

Poverty babies

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I grew up in a small town in Wisconsin in the 80s and 90s. I regularly encountered poor people and people with substance abuse issues in their families. I knew very few people of color.

But I was certainly familiar with the concept of a “crack baby.” Not because the term came up in conversation at home or church or school. It was because my parents subscribed to *Time* and listened to Chicago’s CBS news radio affiliate, and I was always an information sponge. Here’s what I took away from the national media as a kid: irresponsible black women are doing drugs and then having babies whose lives will inevitably be a living hell.

Well, [not quite](#). The evidence has never lined up, and now a long-term study has concluded. It compared full-term, cocaine-exposed babies to a control group. The study initially aimed to learn about the specific effects of cocaine, in order to inform policies for drug treatment and early-childhood interventions.

Instead, this:

The researchers consistently found no significant differences between the cocaine-exposed children and the controls. At age 4, for instance, the average IQ of the cocaine-exposed children was 79.0 and the average IQ for the nonexposed children was 81.9. Both numbers are well below the average of 90 to 109 for U.S. children in the same age group. When it came to school readiness at age 6, about 25 percent of children in each group scored in the abnormal range on tests for math and letter and word recognition.

"We went looking for the effects of cocaine," [research doctor Hallam] Hurt said. But after a time "we began to ask, 'Was there something else going on?' "

There was. All study participants were low income; nearly all were black. By age seven, a large majority had heard gunshots and witnessed an arrest. A third had seen someone shot; almost a fifth had seen a dead body outside. By the end of the study, Hurt and her colleagues [had concluded that](#) "poverty is a more powerful influence on the outcome of inner-city children than gestational exposure to cocaine."

Which isn't to say that cocaine has no effect, as Hurt points out. The study excluded premature births, of which cocaine use can be one cause. The drug can also cause other problems in pregnancy.

Still, it's damning evidence of the racist conclusions the national conversation reached years ago. Growing up where I did, I had some degree of exposure to the effects of poverty on some of my peers. But my understanding of the urban black communities nearby, filtered almost entirely through the news media, was that the issue for those kids was totally different: their irresponsible parents' reckless cocaine use. (Not powder cocaine, of course—though its prenatal effects are identical—but *crack*.)

Our culture demonized these mothers; we [even prosecuted them](#). Now that we know that poverty hurts innocent children's lives more than prenatal crack exposure, will we see even a fraction of the outrage?