

Labor Policy

by John Dermot Woods

It may be surprising, but court records indicate that two years ago there were twenty-eight separate cases of proven human slavery in the city of Baltimore, and, a colleague of mine assured me, that close study of social services records would reveal at least as many more cases that were dismissed or improperly investigated. He said that at least half of these questionable cases, most involving the adoption of adolescent children by distant (and not-so-distant) relatives, could be revealed as cases of human slavery, but only if social services ignored the stringent rules set by the city to justify unannounced home visits, which are time intensive, and often dangerous, operations. Documented accounts of neighbors and witnesses detail screaming children kept home on weekdays, forced to work on what can only be described as suspicious mail-order businesses. Some suspects are even accused of serially adopting unwanted children to establish a full unpaid labor force. Complaints are made in many cases, but there must be a certain number lodged to justify an investigation, and files are closed after a certain time has passed, which, in turn, causes the complaint count to be reset to zero. These files, after several years, become public record, but, my friend noted, that they often disappear mysteriously when new complaints are lodged against a household that was reported in the past. Officials say that this policy is in place as an austerity measure. If they investigated claims of human slavery that were registered once, twice, or even three times, then they would need to hire dozens more detectives, an unthinkable cost. Even though it would most likely afford more than one hundred city residents their basic human freedoms, they would surely be angry and emotionally damaged, putting an incalculable strain on the city's counseling services and penal system. The City Council supports this policy and, by necessity, ranks human slavery very low on the list of the city's woes.

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