

RICH BARLOW | SPIRITUAL LIFE

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## Religious upbringing found to aid children

By Rich Barlow | October 13, 2007

A new statistical study indicates that religious participation by disadvantaged parents correlates to some advantages for their children later in life.

The authors carried out a series of complex statistical functions that cross-referenced dozens of different elements of lifestyle, running the gamut from the education level of parents to use of public assistance and outcomes from the children's health to how happy they were.

The numbers were crunched to determine which effects were statistically significant. What they found was that people who started at a disadvantage in childhood often continued to have disadvantages later in life. That wasn't a surprise. But they also found that children from religious families were buffered against some negative outcomes. For instance, disadvantaged children from religious families were less likely to smoke and were more likely to finish high school or seek higher education.

In families in which the mother had not been educated beyond high school, children in nonreligious families were 31 percent less likely to attend college. In the religious families, children were only 16 percent less likely to attend college.

"Having religious parents had a similar effect in reducing the probability of a child growing up to be a smoker," said Erzo F.P. Luttmer, an associate professor of public policy who teaches economics at Harvard's Kennedy School, one of the study's authors.

However, the results were not always positive. For instance, disadvantaged children from religious families did not fare better in income, health, healthcare, or psychological well-being.

"Having such parents did not make a statistically significant reduction in the likelihood that a child would escape poverty by adulthood," he said, but in general "we find way more buffering [against disadvantage] than you would expect by chance."

Luttmer and coauthors Rajeev Dehejia of Tufts University, Thomas DeLeire of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Josh Mitchell, a doctoral student in economics at Harvard, drew their conclusions in "The Role of Religious and Social Organizations in the Lives of Disadvantaged Youth," released in August.

The study was based on a review of the National Survey of Families and Households, conducted by University of Wisconsin demographers, which surveyed 13,000 Americans in 1987-88 and then reinterviewed many of them in 1992-94 and 2001-03.

The researchers looked at families suffering a variety of disadvantages. Some were poor. Others were headed by parents who were members of a minority group or whose education level was high school or below. And other families had children with difficulties ranging from behavioral problems to low parental expectations that they would graduate from college.

They looked at how people who had been children during the 1980s interviews fared when they reached adulthood in such areas as income, educational achievement, health, and psychological well-being.

The effects were somewhat more pronounced among evangelical Protestants than Catholics or mainline Protestants, but the differences were not statistically significant.

Luttmer acknowledged that religious parents might have other attributes that contributed to the study's findings.

Even if religion is the engine of success, it is not clear exactly how or why. Tutoring or financial aid from churches to disadvantaged youth could play a part, he said, or it could also be that religion instills values in children that lead them to make more of their lives.

But the findings ring true to Matt Dunne, a Vermont businessman and former director of AmeriCorps, the poverty-fighting federal agency.

Dunne, who had not read the study, said he was familiar with cases in which the church played a fostering role with children that had positive results for them when they reached adulthood.

"There are a number of instances where I heard from individuals [who'd grown up disadvantaged] who had gone on to be successful, where the pastor of their church or elders of their church became, at times, a surrogate family" during their childhood, he said.

Youths at risk of making self-destructive decisions, such as joining a gang, do so largely because they don't think beyond the immediate future, Dunne said. But most religions point people toward a longer-term view of life.

*Comments, questions and story ideas may be sent to [spiritual@globe.com](mailto:spiritual@globe.com). ■*