

BIG CITY

Lean Times, but No Rise in Adoptions

By [SUSAN DOMINUS](#)

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Just over a year ago, when the economy first took a nose dive, snatching the stability of countless families with it, the people who run [Spence-Chapin Adoption Services](#), a New York-based adoption agency, prepared themselves for an influx of pregnant women seeking their help.

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They were fully aware that finances were not the only reason women placed their children with adoptive families, but they knew that it was a big one, and so it seemed likely that widespread job losses might influence some women's thinking about their future. Had their own financing not been so tight, recalled Helene Lauffer, associate executive director at Spence-Chapin, she might even have fought to hire another person to handle the anticipated uptick.

But that uptick, so logical, so seemingly inevitable, never came to pass. "We're somewhat surprised," she said. "But the numbers haven't gone up."

If anything, Ms. Lauffer said, even fewer pregnant women have sought the agency's services this year. For domestic adoptions, the agency works with only as many adoptive families as it thinks it can help within a reasonable time frame, and she is finding that prospective parents have been forced to wait longer than usual just to begin the process.

At [Friends in Adoption](#), a Vermont-based agency that works mostly with would-be adoptive families from New York, various board members predicted that the economy would increase the availability of babies. Dawn Smith-Pliner, who founded the agency in 1982, told them they were wrong. She was right. The number of placements made by Friends in Adoption has been on the low end of average.

“It’s like the longest pregnancy ever,” said Lynne Berman, a Friends client who lives in New Jersey and has been waiting for more than two years. “You set these ultimatums. You think, ‘This will be the last Mother’s Day, or the last Thanksgiving.’ But then another one rolls around.”

Ms. Smith-Pliner said the slight reduction in adoptions was consistent with other recessions over the past 30 years. And to some degree, the trend seems consistent with the pairing of poverty, generally speaking, and high birth rates. The dampening of a certain kind of hope can drive a fervor for motherhood.

“I think if some of these pregnant women felt their lives could be improved upon by being able to get on their feet and do well by themselves,” Ms. Smith-Pliner explained, “and have the baby they placed be proud of what they’d been able to accomplish, then it’s a different decision. It’s a difficult decision, but something about it might feel good.”

“But if the achievable goal, a half-decent job, isn’t an option to work toward, then I might as well keep the baby — that’s tangible,” she continued. “You wake up every morning and there’s that beautiful baby.”

Although Ms. Lauffer did not rule out Ms. Smith-Pliner’s theory, she imagined the possibility of broader factors at work. With every passing year, she pointed out, single motherhood grows more socially acceptable; the declining numbers at Spence-Chapin, she further allowed, could be a matter of a changing marketplace.

“More and more people are connecting on the Internet, and, in some of those situations, people who are looking to adopt are offering to pay expenses for birth mothers in fuller ways than a nonprofit agency could do,” she said. “There may be an increase in women looking at those options in this economic time.”

Spence-Chapin, Friends and [Bethany Christian Services](#), an agency that places 600 to 700 children a year, all said that the number of parents seeking to adopt had held steady.

“Even though the economic difficulty is there, family takes on an incredible definition, more than before,” said Cindi Fabozzi, director of Bethany Christian’s

office in Clifton Park, N.Y. “I hear families talking about how they want more than the big-screen TV, how they want to invest in family.”

Those who work in the industry ultimately shrug their shoulders at trying to understand the fluctuations in supply and demand of such a personal transaction. “It’s basically a mystery to most of us who work in adoption, and we’re used to that,” Ms. Lauffer said.

And in a way, even that make sense: If the market apparently cannot be counted on to follow rational market dynamics, certainly families, the messiest, most emotionally driven, desperately desired units of human interaction, can’t either.