and Italy, experienced a significant reduction in numbers (15–20%), while others had an above-average rise, notably the Netherlands, where numbers increased by over a third and Spain, where numbers more than doubled (Table 1). In the next three years there was an acceleration, with the global total rising by 25 percent from 2001 to 2004 (Table 2).

**Table 2** Percentage change in number of adoptions, 2001–4, selected receiving states (peak year in bold)

	Adoptions 2001	Adoptions 2002	Adoptions 2003	Adoptions 2004	Change 2001–4 %
Ireland	179	357	358	<b>398</b>	+122.4
Italy	1797	2225	2772	<b>3402</b>	+89.3
Spain	3428	3625	3951	<b>5541</b>	+61.6
Finland	218	246	238	<b>289</b>	+32.6
France	3094	3551	3995	<b>4079</b>	+31.8
Australia	289	294	278	<b>370</b>	+28.0
USA	19,237	20,099	21,616	<b>22,884</b>	+19.0
Netherlands	1122	1130	1154	<b>1307</b>	+16.5
Sweden	1044	1107	1046	<b>1109</b>	+6.2
Canada	1874	1926	<b>2180</b>	1955	+4.3
Norway	713	<b>747</b>	714	706	-5.5
Israel	<b>269</b>	165	256	226	-16.0
Denmark	<b>631</b>	609	523	528	-16.3
<b>Total<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>36,379</b>	<b>38,524</b>	<b>41,530</b>	<b>45,288</b>	<b>+24.5</b>

Note: <sup>a</sup> 23 states as listed in Table 1.

Source: Statistics provided by central authorities of the 13 listed receiving states.

### *The rise in number of children in receiving states, 1998–2004*

The number of ICAs worldwide increased by 42 percent between 1998 and 2004 (Table 1) but there was wide variation between receiving countries, with Spain experiencing a rise of 273 percent and Ireland a rise of 171 percent. Table 2 shows changes in 13 receiving states between 2001 and 2004.

### *The decline in numbers, 2004–7*

The steady increase in the global number of ICAs was reversed in 2005 and the decline accelerated in 2006 and 2007. Overall there is an estimated decline of 17 percent (Table 3).

Only Malta and Italy show an increase over the four years and for Italy numbers fell in 2004–5 before rising in subsequent years. The largest falls were in the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Spain.

## **States of origin in the 21st century**

The data presented in the tables are estimates based on children received by the 23 receiving states listed in Table 1. The accuracy of

**Table 3** Changes in number of adoptions, 2004–7, ranked by percentage change 2004/5–7 (peak year in bold)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	% change 2004/5–7
Finland	289	<b>308</b>	218	176	-42.9
Netherlands	<b>1307</b>	1185	816	778	-40.5
Norway	<b>706</b>	582	448	426	-39.7
Spain	<b>5541</b>	5423	4472	3648	-34.2
Sweden	<b>1109</b>	1083	879	800	-27.9
Denmark	528	<b>585</b>	450	426	-26.8
Belgium	470	<b>471</b>	383	358	-24.0
France	4079	<b>4136</b>	3977	3162	-23.5
USA <sup>a</sup>	<b>22,884</b>	22,728	20,679	19,613 <sup>a</sup>	-14.3
Australia	370	<b>434</b>	421	405	-7.3
Israel	<b>226</b>	191	176	218	-3.5
Canada	<b>1955</b>	1871	1525	1713	-1.5
Italy <sup>b</sup>	3402	2840	3188	<b>3420<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>+0.5</b>
Malta	46	39	60	<b>64</b>	<b>+39</b>
<b>Total<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>45,288</b>	<b>43,857</b>	<b>39,742</b>	<b>37,526</b>	<b>-17.1</b>

*Notes:*

<sup>a</sup> Total to USA fell by a further 11% in FY 2008 to 17,438.

<sup>b</sup> Total to Italy rose by 16% to 3977 in 2008.

<sup>c</sup> 23 states as listed in Table 1.

*Source:* Statistics provided by central authorities of the 14 listed receiving states.

such estimates is discussed by Kane (1993) and Selman (2002, 2006). While most receiving states shared the general trend of a rise in numbers to 2004 and a subsequent decline, the story is very different for states of origin. Table 4 shows the changes in the numbers for the countries sending most children in 2003.

*Changes in states of origin, 2001–7*

In contrast to most receiving states, the pattern of change over this period varies greatly among countries. Figure 3 shows the trends in total adoptions for the four countries (China, Russia, Guatemala and Ethiopia) sending most children in 2007. Adoptions from China peaked in 2005; those from Russia in 2004. Adoptions from Guatemala and Ethiopia rose annually throughout the period.

*The decline in intercountry adoption, 2004–7*

During this period, estimated global numbers fell by nearly 8000 (Table 3). Ten of the states of origin listed in Table 4 experienced a

**Table 4** Selected states of origin, 2003–7, by rank, 2003 (peak year in bold)

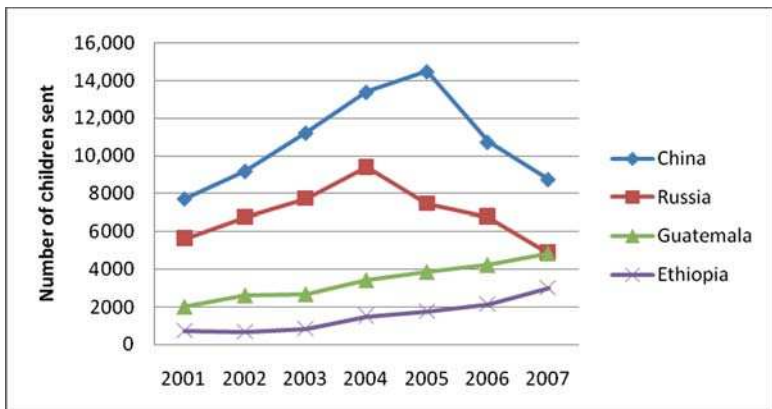
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Ratio <sup>a</sup> in peak year
China	11,228	13,404	<b>14,493</b>	10,740	8753	0.83
Russia	7745	<b>9425</b>	7471	6783	4873	7.7
Guatemala	2677	3424	3857	4227	<b>4844</b>	10.9
Korea	<b>2287</b>	2258	2101	1899	1265	4.8
Ukraine	<b>2052</b>	2021	1982	1053	1619	5.0
Colombia	<b>1750</b>	1741	1470	1629	1626	1.8
India	<b>1172</b>	1062	857	798	941	0.03
Haiti	1055	<b>1159</b>	914	1063	736	5.4
Bulgaria	<b>962</b>	378	125	96	95	15.5
Vietnam	935	483	1190	1364	<b>1692</b>	1.02
Kazakhstan	861	<b>903</b>	823	699	753	6.0
Ethiopia	854	1527	1778	2172	<b>3031</b>	0.93
Belarus	<b>656</b>	627	23	34	14	7.5
<b>Total<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>41,530</b>	<b>45,288</b>	<b>43,857</b>	<b>39,742</b>	<b>37,526</b>	

*Notes:*

<sup>a</sup> Ratio = number of adoptions per 1000 live births.

<sup>b</sup> Total children sent to 23 receiving states.

*Source:* Numbers calculated from data on states of origin in statistics provided by the receiving states listed in Table 1. Korean data provided by Ministry of Health and Welfare.

**Figure 3** Countries sending most children, 2001–7

reduction in total children sent between 2004 and 2007 and three saw a substantial increase. Table 5 shows the contribution to the decline of three key states of origin and the counter-effect of the three countries that experienced an increase over the same period.

**Table 5** Contribution to decline in number of adoptions, 2004–7, of three key sending countries and counter-influence of three countries sending more children (peak year in bold)

Country	2004	2005	2007	Total change 2004–7	Change 2004–7 (%)
<b>Total sent to 23 receiving states</b>	<b>45,288</b>	<b>43,857</b>	<b>37,526</b>	<b>7762</b>	<b>-17</b>
<b>Countries sending fewer children</b>					
China	13,404	<b>14,493</b>	8753	-4651	<b>-35(-40)<sup>a</sup></b>
Russia	<b>9425</b>	7471	4873	-4552	<b>-48</b>
Korea	<b>2258</b>	2101	1265	-993	-44
<b>Total for 3 countries</b>	<b>25,087</b>	<b>24,065</b>	<b>14,891</b>	<b>-10,196</b>	<b>-41</b>
<b>Countries sending more children<sup>b</sup></b>					
Guatemala	3424	3857	<b>4844</b>	+1420	<b>+41.5</b>
Ethiopia	1527	1778	<b>3031</b>	+1504	<b>+98.5</b>
Vietnam	483	1190	<b>1692</b>	+1209	<b>+250</b>
<b>Total for 3 countries</b>	<b>5434</b>	<b>6555</b>	<b>9567</b>	<b>+4133</b>	<b>+76</b>

*Notes:*

<sup>a</sup> Bracketed figure is decline from 2005 when number of adoptions peaked.

<sup>b</sup> In FY2008 the number of adoptions from Guatemala to the USA fell by 12% and those from Vietnam by 9%; but adoptions from Ethiopia rose by 37%.

*Source:* Numbers calculated from data on states of origin in statistics provided by the receiving states listed in Table 1. Korean data provided by Ministry of Health and Welfare.

The reduction in the number of children sent by China and Russia would have had even more impact if it were not for the continuing growth in the number of children sent by Guatemala (mainly to the USA) and the large rise in numbers from Ethiopia and Vietnam. As the number of children sent by China, Russia and Korea is expected to decline further and the trend in Guatemala is predicted to reverse, global numbers seem likely to fall even more rapidly in the future, unless new sending countries emerge. The statistics for 2008 in the USA confirm this. Total numbers fell by 11 percent from 19,613 in 2007 to 17,438 in 2008. The number from China fell by over 500; the number from Russia by 450. Only Ethiopia had an increase – of just under 500 – while the number of visas for Vietnam and Guatemala fell. However, the number of children received by Italy rose in 2008.

There are well over 100 countries involved in sending children for ICA and it is impossible to review trends in all of these. However, the years from 1997 have indicated some clear changes in movements between continents. In 1997, 67 percent of children adopted in Spain came from

Latin America. By 2000 this had fallen to 21 percent and eastern Europe had become the main source, accounting for 47 percent. By 2005 the growth of adoption from China meant that Asia was the main source at 53 percent and the contribution of Africa alone showed growth, to 15 percent of the total by 2007. It now seems likely that Europe will cease to be the major sender it has been since 1990 and that Africa will be the only continent showing an increase. The following four sections will look at trends in four continents with some brief case studies.

### *Intercountry adoption from Asia in the 21st century*

For many years Asian countries were the main source of children for ICA in both Europe and the USA. Adoption from Korea dates back to 1953 and the Korean War.<sup>2</sup> In the USA, in particular, Korea dominated the scene, accounting for over 50 percent of children adopted from abroad in the years 1972 to 1987 (Altstein and Simon, 1991: 14–16). By then, nearly 111,000 children had been adopted worldwide from Korea and by 2007 the total had risen to over 160,000, despite a sharp decline in annual totals after the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Adoptions from the Philippines started in the 1960s; from India and Vietnam in the 1970s. Kane (1993) lists three Asian countries – Korea, India and Sri Lanka – in the top five states sending children for ICA in the 1980s. In the mid-1990s, China entered the ICA arena and is now the most important Asian state of origin. Between 2001 and 2007 China was the origin of more than half the children sent from Asian countries, but India, Korea and Vietnam continue to send significant numbers. Table 6 shows annual totals for the nine Asian countries sending most children in 2003. By 2007, some – China, Korea and Cambodia – were sending substantially fewer; adoptions from Vietnam were rising after an earlier moratorium.

Although the number sent by China in 2007 was only 22 percent down on 2003, the noteworthy change in China over this period was the dramatic fall of 40 percent between 2005 and 2007 (Table 7), a decline likely to continue in 2008.

Figure 4 shows the very different trajectories in four other Asian countries between 2001 and 2007.

### *Intercountry adoption from Latin America and the Caribbean*

Adoption from Latin America dates back to the 1970s, when Colombia began to send children to the USA, becoming the second most important source of children after Korea from 1975. By 1980, El Salvador and Mexico also featured in the top six states sending children to the USA. Kane (1993) found that in the 1980s six of the top 10 sending countries (which together accounted for 90% of adoptions in that decade) were in

**Table 6** Adoptions from Asia, 2003–7, and decline from peak year (in bold) to 2007, or increase 2003–7

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Change (%)
China	11,228	13,404	<b>14,493</b>	10,740	8753	<b>-40</b>
Korea	<b>2287</b>	2258	2101	1899	1265	<b>-45</b>
India	<b>1172</b>	1062	857	834	978	<b>-17</b>
Vietnam	935	483	1190	1364	<b>1692</b>	<b>+80</b>
Thailand	495	<b>515</b>	414	360	438	<b>-12</b>
Philippines	405	411	480	460	<b>532</b>	<b>+31</b>
Cambodia	<b>309</b>	94	95	159	167	<b>-46</b>
Taiwan	221	189	237	260	<b>262</b>	<b>+18</b>
Nepal	195	269	182	<b>395</b>	222	<b>-44</b>

Source: Data for Korea are provided by the Korean Ministry for Health and Welfare. Numbers for the other eight countries are calculated from data on adoptions from the nine countries in statistics provided by the receiving states listed in Table 1.

**Table 7** International adoptions from China<sup>a</sup> to 15 receiving states, 2000–7; six countries receiving most children, 2005

<sup>a</sup>	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
USA <sup>b</sup>	4681	5053	6859	7044	7906	6493	5453
Spain	941	1427	1043	2389	2753	1759	1003
Canada	618	771	1108	1001	973	608	658
Netherlands	445	510	567	800	666	362	365
Sweden	220	316	373	497	462	314	280
France	130	210	360	491	458	314	176
<b>Total to 16 states<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>7725</b>	<b>9135</b>	<b>11,228</b>	<b>13,404</b>	<b>14,493</b>	<b>10,738</b>	<b>8753</b>

Notes:

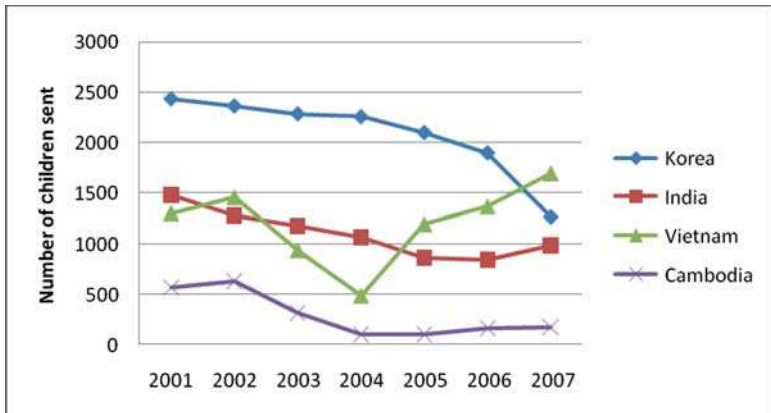
<sup>a</sup> In 2006 the China Centre for Adoption Affairs reported links with 16 countries. The table shows the top six countries. The totals include children sent to Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway and the UK, but no data were available for children sent to Singapore. In 2008 the China Central Adoption Authority announced an agreement to send children to Italy from 2009. The small number of adoptions to Switzerland (about four a year) is not included, as their status is unclear.

<sup>b</sup> Latest figures for USA in FY2008 show that adoptions from China fell by nearly 30% to 3909, the lowest number since 1987.

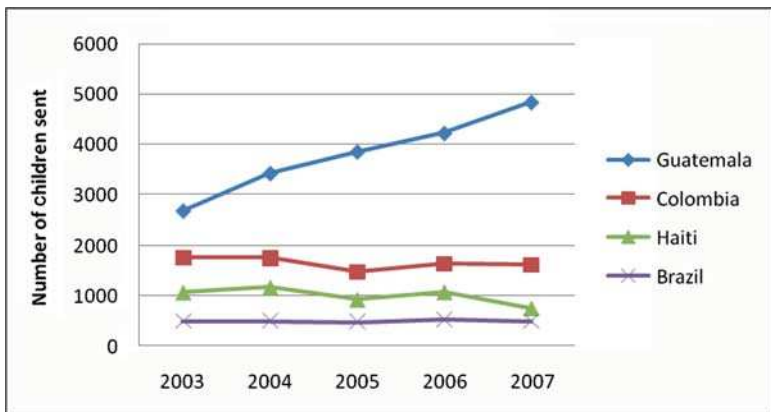
Source: Numbers calculated from data on adoptions from China in statistics provided by the 15 receiving states listed.

Latin America. By 2006, only two of those – Guatemala and Colombia – remained in the top 10 (Selman, 2009a: 51).

Figure 5 shows the pattern of adoption in the four states sending most children in 2003. Guatemala has clearly been of most significance



**Figure 4** Trends in number of children sent by four Asian countries, 2001–7



**Figure 5** Trends in number of children sent by four Latin American countries, 2003–7

in recent years. Figures submitted by Guatemala to the 2005 Hague Special Commission show a rise in transnational adoptions from 1347 in 1998 to 3572 in 2004. Estimates based on adoptions recorded by receiving states (Table 8) indicate a continued rise through 2007.

Table 8 shows annual totals for 2003–7 for nine countries from Central and South America and the Caribbean, with the adoption ratios (adoptions per 1000 live births). In 2007, Guatemala had the highest ratio of all sending countries, with one out of every 100 live births leading to an overseas adoption, a level exceeded only by Korea in the 1980s, Romania in 1990–1 and Bulgaria in 2002–3.

**Table 8** Adoptions from Central and South America and Caribbean, 2003–7 (peak year in bold)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Ratio <sup>a</sup> in peak year
Guatemala	2677	3424	3857	4227	<b>4844</b>	10.79
Colombia	<b>1750</b>	1741	1470	1629	1626	1.80
Haiti	1055	<b>1159</b>	914	1063	736	4.62
Brazil	478	487	463	<b>513</b>	486	0.14
Bolivia	<b>273</b>	260	250	130	134	1.02
Peru	118	91	163	<b>174</b>	164	0.30
Chile	<b>100</b>	93	85	81	80	0.43
Mexico	79	145	149	139	<b>167</b>	0.08
Jamaica	79	75	<b>85</b>	69	66	1.63

Note: <sup>a</sup> Ratio = number of adoptions per 1000 live births.

Source: Numbers calculated from data on adoptions from the nine countries in statistics provided by the 23 receiving states listed in Table 1.

In 1999, 68 percent of the children sent by Guatemala went to the USA, but Canada, France, Spain and the Netherlands also received significant numbers (Table 9). By 2004, over 95 percent was going to the USA while the number going to Canada, Spain and the Netherlands had fallen sharply. In 2007, the USA received 98 percent of the estimated total of 4844 and only Italy, Israel and the UK<sup>3</sup> received more than 10 children. Following Guatemala's new adoption law in December 2007, the US ceased to accept new applications for adoption, and this continued to be the case in March 2009 (US Department of State, 2009), with little prospect of this changing in the near future.

In contrast, only 12 percent of adoptions from Brazil in 2007 were to the USA and over two-thirds went to Italy. Numbers fell further in 2008 and Brazil has indicated that it will limit adoptions further as there is no Hague-accredited US agency in the country. Brazil has reduced the number of international adoptions to 500 a year from over 1600 in 1993 and now only sends children over age 5 or younger ones with special needs or who are in sibling groups. Many other countries in the region, such as Bolivia, Colombia and El Salvador, send children primarily to Europe.

Elsewhere in South and Central America the number of children sent for adoption is well below the level of the 1990s. In the USA, in 1990 13 of the top 20 sending countries were in the Caribbean and Central or South America. By 2006, only four of those – Guatemala, Colombia,

**Table 9** Adoption from Guatemala, 1999–2007: states receiving more than 20 children in at least one of the listed years

	1999	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
USA <sup>a</sup>	1002	2328	3264	3783	4135	4728
France	186	247	72	<50 <sup>c</sup>	<50 <sup>c</sup>	<50 <sup>c</sup>
Canada	74	0	0	0	0	0
Spain	70	28	8	3	0	8
Netherlands	41	4	4	1	1	3
Italy	22	20	8	16	13	14
UK <sup>b</sup>	15	29	17	21	30	46
Israel	n/a	4	11	17	21	31
<b>Total to 23 states</b>	<b>1453<sup>d</sup></b>	<b>2677</b>	<b>3424</b>	<b>3857<sup>e</sup></b>	<b>4227<sup>e</sup></b>	<b>4844<sup>e</sup></b>
<b>% to USA</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>(98)</b>	<b>(98)</b>	<b>(98)</b>

*Notes:*

<sup>a</sup> In 2008 the number of children sent to the USA fell to 4123.

<sup>b</sup> The UK no longer permits adoptions from Guatemala.

<sup>c</sup> Since 2005 France has listed only states sending 50 or more children.

<sup>d</sup> 1998 total had no data from Israel or Ireland, countries which received 10–20 adoptees a year from 2001.

<sup>e</sup> Totals for 2005–7 are underestimates as no data were available for adoptions to Austria, France or Switzerland; proportion to USA may be nearer to 95%.

*Source:* Numbers calculated from data on adoptions from Guatemala in statistics provided by the 23 receiving states listed in Table 1.

Haiti and Mexico – remained in the top 20 and five (Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Honduras and Paraguay) sent few or no children to the USA (Selman, 2009a). In 1991, Chile sent 302 children to the USA; in 2007, it sent none to the USA but 60 to Italy. The children sent now are largely over the age of 5 and many are from minority ethnic groups. Argentina has outlawed ICA given its tragic history in that country, and now only classifies itself as a receiving state.

*Intercountry adoption from Europe*

During the period 1948–62, US parents adopted nearly 20,000 children from abroad. Many of them came from European countries: 3116 from Greece influenced also by the Greek civil war; 1845 from Germany; and 744 from Austria (Selman, 2009a). As late as 1967, there were more children arriving in the USA from Germany than from Korea. England and Italy featured alongside these two countries in the top five states of origin for that year. But by the 1980s there were very few ICAs from Europe.

It is only in the last 20 years that Europe has once again become a significant source of children for adoption in the USA, initially with adoptions from Romania, from 1990–1, and later from other eastern European countries, such as Russia, Bulgaria and Ukraine (Selman, 2009c). At the turn of the century, eastern Europe continued to be a major source for children worldwide, but all that changed when Romania and Bulgaria reduced their numbers sharply as they sought membership of the European Union.

In 2003 Bulgaria had the highest ratio of adoptions to live births (15.5 per 1000) of all sending countries (Selman, 2006: 195). The number of ICAs fell from just over 960 in 2003 to less than 100 in 2006 and 2007 (Selman, 2009c: 147). However, the most striking change was in Romania, which had accounted for about a third of all ICAs between January 1990 and July 1991 (Defence for Children International, 1991; UNICEF, 1998), but finally ended all ICAs to non-relatives in 2005 (Selman, 2009a). The number of adoptions from Romania had fallen from over 2000 per annum in 1999 and 2000, when the ratio would have been higher than 10 adoptions per 100 births (Selman, 2009c: 146).

Other countries such as Belarus and Russia also sent fewer children. The number of children from Belarus fell from 656 in 2003 to 13 in 2007; the number from Russia fell from 9425 in 2004 to 4844 in 2007, with further reductions in the number sent to the USA and Italy in 2008. There had been growing concerns in the Russian media over the fate of children sent for adoption, following reports of the murder of children by their adoptive parents in the USA (Khabibullina, 2006) and the case of the 5-year-old girl adopted by a paedophile for purposes of sexual exploitation (Smolin, 2007: 20–31). In 2006, Russia announced that it intended to re-accredit all foreign agencies involved in the placement of children, and in 2009 released a new list of US agencies with which they would no longer work.

Although most countries of central and eastern Europe have reduced numbers, the exceptions are five of the countries which joined the EU in 2003 – Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland – all of which sent more children for ICA in 2007 than in 2003 (Selman, 2009c: 147).

### *Intercountry adoption from Africa*

In the 1980s and 1990s there were few ICAs from Africa. Only two countries – Ethiopia and Madagascar – featured in the top 25 sending countries in the 1980s according to Kane (1993). The numbers sent by these two countries to France increased in the 1990s: Ethiopia from 70 in 1991 to 217 in 2003; and Madagascar from 104 to 325 over the same period. After 2003 the number of children sent by Madagascar

fell steadily, but numbers from Ethiopia rose, doubling in France and increasing very rapidly in the USA and Spain, which had become the main destinations for Ethiopian children by 2007 (Table 11 opposite).

Table 10 shows the changes in seven key African states of origin in 2003–7. Only Madagascar has reduced numbers significantly. The rapid growth in Ethiopia (Table 11) is partly due to an increase in the number of children sent to the USA, which some attribute to the publicity over the adoption of an Ethiopian child by film stars Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Adoptions from Liberia are almost entirely to the USA.

Ethiopia has clearly been of greatest significance in global terms. The estimated number of children sent for ICA has risen from under 500 in 1998 to nearly 3000 in 2007 and is expected to rise further in 2008. Nearly 80 percent go to the USA, Spain and Italy. But the adoption ratio remains modest and if Ethiopia were to send children on the scale of Russia and Korea, the total numbers could rise to over 10,000.

Much has been made of the huge number of AIDS orphans in Ethiopia, but most of them are cared for by their extended family and the priority is to give support to grandparents and other caring relatives. Fears that Africa might be seen as a new source of children to replace those formerly received from China and Russia were fuelled by the arrest in October 2007 of seven French aid workers who were attempting to fly out 103 children from the impoverished country of Chad, which borders on the Darfur region of Sudan (Duval Smith and Rolley, 2007). This episode raised again the unacceptability of ICA as a rescue

**Table 10** Adoptions from Africa, 2003–7; countries ranked by number sent in 2003 (peak year in bold)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Ratio in peak year
Ethiopia	854	1527	1778	2172	<b>3031</b>	0.95
Madagascar	<b>393</b>	331	280	133	63	0.55
South Africa	144	<b>242</b>	226	204	186	0.22
Mali	135	82	93	125	<b>166</b>	0.33
Burkina Faso	63	93	78	<b>106</b>	97	0.18
Nigeria	64	94	99	<b>100</b>	70	0.02
Liberia <sup>a</sup>	32	87	193	<b>369</b>	335	2.01

*Note:* <sup>a</sup> Adoptions from Liberia, mostly to the USA, rose rapidly until 2006, but have subsequently declined amid continuing concern over irregularities.

*Source:* Numbers calculated from data on adoptions from the seven countries in statistics provided by the 23 receiving states listed in Table 1.

**Table 11** Adoptions from Ethiopia, 1998–2007: countries ranked by number of children received in peak year (2007)

	1998	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
USA	96	105	135	289	441	732	1255 <sup>a</sup>
Spain	0	12	107	220	227	304	481
France	155	209	217	390	397	408	417
Italy	9	112	47	193	211	227	256 <sup>a</sup>
Canada	n/a	13	14	34	31	61	135
Belgium	46	41	52	62	112	88	124
Netherlands	18	25	39	72	72	48	68
Australia	37	36	39	45	59	70	47
<b>Total<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>481</b>	<b>695</b>	<b>854</b>	<b>1527</b>	<b>1778</b>	<b>2172</b>	<b>3031<sup>b, c</sup></b>

*Notes:*

<sup>a</sup> In FY 2008 adoptions from Ethiopia to the USA rose by a further 500 to 1725; the number of children sent to France and Italy also rose, to 484 and 338 respectively.

<sup>b</sup> The total includes other countries which have received children from Ethiopia in this period, e.g. Finland, Germany, Ireland, Malta and Switzerland.

<sup>c</sup> Currently adoptions to Ireland are suspended and the Austrian agency (Families for You) which received over 70 children between 2004 and 2006 has been removed from the approved list.

*Source:* Numbers calculated from data on adoptions from Ethiopia in statistics provided by the 23 receiving states listed in Table 1. Adoptions to Austria not included.

mission at times of crisis when so many children are separated from their families (McGinnis, 2005). The organization involved, Zoe's Ark, which was set up to help tsunami victims in 2005 (BBC News, 2007), has been condemned by the French government. The episode was reminiscent of the Italian 'adoptions' from Rwanda in 2000 (BBC News, 2000, 2001) which led to a major crisis between the two countries.

### Why are numbers falling after a decade of growth?

The rise in international adoptions to 2004 seems in many ways to have been driven by an increasing demand for children, fuelled by the apparent steady increase in the number of children available in China, Russia and Guatemala and the opening up of possibilities for adoption by single individuals. The subsequent decline seems to be more influenced by the supply of children from key states of origin (Table 5). A reduction in numbers from individual countries has been found in the past, notably in Latin American and Asian countries in the 1980s, as discussed earlier. The reduction in the number of children received in the Netherlands – from 1704 in 1980 to 574 in 1993 – was seen as reflecting a fall in demand, as the problems associated with ICA became apparent

(Hoksbergen, 1991, 2000). Similar falls were recorded in Sweden, where the number of overseas adoptions was the equivalent of two for every 100 births in 1979 (Andersson, 1986). By the end of the 1980s global numbers seemed to have peaked and Howard Altstein, writing in 1991, predicted a continuing decline despite the temporary rise as a result of the situation in post-Ceausescu Romania (Altstein and Simon, 1991: 191). In reality, the years from 1988 to 1992–3, when numbers fell in the USA and many other countries, proved to be a period of transition to the huge acceleration in ICA from 1993 to 2004, fuelled by the increased demand created by the Romanian surge, the rise in adoptions from Guatemala to the USA (from 257 in 1990 to 3783 in 2005) and the new potential of children from China and Russia.

Although the impact of China's reduction from 2005 has been most dramatic, in some countries the reduction in numbers can be traced back to the first years of the 21st century. The rapid reduction in numbers from Romania and Bulgaria described earlier was no doubt influenced in part by pressures from the EU as the two countries sought membership, but the equally dramatic decline in Belarus and the steady reduction in Russia seem to reflect a reaction in all of these countries to poorly controlled adoption practices, reflected in a series of scandals and increasing opposition from citizens of those countries, as previously discussed.

The sudden reversal in China is clearly a conscious move by the government through its central authority, the China Centre for Adoption Affairs (CCAA). Concern had been building in China about the growing number of applications from single women (many in same-sex relationships). The reduction in the number of children sent dates from 2006 when the CCAA announced new guidelines, including a requirement that prospective adopters must be a heterosexual couple who have been married for at least two years (Bellock and Yardley, 2006; Hilborn, 2007). This has effectively ended adoption by single women, who accounted for up to a third of USA adopters in the late 1990s (Selman, 2009a: 59).

Although China has taken a pragmatic stance, seeing short-term value in placing children from overcrowded institutions and deriving valuable revenue from the fee (\$3000–5000) charged to all adopters, many observers also note that the child welfare system is now much improved, that there is clearly a large interest in domestic adoption and that China is becoming aware of the negative image that continuing international adoption can create. Similar considerations have led the Korean government to move towards a long-promised ending of ICA after 55 years, during which time Korea has been transformed from a

wartorn developing country with a population problem to one of the richest countries of the world with one of the lowest fertility rates. In Korea, unlike China, the demand for an end is led, in part, by returning adoptees (Hubinette, 2006; Trenka, 2003), but there can be little doubt that similar calls will arise from Chinese adopted girls if ICA continues when they reach adulthood.

### **The future of intercountry adoption**

Faced with the clear evidence of declining numbers and the growing criticism of a system so open to abuse (Post, 2007; Smolin, 2007), many feel that this may indeed be the 'beginning of the end of wide-scale ICA' which Altstein and Simon (1991: 191) predicted more than 15 years ago. Others will point to the continuing growth in Ethiopia and the revival of ICA from Cambodia and Vietnam as evidence that we may be seeing a downsizing and reshaping rather than an end. The situation of the many childless couples in the rich countries of the West hoping for a child seems likely to worsen, so that many of those approved will face a long wait and may never receive a child. In France, there have been newspaper reports of as many as 25,000 families approved for international adoption (Moreau, 2008), while the number of adoptions a year fell from 4136 in 2005 to 3162 in 2007. There are similar reports in Spain, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries (Selman et al., 2009). The USA is facing a major shortfall in the number of children available if the moratorium on adoptions from Guatemala continues. The global economic crisis may lead to a reduction in demand or could result in an acceleration of market forces and an increased risk of trafficking.

Smolin (2004: 325) has pointed to the continuing evidence of child trafficking as a reason why ICA should end unless reformed, and has suggested that history may label 'the entire enterprise as a neo-colonialist mistake', just as it is now widely accepted that in the case of the 'shipment' of poor children from England to Australia and Canada 'a damning verdict is inescapable' (Parker, 2008: 293) and that apologies have rightly been given to the 'stolen generation' of aboriginal children in Australia.

Negative judgements and overgeneralizations would be hurtful to the many thousands of people who have adopted children from overseas and to many adoptees who recognize the positives in their experience, knowing that without such intervention they might well not have survived. The counter-argument that ICA can be a global gift is particularly compelling in the cases of the many children with special needs who are now being adopted, and is backed by the growing body of

research that indicates the potential of a new family for reversing the impact of early deprivation (Juffer and Van IJzendoorn, 2009). Some advocates of ICA, such as Bartholet (2005) and Wallace (2003), go further and call for an increase in the numbers to meet the needs of children in the developing world, seeing ICA as the most logical solution to the problem of orphaned and abandoned children.

However, even if we feel hesitant to accept the verdict of Smolin (2004, 2006, 2007), rooted in a personal experience of adopting children stolen from their birth parents, we must recognize that 'in a perfect world, without the gross inequalities which still reign on this planet at the beginning of the new millennium, wide-scale ICA would not exist' (Van Loon, 2000: 1), and remember Altstein's observation that 'one over-riding question exists in relation to ICA. Is it moral and humane to remove a child from his native society to be reared in a culture other than his own?' (Altstein, 1984: 202), and Hoksbergen's (1991: 156) hope that 'culture and economic circumstances in all Third-World Countries change to the extent that it will be the exception when a child's only chance for a satisfactory upbringing exists with a family thousands of miles from its birthplace'. Until such time the imperative is to seek to ensure that ICAs are only carried out with the vision of the Hague Convention, with full consideration of the principle of the best interests of the child, and a determination to press for more open adoptions in which a child can retain links with and pride in his or her country of origin and, where possible, his or her birth family.

## Notes

1. US statistics on ICA are recorded by fiscal year, which begins on 1 October and ends on 30 September (Office of Children's Issues, 2009; Selman, 2006: 185).
2. For more discussion on Korea see Bergquist et al. (2007), Hubinette (2006) and Selman (2007, 2009b).
3. The UK has now imposed a moratorium on all adoptions from Guatemala.

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