

What lies behind the Born and Code Red projects?

A reminder that a just society should be caring, prosperous

Hamilton Spectator – Born: a Code Red project
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By Paul Berton

“Poverty,” said Mahatma Gandhi, “is the worst form of violence.”

It is not the way most of us think about it, but it's hard to deny. Poverty comes in many forms, and we all think about it differently. Each of us has our own opinion about its causes, its solutions, its costs.

One of the roles of a newspaper is to help readers understand issues, and poverty is an issue The Hamilton Spectator takes very seriously.

That is why we have used the past three Saturdays to highlight our investigation into the health of mothers and babies across the province.

The series is called Born: A Code Red project. It is a detailed followup to The Spectator's groundbreaking Code Red series last year, for which this news organization was recognized nationally and internationally. You'll find it in today's Weekend Reader section, and you can read the entire series, view interactive graphics and see videos at thespec.com.

Spectator reporter Steve Buist, who won a National Newspaper Award for Code Red, worked with colleague Teri Pecoskie to write and report this remarkable series. They were joined by photographer Cathie Coward to tell the stories of those involved. They were helped in their data analysis by Neil Johnston and Pat DeLuca, two researchers at McMaster University who were a key part of the first Code Red project.

Code Red examined the relationship of poverty to specific neighbourhoods in Hamilton. Born is an exclusive analysis of 535,000 birth records across the entire province. It drills down into specific neighbourhoods and shows that those with low income and poor education suffer devastating effects when it comes to teen mothers, low-birth-weight babies and early prenatal care.

If Code Red spoke to the connection between poverty and where you live, *Born* is an alarming illustration of the intergenerational cycle of poverty. And it highlights the growing costs — financially and socially — for all of us. The series includes sad stories and happy stories (it is, after all, about motherhood) but it is really about helping ourselves, and helping society.

Today's instalment tackles the tricky issue of solutions. The provincial government promised to deal with the issue more than a decade ago, but has failed miserably. What must we do to break the cycle of poverty, improve lives and save money?

It won't be easy, but these problems can be solved. After all, we are not dealing with evil despots, ancient traditions, rampant corruption, logistical challenges or environmental devastation of the type we face in the developing world.

This is Ontario. These are our neighbours. It is our problem — and it can be solved.

If the Code Red project reminds us of anything, it is that we aren't reminded enough of these challenges despite the fact they are in our face daily, not on television transmitted from far-off lands, but on the sidewalk as we go to work, in the malls where we shop, on the streets where we live.

Some people would have us write only of economic development and why we're a great city (which we do), but we have an obligation to remind ourselves that a just society is a caring society, and a caring society is a prosperous one.