

The Compassion Gap

MARCH 1, 2014

Nicholas Kristof

SOME readers collectively hissed after I wrote a week ago about the need for early-childhood interventions to broaden opportunity in America. I focused on a 3-year-old boy in West Virginia named Johnny Weethee whose hearing impairment had gone undetected, leading him to suffer speech and development problems that may dog him for the rest of his life. A photo of Johnny and his mom, Truffles Weethee, accompanied the column and readers honed in on Truffles' tattoos and weight.

"You show a photograph of a fat woman with tons of tattoos all over that she paid for," one caller said. "And then we — boohoo — have to worry about the fact that her children aren't cared for properly?"

On Twitter, Amy was more polite: "My heart breaks for Johnny. I have to wonder if the \$\$ mom spent on tattoos could have been put to better use."

"This is typical of the left," Pancho scolded on my Facebook page. "It's not anyone's fault. Responsibility is somebody else's problem."

To me, such outrage at a doting mom based on her appearance suggests the myopic tendency in our country to blame poverty on the poor, to confuse economic difficulties with moral failures, to muddle financial lapses with ethical ones.

There is an income gap in America, but just as important is a compassion gap. Plenty of successful people see a picture of a needy child and their first impulse is not to help but to reproach.

To break cycles of poverty, we have the tools to improve high school graduation rates, reduce teen pregnancies and increase employment. What we lack is the will to do so.

There may be neurological biases at work. A professor at Princeton found that our brains sometimes process images of people who are poor or homeless as if they were not humans but things.

Likewise, psychology experiments suggest that affluence may erode compassion. When research subjects are asked to imagine great wealth, or just look at a computer screen saver with money, they become less inclined to share or help others. That may be why the poorest 20 percent of Americans give away a larger share of their incomes than the wealthiest 20 percent.

The generosity of the poor always impresses me. In West Virginia, I visited a trailer that housed eight people and sometimes many more. A woman in the home, Lynmarie Sargent, 30, was once homeless with a month-old baby, and that discomfort and humiliation seared her so that she lets other needy families camp out in her trailer and eat. Sometimes she houses as many as 17.

Sargent is an unemployed former addict with a criminal record, struggling to stay clean of drugs, get a job and be a good mom. She has plenty to learn from middle-class Americans about financial planning, but wealthy people have plenty to learn from her about compassion.

A Pew survey this year found that a majority of Republicans, and almost one-third of Democrats, believe that if a person is poor the main reason is "lack of effort on his or her part."

It's true, of course, that the poor are sometimes lazy and irresponsible. So are the rich, with less consequence.

Critics note that if a person manages to get through high school and avoid drugs, crime and parenting outside of marriage, it's often possible to escape poverty. Fair enough. But if you're one of the one-fifth of children in West Virginia born with drugs or alcohol in your system, if you ingest lead from peeling paint as a toddler, if your hearing or vision impairments aren't detected, if you live in a home with no books in a gang-ridden neighborhood with terrible schools — in all these cases, you're programmed for failure as surely as children of professionals are programmed for success.

So when kids in poverty stumble, it's not quite right to say that they "failed." Often, they never had a chance.

Researchers also find that financial stress sometimes impairs cognitive function, leading to bad choices. Indian farmers, for example, test higher for I.Q. after a harvest when they are financially secure. Alleviate financial worry, and you can gain 13 points in measured I.Q.

The tattoos that readers saw on Truffles are mostly old ones, predating Johnny, and she is passionate about helping him. That's why she enrolled him in a Save the Children program that provides books that she reads to him every day. In that trailer in Appalachia, I don't see a fat woman with tattoos; I see a loving mom who encapsulates any parent's dreams for a child.

Johnny shouldn't be written off at the age of 3 because of the straw he drew in the lottery of birth. To spread opportunity, let's start by pointing fewer fingers and offering more helping hands.