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Can Religion Offset the Effects of Child Poverty?

By MELISSA LAFSKY

Dubner and Levitt have written quite a bit about parenting, both in *Freakonomics* and [on this blog](#). In particular, they've focused on what parents can do to help produce "successful" offspring. The key, they've found, is this: be well-educated and successful yourself, and your children are more likely to follow suit.

But what about children from impoverished backgrounds? What steps can poor parents take to counterbalance the effects of poverty?

According to **Rajeev Dehejia**, an economics professor at Tufts University, one answer may be to join a church. Dehejia, along with **Thomas DeLeire**, an economics professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and **Erzo Luttmer** and **Josh Mitchell**, from the Harvard economics department, have written a new working paper called "[The Role of Religious and Social Organizations in the Lives of Disadvantaged Youth](#)." In it, they test the impact of religion on more than 20,000 children raised by "disadvantaged" families, as defined by factors like family income, the parents' levels of education, and "child characteristics including parental assessments of the child." Using the National Survey of Families and Households, they questioned each child on the amount of involvement his or her parent had with a religious organization, then observed the child's outcome 13 to 15 years later, as measured by education, income, and levels of health and psychological well-being.

Their findings are summarized as follows:

Overall, we find strong evidence that youth with religiously active parents are less affected later in life by childhood disadvantage than youth whose parents did not frequently attend religious services. These buffering effects of religious organizations are most pronounced when outcomes are measured by high school graduation or non-smoking and when disadvantage is measured by family resources or maternal education, but we also find buffering effects for a number of other outcome-disadvantage pairs. We generally find much weaker buffering effects for other social organizations.

Of course, a parent's decision to practice a religion may coincide with other traits like self-discipline, community involvement, and mentoring skills, all of which will likely affect a child's upbringing. Not to mention the fact that the authors offer no analysis of whether a parent's including the child in the religion has any effect:

Our data do not allow us to determine to what extent the buffering effects are driven by religious organizations actively intervening in the lives of disadvantaged youth (through tutoring, mentoring, or financial assistance) as opposed to providing the youth with motivation, values, or attitudes that lead to better outcomes.

Still, it appears that, particularly where education and smoking habits are concerned, a parent's heading to a church, synagogue, or mosque might be useful in counteracting the negative effects of child poverty.

Assuming, of course, the parents aren't also stocking their child's bedroom with [copies of Richard Dawkins](#).

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