

## Adoption down, abandonment up

FARANAAZ PARKER | JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA - Jul 02 2009 09:00

There has been a steep decline in the number of people who have applied to adopt children and to offer themselves as foster parents. In the same period cases of child abandonment and neglect have increased.

Johannesburg Child Welfare says it has seen a 40% drop in the number of families who have come forward as potential adopters since 2007. "We don't have enough families for the children waiting," says Pam Wilson, supervisor of its adoption team.

The organisation believes the economic climate could have something to do with the drop in interest around adoption. "Since last year people are worrying more about job security and about taking on extra responsibilities," says Wilson.

The Department of Social Development records that 2 560 children were adopted in the year ending March 2007. The following year 2 058 were adopted. This year the number is down to 1 851.

Pretoria-based AFM Abba Adoptions says the number of people applying for adoption in their black and inter-race programmes had almost halved in the past year. At the same time the organisation saw an increase in the number of children abandoned by their parents.

René Ferreira, programme manager at the organisation's head office, says some mothers just cannot afford to raise their children. "Some choose parenting, but are later forced to look at adoption as an option because they can't afford to care for the baby and don't have support from family."

"It's a terribly desperate act to leave your child," says Sue Krawitz, director of the Impilo adoption agency, who believes the lack of support for migrant workers and refugees is not helping matters. "They [mothers] come to live and work here and they can't cope so the child gets removed or they leave the child in the hospital," she says.

Child Welfare South Africa says it is seeing more commercial sexual exploitation of children and also more "situational neglect", such as malnourishment or poor school attendance. Megan Breide, the organisation's senior manager responsible for child protection, says many parents want to care for their children, but are simply unable to do so adequately.

Door of Hope, a ministry that receives abandoned and neglected children in Johannesburg, has noticed a similar trend -- the number of children it accepts increased from four a month in 2004 to 12 a month this year.

"Mothers just can't afford to keep their babies. We've seen mothers bringing in older children aged between one and three, rather than just babies, and we've also seen a lot of premature babies," says Kate Allen, director of Door of Hope. Allen believes the increase in premature babies is because of poor maternal nutrition, linked to poverty.

Zanele Mngadi, a spokesperson for the Department of Social Development, says it is hard to know whether the economic climate has anything to do with the increase in abandonments. "If that is true it is unfortunate, especially because government has the social relief of the distress grant of up to R1 030 to help families. We invite families facing financial difficulties to apply for assistance."

Welfare workers agree that more children need to be cared for in environments where they have a sense of security and belonging. The problem, some say, is that the country does not have a "culture of adoption". Krawitz believes the state should be doing more to encourage adoption and fostering.

The Department of Social Development says it is developing a strategy to address the decrease in adoptions. According to Mngadi, the department will hold a workshop with stakeholders next month to take the process further. "We are also doing a study to establish the attitudes and barriers regarding adoptions. The findings of this research study will be incorporated in the strategy that is to be developed and implemented," she says.

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