

# THE DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE

## Adoption Perceptions Study

  
J. WALTER THOMPSON WORLDWIDE

RESEARCH  
in KIND

Strength in numbers

# Introduction

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In September of 2015, DAI completed a first-of-its-kind, national survey of public opinion on the landscape of adoption in the 21st century. This groundbreaking research has helped us gain a modern understanding of how the American people, including the adoption community, perceive and respond to adoption, foster care adoption and the policies surrounding both. It has provided insight into which topics needed to be addressed at our town hall events and will serve as a baseline measure to changes in perception over time.

The research was fielded by a new, nonprofit partner named Research In Kind, founded by the Global Head of Brand Intelligence at J. Walter Thompson. Research In Kind helped develop the questionnaire, define the sample set, recruit the participants, execute the survey and provide a report on the results.

The below represents a snapshot of some of the key findings from our public opinion survey. DAI plans to release a more detailed analysis of the full results in the new year. The reality is public perception has great influence over how experiences are contextualized. Adoption is an experience that many people have a difficult time understanding for a variety of reasons; further, many hold a variety of misperceptions about adoption that serve to fuel stereotypes and make it even harder to influence needed changes in policy and practice.

In today's modern world, family dynamics are ever-changing. The diversity of family experiences today is far richer than ever before and we must make sure society is keeping up with the transformation in family. There is beauty in this diversity, yet there is also complexity. Ensuring realistic perceptions and combatting stereotypes that are often stigmatizing will support families, keep them healthy and strong, and keep the needs and interests of children at the heart of family building.

# Methodology

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**WHAT:** Quantitative study conducted using SONAR™ – JWT’s proprietary online research tool – in partnership with Research In Kind™

## WHO:

General Sample\*:

- ❖ n = 2,000 U.S. adults age 18 and older, including an oversample in the following cities:
  - New York, San Francisco, Dallas, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.

Key Stakeholder Sample:

- ❖ n = 233 Adopted People
- ❖ n = 219 Adoptive Parents
- ❖ n = 197 First/Birth Parents
- ❖ N = 97 Foster Parents
- ❖ N = 89 Foster Alumni

\*Data is weighted to census to be representative of all U.S. adults across gender, age, and income.

**WHEN:** August/September 2015

# Adoption Community Segment Overlap

Note that key stakeholders are not mutually exclusive. There is some overlap – especially among the foster care segments.

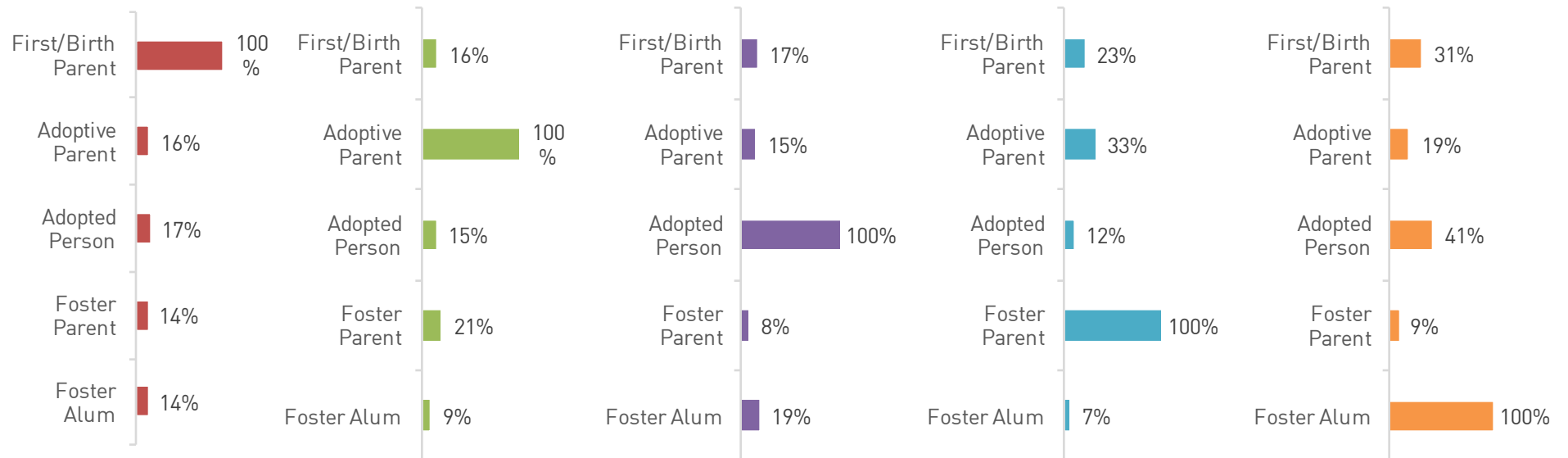
## First/Birth Parents

## Adoptive Parents

## Adopted People

## Foster Parents

## Foster Alumni



# Key Findings

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- ❖ **LASSO SUPPORT THROUGH EDUCATION:** Adoption regulation and reform is among the most supported issues across all those we tested – despite Americans readily admitting to not knowing much, if anything, about adoption. In fact, understanding and knowledge within the adoption community itself is fairly low – pointing to a clear opportunity to educate people on adoption overall and why reform is needed.
- ❖ **IGNITE A POLITICAL-LIKE PASSION:** People tend to place more importance and urgency on more politicalized issues (such as equal pay, abortion, and gun control) than the issue of adoption. Relative to these more newsworthy issues, adoption reform tends to fall in the middle of the pack. Communications that educate and ignite passionate support for adoption reform will likely drive the adoption issue further up that list.
- ❖ **LEVERAGE TWO DEGREES OF SEPARATION:** While very few have any direct, first-hand connection with adoption, the majority of Americans do have a friend or family member who has been impacted by adoption. Emphasizing these relationships in communications and lobbying efforts may drive relevance and desire for reform among the public at large.
- ❖ **STRATEGICALLY TACKLE HALLMARK MOVIE (MIS)PERCEPTION:** Americans are a bit Pollyanna when it comes to adoption, generally feeling quite “warm and fuzzy” about adoption overall and believing that the system is in relatively good shape. Communications that strike a balance between leveraging this positivity while calling attention to the reality of the problems the community faces may help stimulate support for reform.

# Key Findings (cont.)

- ❖ **CHAMPION RIGOROUS NATIONAL STANDARDS:** There is demand for a rigorous, standardized and regulated evaluation process to make sure adopted children are placed in safe homes. This is especially prevalent among those with first-hand experience. The adoption community is calling for national standards for access to records, support services and the home study, among several others. Still, manufacturing a process that does not become a barrier to processing worthy adoptions will be important as citizens already feel it's becoming more difficult for deserving people to adopt.
- ❖ **PROMOTE INCLUSIVENESS AND EQUALITY:** Americans overall and the community alike agree that people from all walks of life should be able to adopt so long as they can provide a loving home – including interracial and LGBT couples. Still, there is a growing perception that only wealthy families can afford to adopt these days. Therefore, advocating for fair evaluation standards that safeguard against discrimination and prejudice will likely be well-received.
- ❖ **BREAK DOWN LATENT STEREOTYPES:** Whether people like to admit it or not, there are latent stereotypes against people in the adoption community. This is especially true for first/birth parents who still face a more recognizable stigma – that these people are young, poor, single, troubled and desperate. Those who lose custody are seen in an especially negative light, being described as drug addicts and abusive. Opportunity exists to challenge these misperceptions and educate the public on the true reality.
- ❖ **SUPPORT OPENNESS, TRANSPARENCY & ACCESS:** There is overwhelming support for more transparency when it comes to access to medical records and original birth certificates. “Open” adoptions also garner a significant amount of support, with adopted people who are in an open adoption being more satisfied with the current state of their adoption compared with those in a closed adoption. Still, efforts must be highly strategic as this remains a polarizing issue, with a small, yet vocal cohort vehemently opposing open adoptions.

# Key Findings (cont.)

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- ❖ **TACKLE “REHOMING” HEAD ON:** While few have ever heard of “rehoming,” after learning about it, there is near universal support for making it illegal across the nation and for increased funding for enforcement of laws. Communications and lobbying efforts for policies against “rehoming” may be an easy way to gain momentum for the movement for reform.
- ❖ **CAPITALIZE ON WIDESPREAD SUPPORT FOR MORE SERVICES:** Both citizens and members of the adoption community overwhelmingly favor increased support services for adopted people, adoptive parents and first/birth parents – both before and after an adoption has taken place. There might be a particular opportunity to provide first/birth parents a greater level of support as many are left feeling regretful and coerced after an adoption has taken place. Efforts to grow support services may be strengthened by highlighting people’s belief that these type of services not only benefit those directly impacted, but society at large. When we build stronger families, everyone wins.
- ❖ **BUILD A STRONGER COMMUNITY:** There is a desire among key adoption stakeholders to feel a stronger sense of community across the spectrum of adopted people, adoptive parents and first/birth parents. Opportunity exists to help create and foster this community by bringing together different stakeholders from across the community and helping them feel more united.
- ❖ **HELP ADOPTED PEOPLE HAVE A LOUDER VOICE:** Within the adoption community, there is belief that the adopted child should have a greater say in the adoption process and in the decision about openness. Champion adopted peoples’ right to advocate and decide for themselves what’s best for them.

# Key Findings (cont.)

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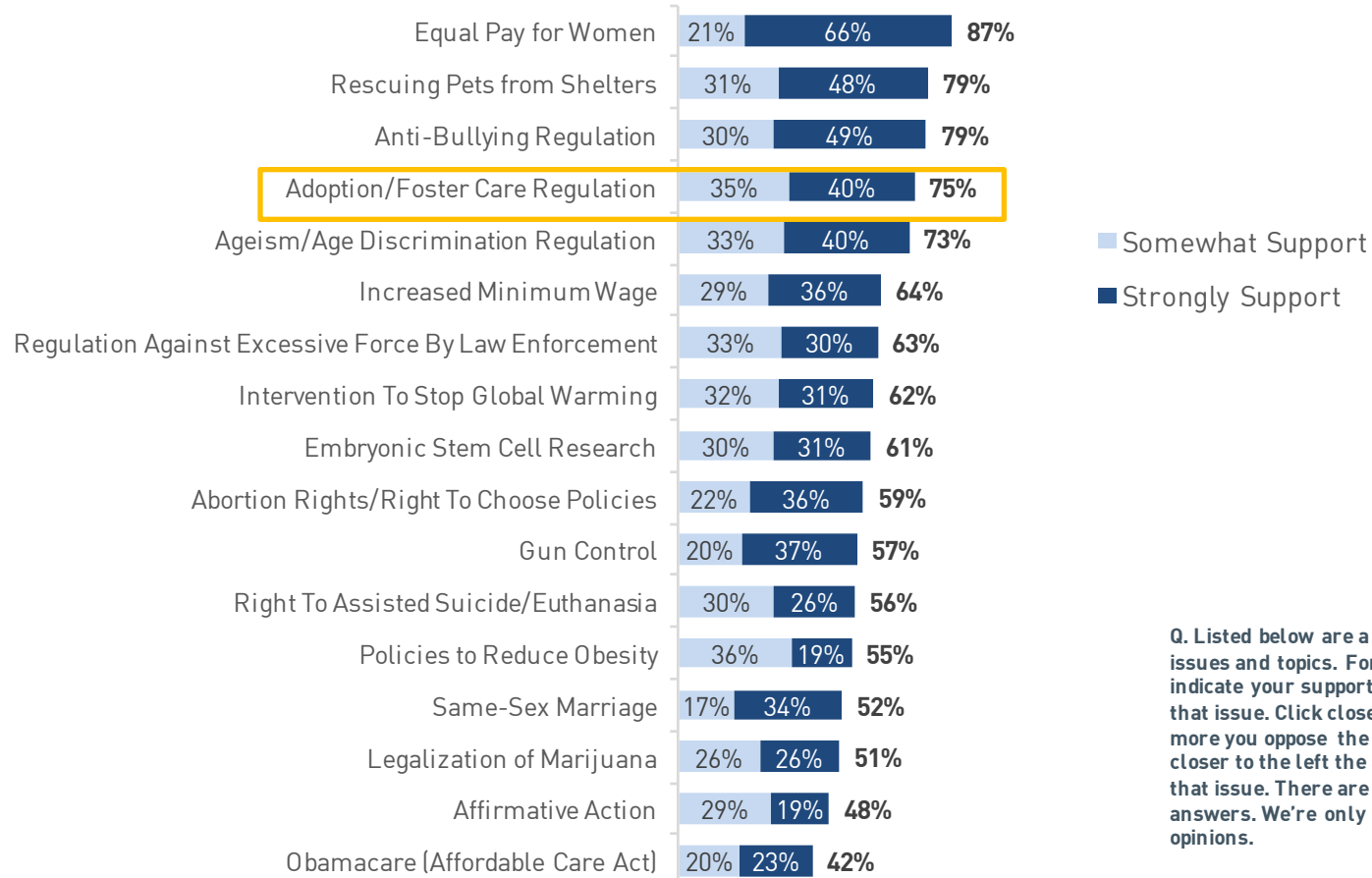
- ❖ **EDUCATE ELECTED OFFICIALS:** There is a clear sense among stakeholders that their elected officials do not understand them nor their unique needs. Stakeholders also feel elected officials should be doing more for the community. Capitalize on these beliefs by empowering stakeholders to join you in lobbying efforts for reform. Efforts should also serve to educate elected officials on why reform is needed.
- ❖ **CAREFULLY ADDRESS THE DIGITAL SPACE:** People have mixed feelings about adoption in the digital age, especially when it comes to advertising yourself as an adoptive family, using social media to find first/birth parents, advertising for professional adoption services and crowdfunding to pay for adoptions. Wade into these issues carefully.
- ❖ **AMPLIFY AND CULTIVATE ADVOCATES:** At the end of the day, adopted people and parents alike overwhelmingly say that they are better off because of their experience with adoption. Cultivate this tremendous positivity to create a stronger community of advocates that will work with you to begin to break down stereotypes and tackle issues head on.



# Selected Key Findings

**There is a considerable amount of support for adoption/foster care regulation – with citizens placing it high on the list compared to other social issues...**

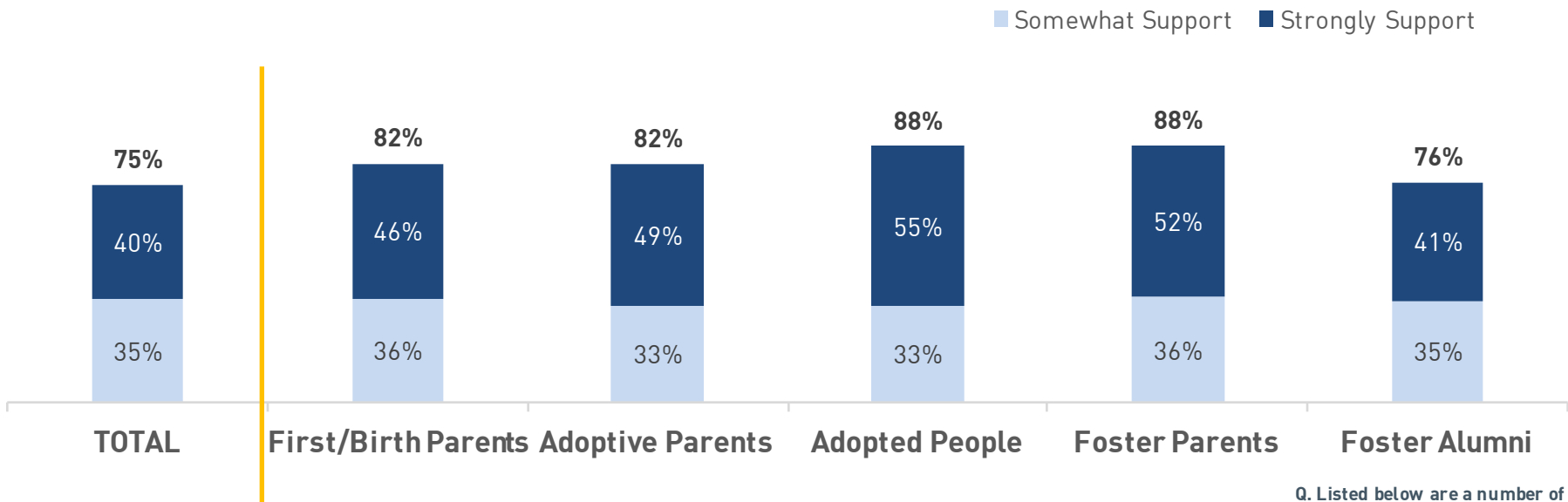
**Issue Support**



Q. Listed below are a number of social issues and topics. For each issue, please indicate your support or opposition of that issue. Click closer to the right the more you oppose the issue and click closer to the left the more you support that issue. There are no right or wrong answers. We're only interested in your opinions.

...with those in the adoption community, not surprisingly, showing even higher levels of support.

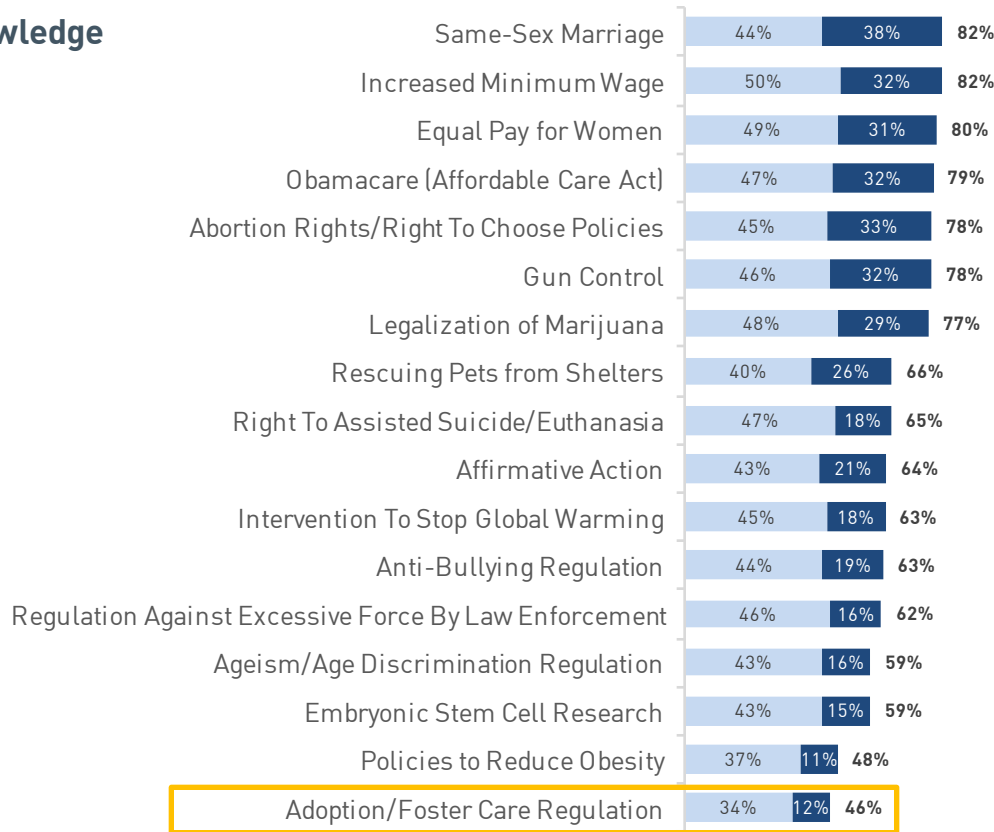
Support of Adoption/Foster Care Regulation



Q. Listed below are a number of social issues and topics. For each issue, please indicate your support or opposition of that issue. Click closer to the right the more you oppose the issue and click closer to the left the more you support that issue. There are no right or wrong answers. We're only interested in your opinions.

When it comes to knowledge about adoption/foster care regulation, however, people readily admit to not knowing much – in fact, they know less about adoption than any other social issue we measured.

Issue Knowledge



**61%**  
 “I must admit, I don’t know much about adoption and how it works.”

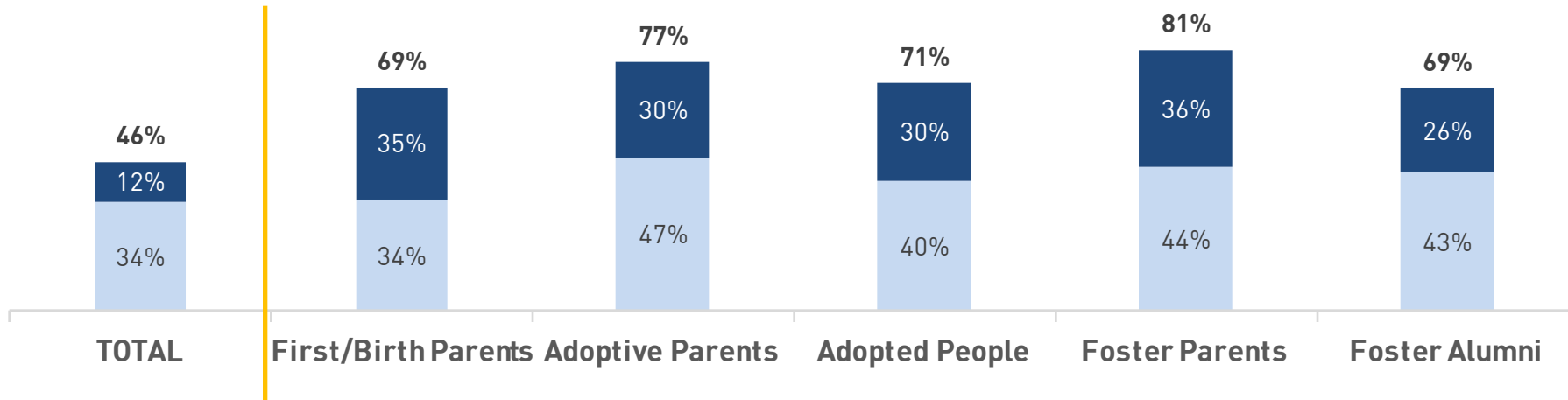
■ Somewhat Knowledgeable  
 ■ Very Knowledgeable

Q. People have told us that they are able to form a point of view on certain issues even though they are not completely knowledgeable about the issue – but based on what they see or hear through the media. How knowledgeable would you say you are on each of the following issues?

## Those with first-hand adoption experience say they are more knowledgeable...

### Knowledge of Adoption/Foster Care Regulation

■ Somewhat Knowledgeable ■ Strongly Knowledgeable

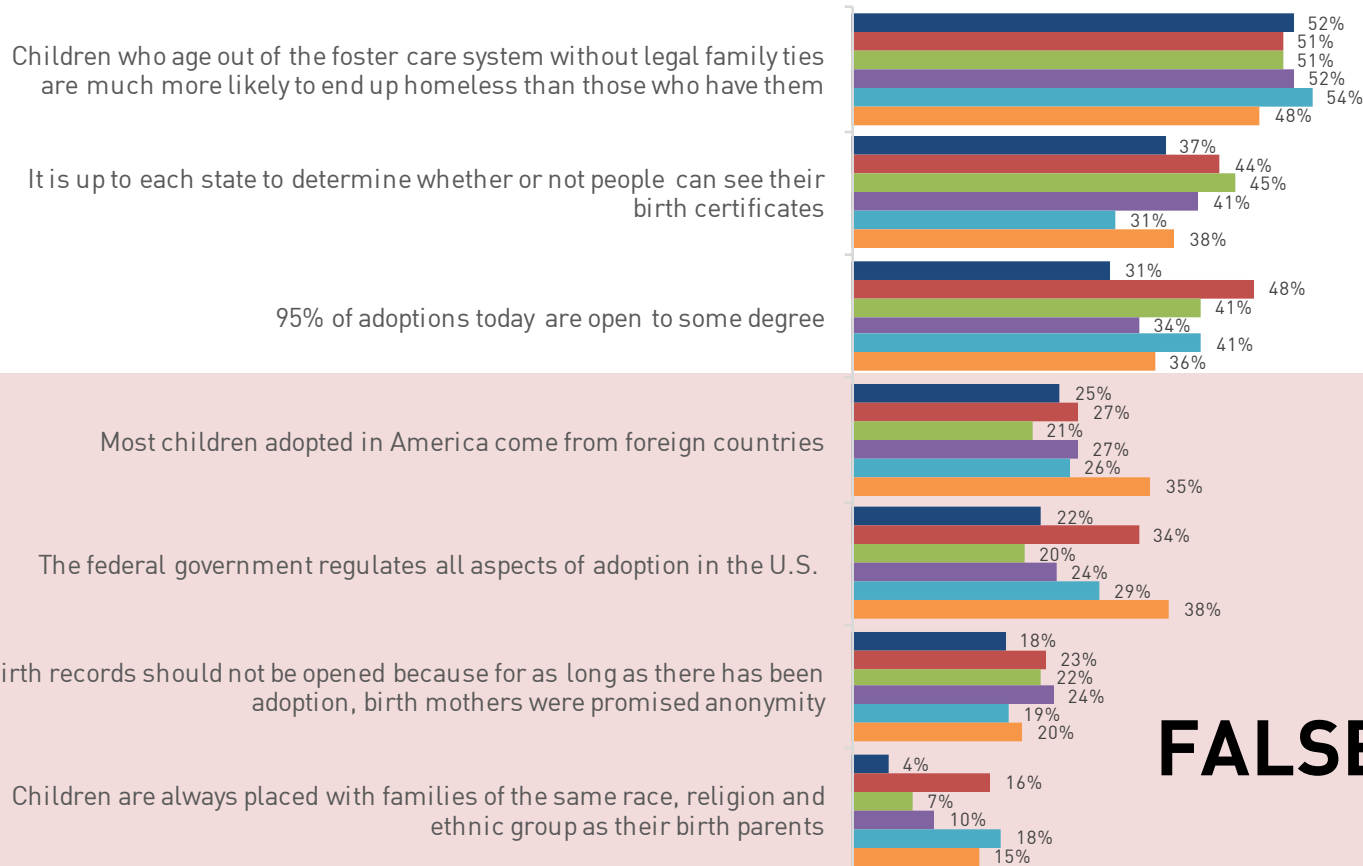


Q. People have told us that they are able to form a point of view on certain issues even though they are not completely knowledgeable about the issue – but based on what they see or hear through the media. How knowledgeable would you say you are on each of the following issues?

...although this may be overstated...

Adoption IQ Test

■ TOTAL ■ First/Birth Parents ■ Adoptive Parents ■ Adopted People ■ Foster Parents ■ Foster Alumni



**FALSE**

Q. Listed below are a number of things about adoption. Some of these are true and some of these are false. To the best of your knowledge, please select the statements you believe to be true.

...as even those with personal experience do not score well on our adoption IQ test.

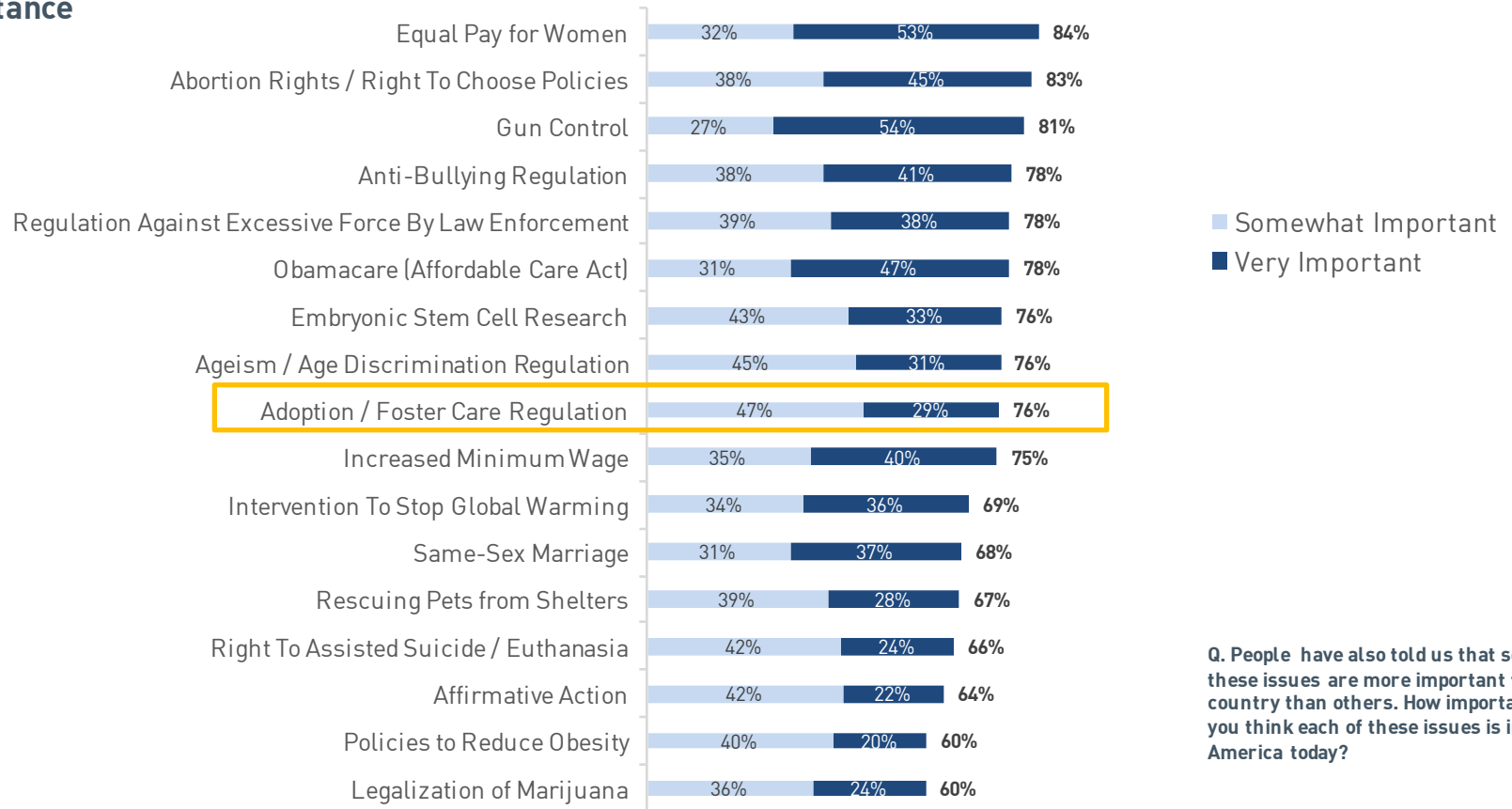
## Adoption IQ Test

ADOPTION IQ TEST REPORT CARD		
	Score	Grade
TOTAL U.S. ADULTS	67	<b>D</b>
First/Birth Parents	67	<b>D</b>
Adoptive Parents	70	<b>C</b>
Adopted People	66	<b>D</b>
Foster Parents	66	<b>D</b>
Foster Alumni	63	<b>D-</b>

Q. Listed below are a number of things about adoption. Some of these are true and some of these are false. To the best of your knowledge, please select the statements you believe to be true.

Despite strongly supporting reform, compared to other issues, citizens place adoption regulation in the middle of the pack when it comes to importance in our country today—placing greater importance (and potentially urgency) on many other issues.

Issue Importance

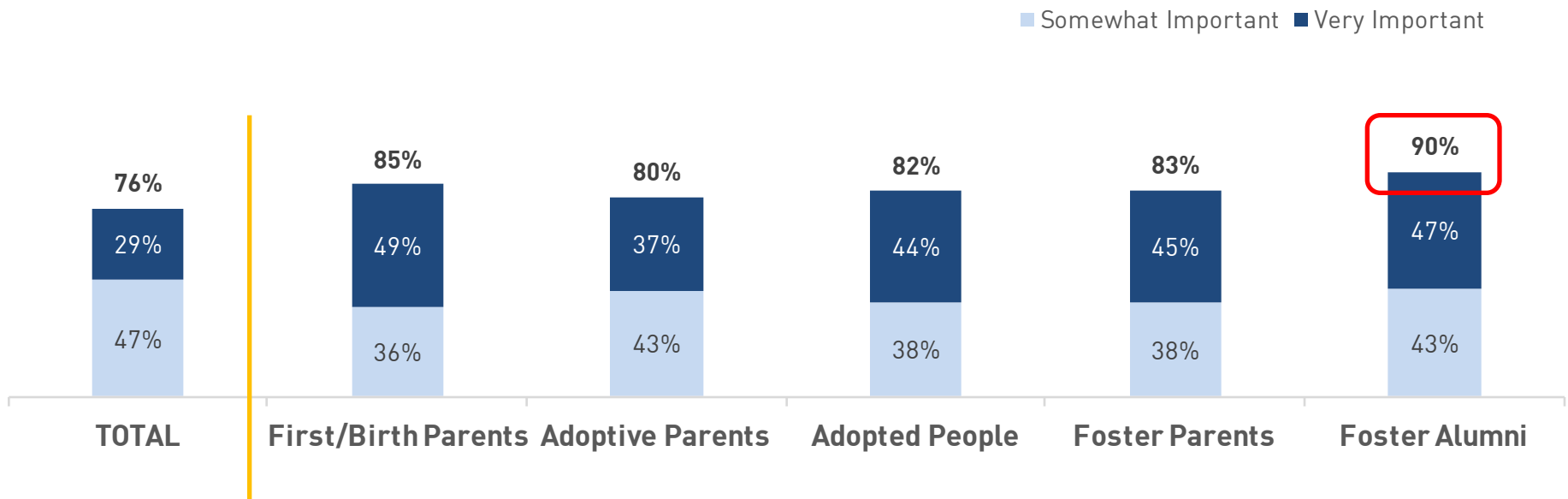


Q. People have also told us that some of these issues are more important to our country than others. How important do you think each of these issues is in America today?



Adoption regulation is particularly important to those in the community – especially foster alumni.

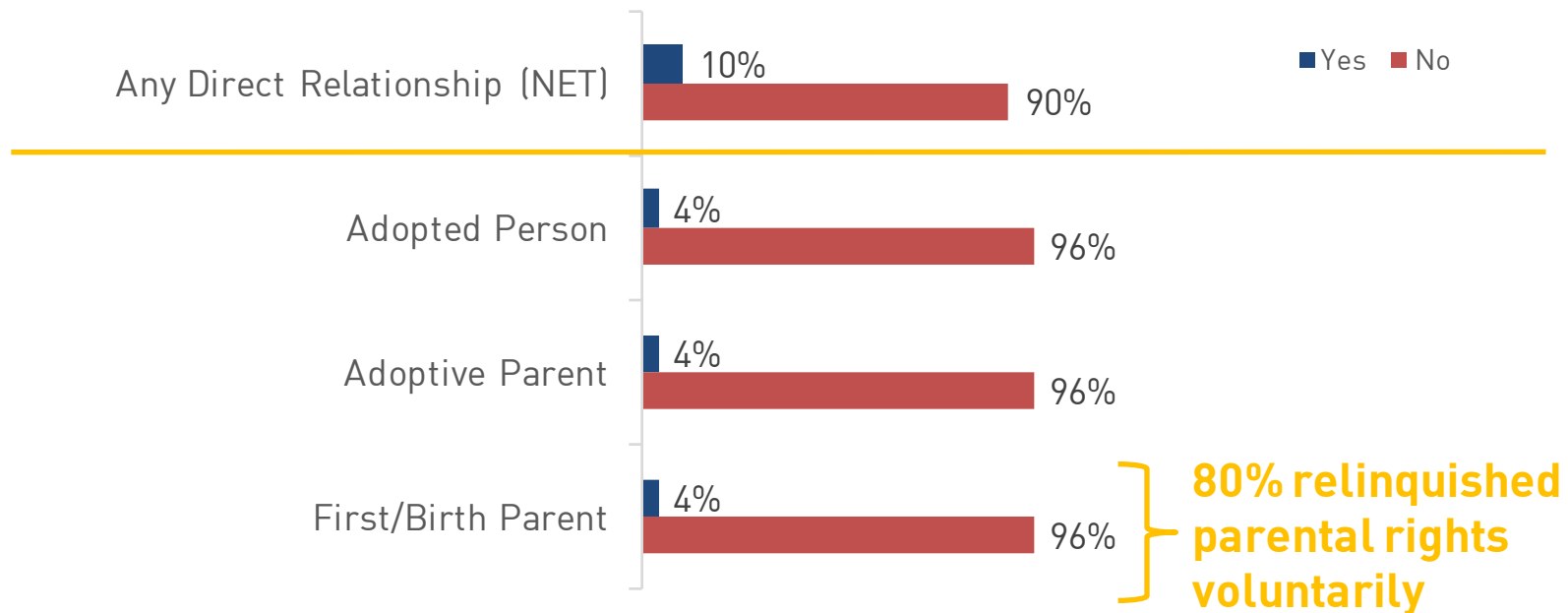
Importance of Adoption/Foster Care Regulation



Q. People have also told us that some of these issues are more important to our country than others. How important do you think each of these issues is in America today?

## Just 4% of all U.S. adults are adopted, have adopted a child or have placed a child for adoption...

### Incidence Of Adoption Segments



Q. Are you, personally, an adopted person?

Q. Are you, personally, an adoptive parent, either on your own or with your spouse/partner?

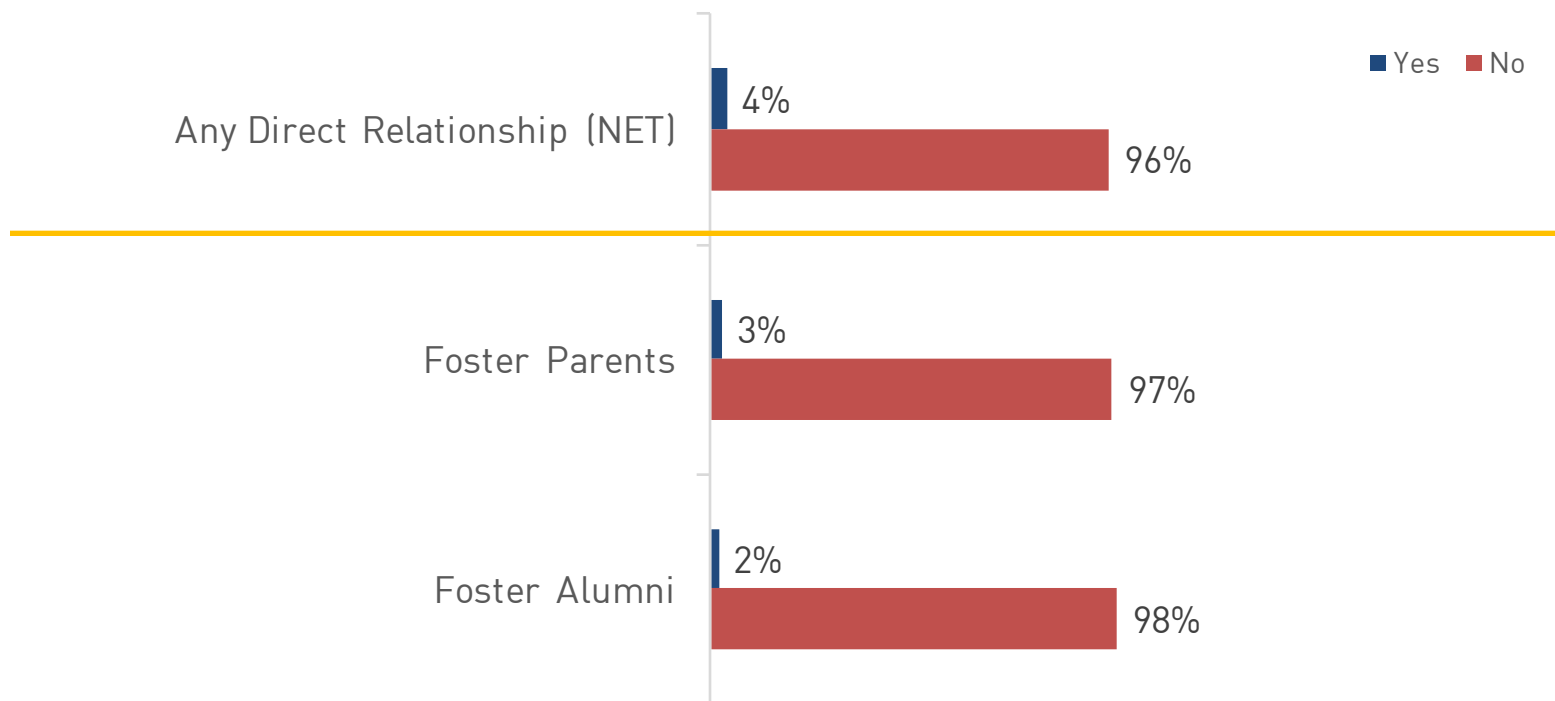
Q. Are you a first/birth parent, that is, have you ever given birth to a child who was then adopted by another person or family?

Q. Are you a first/birth parent, that is, have you ever fathered a child who was then adopted or fostered by another person or family?

Q. Did you relinquish your parenting rights?

...with even lower levels having any direct relationship with foster care...

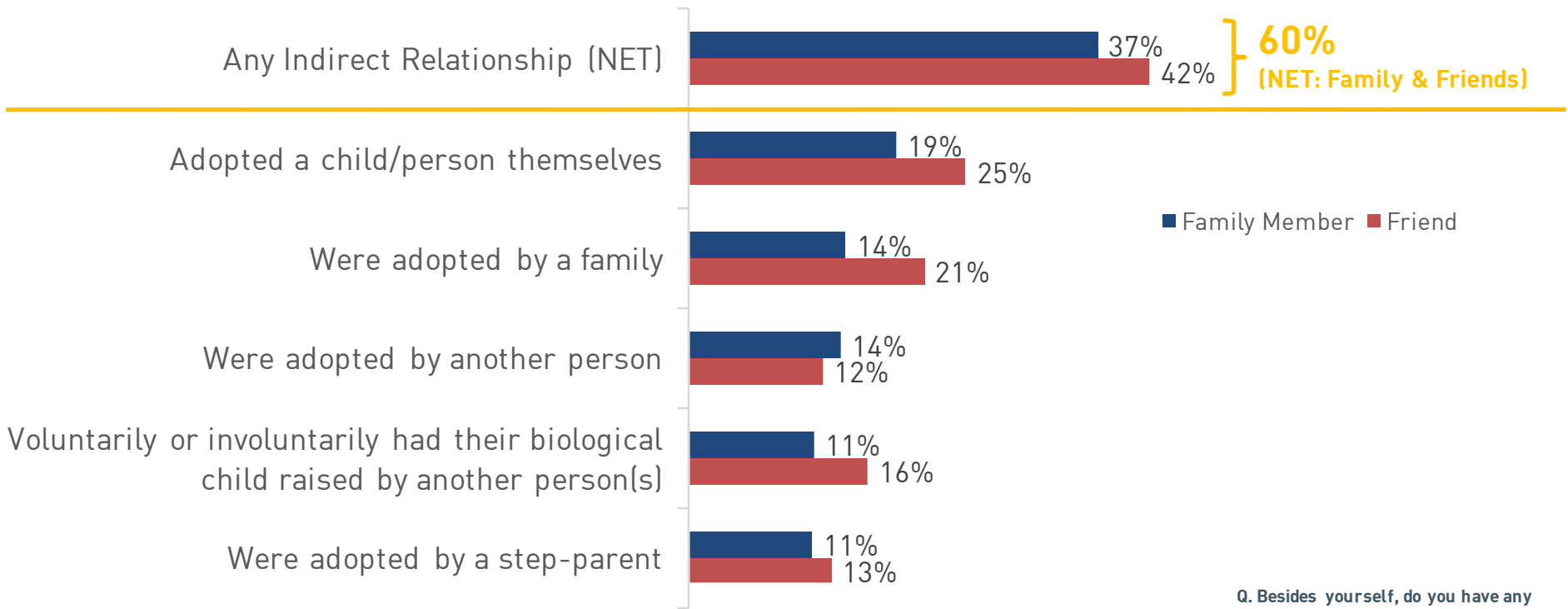
Incidence Of Foster Care Segments



Q. Which of the following, if any, describe you personally?

...although most do have some relationship to the adoption community through their family and friends. Two in five know someone who has adopted a child, while a third have a friend or family member who is an adopted person.

Friend or Family Relationship with Adoption Community



Q. Besides yourself, do you have any friends or family members who...?

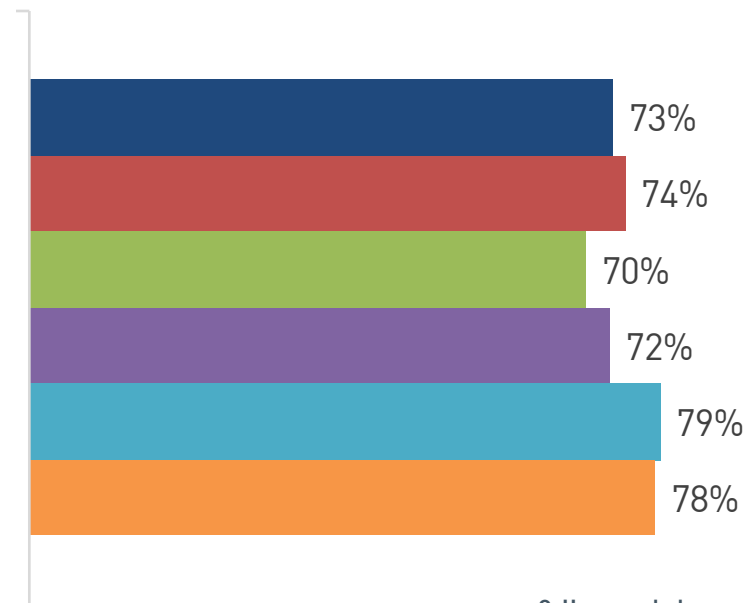
## Adults and the adoption community agree that people from all walks of life should be able to adopt so long as they can provide a loving home...

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### Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree

■ TOTAL ■ First/Birth Parents ■ Adoptive Parents ■ Adopted People ■ Foster Parents ■ Foster Alumni

Gay, lesbian, black, white, single, married: who cares who adopts as long as they can provide a loving and safe environment for a child?

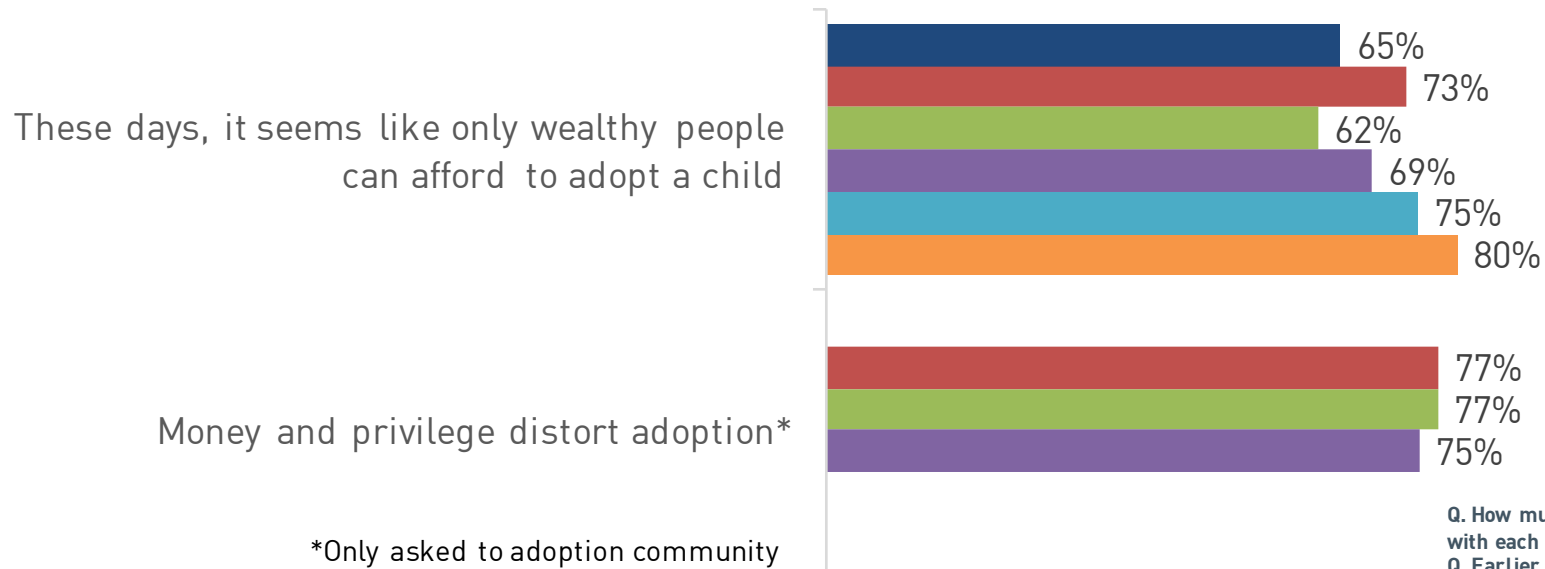


Q. How much do you agree or disagree with each one?

...although there is a perception that only wealthy people can afford to adopt these days...

Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree

■ TOTAL ■ First/Birth Parents ■ Adoptive Parents ■ Adopted People ■ Foster Parents ■ Foster Alumni



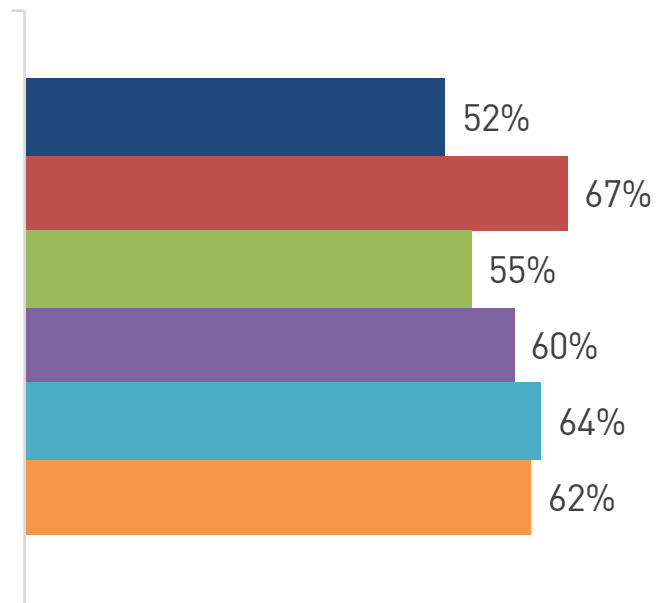
Q. How much do you agree or disagree with each one?  
 Q. Earlier you mentioned that you have a personal experience with adoption. Based on your experience, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following questions?

...which is, at least in part, fueled by celebrity culture.

Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree

■ TOTAL ■ First/Birth Parents ■ Adoptive Parents ■ Adopted People ■ Foster Parents ■ Foster Alumni

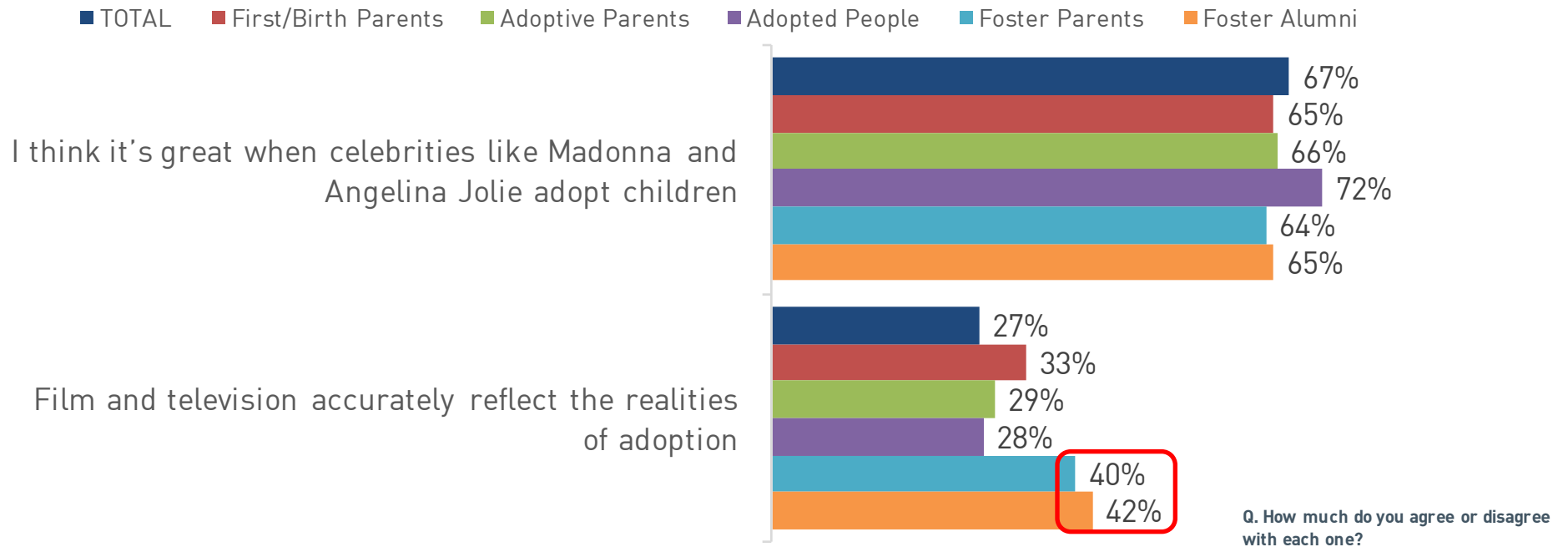
When celebrities like Madonna and Angelina Jolie adopt children, it suggests that adopting is primarily for the wealthy



Q. How much do you agree or disagree with each one?

Still, adults generally feel it's a good thing when celebrities adopt children. While few feel film and TV accurately reflect the realities of adoption, those with foster care experience are more apt to say it is an accurate depiction – perhaps because foster care is portrayed differently?

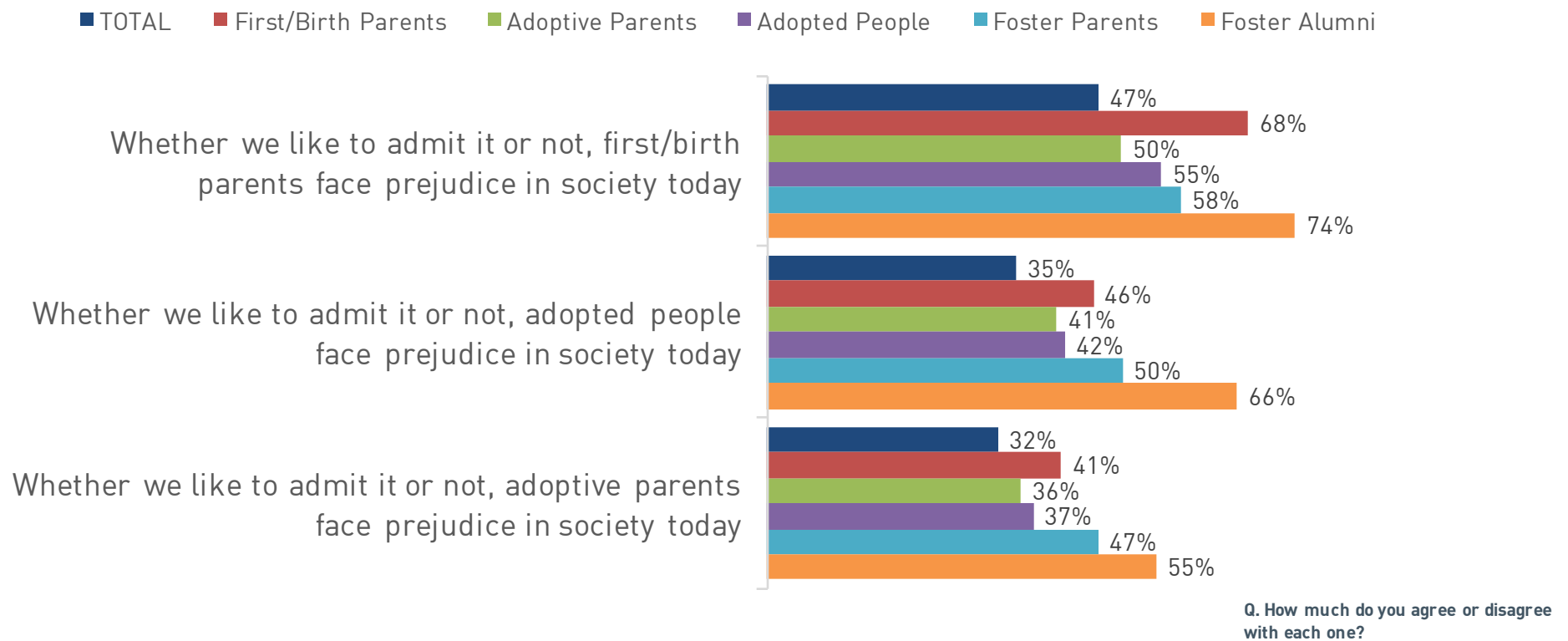
Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree





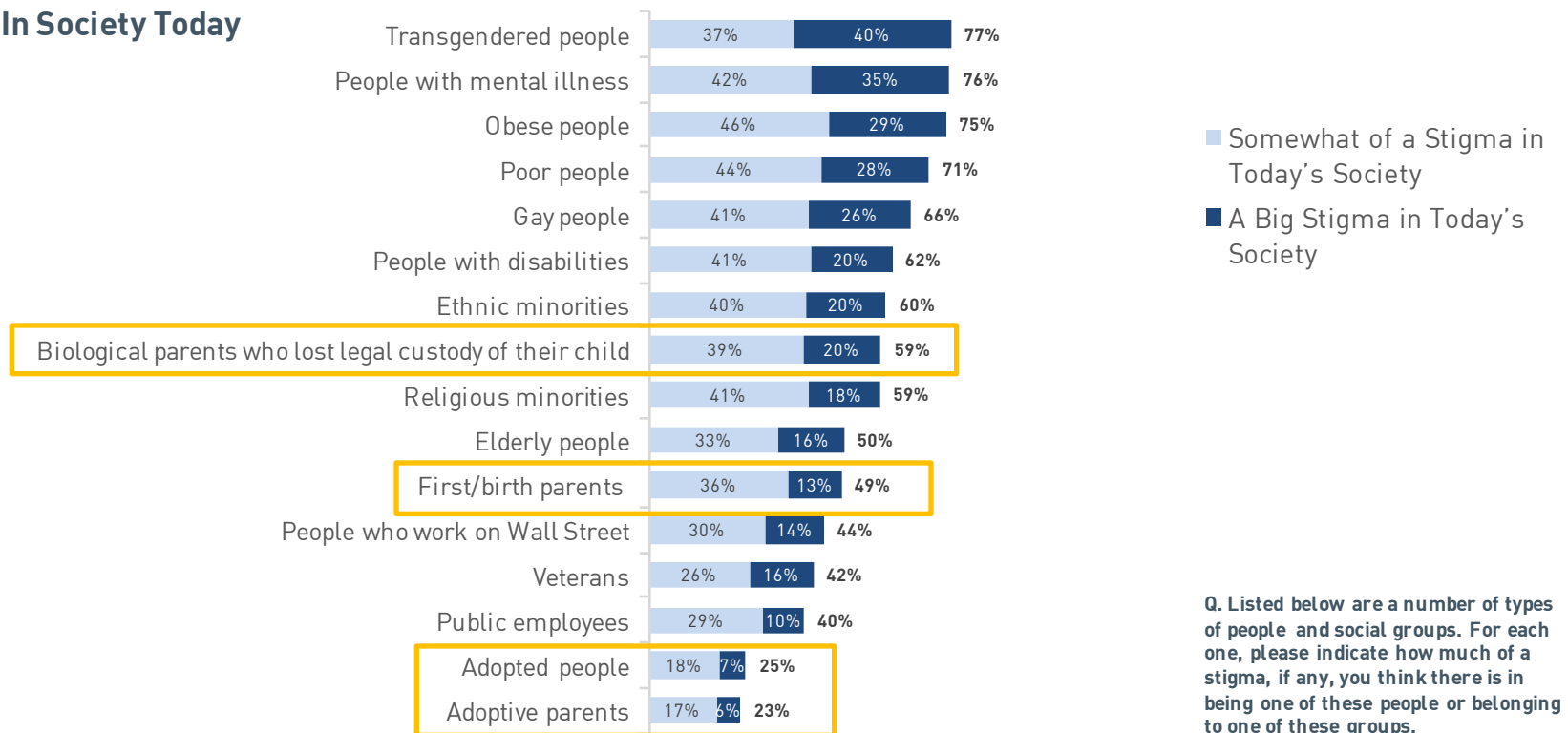
## Less than half of U.S. adults feel first/birth parents, adoptive parents or adopted people face prejudice in society today...

### Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree



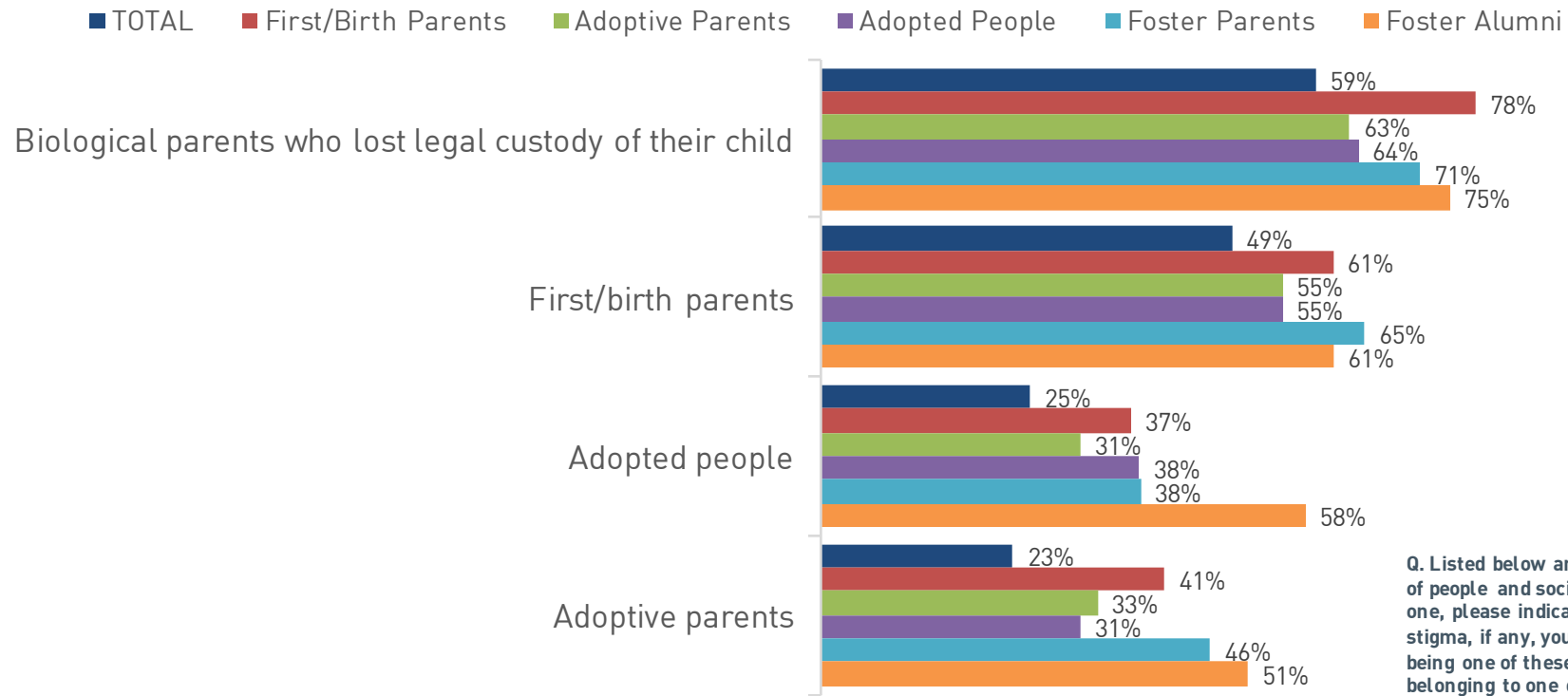
...and from the outside looking in, few feel adopted people nor adoptive parents have a stigma. Across the different stakeholders, first/birth parents who lose custody face the biggest stigma – although still not to the extent of transgendered, mentally ill, obese and even poor people.

### Faces Stigma In Society Today



Those with personal experience, however, are more apt to say they face a stigma in society today. This is especially true for first/birth parents.

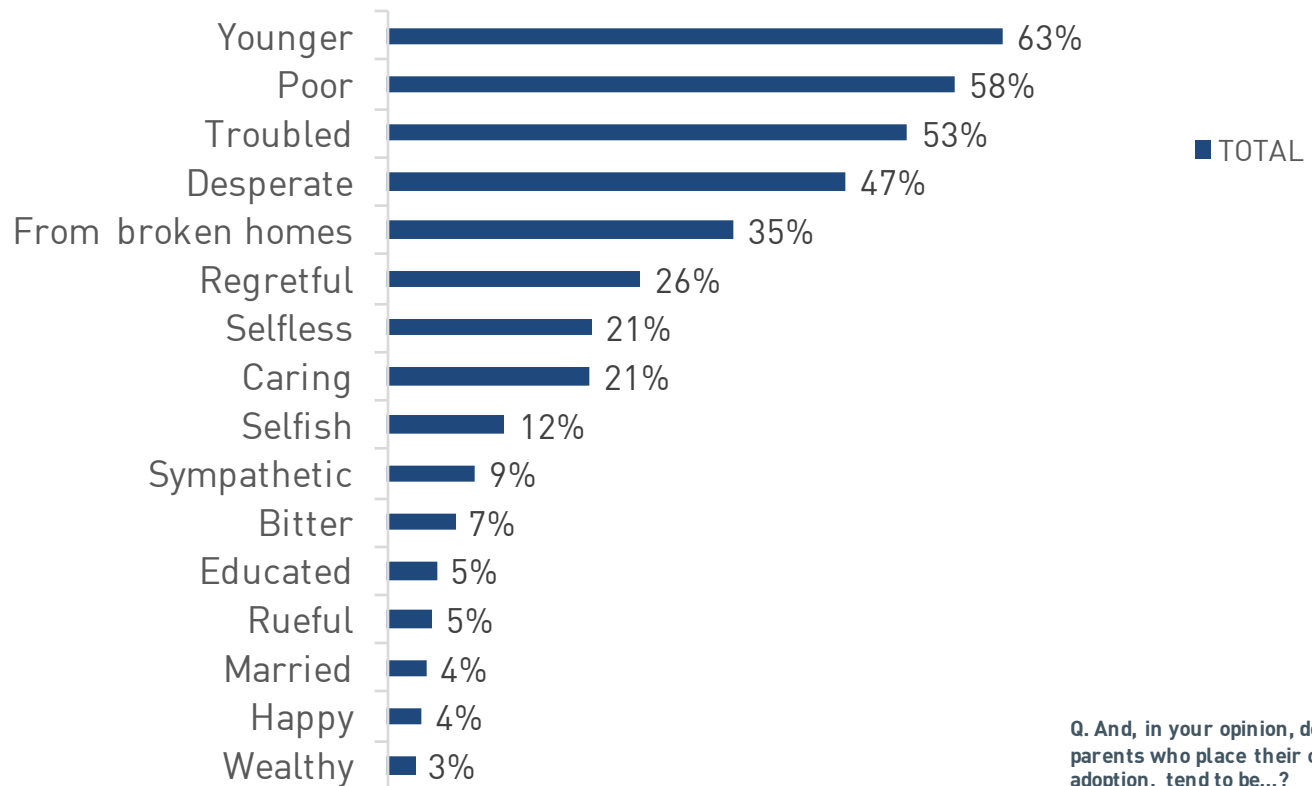
Faces Stigma In Society Today - % Big/Some Stigma





When prompted, first/birth parents are again described as young and poor, and also troubled and even desperate.

Perceptions of First/Birth Parents



Q. And, in your opinion, do first/birth parents who place their children for adoption, tend to be...?

Firth/birth parents themselves are more than twice as likely to describe themselves as selfless and caring, but also regretful.

Perceptions of First/Birth Parents

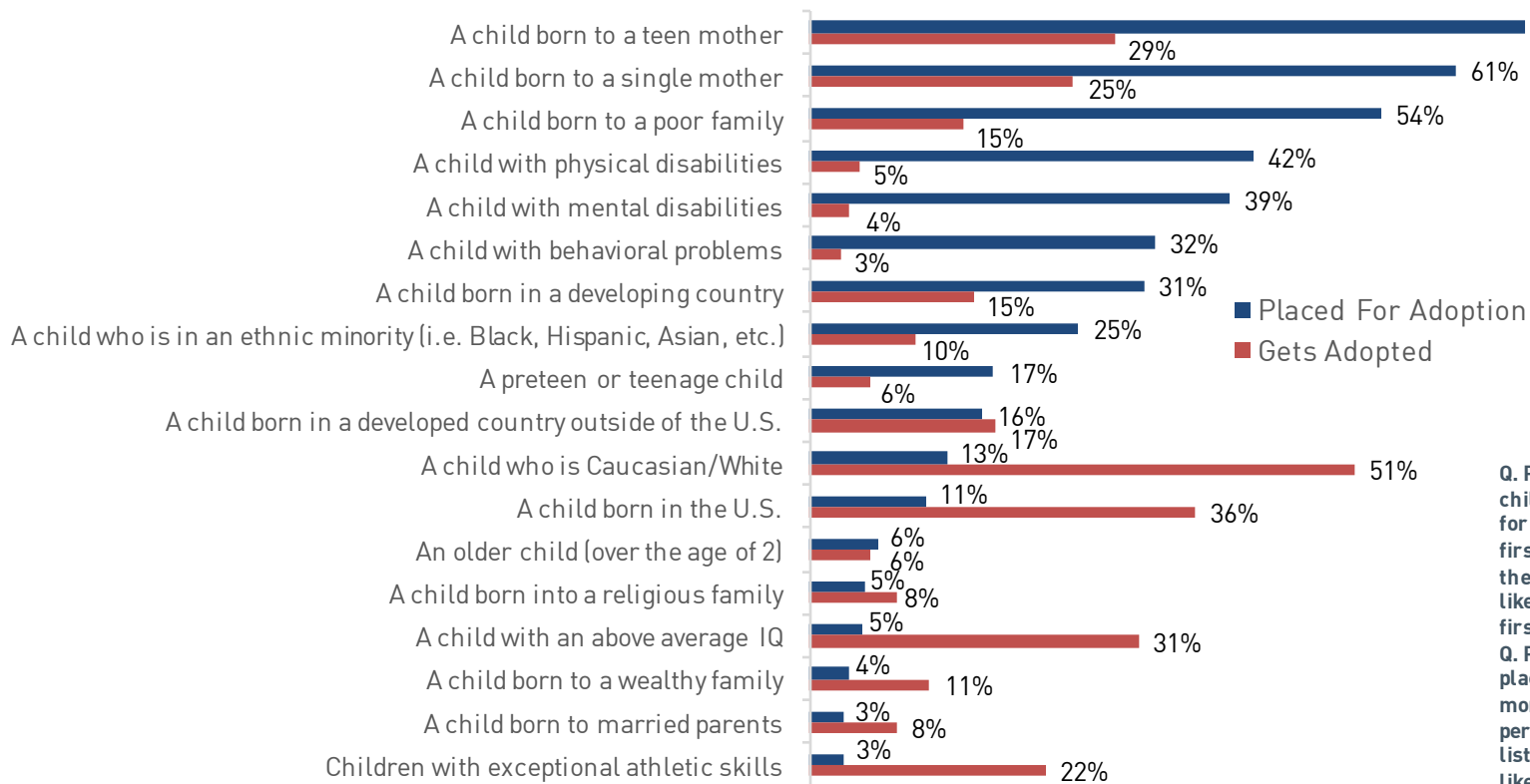
	TOTAL	First/Birth Parents	Adoptive Parents	Adopted People	Foster Parents	Foster Alumni
Younger	63%	56%	61%	60%	60%	31%
Poor	58%	42%	50%	56%	54%	40%
Troubled	53%	42%	45%	48%	54%	38%
Desperate	47%	39%	44%	46%	50%	34%
From broken homes	35%	31%	34%	35%	41%	28%
Regretful	26%	33%	21%	29%	29%	27%
Selfless	21%	51%	22%	32%	32%	29%
Caring	21%	42%	30%	27%	30%	27%
Selfish	12%	11%	10%	12%	9%	14%
Sympathetic	9%	17%	10%	14%	9%	17%
Bitter	7%	10%	8%	8%	14%	10%
Educated	5%	16%	10%	11%	10%	22%
Rueful	5%	9%	6%	6%	3%	7%
Married	4%	8%	5%	8%	7%	22%
Happy	4%	8%	5%	9%	8%	15%
Wealthy	3%	7%	5%	4%	7%	13%

BLUE = significantly higher than those who do not qualify for banner point  
 RED = significantly lower (at the 90% confidence level)

Q. And, in your opinion, do first/birth parents who place their children for adoption, tend to be...?

There is also a latent stereotype regarding the types of children who get placed for adoption and who gets adopted – with a clear gap existing between the two.

### Children Who Get Placed For Adoption



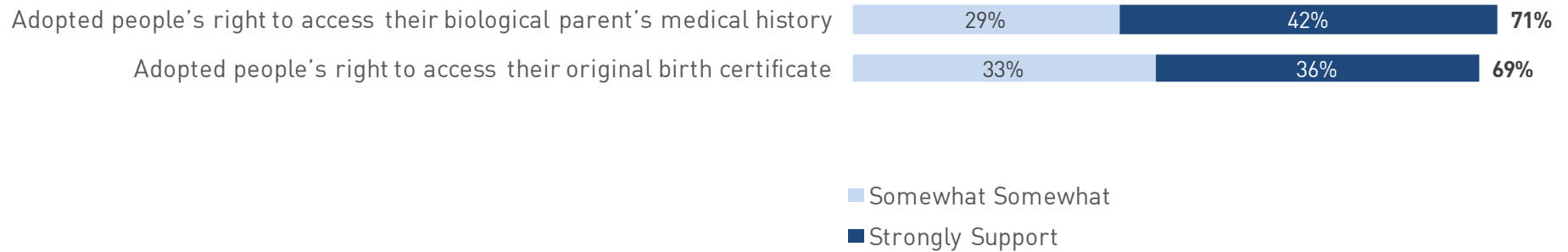
**86%**  
 “Certain types of children are more likely to be adopted than others.”

Q. People have told us that some children are more likely to get placed for adoption by their biological first/birth parents than others. From the list below, who do you think is more likely to get placed for adoption by their first/birth parents?

Q. People have also told us that, once placed for adoption, some children are more likely to actually get adopted by a person or family than others. From the list below, who do you think is more likely to actually get adopted?

**Above all, the public supports adopted people's right to access their biological parent's medical history and their original birth certificate.**

### Support of Adoption-Related Issues

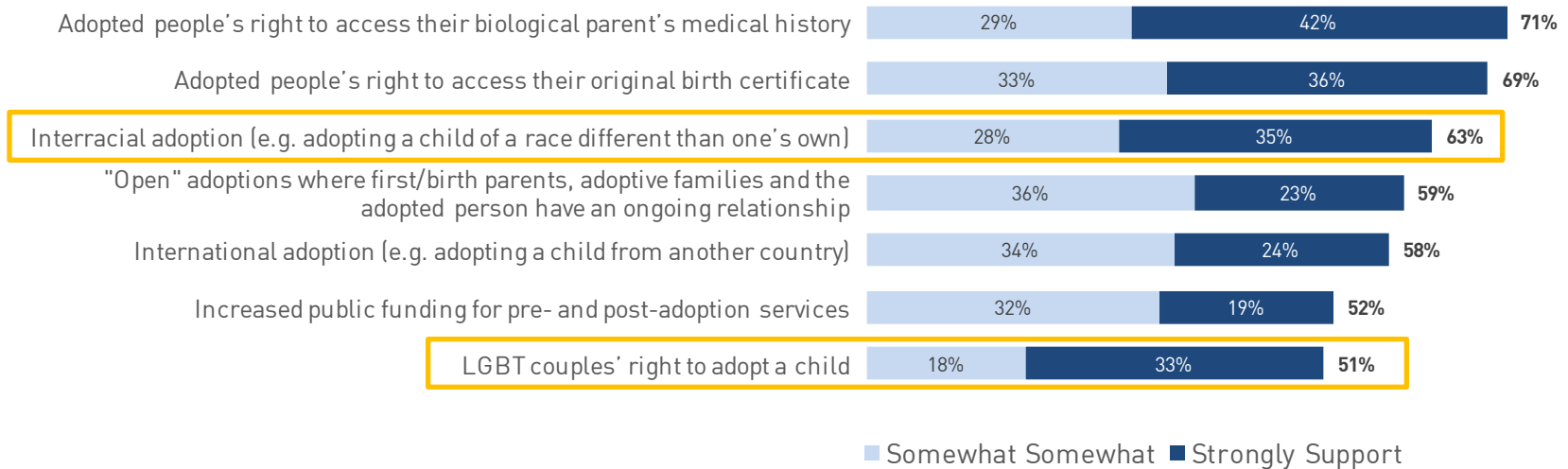


Q. Listed below are a number of different adoption issues. For each one, please tell us the degree to which you support or oppose this issue.



**The majority of people support interracial (transracial) adoption as well as adoption by the LGBT community.**

**Support of Adoption-Related Issues**



Q. Listed below are a number of different adoption issues. For each one, please tell us the degree to which you support or oppose this issue.

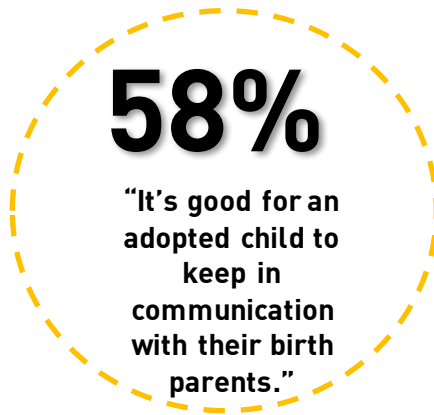
Open adoption garners a significant amount of support, with three in five agreeing that it's good for an adopted child to keep in communication with their first/birth parents.

## Support of Adoption-Related Issues

"Open" adoptions where first/birth parents, adoptive families and the adopted person have an ongoing relationship



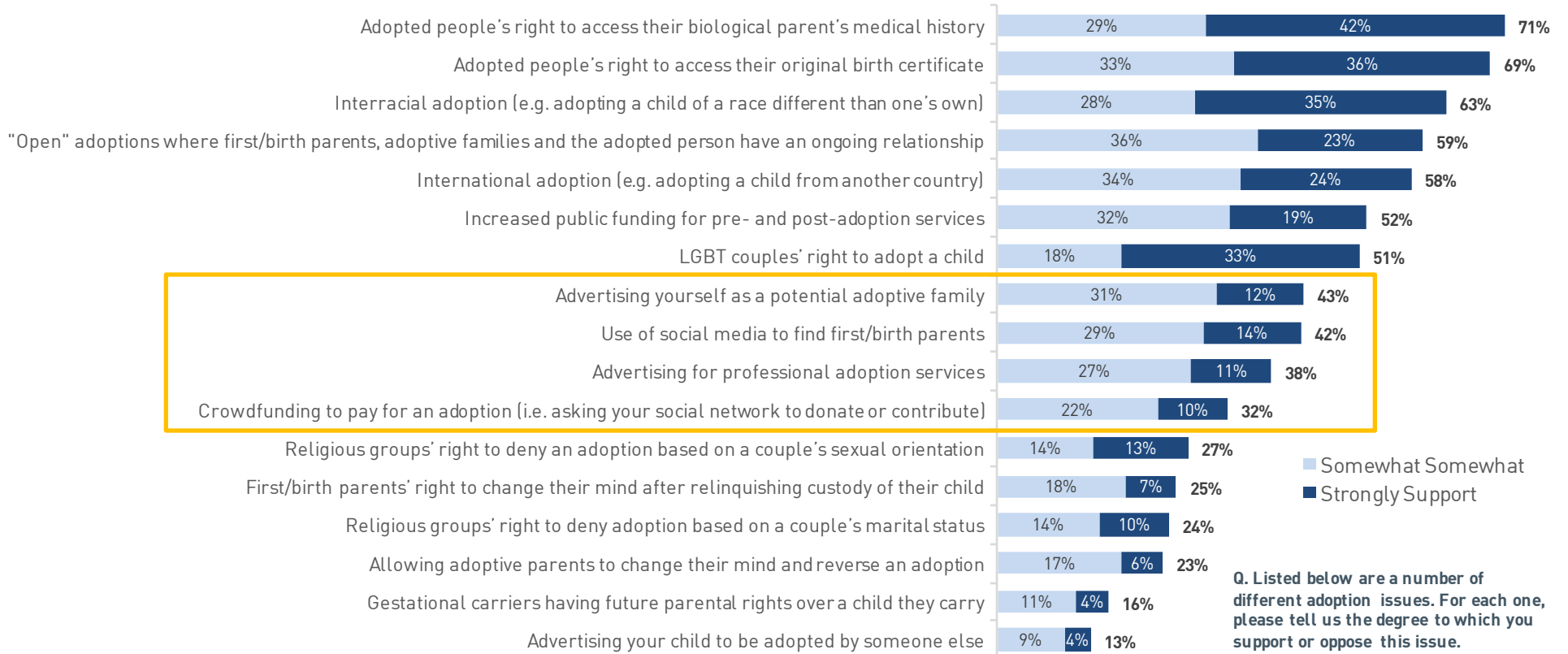
■ Somewhat Support ■ Strongly Support



Q. Listed below are a number of different adoption issues. For each one, please tell us the degree to which you support or oppose this issue.

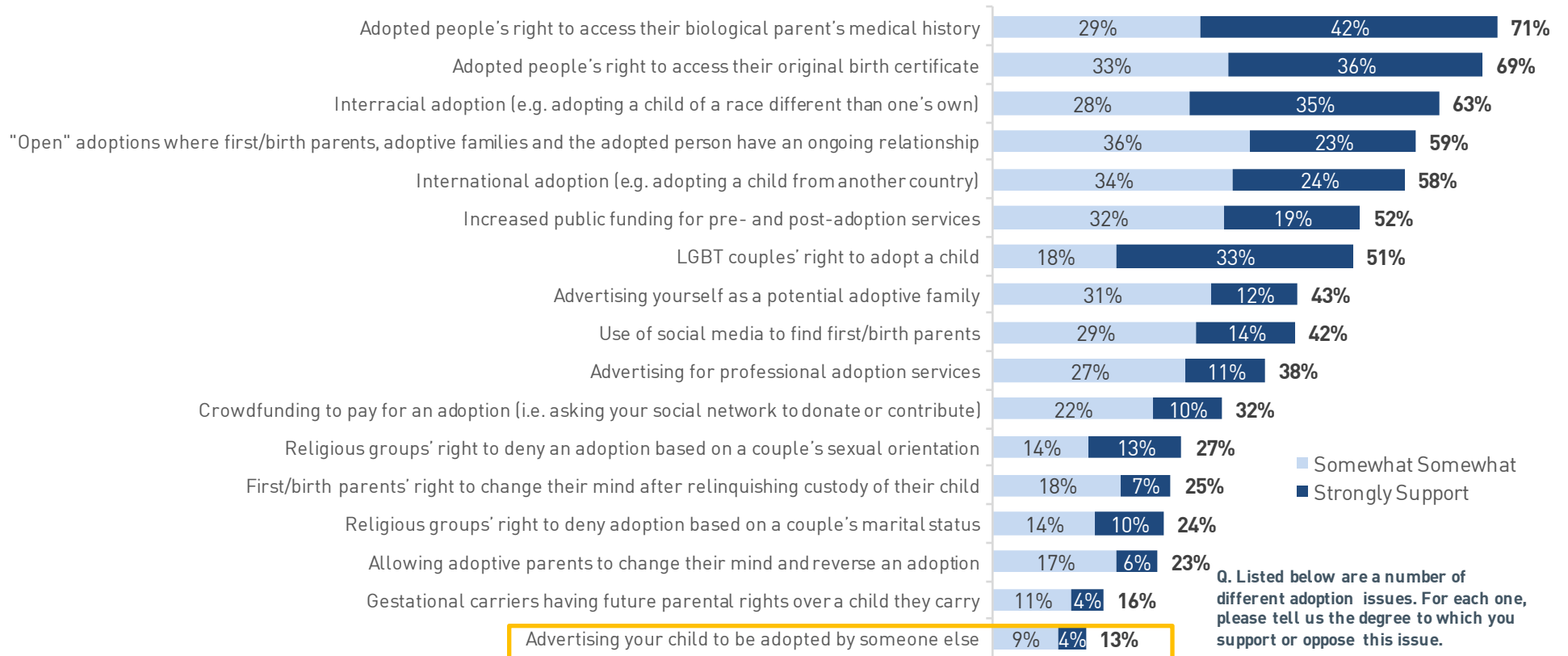
# People are torn with regards to their support for using advertising and social media when it comes to adoption...

## Support of Adoption-Related Issues



...although the vast majority clearly do not support advertising your child to be adopted by someone else.

### Support of Adoption-Related Issues

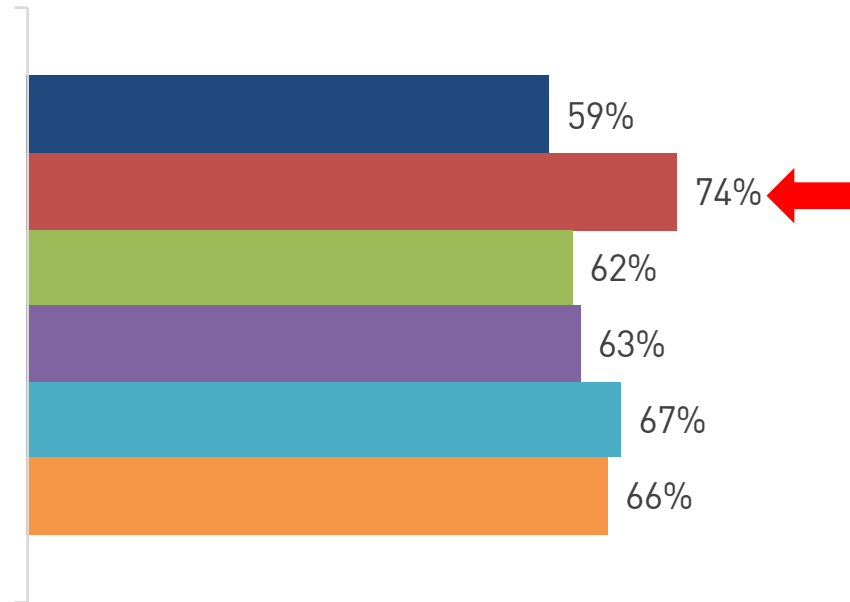


Still, three in five do agree it's a good thing when adopted people use social media to connect with their first/birth parents. First/birth parents are particularly likely to agree.

### Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree

■ TOTAL ■ First/Birth Parents ■ Adoptive Parents ■ Adopted People ■ Foster Parents ■ Foster Alumni

It's a good thing when adopted people use social media to reconnect with their first/birth parents

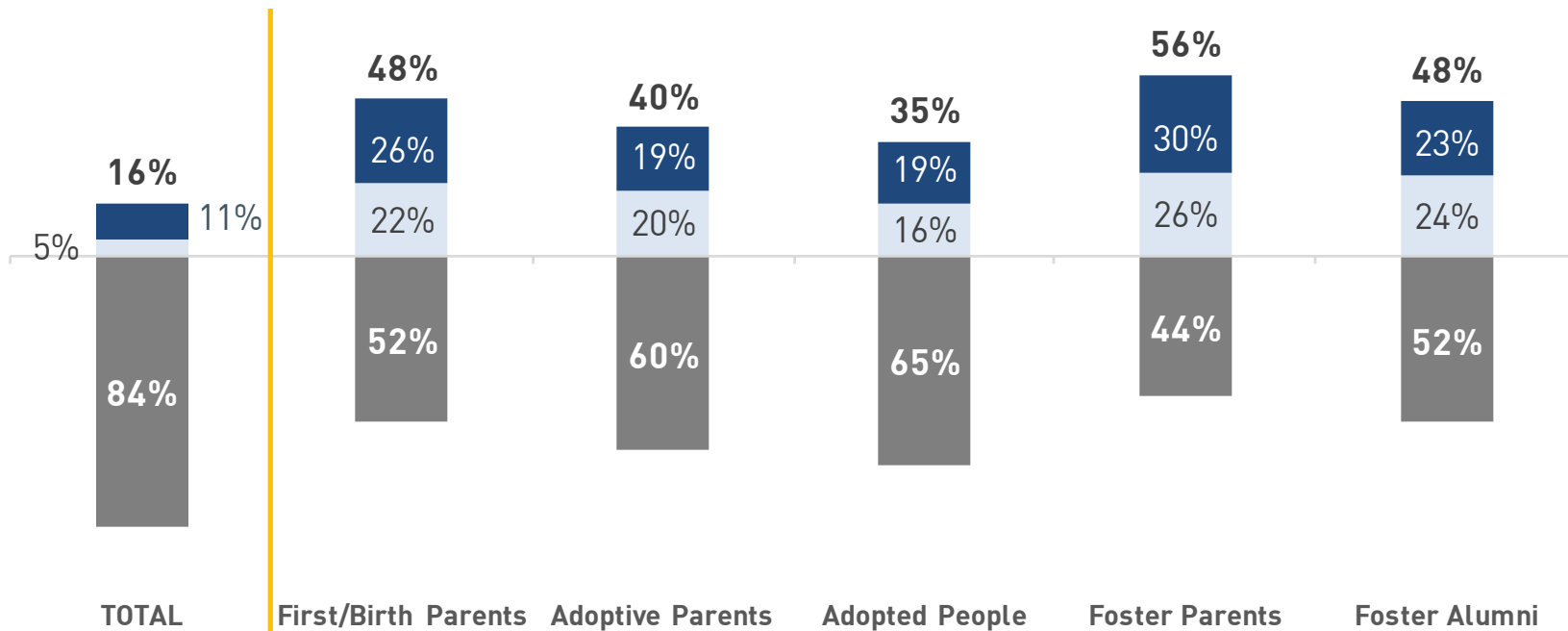


Q. How much do you agree or disagree with each one?

Most U.S. adults have never heard of “rehoming.” Those in the community are more familiar – especially foster parents.

Familiarity with “Rehoming”

- I’ve heard of it, but don’t really know what it is
- Yes, I know what this is
- No, I’ve never heard of this before

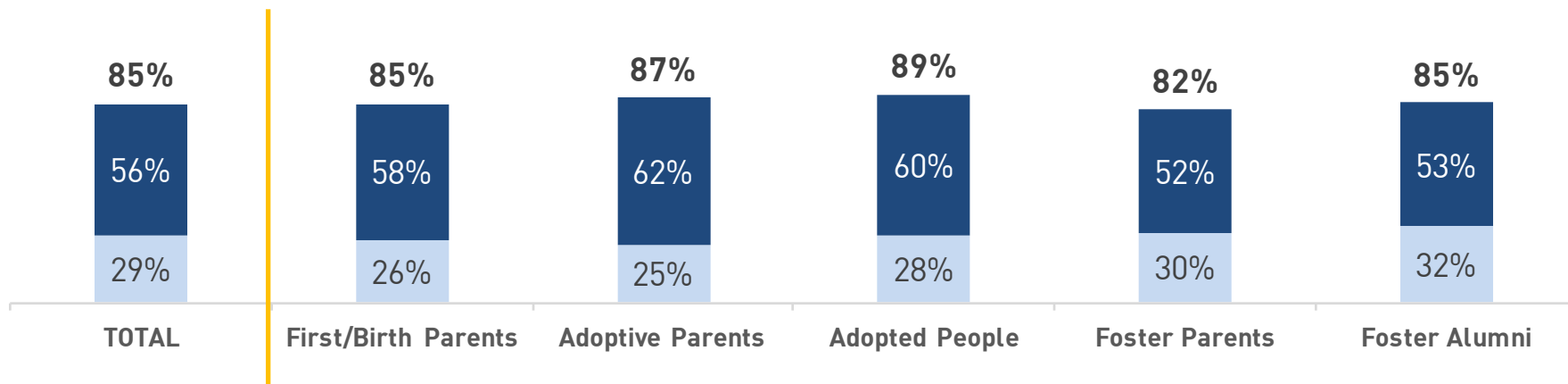


Q. Are you familiar with the practice of “adoption rehoming?”

## Upon learning what it is, most feel it should always be illegal...

### Whether “Rehoming” Should Be Illegal

- Should be illegal in most cases
- Should always be illegal in any case

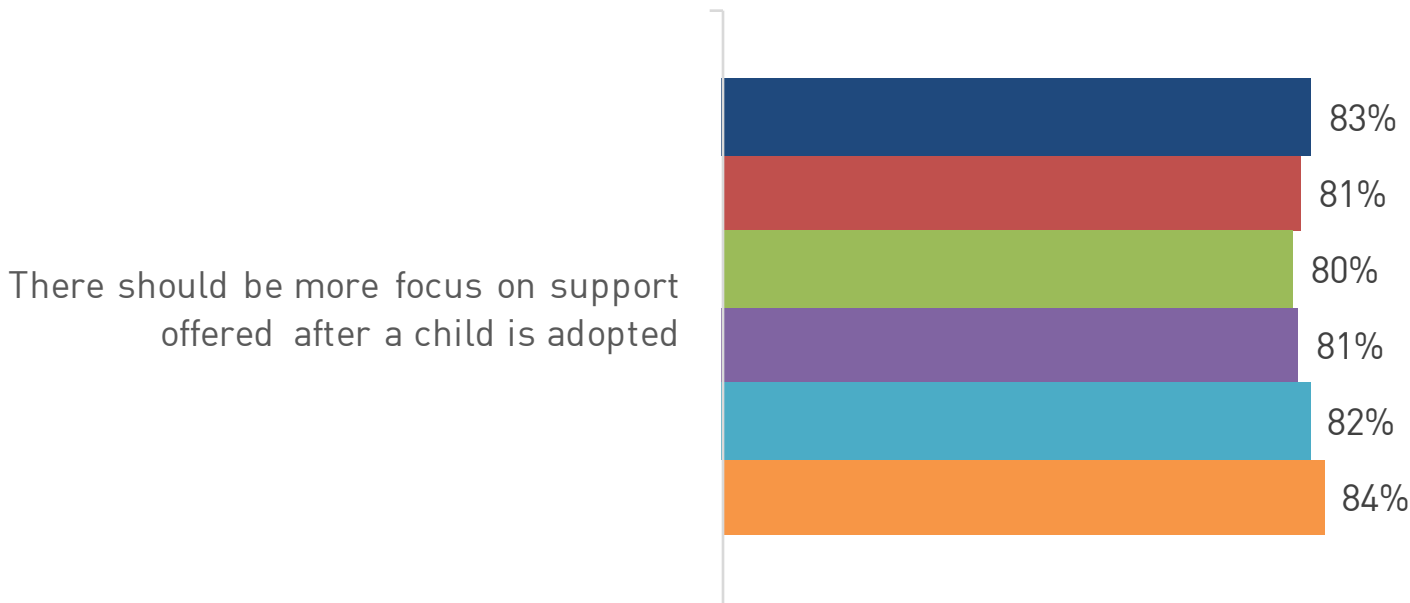


Q. As you may or may not be aware, adoption “rehoming” is an unregulated child custody transfer and is the practice of parents advertising their adopted children online for the purpose of transferring custody of them to unrelated strangers without state or court approval and oversight. Using the scale below, which of the following describe how you feel about adoption “rehoming?”

## Citizens agree there should be more support services for adoptive families...

### Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree

■ TOTAL ■ First/Birth Parents ■ Adoptive Parents ■ Adopted People ■ Foster Parents ■ Foster Alumni

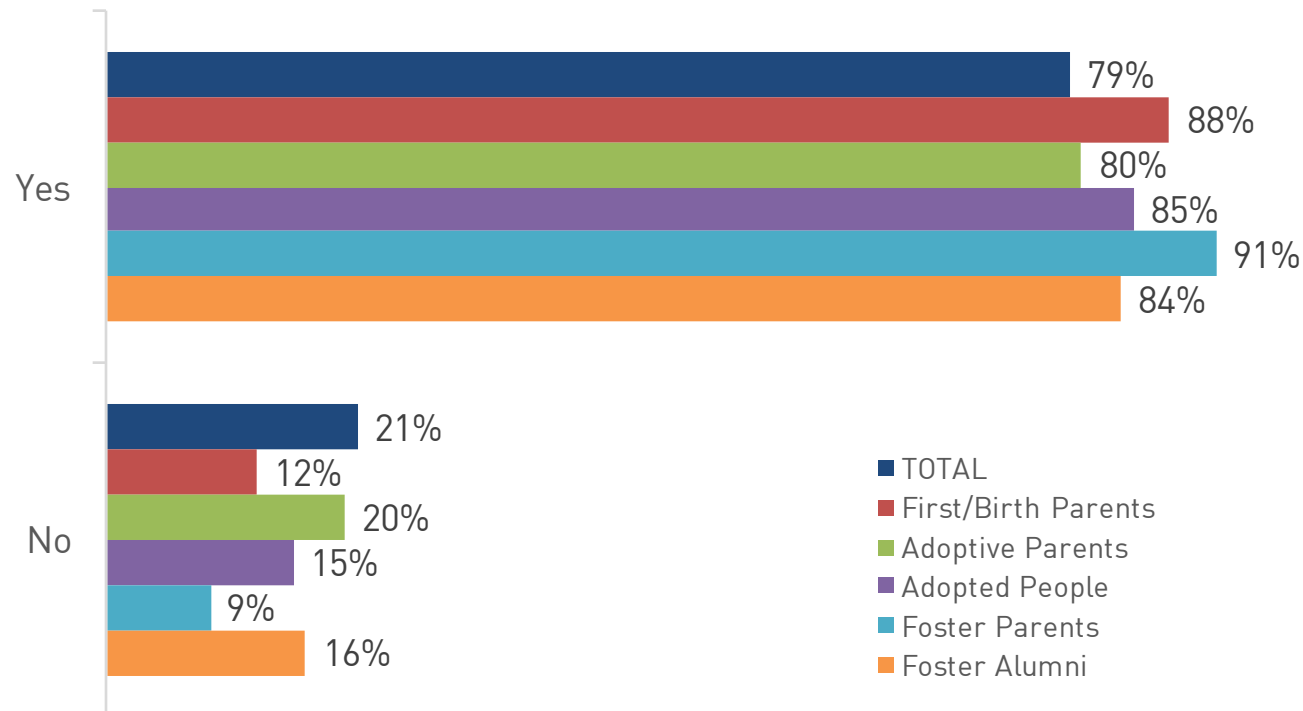


Q. How much do you agree or disagree with each one?



...with four in five indicating families should be provided support services after an adoption has taken place...

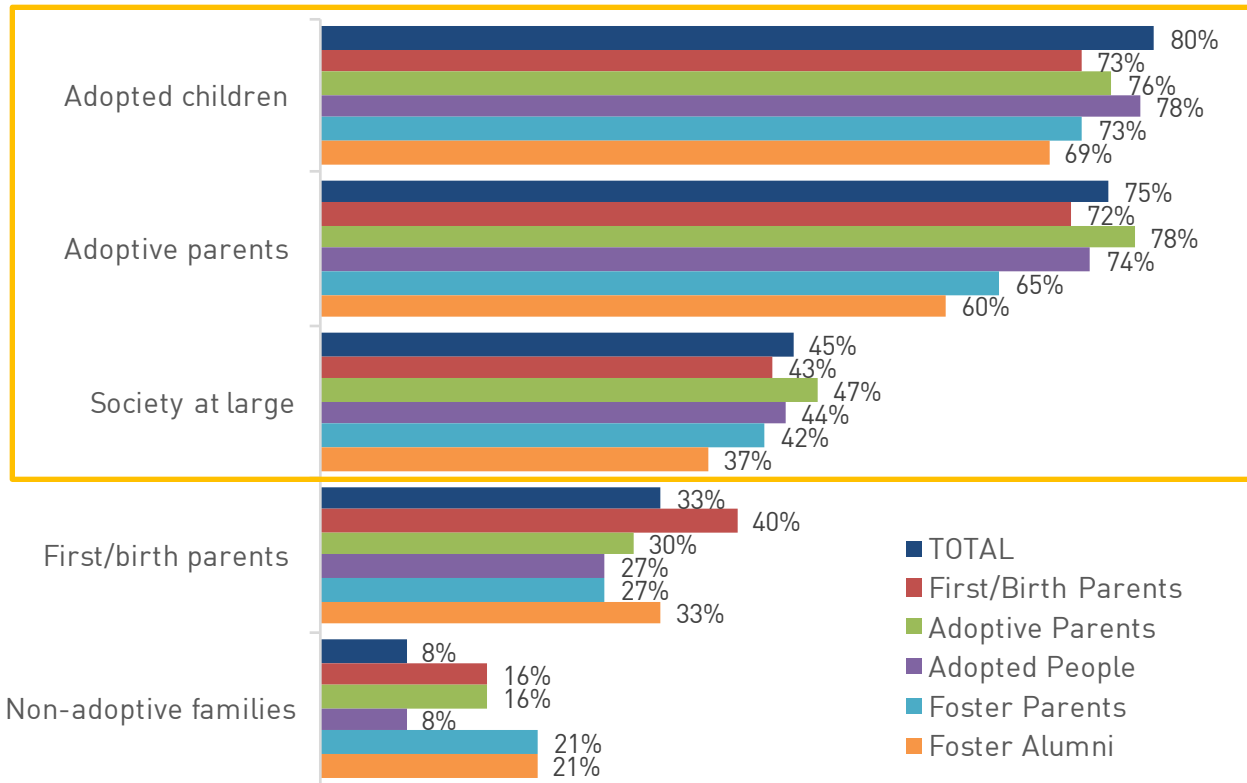
### Whether Support Is Needed AFTER Adoption Takes Place



Q. Do you believe adoptive families should be provided support services after an adoption has taken place?

...as these types of services not only benefit adopted children and adoptive parents, but also society at large...

Who Benefits from Post-Adoption Services



Base: Should have support services

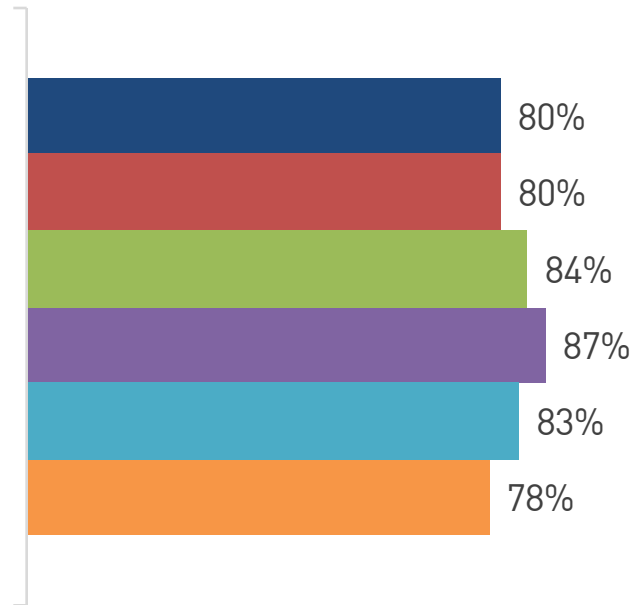
Q. And who do you feel benefits from support services for adopted families?

...as people agree that building stronger families benefits everyone.

Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree

■ TOTAL ■ First/Birth Parents ■ Adoptive Parents ■ Adopted People ■ Foster Parents ■ Foster Alumni

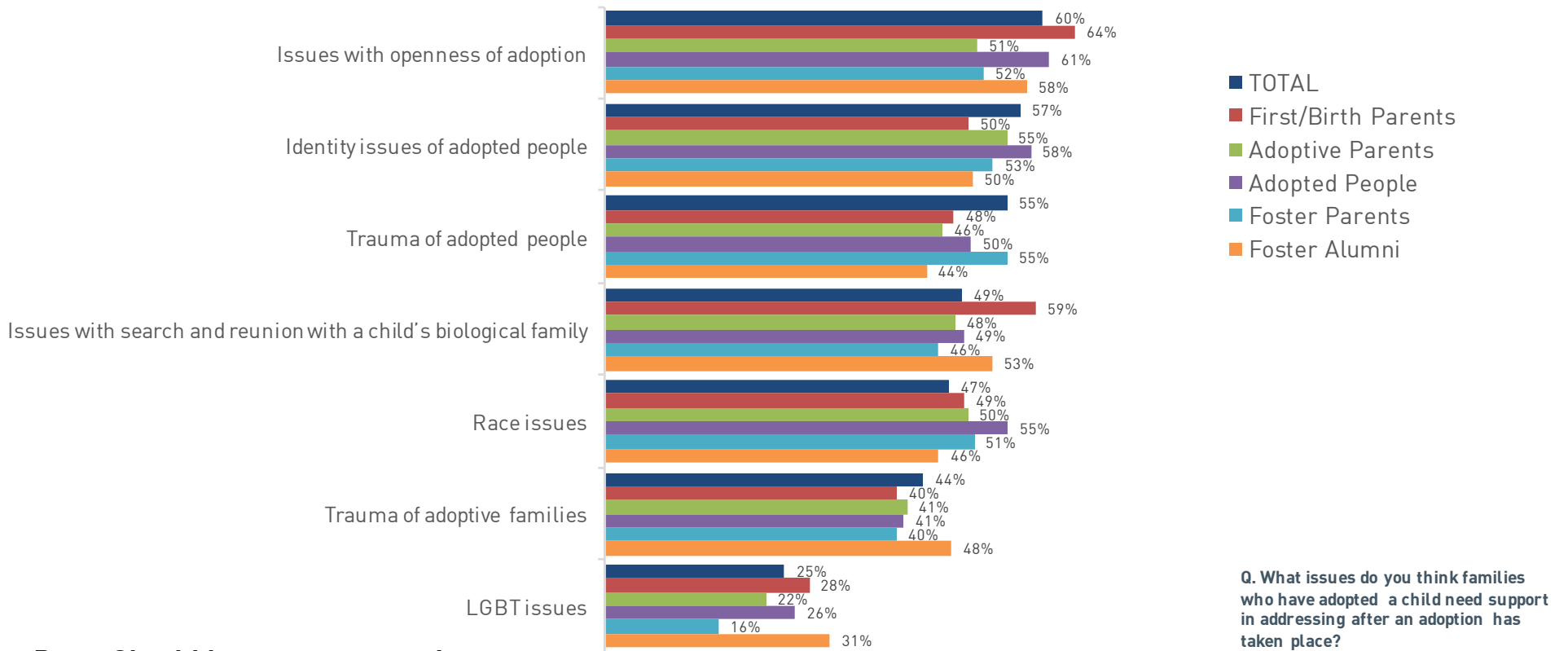
Providing families with an adopted child post-adoption support benefits everyone in this country



Q. How much do you agree or disagree with each one?

There are a wide variety of issues people feel need to be addressed after an adoption has taken place, including those related to openness and identity.

### Issues To Be Addressed After Adoption Has Taken Place

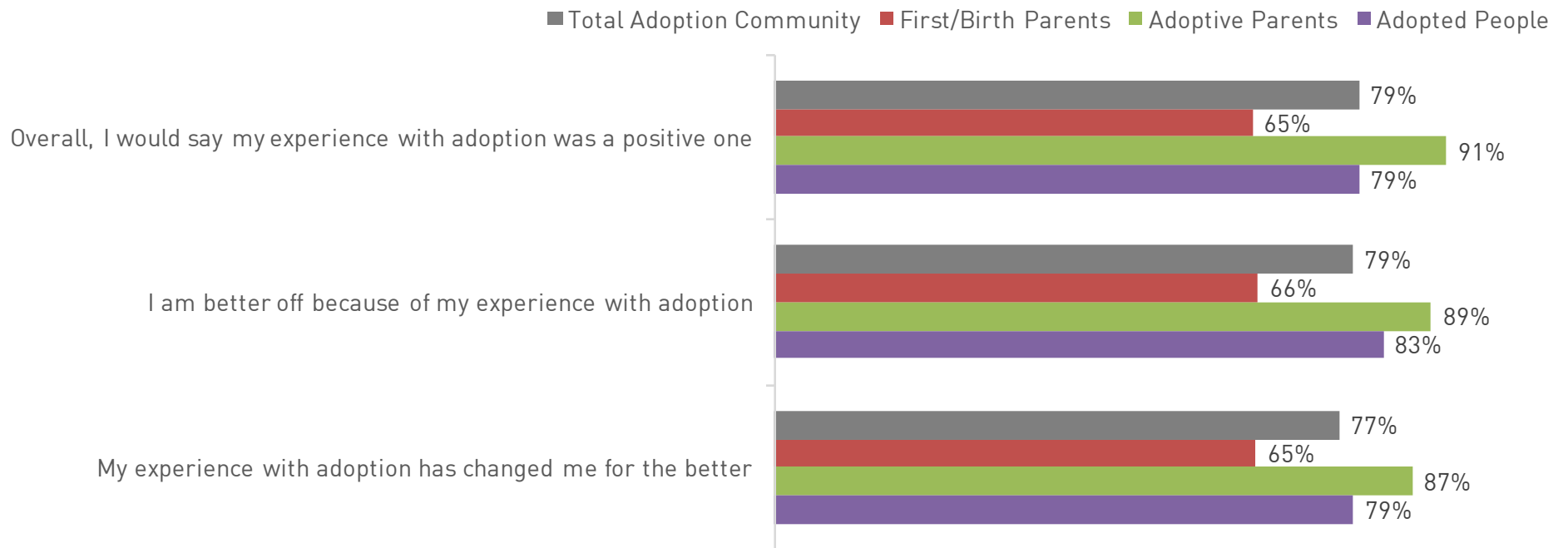


Base: Should have support services

Q. What issues do you think families who have adopted a child need support in addressing after an adoption has taken place?

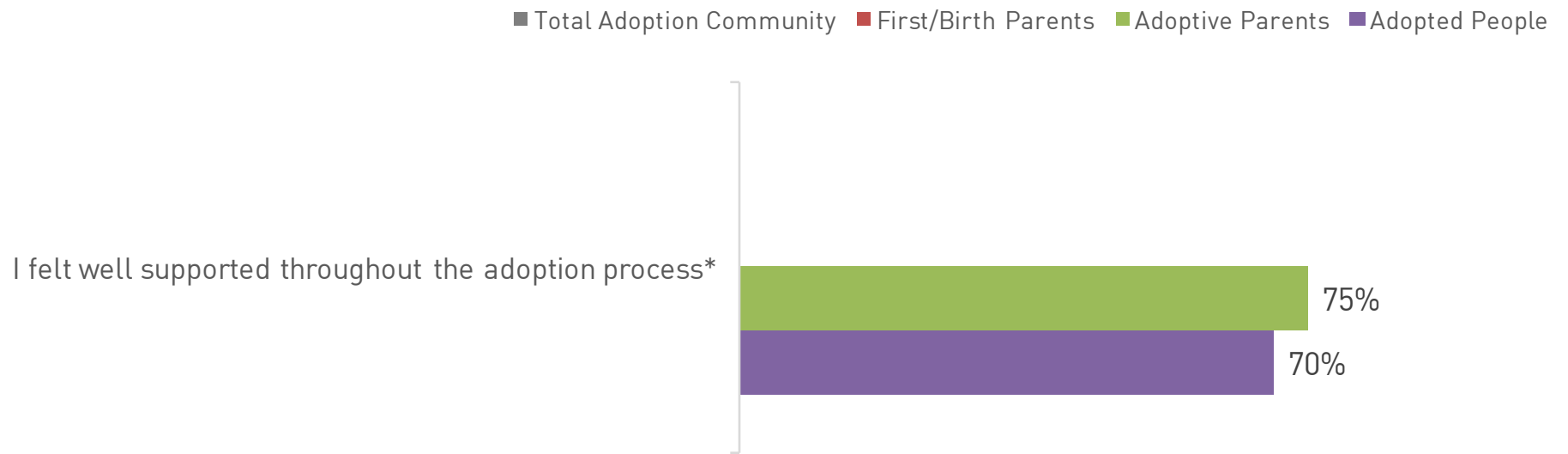
## Overall, those in the adoption community indicate a positive experience...

### Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree



Q. Earlier you mentioned that you have a personal experience with adoption. Based on your experience, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following questions?

Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree

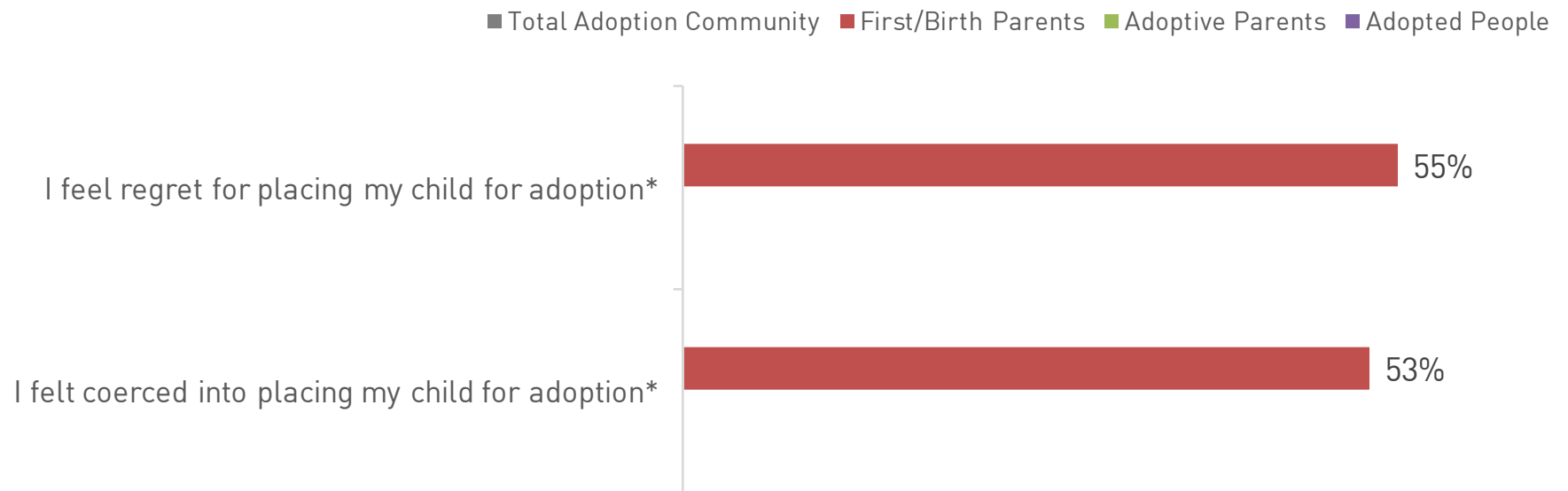


\*Not asked to First/Birth Parents

Q. Earlier you mentioned that you have a personal experience with adoption. Based on your experience, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following questions?

...although first/birth parents report a somewhat more negative overall experience.

Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree



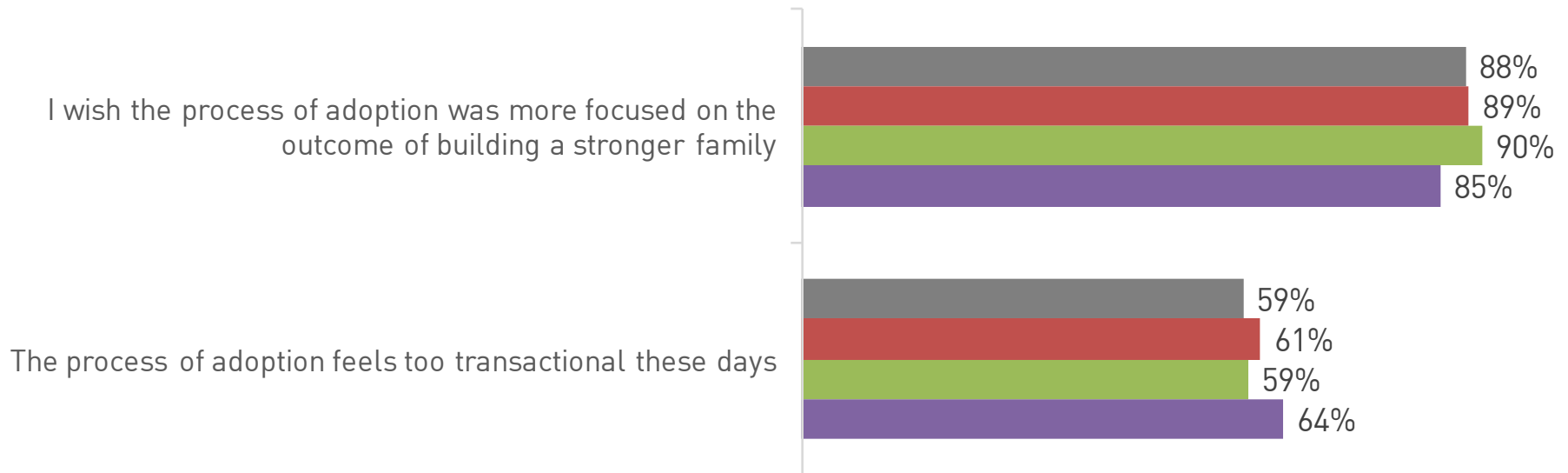
\*Not asked to Adoptive Parents or Adopted People

Q. Earlier you mentioned that you have a personal experience with adoption. Based on your experience, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following questions?

**There is a need to transform the adoption process to be less transactional and more focused on better outcomes.**

**Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree**

■ Total Adoption Community ■ First/Birth Parents ■ Adoptive Parents ■ Adopted People

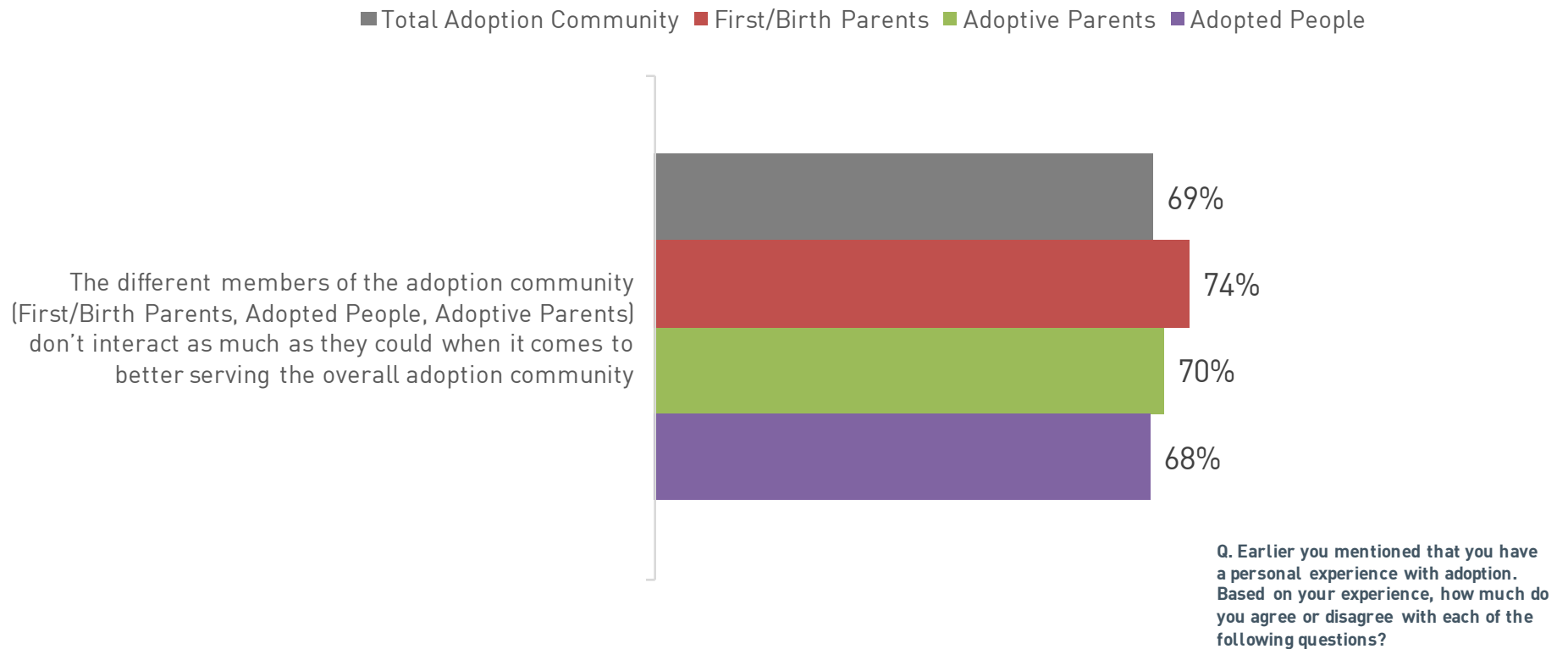


Q. Earlier you mentioned that you have a personal experience with adoption. Based on your experience, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following questions?



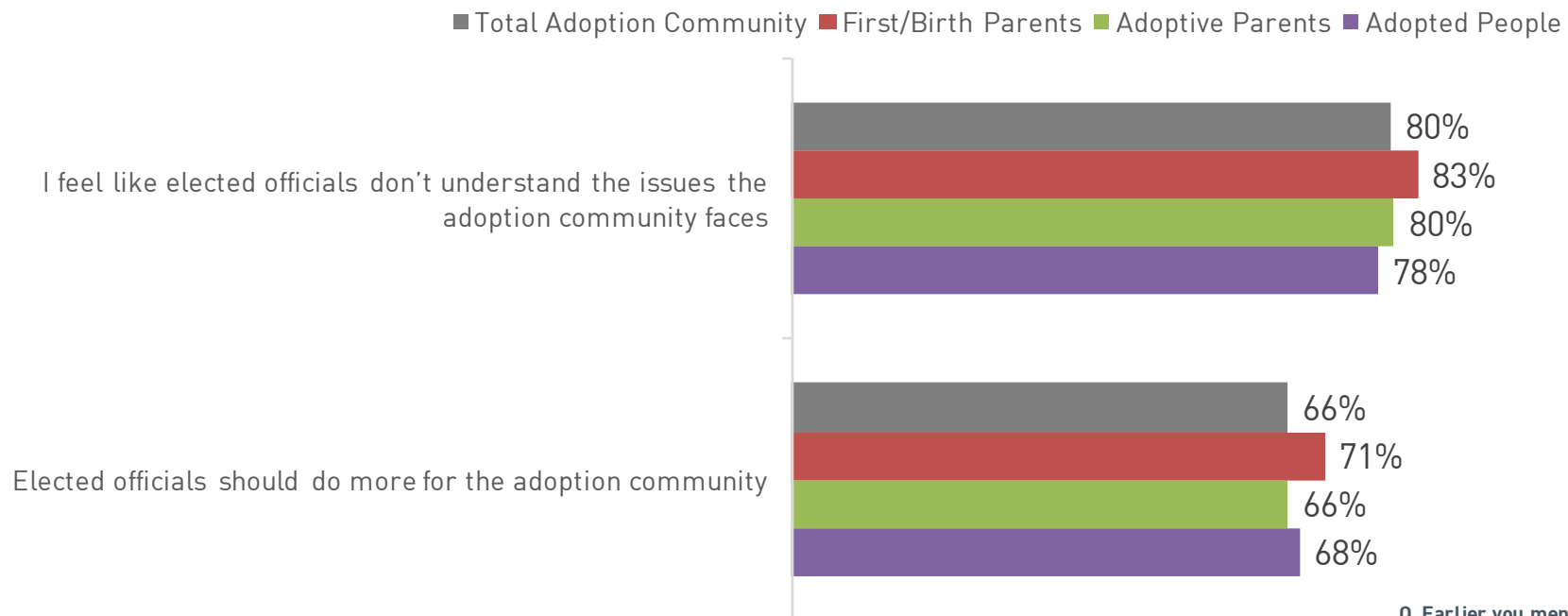
There may also be an opportunity to help build a stronger community among stakeholders.

Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree



## Those in the adoption community do not feel understood nor well-represented by their elected officials.

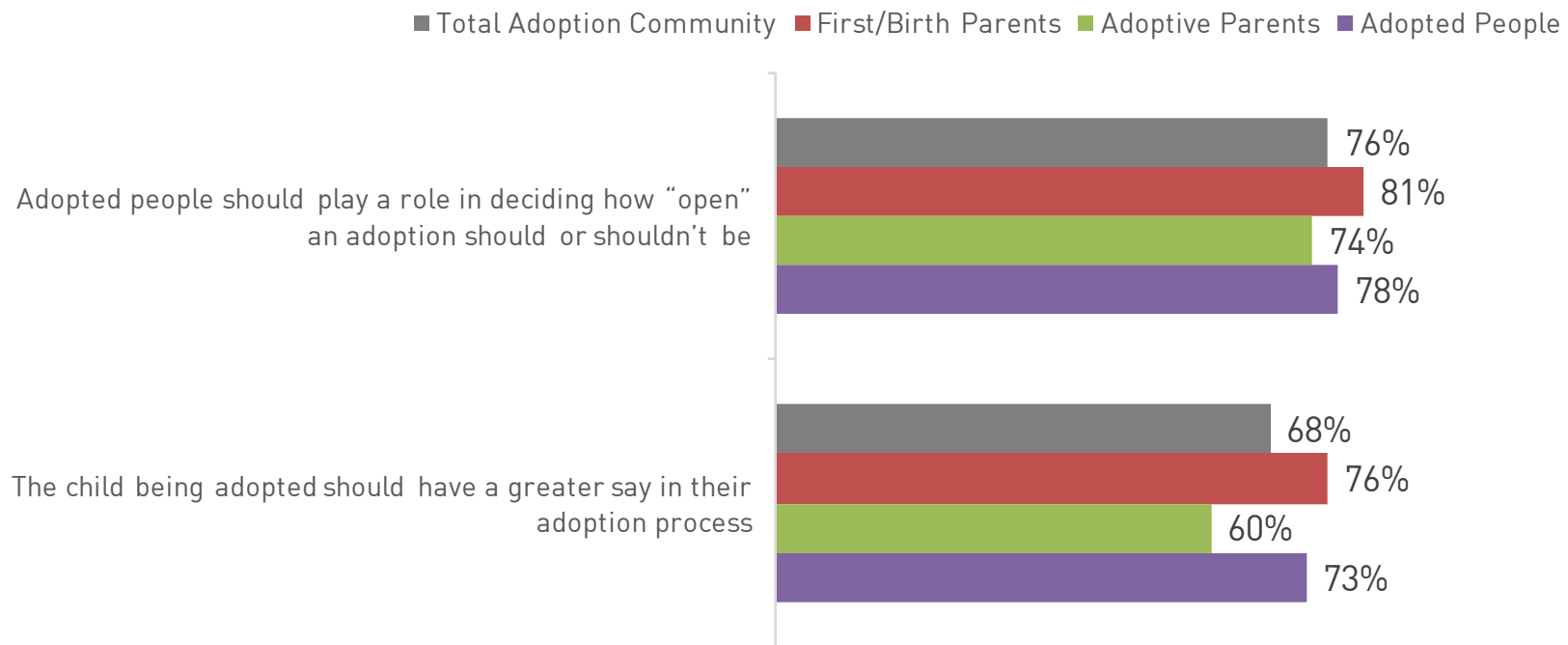
### Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree



Q. Earlier you mentioned that you have a personal experience with adoption. Based on your experience, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following questions?

## Stakeholders feel adopted people should have more of a say in the process.

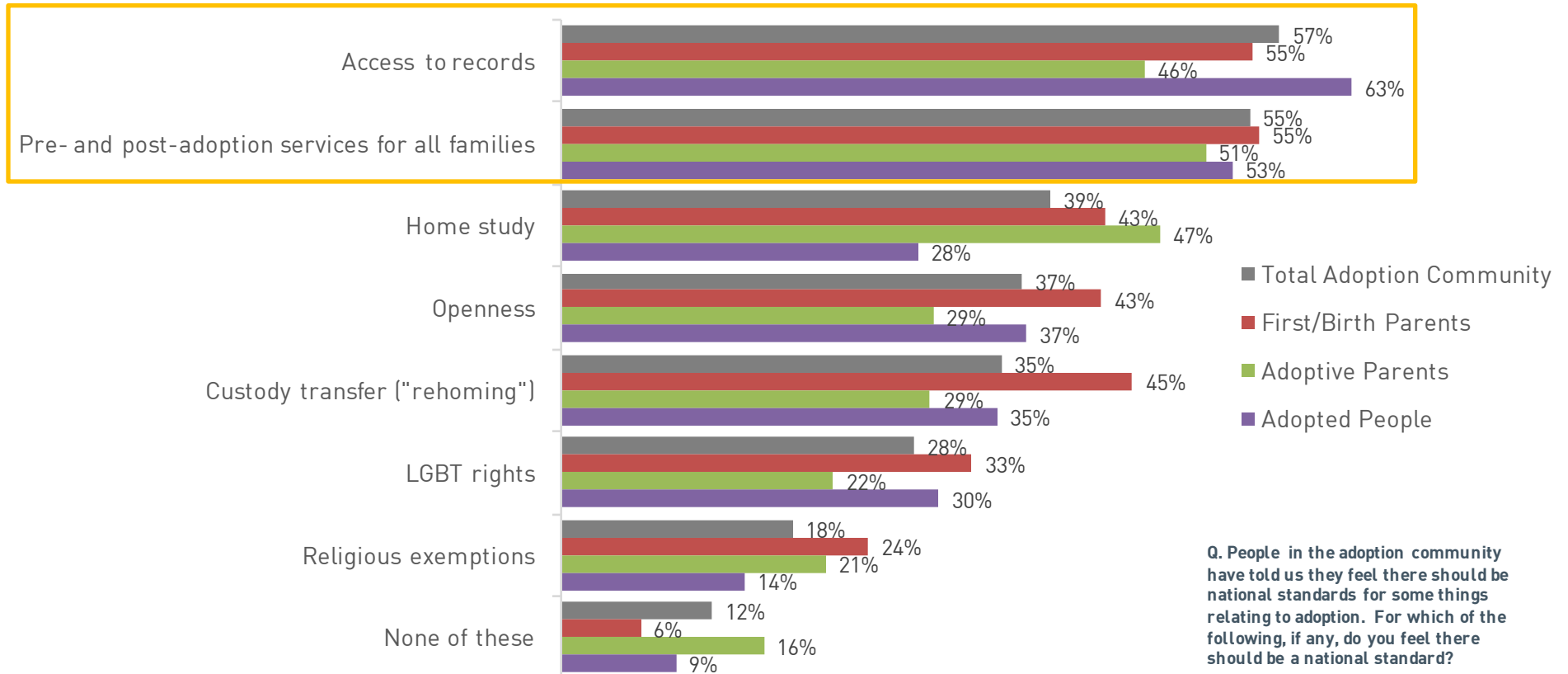
### Adoption Attitudes - % Strongly/Somewhat Agree



Q. Earlier you mentioned that you have a personal experience with adoption. Based on your experience, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following questions?

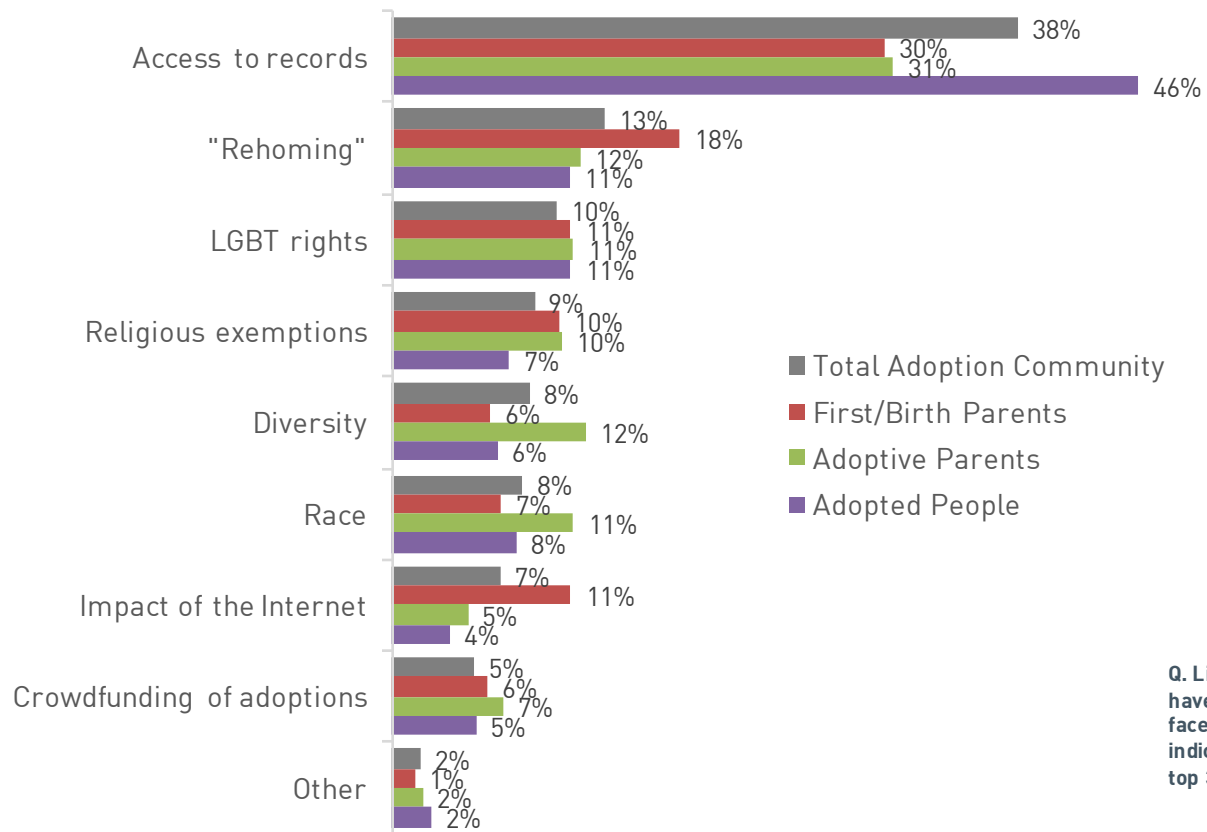
## The adoption community feels there needs to be national standards for access to records and pre- and post-adoption services...

### Issues Need National Standards For



...and that access to records is the most important issue facing the adoption community today. This is especially true of adopted people.

**Most Important Issue Facing Adoption Community**



Q. Listed below are some issues people have told us the adoption community faces today. From the list below, please indicate which issues you feel are the top 3 most important.

# About The Donaldson Adoption Institute

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THE DONALDSON  
ADOPTION INSTITUTE

Since 1996, The Donaldson Adoption Institute has been on a mission to improve the lives of children and families through research, education and advocacy. We investigate the issues of greatest concern to first/birth parents, adopted people, adoptive/foster families, the people who love them, and the professionals who serve them. We educate and train professionals, enlighten parents and engage members of the community to make a positive impact on laws, policies, practices and perceptions. To learn more, please visit [www.adoptioninstitute.org](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org).