

Applying neuroscience to poverty may do more harm than good

The idea that poverty can change the brain has gotten [significant attention](#) recently, and not just from those lay readers (a minority, according to [recent research](#)) who spend a lot of time thinking about neuroscience. Policy makers and others have begun to apply neuroscientific principles to their thinking about poverty — and some say this could end up harming poor people rather than helping.

At The Conversation, the sociologist Susan Sered [takes issue](#) with “news reports with headlines like this one: ‘[Can Brain Science Help Lift People Out Of Poverty?](#)’” She’s referring to a [June story by Rachel Zimmerman](#) at WBUR, about a nonprofit called Crittenton Women’s Union that aims to use neuroscience to help get people out of poverty. Elisabeth Babcock, Crittenton’s chief executive, tells Ms. Zimmerman:

“What the new brain science says is that the stresses created by living in poverty often work against us, make it harder for our brains to find the best solutions to our problems. This is a part of the reason why poverty is so ‘sticky.’”

And, she adds:

“If we’ve been raised in poverty under all this stress, our executive functioning wiring, the actual neurology of our brains, is built differently than if we’re not raised in poverty. It is built to react quickly to danger and threats and not built as much to plan or execute strategies for how we want things to be in the future because the future is so uncertain and planning is so pointless that this wiring isn’t as called for.”

Sered, however, says that applying neuroscience to problems like poverty can sometimes lead to trouble: “Studies showing that trauma and poverty change people’s brains can too easily be read as [scientific proof](#) that poor people (albeit through no fault of their own) have inferior brains or that women who have been raped are now brain-damaged.”

Read full, original article: [Can Brain Science Be Dangerous?](#)