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Despite a Tragedy, Adoption Aid Remains Crucial

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The tragic deaths of Minnet C. Bowman and Jasmine Nicole Bowman, [Metro, Oct. 10] allegedly at the hands of their adoptive mother, [Renee Bowman](#), will raise questions about the implementation of the Adoption Assistance Program (AAP), the federal program that provides financial help to families who adopt children from foster care. Legitimate questions about the motives of Renee Bowman, however, must not result in reduced support for the thousands of other children who are lovingly adopted from foster care each year.

The Adoption Assistance Program, expanded in legislation signed by [President Bush](#) just last week, provides an invaluable source of financial support for families who adopt. In addition to providing children with permanent homes, society's upfront investment in adoption assistance saves significant money in the long term.

Recent research by Richard Barth (now at the [University of Maryland](#)) found that while facilitating an adoption from foster care costs government about \$115,000, it saves approximately \$258,000 in child welfare costs, netting \$143,000 in taxpayer savings for each child. My research estimates that each adoption from foster care nets an additional \$190,000 to \$235,000 in other savings -- from reductions in special education spending to the costs of future involvement in the juvenile justice system, for example. Moreover, a child who is adopted from foster care is likely to earn more -- and pay more taxes -- than counterparts who "age out" of foster care without a permanent family (between \$88,000 and \$150,000 over a lifetime). All told, every dollar spent adopting a child from foster care yields about three dollars in benefits.

As every adoptive family knows, adoption confers an irreplaceable sense of belonging: emotional security that enhances overall well-being and promotes gains in educational attainment and success in the labor market.

When an adoption goes wrong, as it did so tragically for the Bowman girls, it is important to ask questions. Were there warning signs missed? Who missed them? What can be done to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again? But it is equally important to remember that child abuse in foster care and adoption is relatively rare, especially as compared to child abuse and neglect among the general population.

In the average year, about 800,000 children are served by the states' child welfare systems. There are approximately half a million children in foster care. Approximately 129,000 children are "waiting to be adopted." In the 1990s the number of adoptions from foster care increased significantly, due in no small part to the Adoption Assistance Program, which provides subsidies aimed at lowering the costs of raising eligible children with special needs. Indeed, my research found that an increase of just \$100 in monthly adoption assistance payments is associated with just over 80 additional adoptions from foster

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care in each state. Across the country and territories, that means 4,200 fewer children waiting for adoption each year.

Adoption subsidies are particularly important given that families that adopt children from foster care experience higher-than-average costs for caring for these children. Of the children adopted from foster care between 1995 and 2003, 66,100 had a medical problem; 31,800 had an emotional disturbance; and 6,500 had cognitive impairments. While some expenses are covered by [Medicaid](#), adoption-specific therapies are hard to find and seldom fully covered. States and localities vary widely in both the quantity and quality of services that they provide in support of adoptive families. Adoption assistance provides a critical bridge.

The Bowman tragedy should jump-start a broader policy discussion about needed reforms to the child welfare system, but cutting critical financial support to adoptive families would reduce the number that are able to step forward to offer a permanent home for waiting children. This incident, coupled with our nation's growing financial crisis, only underscores the need to increase support to those families who have taken on the joys and challenges of helping children at risk. Even in the worst of financial times, adoption assistance is money well spent.

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