

Baltimore enacts law fining parents whose children violate curfew

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On Friday, Baltimore, Maryland city officials enacted a law that will allow children under the age of 14 caught outside during the hours of 9:00 pm through 6:00 am to be detained and held by police until a parent or guardian can claim them.

Though authorities said that the children would not be handcuffed or put under arrest, parents of frequently unaccompanied children will be forced to pay a fine of up to \$500. In order to house the youth, city officials have retooled two formerly-shuttered recreational centers to be kept open at night and staffed by police officers.

The law is an extension of a former statute that forbid all children 16 and below from being in public places after midnight. While eliminating the provision that allowed for imprisoning parents of the frequently unaccompanied, the new law significantly raises the possible fine that can be levied. It also considerably lengthens the period during the school day in which youth cannot be unaccompanied in public by an adult. Children between 14 and 16 must be inside by 10:00 pm on weekdays and 11:00 pm on weekends or during the summer.

The law was enacted after a spate of gun violence that has claimed the lives of a number of youth in the city. Though overall crime in Baltimore has declined by ten percent since the beginning of 2014 and shootings have gone down by 20 percent, city authorities have pressed ahead with the draconian law, which is the strictest curfew statute in the US.

“This isn't a jail. This is a safe, youth-friendly environment, potentially a lot safer than where they might otherwise be late at night, like in front of a liquor store,” declared Kevin Harris, a spokesman for Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. Harris and Rawlings-Blake have defended the new law on the

grounds that it will help to protect children in need.

Civil liberties advocates have expressed concern at the curfews' enactment. “What these laws do is give the ability to officers to stop any young-looking person who is outside at a certain time and ask what they're doing, ask for identification. It affects not only those who are explicitly covered by the curfew, but reaches older adolescents and young people as well,” said Sonia Kumar of the Maryland ACLU. Kumar also expressed a “real fear” that the imposition of such a law would “devolve into stop-and-frisk for kids, or worse.”

Kumar also raised concerns about police reactions to minors who attempted to run from them after being confronted.

Ingrid Lofgren, an attorney for the Homeless Persons Representation Project, warned about the fate of the nearly 2,400 homeless youth the city. “I'm really concerned that this is going to push them farther into the shadows. They're already very hard for us to connect with, and a threat of increased police contact will make them even harder to find,” she said.

There are also concerns that the conditions at the holding centers in which youth will be kept will be inadequate. With inadequate staffing, children may be mass warehoused at the facilities without recourse to adequate supervision or care, nominally the reason for the law itself.

The imposition of such draconian legislation—in effect criminalizing youth out past dark and fining families unable to provide supervision—comes amid a deepening social crisis, with the ruling class and political establishment responding by ramping up the police presence in ravaged neighborhoods and attacking basic democratic rights.

Rawlings-Blake's feigned concern for the fate of the

city's children is exposed by the continued gutting of social programs. In 2012, Rawlings-Blake enacted cuts of over \$6 million to city afterschool and summer programs. The cuts included funding to youth recreational centers. Nearly half of these centers have been closed, while others have been turned over to private operators.

The state government has also implemented a wave of cuts, with Democratic Governor Martin O'Malley slashing over \$1 billion from the state's budget since assuming office in 2007. These cuts have come as the state has built up a considerable surplus in its coffers.



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