

baby trade

Many adoption agencies still price children on the basis of race — and even they know it's wrong

BY DUSTY RHODES

What price would you put on the smile of a child? How much would you pay for the pitter-patter of little feet? What about the singular sensation of a baby instinctively squeezing your finger or the exquisite pleasure of a newborn nuzzling sleepily into your neck — what are those warm fuzzies worth, exactly, in real cash dollars and cents?

Luckily, most folks never have to calculate the cost, because they conceive children the fun, free way. But couples who can't, or anyone seeking to adopt a baby, will probably run into this barbaric math problem: How much are you willing to pay for a child?

Further complicating that question is race. No matter how fervently Americans vow that all men are created equal, the adoption industry seems to suggest otherwise. Many well-established, respected, licensed agencies openly charge significantly higher fees for white infants than for children of any other race, making African-American babies, available at a fraction of the fees charged for the adoption of white babies.

Illinois' largest infant-adoption agency, the Cradle, charges \$9,200 to handle the placement of an African-American infant but \$25,000 for the adoption of a white baby. Another prominent Illinois agency, Sunny Ridge Family Center, based in Wheaton, charges \$7,250 for an African-American newborn and \$19,750 for a white child.

American Adoptions, based in Overland Park, Kan., with licenses in five other states, has an online application form that requires prospective parents to choose either an "agency-assisted" adoption, for \$12,000 to \$19,000, or a "traditional" adoption, for \$20,000 to \$35,000. The "traditional" program is defined as "all non-African-American healthy newborns and infants," while the cheaper program is for "African-American (or any race combined with African-American heritage) healthy newborns and infants."

The Web site of Heaven Sent Adoption Services, based in Fulton, Mich., features Bible verses and pictures of Jesus along with a catalog of birth mothers looking for

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Sunny Ridge Family Center in Wheaton, Ill., charges \$7,250 to place an African-American infant and nearly \$20,000 for a white baby. “It has nothing to do with the value of the child!” says Becky MacDougall, Sunny Ridge’s director of domestic adoption.

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adoptive families. The fees vary by situation, but most of the African-American babies listed fall into the \$6,500 to \$14,000 range, with white babies listed at \$15,000 to \$27,000.

Because agencies aren’t required to publish their fee structures, it’s hard to know how many agencies factor race into their fees. But anecdotal evidence shows that it’s common and accepted practice.

Beth Hall, executive director of Pact, An Adoption Alliance, an Oakland, Calif.-based organization known nationwide for facilitating minority-infant placements, frequently gets calls from agencies looking for families ready to adopt African-American newborns. She estimates that only about 25 percent of these agencies have explicit policies stating different prices for children of different races.

However, she says, even agencies that don’t have such a blatant policy often have a casual tradition of discounting fees for black babies. Overall, Hall estimates that as many as half of all adoption agencies and attorneys base their fees on the race of the child.

One agency that has discontinued this system is Dallas-based Buckner Adoption and Maternity Services. In 2000, executive director Adela Jones approached Buckner’s board to suggest abolishing race-based fees.

“It just bothered me and bothered me,” she says. “It seemed to me that these children were considered blue-light specials, and I just couldn’t stand that. I just thought it was so denigrating.”

She convinced the board to make fees dependent on the adoptive family’s income — a system that she says has proved successful.

Still, she understands why other agencies think a discount is necessary: “It’s just hard to find couples who will accept African-American

children,” she says.

Not only is there a shortage of African-American couples applying to adopt (a problem Pact’s Beth Hall blames on the adoption industry itself), but there’s also the fact that most white couples prefer white babies.

Transracial adoption is still a new and controversial idea. Even though white couples have been applying to adopt black children of various ages since the 1970s, the National Association of Black Social Workers lobbied against the practice. Finally, the number of black youngsters languishing in the child-welfare system simply because their white foster parents weren’t allowed to adopt them became so embarrassing that Congress passed the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, known as MEPA, declaring that race could no longer be used as a reason to deny or delay placement of a child in a qualified home.

“It seemed to me that these children were considered blue-light specials, and I just couldn’t stand that.”

MEPA was signed into law in 1994. That’s right: As recently as 10 years ago, race could determine which children a family could adopt. In 1996, Congress passed a set of amendments called the Interethnic Adoption Provisions, or IEPA, to state more clearly that “discrimination is not to be tolerated” and to strengthen MEPA’s compliance and enforcement procedures.

Current Situations:

All fees listed include Heaven Sent fee, are approximate and could change as needed by the agency or attorney. Finalization is usually included also unless otherwise stated. All pregnancies are drug free unless otherwise stated.

The entries in red are changes or additions to the situation.

(YORH) Young Florida mother looking for a semi open adoption plan with a Christian two parent family for her Biracial baby girl due 2/24/05. Estimated fees are \$15,000.00

(BEGV) Indiana mother of two currently is looking for an open adoption with a family where one parent is Black American for her male child due 3/17/05. Estimated fees are \$7,000.00

(JAZM) Black American baby girl due in Florida on April 14th. Mom is looking for semi open adoption with a traditional Christian family. Father of Baby is diagnosed with Schizophrenia and is very musically talented. Estimated fees are \$10,000.00.

(VENM) Caucasian baby boy due July 25th in Florida. Mother does not know father or how to locate. Publication will be needed. Mother is diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She has 5 other children and is parenting 1 of them. Estimated fees are \$20,000.00 with half due at match.

(JAMA) Black American baby boy due in KS on 2/28. Mom is looking for a open adoption with contact and letters and photos. Estimated fees \$12,500.00

The Web site of Heaven Sent Adoption Services — www.heavensentadopt.com — lists children available for adoption, including race, a brief family history, and estimated fees. This week, for example, a black baby girl with a schizophrenic father was listed for \$10,000, and a white baby boy whose birth mother has bipolar disorder was priced at \$20,000.

Before and after statistics demonstrate the significance of these two Acts: Before MEPA, a 1987 National Health Interview Survey, conducted by the federal government's National Center for Health Statistics, found that only 8 percent of adoptions were transracial and just 1 percent involved the adoption of black children by white moms. In 1998, after IEPA, about 15 percent of the 36,000 adoptions accomplished by the foster-care system were transracial or transcultural, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The new laws also affected private adoption agencies, and suddenly little brown babies found themselves competing against blue-eyed blonds in the adoption market.

And oh what a creative marketplace it is. Adoption laws and regulations vary wildly from state to state. For example, in most states, facilitators (unlicensed matchmakers, typically doctors, priests, neighbors, or friends) aren't allowed to be paid for their services. A few states, though, permit facilitators to charge thousands of dollars per match, which has made facilitation a lucrative profession in these states.

Some states allow adoptive families to underwrite rent, utilities, and even clothing and "personal hygiene" expenses for a pregnant woman in the hope that she will place her child with them. Other states ban any payments to a birth mother except medical costs — after the child has been placed.

Laws regulating how or even whether the birth father is notified also vary from one state to another. Similarly, some states allow birth mothers to sign away parental rights within hours of giving birth; others require a woman to wait several days, thus increasing the chances that she'll change her mind.

To complicate the system further, an agency can move a pregnant woman — temporarily — to a state with more favorable laws. After the baby is born and the birth parents'

rights have been terminated, paperwork resolving all the differences is exchanged between the state where the child was born and the state where the child will live.

Fees are likewise loosely regulated. Even though most agencies are technically nonprofit, many manage to provide handsome salaries for staff. Deedee Anderson, an unpaid consultant to agencies handling "hard-to-place" children, networks from her home in Utah with all sorts of adoption professionals, some of whom drop their charitable veneer.

"I've known directors of 'nonprofit' agencies living in million-dollar homes with three Hummers in the garage. I know one lady on the East Coast who routinely takes trips to Bermuda with her whole family on a week's notice. Now imagine how much that costs. It's despicable," Anderson says.

Most agencies explain their fees as the cost of services — overhead, keeping the lights on, paying staff. But the only real constraint on what they charge is what the market will bear.

Linda Mur, who worked at a nonprofit Pennsylvania adoption agency for a year, says that adoptive families were shown tables itemizing all fees, but that the tolls were necessarily related to costs.

"It was broken out in a way that made it look fee-based, but it was way more arbitrary than they made it sound," she says.

Industrywide, fees seem to shift with the value of the federal adoption-tax credit. This credit, designed to encourage families to adopt, basically works like a coupon adoptive families can apply toward payment of their federal income tax. In 2001, when the adoption-tax credit jumped from \$5,000 to \$10,000, agency fees increased accordingly.

Compare this credit to the fees charged for minority babies — \$9,200 at the Cradle, \$7,500 at Sunny Ridge. Thanks to the tax credit, these little brown bundles of joy come with full rebates.

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PHOTO BY HUGH GRANUM/DETROIT FREE PRESS/ART

It wasn't until 1994 that the federal government said race could no longer be a reason to deny or delay the placement of a child in a qualified home.

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Not all agencies have color-coded fees. Some wouldn't even dream of it.

Jeanne Malone, adoption coordinator for the Springfield diocese of Catholic Charities, finds it difficult to believe that such a system exists.

"Are you saying they charge different fees based on race? That's just wrong!" Malone exclaims. "A healthy baby is a healthy baby, and there's no difference. I have so many people who would just get down and mud-wrestle for any baby from anywhere. That is just insane!"

Illinois Lutheran Child and Family Services adopted a flat \$9,500 rate years ago, says La Nell Hill, statewide director of adoptions. "Back in the 1980s, there may have been a different fee schedule for African-Americans — I'm pretty sure that's the case. But after IEPA went into effect, we decided it probably wasn't legal to do that," Hill says.

The change came as a relief to Hill, who says she never was comfortable charging fees based on race.

"My personal opinion — not policy from the agency but just me — is that it just doesn't feel right to charge one fee for a baby with a particular racial background and another fee for another baby with a different racial background," Hill says.

Shelia Davis, founder of Heaven Sent Adoption Services, freely admits that the adoption industry bases fees on race and says that couples looking to adopt have learned to expect a discounted rate for a black baby. Her agency charges a flat \$6,000 administrative fee for each adoption. But another part of her business involves "networking" for 26 different agencies and attorneys to help find homes for hard-to-place babies — that is, medically fragile or minority infants. Davis' fee for placing these babies is a flat \$1,000 per match, but that's on top of the fee charged by the original agency or attorney, and those fees are based on race.

As a veteran of the adoption industry, Davis justifies this system by saying it's the only way

to find homes for minority children. As the adoptive mom of two white girls and one black boy, though, Davis chokes up as she talks about how "society" has "devalued people based on pigmentation."

Some agencies effectively skirt the issue by "specializing" in minority infants. But even these agencies sometimes charge more for biracial infants than for babies with two African-American birth parents (the Pennsylvania agency where Mur worked is one example).

Again, there's no way to determine what percentage of agencies use this stratified fee structure, but it's common enough that when Margaret Fleming of Chicago launched Adoption-Link Inc., an agency specifically to serve African-American birth mothers, she posted this promise on the agency Web site: "Adoption-Link makes no differentiation in fee among full African-American, biracial, or multiracial children."

Adoption-Link charges a flat fee — "under \$10,000," Fleming says. It was a decision that Fleming — adoptive mom of seven children, four of whom are black — didn't have to ponder for a second.

"The worst thing that can happen to a kid is to have a price put on his head. That's like slavery," she says.

In November, more than 40 adoption professionals from agencies all around Texas gathered in Dallas for a half-day conference on ethics. Split into groups of 10, they were assigned dilemmas to discuss, and one group was given this question: "Is it ethical to charge a lesser fee for an adoptive couple who are open to an African-American or biracial child?"

Adela Jones, who had persuaded Buckner Adoption to stop that practice, discovered that her agency was the only one in the room that didn't differentiate on the basis of race. But all of the others had noble reasons to explain why they did.

"Their argument is that all families' adop-



When Robin Sewell and her husband, Chris, began the adoption process, they were inundated by calls from agencies, seeking to place African-American children. “It broke our hearts, because we couldn’t take every kid,” she says.

tion fees contribute to the agency’s goal of placing children of all colors in a speedy manner,” Jones says. “So in other words, families adopting Caucasian children are subsidizing families adopting African-Americans, and that’s OK, because it’s a form of affirmative action.”

Jennifer Montgomery, director of special projects at the Cradle — an 82-year-old Chicago institution whose list of famous adoptive parents includes Bob Hope, Donna Reed, Al Jolson, and Pearl Buck — says that her agency gets a state subsidy under the “black infant adoption contract” that makes up some of the nearly \$16,000 difference in fees between African-American and white babies.

“I have so many people who would just get down and mud-wrestle for any baby from anywhere.”

But even at agencies that don’t get subsidies, the use of color coding is sometimes viewed uncomfortably as a necessary evil — necessary to attract families willing to adopt African-American babies.

Becky MacDougall, director of domestic adoption and birth-parent services at the Chicago-area agency Sunny Ridge Family Center, says she wishes she knew of a better way to promote adoption of black babies.

“We don’t like that there’s different fees. It’s just a practicality of getting families,” she says. “There’s criticism both ways, even among staff. It’s one of those problems that you wish didn’t exist, but it exists because of our cultural issues.”

She stresses that Sunny Ridge’s fees are for services — “It has nothing to do with the value of the child!” — and notes that the higher fee for white infants includes as much

as \$8,000 in medical expenses, while the lower African-American fee includes no medical expenses because many of these birth mothers are on Medicaid.

And she takes the issue personally. Her husband also works at Sunny Ridge, and one day a few years ago, he heard talk around the office about a birth mom who was requesting a Christian family willing to maintain an open adoption. This birth mother happened to be carrying a biracial infant, but MacDougall says her husband felt “something just gripped his heart.”

Three weeks later, they had a new son. MacDougall says that her family could not have made that spur-of-the-moment decision if the fee for that baby had been the white price.

There’s a popular perception that the hottest commodity in adoption is the “healthy white infant.” That’s may be true, but running a close second is the willing and qualified black couple.

Most domestic adoptions now involve some degree of “openness,” ranging from an exchange of photos and letters to an ongoing, fully identified relationship. At a minimum, though, adoption agencies allow a birth mother to select a family for her child by giving her an assortment of profiles compiled by prospective parents.

Not surprisingly, many African-American birth mothers leaf through these scrapbooks hoping to find faces that are a familiar shade of brown. But nationwide, adoption agencies have trouble attracting black applicants.

Robin Sewell, a California anthropologist who describes herself and her husband as “painfully overeducated,” drops her voice in embarrassment when she describes what happened when she and her African-American husband began the adoption process. They had just registered with Pact, and a social worker had begun the extensive personal-background analy-

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Why Aren't All Adoptions Created Equal?

\$35,000

\$4,000

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sis known as a “home study” that every adoptive parent must have approved.

“Even before our home study was done, we had a number of calls. It was clear that we were, well, *in demand*,” she whispers, “and it broke our hearts, because we couldn’t take every kid.”

They eventually adopted a black baby girl from Illinois. And even though they could “pass” as a biologically related family, Sewell often finds herself announcing that her daughter is adopted as a way of encouraging other African-Americans to consider adoption.

“I try to talk to as many folks as possible and let them know that there’s a need for black families,” she says.

Agencies are trying all sorts of methods to recruit black families. Sunny Ridge hired an African-American social worker and sent her out to make presentations at minority churches and businesses. At the Cradle, NFL Hall of Famer Gale Sayers and his wife, Ardythe, lent their names to the African-American adoption program, earning the agency a nice feature story in *Ebony* magazine. Jennifer Montgomery says that the Cradle is also working with Chicagoland megachurches to recruit more minority families.

Pact director Beth Hall blames the adoption industry for not tackling this problem sooner.

“The adoption community has done an abysmal job of recruiting black families,” she says. “They bemoan that those families aren’t out there, but they are. We just need to do a better job of recruiting.”

African-Americans already adopt at twice the rate at which whites do — 4 percent instead of 2 percent, Hall says. At Pact — a facilitation organization focused exclusively on minority babies, with fees based solely on income — two of every three babies are placed with adoptive parents of their own race.

For now, though, most minority babies placed through private adoptions will end up with white parents — some of whom opted for a black or biracial child simply because of the lower fee and the shorter waiting period. It’s up to agencies to try to educate these adoptive parents about the unique challenges that come with raising a kid of a different color.

Pact puts potential parents through a rigorous screening that includes a written self-assessment and an in-depth interview. Sunny Ridge uses Pact literature and requires prospective parents to attend a series of three meetings with a panel of adoptees reared in transracial homes. The Cradle requires prospective parents to take

several courses, including one called Conspicuous Families (available online at adoption-learningpartners.org).

“Just going to Kwanzaa fest doesn’t do it,” says Sunny Ridge’s Becky MacDougall, adoptive mom to a biracial son. “You have to become a multiracial family. You have to bring people of color into your life.”



Ken Hutcherson (left), pastor of Antioch Bible Church in Seattle, was outraged that adoption fees varied on the basis of race. His church started an “adoption ministry” and launched an advertising campaign to shed light on the practice.

Ken Hutcherson isn’t so worried about color coordination. As a black man married to “the whitest woman on the face of the earth — a blond, blue-eyed *fraulein*” — he likes to joke that he’s the father of “four German-chocolate children.”

He is, however, outraged by the price tags pinned to babies by adoption agencies. Five years ago, Hutcherson launched a series of billboards in metropolitan Seattle using photos of

“Whites have been in control for so long, they can be discriminated against and think it’s a privilege.”

babies — black, brown, and white — asking this question: “Why Aren’t All Adoptions Created Equal?” Above each baby was a dollar amount: \$4,000 for the black infant, \$10,000 for the brown one, and \$35,000 for the classic Gerber model.

“These billboards caused so much unrest. And you know who the most angry people were? Adoptive parents,” Hutcherson says, “especially adoptive mothers. They said I was making it look like they paid different prices for their kids. I said, ‘Well, you did!’”

A former linebacker for the Seattle Seahawks, Hutcherson is now the pastor of Antioch Bible Church, where the congregation is racially diverse and 4,000 members strong. He and his church have been working to reform adoption for 15 years. The billboards are just the flashiest part of his campaign.

For the past 10 years, his church has hosted an “adoption ministry” that provides adoptions for free. Home studies and other legal work are

provided at no cost to the adoptive family. So far, the program has produced about 100 adoptions. Hutcherson also commissioned lawyers to draft Senate Bill 6457 outlawing race-based fees. It’s pending before the Washington state Legislature now, and Hutcherson dreams of taking similar legislation to the U.S. Congress.

He is also lobbying for the establishment of an adoption-oversight office in each state. In Washington, he’s been told, “Not now — we’re trying to cut the budget.” So during a meeting with a group of legislators, Hutcherson offered to staff an oversight office for free.

“I said, ‘You don’t have to pay me — just give me the teeth to fire people that’s breaking the law, and I’ll do it for free,’” he says. The legislators responded by closing the meeting.

“They don’t know what to do with an African-American complaining that white [adoptive parents] are being discriminated against. Whites have been in control for so long, they can be discriminated against and think it’s a privilege,” he says.

Hutcherson is not the only success story. At Buckner in Dallas, Adela Jones found that removing the discount for black babies did not have the predicted consequence of discouraging black families from applying. In fact, Jones says, of five African-American babies placed in the past 18 months, four went to black families who paid the full fee. The fifth went to a family whose household income was low enough to qualify for a discount — a preacher and a stay-at-home mom — and that family happened to be white.

But aside from her ethics conference and Hutcherson’s billboards, this topic isn’t getting much discussion.

“I think on some level there’s embarrassment,” Jones says. “There’s a school of thought that says money should never be part of placing children.” ■