

Babies Are Not Born as Criminals: Factors Are Parenting, Education, Location

When a baby arrives onto its mother's chest, it arrives with built in survival mechanisms but undetermined social ones. The brain starts its social development with societal inputs from a plethora of messages starting with the mother. From that point on the inputs arrive from all social, and physical, contacts. The brain is continually learning and adapting. What those inputs are and how and when and to what extent they arrive are determining factors in what attributes the child has taken in by the time of becoming a supposedly responsible adult.

The influences on the baby start pre-birth and include those experienced by the mother, social choices made by the mother such as alcohol, drug use and variety and type of diet plus environmental exposures. Some influences are choices made by the mother while others may be advertently or inadvertently experienced. Unfortunately, not all the exposures experienced by the fetus are controllable either by the mother or those affecting her. So, irrespective of any attributes of parenting and education, the final adult product is not totally controllable or able to be programmed.

Also, not all mothers have the necessary skills or information to be a positive influence on the baby both pre- and post-birth. To be considered is that all mothers are not equally prepared for good parenting and, unfortunately, often unmotivated. For such mothers, the following statement is voiced and likely to be repeated: a mother cannot give a child that which she does not herself possess. How many times has someone not lamented "if that child was properly raised etc.?" If the mother lacks the proper attributes for that imperative, how can a societally responsible adult be produced? A non-socially equipped mother cannot provide a proper social environment to a child. Again, a mother cannot give a child that which she does not herself have. So, the obvious question is how to provide these skills not only to those deficient in them but equally to all mothers.

The corollary question is how to identify and reach those mothers.

The mothers being identified here would be pregnant woman, and the earlier in their pregnancies they are identified the better. Those women with a caregiver or provider or with a care center are easily reachable. Not all women are signed up with either a physician or care center, so outreach programs are necessary to go out into the community actively seeking and literally stopping these women in the street to talk to them.

This was done by an outstanding educator named Geoffrey Canada. In circa 2008, he and his staff went out into the streets in a 24-block zone in the Harlem section of New York searching for pregnant young women to enroll in a workshop he initiated called Baby College. (Over time, the Zone would grow to 97 blocks.) In this 'college' they would learn how middle-class parents seemed to become successful parents through activities such as reading to their young children, teaching them to observe and think, stimulating them, and using distraction and negotiation in lieu of resorting to beating as a preferred method of discipline.

The next requirement is that these facilities, other than offering parenting skills, can offer the kind of help and knowledgeable expertise necessary. Basically, as well as medical care, what is needed are parenting programs, but parenting programs able to fill the disparities in each pregnant woman's abilities.

Once an area in need of a parenting program can be established, the next hurdle is adequate funding. No matter what the funding needs are, it is important to realize that inadequate or not funding in the long haul, turns out to be more expensive.

Unfortunately, that argument too often falls on deaf ears as political decision maker funders, normally those elected to legislatures are called upon to raise taxes to fund these programs. Then there are the taxpayers who not only resist the raising of taxes but consist of the voting public whose children are generally those not at risk And, those at risk, generally do not vote.

Next is the extent of who is at risk and the research shows that low-income mothers take the brunt. A recent Massachusetts study by the 'Special Legislative Early Education and Care Economic Review Commission' showed that in Massachusetts, with a population of over 6 million, there are nearly 950,000 children ages 0-12. Over half of these children (63%) live in households with incomes below the state median income (SMI) (\$131,252 annual income for a family of four), which is roughly 500% of the federal poverty level. Approximately 475,000 children live in households with incomes below 85% of SMI (\$111,564 for family of four) and about 279,000 children live in households with incomes at or below 50% of SMI (\$65,626 annual income for a family of four). A substantial majority, over 75%, of children live in households with adults who work full-time. It is evident that low-income families with both parents working have less time for their children and are at higher risk. As the report notes, 'As the Commonwealth works to create an equitable K-12 education system that prepares every child for career and adult success, investing in the first years of children's development is critical'.

So, we have gone from the need to identify and reach all compromised pregnant women to the need for programs to deal with their lack of parenting skills to the need for educational programs for their young children.

When addressing educational programs, the quality of the education a child receives from birth to age five is imperative, with that from birth to age three being critical. To point out how critical this period is for the developing child, the work of an extraordinary researcher and her team are now referred to.

In 2011, this extraordinary researcher, Terrie Moffitt, and her team published 'A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety'. Those interested in this fascinating study, please read the original study.

What Moffitt and her team did was to study a cohort of over 1000 children in

Dunedin, New Zealand from birth to age three and then periodically to age 11. They later, at age 32, were then able to locate and study most of the cohort. They were able to follow this group at this age as people in Dunedin either remain there or elsewhere in New Zealand with some moving to Australia. Thus, they were relatively easy to locate and to further follow.

The title of the study implies there were many areas of study, but my focus is on the parts dealing with crime and the development, or lack thereof, with the critical variable being whether the child developed, or more importantly, did not develop self-control.

My focus here is the effect of the development on self-control as a predictor of adult crime. As for predicting crime, Moffitt and her team obtained records of study members' court convictions at all courts in New Zealand and Australia by searching the central computer systems of the New Zealand Police. Moffitt and her team found that 24% of the study members had been convicted of a crime by the age of 32 y with the critical variable being self-control. Children with poor self-control were more likely to be convicted of a criminal offense, even after accounting for social class origins and IQ. Beyond this, they wrote about a "Self-Control Gradient" in which they write that 'We observed a self-control gradient in which boys and girls with less self-control had worse health, less wealth, and more crime as adults than those with more self-control at every level of the distribution of self-control'.

Their further extraordinary finding was that 'Moreover, those children who became more self-controlled from childhood to young adulthood had better outcomes by the age of 32 y, even after controlling for their initial levels of childhood self-control. As a caveat, it is not clear that natural history changes of the sort we observed in our longitudinal study is equivalent to intervention-induced change. Nevertheless, these suggestive findings should stimulate consideration of interventions to raise self-control'.

In answer to what makes a criminal, Moffitt questions as to whether there is such a thing as 'a criminal mind', and whether adolescent delinquency forecasts a life of crime. Now, after decades of trying to answer these questions, she provides some answers to interviewer Dan Jones in the July 11, 2020, edition of New Scientist. Here she responds to Jones on the question 'Are some people destined for a life of crime? No. People will turn out just fine if, and that is a big if, they have good parents who provide warm, sensitive, stimulating parenting and lots of consistent, loving discipline, plus the necessary resources for child development, such as nutritious food and encouragement at school. But great childhoods can be in short supply. Deprivation, abuse, and neglect allow a child's own personal vulnerability to grow into antisocial and criminal behavior'.

Now returning to my original premise that Babies Are Not Born as Criminals, and now focusing on education, the question now is how this relates to the education system in not only American society but in so many other societies.

To close existing opportunity gaps in the any education system, it is important to maximize investments in the early learning environments in which children spend extensive time prior to regular school entry. Research documents the relationship between preschool quality and elementary school performance, including reading comprehension, word recognition, and vocabulary development.

Access to reliable high-quality early education and quality childcare are strong drivers of a healthy economy. A recent multi-state analysis finds an average annual loss of \$1 billion per state in economic activity due to early education and care challenges. Adding to the burden, the recent Covid-19 pandemic, mothers have disproportionately scaled back their hours or left the labor force to care for their children during the pandemic.

Low-income families and families of minorities have been disproportionately negatively impacted by the pandemic. These groups are less likely to be able to afford

high-quality early education and care expenses and are more likely to have used programs that closed during to the pandemic.

As for education systems, unfortunately, there are great disparities in education systems offered worldwide and the quality of any education system depends on the amount of money spent on it and the demands quantifying it made by a parent. Parents want the best possible education for their children, but they want it at the lowest possible price. Beyond that they care mostly about only their children and want the optimum performance level of the education system to start based on their child's abilities. Education systems are reliant upon funding from taxation, either centrally or locally raised. Those funded centrally, a sort of single-payer system, are more able to equally spread resources as opposed to locally taxed systems which are more likely to produce inequities. Other quality factors are dependent upon the esteem with which teachers are held in a society and how much money a society is willing to remunerate its teachers.

For example, Singapore is noted as having one of, if not the best education system in the world. Why is that? Singapore funds its education system centrally and thus, resources tend to be distributed equitably. Singapore also pays its teachers very well and is thus able to attract people to the profession and thus candidates for positions come from the upper one-third of university graduating classes and are further vetted from that pool. Further, teachers are held in high esteem in Singapore.

Next, look at the United States in general and Massachusetts in particular. In the United States, with notable exceptions teacher applicants derive from the lowest one-third of university graduates, are not well-paid, and are not generally held in high esteem. Their salaries rely on the funding of their education system from taxes based upon real estate values in their community and are often subject to the political and social biases of their controlling school boards. As an example, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is rated as having the highest education level in the United States;

however, within the state there are varying qualities of education systems based upon the overall wealth of the community. High real estate values produce higher tax collection and thus more money to spend per pupil. The average amount spent per pupil in Massachusetts is \$17,068. In a very high per capita income town like Wellesley, that amount is \$24,084 whereas in a working-class community like Lynn, the expenditure is only \$14,917. It is noted that additional funding to systems in Massachusetts comes from state and federal funds, however, the majority are locally funded. It is not difficult to envision that the quality of these two systems is not equal and the education attainment levels attained by their students is markedly different. As with most things in life, the quality of what you get depends upon how much you are willing to pay.

The bottom line is that unless time, effort and money is allocated toward quality parenting programs and fully funded education systems and especially for early education, we will continue to bear the burden of seeing babies growing up and defaulting to criminal behaviors.

Once again referring to the observation that Babies Are Not Born as Criminals, I now refer to the research findings of Raj Chetty and his colleagues at Harvard University. They were able to trace the roots of today's affluence and poverty back to the neighborhoods where people grew up. Therefore, as well as proper parenting and quality education, the simple fact is that the neighborhood environment in which a child grows up is equally important in determining the successful outcome of a person's life. In their 2020 research summary, *The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility*, Chetty and co-authors John Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie Jones, and Sonya Porter reported that "on average, moving within one's metro area from a below-average to above-average neighborhood in terms of upward mobility would increase the lifetime earnings of a child growing up in a low-income family by \$200,000."

Formerly, most Americans could expect that upon reaching adulthood they would

earn more than their parent; however, that progression no longer exists, mostly because economic growth has become skewed toward top earners. A question then presents itself on how to skew the curve to favor the low earners. And how to produce an environment favorable to higher paying jobs.

In a comparison between Atlanta and Minneapolis, Chetty and his colleagues found a great disparity between income levels of people growing up in these two communities. By analyzing census and tax data, they found that children who grew up in low- and middle-income families in Atlanta had low levels of income as adults, one of the lowest rates in the country while Minneapolis had relatively low job growth during that time but some of the highest levels of income for adults who grew up there. The reason for the disparity is that according to Chetty, “cities like Atlanta import talent while cities like Minneapolis cultivate it”.

Chetty notes that “people who grow up in places with excellent schools and strong communities can prosper even if there’s unremarkable job growth”. He adds that “programs from education and job training to housing and health can have tremendous impacts on people’s long-run outcomes, and concerted investment at the community level is necessary for addressing the consequences of decades of disinvestment and other harmful policies”. In addition, if people are willing to do so it is important to recognize the role of residential segregation and to “explore how we can help more low-income families access better neighborhoods”.

Many barriers to relocation of families exist and Chetty’s group wanted to see what would happen if some of those barriers were removed. In 2018 they partnered with the Seattle and King County housing authorities to pilot a randomized intervention program. In this program, “a thousand families came to the housing authority to apply for vouchers through the normal process. Half of them, however, got additional support including assistance with the housing search, connections to landlords, and a small amount of short-term financial assistance”. Chetty notes that, “We ended up finding that,

when we provided additional support to families—pointed out to them where the high opportunity neighborhoods were in Seattle and gave them assistance to transition to these places—it dramatically shifted where they chose to move.”

For the group that didn’t receive the additional assistance, only 15 percent of families moved to high opportunity areas. However, the number jumped to 55 percent for those receiving the additional support. For the half that moved to better housing places, Chetty estimates this group will go on “to earn about \$200,000 more over their lifetimes”.

Research by Dr. Stefanie DeLuca, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University worked with families to understand how the program worked. Her data suggested that “the reason the program was so successful in helping families move was not primarily the financial incentives or information about opportunity areas—it was the emotional support and communication strategies employed so effectively by program staff”.

Based upon the results of the Seattle pilot, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is providing funding to replicate the Seattle program in nine other cities across the United States. Due to the promising results and as an example of bipartisanship, Democrats and Republicans are supporting a bill to expand the housing voucher program by an additional \$5 billion per year to provide the kind of support offered. Chetty finally notes that “If you can take \$20 billion, and, “by providing a little bit of additional support, you can make those dollars far more effective in achieving the goals of breaking the cycle of poverty, Republican or Democrat, that sounds like a good idea.”

In the Scientist Spotlight section of an American Psychological Association Publication, Terrie Moffitt noted “More than ever before, every child must grow up to be productive, physically healthy, and mentally healthy—and sustain that for 100 years”. We now know what is necessary to achieve those goals but in order to achieve

them we must provide the will and the funding necessary to make that a reality for every child. This is not rocket science, this is not pie in the sky suppositions by academics, these goals and what is necessary to obtain them are based upon real world results. This is a no-brainer!

I would now like to highlight the three main protagonists highlighted by me, Geoffrey Canada, Dr. Terrie Moffitt and her collegial husband, Dr. Avshalom Caspi and Dr. Raj Chetty.

Geoffrey Canada is an African American. Canada was born in the South Bronx part of New York City in 1952. His mother was a substance abuse counselor whose marriage ended in 1956; he was raised by his mother. His father did not contribute to their financial support. Canada was raised among “abandoned houses, crime, violence and an all-encompassing sense of chaos and disorder”. Aided by scholarships, he attended Bowdoin College (B.A.) and Harvard University (MEd).

Terrie E. Moffitt was born in Nuremberg, Germany in 1955 and holds both American and British citizenship. She grew up in North Carolina, United States, and attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (BA), the University of Southern California (MA and PhD). Avshalom Caspi was born in Israel in 1960 and is an Israeli-American citizen. Caspi graduated from University of California, Santa Cruz (B.A) and attended Cornell University (MA and PhD). They are married, having met in 1987.

Raj Chetty, Nadarajan “Raj” Chetty was born in 1979 in New Delhi, India and lived there until the age of nine. His family immigrated to the United States in 1988 and both parents subsequently had successful academic careers here. He received his BA, AM and PhD from Harvard University.

In reviewing the background of these amazing people, many hallmarks are to be noted. First, the only one born in the United States is Canada and he is African American. Moffitt was born in Germany, her husband, Caspi, in Israel and Chetty in

India. Here are a group of people who have made outstanding contributions in making life better for all people here, too many of whom not only would seek to prevent them from ever entering the United States but exhibit animosity and even hatred of them and who they represent.

It is worth ruminating and dwelling on this as to question the basic motivations of people who benefit from the achievements of these individuals but to also note that these remarkable individuals do exist and due to their intelligence and basic humanity and their strive for excellence benefit even those who would try to destroy them.

As William Shakespeare noted in a line from *A Midsummer Nights Dream* spoken by the mischievous fairy Puck, where Puck is addressing his king. Puck is commenting on the folly of the human beings who have come into his forest and says, Lord, what fools these mortals be! Using today's vernacular, Shakespeare might have used a word other than fools.