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The 2020 intercountry adoption figures put to the Covid-19 test

As customary, ISS/IRC is pleased to present the intercountry adoption statistics for 2020 as well as a brief analysis of these figures — a peculiar analysis nonetheless given the global context.

What can we gather from intercountry adoptions (ICAs, hereafter) carried out in 2020? That is the budding question that arises with this new year. Shall we consider the 2020 numbers as being exceptional or do they actually confirm last years' analyses (see MRs no. 236 from October-November 2018, no. 237 from December 2019 and [no. 247 from December 2020](#))?

Collaborations in 2020: an ever-present diversification

From the perspective of the main *receiving States* (see table no. 1 below), it is no surprise that all States have noticed a decrease in terms of ICAs with an average decrease of 41.6%, the sole exception being Ireland that went from 18 ICAs in 2019 to 29 in 2020. Nevertheless, this generalised decrease has sometimes been drastic (like in

Finland and Norway, for instance, with 59.7% and 54.9% decreases, respectively) and sometimes less notable (such as in the case of Germany with a 4.7% decrease). This year, ISS/IRC has decided to add three receiving States to its table of annual statistics with the purpose of offering complete statistics as much as possible. These three countries are Finland, Ireland, and New Zealand, which have had 27, 29, and 19 ICAs respectively throughout 2020.

Based on the data provided by the main receiving States, ISS/IRC also shares a table with the top 33 *States of origin* for 2020, representing 88% of recorded ICAs worldwide (see table no. 2). This year, ISS/IRC has decided to present the States that have carried out at least 20 ICAs throughout 2020. In any case, it should be noted that more than half of the 113 States of origin that were referenced for 2020 had

Receiving State ¹	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
United States ²	8,668	7,094	6,441	5,648	5,372	4,714	4,059	2,971	1,622
Italy ³	3,106	2,825	2,206	2,216	1,872	1,439	1,394	1,213	669
Canada ⁴	1,367	1,242	905	895	790	621	658	576	416
France ⁵	1,569	1,343	1,069	815	953	685	614	421	244
Spain ⁶	1,669	1,188	824	799	567	531	445	370	195
Sweden ⁷	466	341	345	336	257	240	185	170	92
Germany ⁸	801 (420)	661 (272)	209	308	213	81	91	85	81
The Netherlands ⁹	488	401	354	304	214	210	156	145	70
Belgium ¹⁰	265	219	144	136	121	133	134	99	53
Norway ¹¹	231	154	142	132	126	127	87	91	41
Switzerland ¹²	212 (314)	169 (280)	105 (226)	104 (197)	91 (101)	82 (69)	58 (79)	72	38
Australia ¹³	149	129	114	83	82	69	65	57	37
Ireland ¹⁴	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	29
Finland ¹⁵	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	27
Denmark ¹⁶	219	176	124	97	84	79	64	46	23
New Zealand ¹⁷	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	19
TOTAL	19,312	16,053	13,103	11,966	10,752	8,998	8,031	6,316	3,656

carried out 10 or fewer ICAs in 2020. This observation confirms the trend that had been identified the previous year in which inter-State collaborations are being diversified, thus there are more States of origin, however, there are fewer adoptions in each of these States. From a geographical point of view, if Asia remains as the continent with the highest number of ICAs, Europe moves from second to third place, behind the Americas. Africa and Oceania follow in fourth and fifth place, respectively, as in 2019

State of origin ¹⁸	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Colombia ¹⁹	901	562	355	359	314	542	559	597	387
Ukraine	713	674	560	339	339	270	280	366	277
South Korea	797	206	494	406	362	396	303	254	266
India	362	298	242	233	323	518	456	503	263
China	3,998	3,316	2,734	2,817	2,475	2,189	1,773	1,059	250
Haiti	262	460	551	236	324	398	325	257	209
Bulgaria ²⁰	350	421	323	262	324	289	201	270	169
Hungary	145	104	77	84	88	233	235	238	158
Taiwan	291	188	147	172	150	157	109	149	124
Thailand	251	272	207	172	250	218	215	208	117
Philippines ²¹	374	525	405	354	313	304	206	214	112
Viêt Nam	216	293	285	287	248	356	215	220	108
Nigeria	238	225	175	163	139	206	185	140	96
United States ²²	178	167	155	160	147	89	140	76	89
Brasil	337	246	31	32	29	127	38	66	55
South Africa	81	147	176	172	103	130	112	113	53
Burkina Faso ²³	87	74	99	56	61	59	37	59	45
Russia	2,442	1,703	381	210	151	319	260	221	44
Belarus ²⁴	46	N/A	104	40	90	27	112	81	42
Jamaica ²⁵	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	52	37
Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) ²⁶	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	28	N/A	41	36
Burundi ²⁷	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	40	59	53	36
Rumania ²⁸	0	7	14	23	19	29	41	24	33
Peru ²⁹	122	92	97	79	91	71	56	67 ³⁰	32
Lithuania ³¹	98	80	78	62	67	47	56	28	32
Madagascar ³²	46	40	57	77	62	54	40	40	31
Liberia ³³	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	22	30	51	29
Pakistan ³⁴	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	26	28
Morocco ³⁵	102 ³⁶	32 ³⁷	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	35	27
Uganda ³⁸	246	289	203	208	191	60	27	37	26
Mexico ³⁹	10	10	19	10	19	6	20	40	23
Ivory Coast ⁴⁰	27	22	29	27	10	N/A	49	27	22
Latvia	59	131	96	189	89	84	79	38	20

A decrease in ICAs in 2020, but not for all...

As mentioned above, one thing is certain: adoptions have drastically decreased in 2020. According to the available data, this global decrease is of the order of 42%, going from 6,316 in 2019 to 3,656 in 2020. This spectacular drop can also be noticed in the number of ICAs registered in countries that are normally considered as the top States of origin, like, for instance, China, which had been for several years the top State of origin and which is now the 5th (a 76.4% decrease). More than just mere numbers, the data from 2020 shake up the list of top States of origin, with Colombia becoming the first State of origin, followed by Ukraine, South Korea, India, China, and Haiti.

While these States of origin have shown an average decrease of 29% in terms of intercountry adoptions, some

have maintained stable figures (Costa Rica), experienced a slight decrease (Brazil and Taiwan, with a 16% decrease), or an increase, sometimes even a significant one. We must indeed mention that in terms of the referenced countries, 16% have seen an increase in regards to ICAs. Out of the 33 top countries, this is notably the case of the United States (17.1% increase), Romania (37.5% increase), Lithuania (14.3% increase), and Pakistan (7.7% increase), the latter appearing for the first time on the list of the top 30 States of origin. This raises some concerns that were already present in 2019. Indeed, Pakistan and Morocco —likewise present in table no. 2— are countries whose legislation is influenced by or based on Sharia Law, and do not recognise or prohibit adoption (see pp. 48 et seq., pp. 59 et seq. of the [ISS/IRC kafalah study](#)).

How can we interpret such divergent trends? Are these significant decreases linked to the particularly dramatic consequences of the pandemic in certain national contexts (for instance, China or India)? Or are they linked to precautionary measures adopted in terms of child protection (for example, postponing “non-urgent” administrative or judicial procedures)? Or on the contrary, can we say that the increases are, for instance, due to a better adjustment of certain procedural steps (see MR no. 247 of December 2020) or exceptionally adopted expedited procedures?

The child protection system affected as a whole

Domestic adoptions have been equally affected by the 2020 global context. While the number of domestic adoptions in several States has been significantly higher than ICAs for several years, many of them have also experienced a decrease in domestic adoptions⁴¹ (Bulgaria, with a 16.4% decrease; Chile, with a 26.76% decrease; Colombia, with a 16.29% decrease; El Salvador, with a 71.42% decrease), some have experienced stability (Peru), and few have experienced an increase (e.g., Togo, which went from 13 in 2019 to 29 domestic adoptions in 2020).

Although there are nuances between these countries, this trend raises the hypothesis that adoption has been affected worldwide by the pandemic, both domestically and internationally. More than just the institution of adoption, we are talking about the entire child protection system being undermined during 2020. In terms of consequences for children, whether it be nationally or internationally, the impact is quite considerable and many are the testimonies and warning signs that attest to the great vulnerability of these children (see in particular the [recordings](#) of the 2021 Day of General Discussion). Although caution was and remains warranted, this does not mean that certain children do not require protection via alternative care or adoption. The various lockdowns and other governmental measures have forced institutions to close, children to be left without protection on the streets, children to be returned—sometimes rather hurriedly—with their birth families or, on the contrary, families to be suddenly separated, etc., and many caregivers have also died due to the virus. How can we adapt our systems to these times marked by the pandemic, which we already have seen has lasted throughout 2021 and may well continue? How can we keep the children’s best interests at core, protect them, and contribute to their well-being both physically and mentally?

ICAs in 2020, between numbers and initiatives

Perhaps 2020 is the year in which actions spoke louder than numbers. They confirmed a trend that had been identified in ISS/IRC’s previous analyses: intercountry adoption is now attracting more and more attention, whether it be via national case law (see, for example, MR no. 241 from May 2020), national reforms or studies (see, for example, MRs no. 246 from October-November 2020 and no. 247 from December 2020), or research on practices pertaining to intercountry adoption (see, for example, MRs no. 248 from January 2021 and no. 250 from March-April 2021).

From a legal standpoint, it is worth mentioning that nearly 75,8% of ICAs in 2020 were carried out in virtue of the 1993 Hague Convention, a rather stable trend in comparison to 2019 (81%). Along the same line, it is also worth noting that Saint Kitts and Nevis ratified the 1993 Hague Convention in 2020, which entered into force in the country on February 1, 2021. Along with Niger’s ratification in 2021, the Convention now has [104 contracting States](#).

It is essential to point out that among the several countries that have seen an increase in ICAs, more than half of them are non-contracting States to the 1993 Hague Convention, which is notably the case of several new States of origin such as Libya, South Sudan, or Samoa, each respectively with one, two, and four ICAs in 2020.

Towards a more comprehensive data collection

Thus, over 100 States are currently under the obligation established in Article 7 of the 1993 Hague Convention to take “all appropriate measures to (...) provide information (...) such as statistics (...)”. It is encouraging to see a growing number of States providing increasingly precise and detailed intercountry adoption data on a yearly basis. The most common details are the following:

the child’s age, origin, gender, and where pertinent, the child’s particular need(s), intrafamily adoptions

Regarding more uncommon details — which should though become more frequent in terms of statistical reports—

information on the biological mother (age, civil status), adoptive parents (number of applicants within the country, number of adoption licenses issued, ages, civil status, region/province within the country, presence of

children in the household), regarding the procedure itself (reason for giving the child up for adoption, timeframe, costs, consents obtained), and to post-adoption (adoption breakdowns, children in need of support, agreements for potential contact, access to identifying or non-identifying information), etc.

It is greatly thanks to these increasingly precise data that we can observe a change in the profile of adopted children. Indeed, it seems that the number of adoptees under five is growing, a trend that had already been identified in prior years, and often constitutes the majority of children adopted from across borders (e.g., 16 out of 37 ICAs in Australia, 10 out of 19 intercountry adoptions in New Zealand, 145 out of 244 intercountry adoptions in France, 78 out of 92 intercountry adoptions in Sweden). Again, questions arise regarding the interpretation of this tendency. Is it the result of a swifter identification of special needs for certain children? But how do States define the concept of “special needs”? Are we sure that in all these cases specific and concrete efforts were undertaken to search for a biological relative and to actively seek family reintegration? Even if the responses to these questions vary from one context to the next, it seems important in any case to remark that disaggregated data combining age and special needs of adopted children are still rare, however essential to better understand this observation.

The year 2020 does not seem to be a year to extract definitive conclusions on the intercountry adoption landscape and it seems highly doubtful that this will really change for the 2021 statistical analysis. Certainly, the global pandemic has led many States to review their procedures (see MRs no. 240 from March-April 2020, no. 241 from May 2020, no. 245 from September 2020, and no. 247 from December 2020), in addition to seriously impacting opportunities to travel, organising first encounters and moments of living together which are crucial in the development of secure attachments... However, 2020 was perhaps the ideal moment to re-evaluate, identify certain grey areas, and propose new possibilities based on experiences and lessons learnt, in order to establish a foundation for systematic change. Surely this is what we gather from this year.

ISS/IRC highly encourages all States to be inspired by these criteria in order to thoroughly comprehend current intercountry adoption to the extent that is possible. It is clear that now is not the time to ponder on the purpose of these figures, which are crucial for the development of adequate policies, efficient support services, a system to prevent unnecessary family separation, all for the benefit of the adoption triad.

In light of this, the year 2020 has seen an increase in efforts to improve post-adoption services, the tools available to those who wish to embark on the journey of search for their origins, mainly in Spain and France (see MR no. 239 from February 2020), in Brazil and Ireland (see MR no. 243 from July 2020) and in Australia (see, for example, MR no. 245 from September 2020), and domestic efforts regarding investigation and analysis surrounding intercountry adoption (see, for example, MRs no. 248 from January 2021 and no. 250 from March-April 2021). For many years, certainly, the initiatives of adoptees and their families have often been at the source of these developments, based on their demands for improvements, for support and for answers, especially in cases when illegal adoption practices have been discovered —whether at systematic or individual basis.

**ISS/IRC Team
December 2021**

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Table No. 1

¹ Unless specified, statistics used are those shared with the [Hague Conference on Private International Law \(HCCH\)](#), based on a standard form.

² These [statistics](#) are based on the US fiscal year.

³ The statistics on intercountry adoption for the years 2016 to 2020 were provided to ISS/IRC by the Italian Central Authority.

⁴ For 2012, 2015-2018 and 2020, the statistics were provided to ISS/IRC by Canadian Federal Central Authority. For 2013-2014 and 2019 the numbers originate from the statistics shared by the country with the HCCH.

⁵ Data for 2020 is available on the [website of the official French statistics](#).

⁶ As in previous years, the 2020 statistics for all *Comunidades Autónomas* were shared with ISS/IRC by Spain's Federal Central Authority.

⁷ For 2017- 2019, the statistics were provided by the Swedish Central Authority. For 2016 and 2020, the statistics are those shared by the country with the HCCH.

⁸ For 2015 and 2016, ISS/IRC it resorted to the *Statistisches Bundesamt*, whose numbers exclude relative adoptions, and whose accounting methods differ from those of the German Federal Central Authority. Data for the years 2014, 2017 to 2019 are based on statistics provided by the country to the HCCH. For 2020, the German Federal Central Authority has provided the statistics presented in the table to ISS/IRC and the HCCH. However, the Federal Central Authority clarified that these figures only include adoptions that took place in a Contracting State to the 1993 Hague Convention and that were mediated through a German accredited adoption body or a regional Central Authority. Further, these statistics do not include private nor independent adoptions.

⁹ Data for 2020 were provided to ISS/IRC by the Dutch Central Authority.

¹⁰ ISS/IRC has included Belgium in its statistics compilation since 2014. For 2014, 2017 and 2019, the statistics are those shared with the HCCH; for 2015, they were provided by Belgium's Federal Central Authority. For 2018, the statistics are those published by the *Service public fédéral justice*. For 2016 and 2020, the numbers were provided by the Central Authorities of the French and Flemish Communities, and represented those children physically cared for in their adoptive families, even when the adoption is sometimes declared months or years later.

¹¹ Data for 2019 are based on statistics provided by the country to the HCCH. Data for 2020 have been provided to ISS/IRC by the Norwegian Central Authority.

¹² Data for 2015-2018 were provided by the *Office fédéral de la statistique*. The numbers for 2016-2018 do not include relative, nor adult adoptions. Between 2011 and 2013, the statistics were provided by the Swiss Federal Central Authority. For 2014 and 2020, the numbers are those provided by the country to the HCCH. The 2019 data has been provided by the Swiss Federal Central Authority. In 2019, the Swiss Federal Central Authority decided to review its data collection and analysis system, by recording an intercountry adoption based on the child's time of arrival to Switzerland in a given year. Previously, data analysis was recorded based on the year of the adoption decision. The Swiss intercountry adoption numbers were adjusted back to 2008 by using the changed calculation method, which is why the ISS/IRC has chosen to highlight differences in the table above (data based on the old system is provided in parenthesis).

¹³ These statistics are based on the fiscal year as applied in Australia which runs from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020. The following [link](#) shows the figures for the financial year 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021.

¹⁴ ISS/IRC has chosen to add Ireland from this year 2020 onwards in the statistics compilation. In order not to distort the statistics published in recent years by ISS/IRC, the statistics for previous years (2012-2019) are not included in the total for said period, but are available at the following [link](#).

¹⁵ ISS/IRC has chosen to add Finland from this year 2020 onwards in the statistics compilation. In order not to distort the statistics published in recent years by ISS/IRC, the statistics for previous years (2012-2019) are not included in the total ICA numbers for said period, but are available at the following [link](#).

¹⁶ Data for 2019 and 2020 were provided to ISS/IRC by the Danish Central Authority.

¹⁷ ISS/IRC has chosen to add New Zealand from this year 2020 onwards in the statistics compilation. These statistics are based on the fiscal year as applied in New Zealand which runs from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020. The following [link](#) shows the figures for the financial year 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021. In order not to distort the statistics published in recent years by ISS/IRC, the statistics for previous years (2012-2019) are not included in the total ICA numbers for said period, but are available at the following [link](#).

Table No. 2

¹⁸ Where a source is not specifically indicated, statistics are based on those of the main receiving States. ISS/IRC has chosen here to provide an overview of States of origin having realised at least 20 intercountry adoptions during 2020. Variations with the statistics provided by States of origin to the HCCH may exist and may be linked to different counting methods for an intercountry adoption between States.

Over the past years, several countries, e.g. Australia, Germany, Italy, Norway and Switzerland, include some States of origin in general categories, such as 'several Asian countries' or 'other countries'. Thus, it was impossible to determine the exact origins of these adopted children. By using the HCCH standard form, this issue seems to have been addressed.

¹⁹ It should be noted that the [statistics provided by the country to the HCCH](#) mention 435 intercountry adoptions in 2020.

²⁰ It should be noted that the [statistics provided by the country to the HCCH](#) mention 178 intercountry adoptions in 2020.

²¹ It should be noted that the [statistics provided by the country to the HCCH](#) mention 95 intercountry adoptions in 2020.

²² It should be noted that the [statistics provided by the country to the HCCH](#) mention 42 intercountry adoptions in 2020.

²³ This country was added in 2018. Statistics for 2012-2018 are those registered by the HCCH. 2019 and 2020 data are based on statistics shared by the main receiving States.

²⁴ This country was added in 2018. The 2018 statistics are based on the statistics provided by the country to HCCH. Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

²⁵ This country was added in 2019. Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

²⁶ This country was added in 2019. Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving states. Statistics for 2017 are based on [statistics provided by the country to the HCCH](#).

²⁷ This country was added in 2019. For 2017 and 2018, this is the sum of data provided by the *US Department of State*; the French Central Authority; and the *Commissione per le Adozioni Internazionali* (Italy). Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

²⁸ This country was added in 2020. Data for the years 2012 to 2018 are based on statistics provided by the country to HCCH. Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

²⁹ This country was added in 2019. Data for the years 2012 to 2018 are based on statistics provided by the country to HCCH. Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on the main receiving states. Note that the [statistics provided by the country to the HCCH](#) indicate 34 intercountry adoptions in 2020 and 64 intercountry adoptions in 2019.

³⁰ Note that the [statistics provided by the country to the HCCH](#) indicate 64 intercountry adoptions in 2019. See, MIMP, [page 7 of the submission](#).

³¹ This country was added in 2020. Data for the years 2012 to 2018 are based on statistics provided by the country to the HCCH. Data for 2019-2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States. Note that the [statistics provided by the country to the HCCH](#) indicate 30 intercountry adoptions in 2020 and 34 intercountry adoptions in 2019.

³² This country was added in 2018. Data for the years 2012 to 2017 are based on statistics provided by the country to the HCCH. Data for 2018-2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

³³ This country was added in 2019. Data for 2017-2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

³⁴ This country was added in 2019. Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

³⁵ This country was added in 2019. Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

³⁶ According to ISS/IRC statistics on *kafalah* (see: Morocco Country situation, August 2017).

³⁷ According to ISS/IRC *kafalah* statistics (see: Morocco Country situation, August 2017).

³⁸ This country was added in 2019. Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

³⁹ Data for 2012-2018 are based on [statistics provided by the country to the HCCH](#). Data for 2019 and 2020 are based on statistics provided by the main receiving States; note that the [statistics provided by Mexico to the HCCH](#) for 2019 only mention nine intercountry adoptions in 2019.

⁴⁰ This country was added in 2020. Data for the years 2012 to 2016 are based on statistics provided by the country to the HCCH. Data for 2018-2020 are based on statistics from the main receiving States.

⁴¹ The data concerning domestic adoptions from the origin States have been included in full in the statistical tables available on the HCCH website. The statistics on domestic adoptions for Germany, Ireland and Australia also come from the HCCH website.

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