



With  
Charity  
for All

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Why Charities Are  
Failing and a  
Better Way to Give

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Why Charities Are Failing and a Better Way to Give

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For my son, Nate,  
who will someday write books of his own

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*About the Author*

WHEN THE FRENCHMAN Pierre L'Enfant laid out his plans for the new District of Columbia in 1791, he designed Sixteenth Street to be one of the grand avenues of the new capital. Two hundred and twenty years later, his vision has been mostly realized. Sixteenth Street rises from the foot of the White House, runs north past luxury hotels, rows of embassies, the blank façade of the national headquarters of the Freemasons, through parks and the prosperous leafy neighborhoods of Washington's Gold Coast, up past Walter Reed Hospital before reaching a tired ending among the down-market strip malls and mini-marts of Silver Spring, Maryland. At key points, it commands sweeping views not only of the White House but of the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial beyond.

Living in the Mount Pleasant section of Washington, I frequent a stretch along this storied street. From my home, it's a fifteen-minute walk along Sixteenth Street to our local grocery store. Along the way, I pass some of the landmarks of the neighborhood: the All Souls Unitarian Church, the Little Flower Montessori School, the Scottish Rite Temple, a dormitory for Howard University students. In a span of about eight blocks, I pass no fewer than sixteen nonprofit organizations: five churches, four educational institutions, five social service organizations, one credit union, and one fraternal organization.

Most people would be hard-pressed to name sixteen charities, but in fact my little trip is not that unusual. Every day our lives are touched by the charitable sector. To the extent that we think about charities, we tend to associate them with services for the poor and the dispossessed. But the charitable sector is much more than that. It educates our young; it takes care of our old and infirm; it fields the teams that we cheer for on Saturdays and serves us spiritual sustenance on Sundays; it provides much of the intellectual and cultural nourishment for this country. The nonprofit community occupies some of the most sacred real estate in our public square and cushions some of our most important private and intimate moments. We entrust our children and our parents to it, and it is often the first and most important responder in times of crisis—whether those crises are personal in nature or global in reach.

There are approximately 1.1 million charities in this country—not local chapters, but unique, full-fledged organizations.<sup>1</sup> Stop and think about that number for a moment. It means tens of thousands of charities in every state, thousands in every county. And the number grows by more than fifty thousand every year, in good times and in bad. The charitable sector employs approximately thirteen million people. In addition, more than sixty-one million Americans volunteer for charities, adding about eight billion hours of effort to charitable causes—roughly the equivalent of another five million full-time employees. Charities take in over \$1.5 trillion each year in revenues and have assets approaching \$2 trillion.<sup>2</sup> Charitable activity accounts for 10 percent of the economic life of this country.<sup>3</sup> And this percentage is certain to grow as the challenges of our society multiply and government proves unable to respond in a meaningful way.

Almost all of us are engaged in the charitable sector in direct ways: as employees, as volunteers, as donors, or as customers and clients. And even those few not so involved are indirectly entangled as taxpayers and citizens. While considerable funding for charities comes from purely private sources, our governments—federal, state, and local—provide hundreds of

billions of dollars in direct grants each year. A figure for total government support of the nonprofit sector is difficult to calculate, but most estimates put direct charitable revenue from government at roughly \$500 billion a year.<sup>4</sup> These same governments also provide an enormous amount in indirect support by exempting charities from income and property taxes and providing deductions for charitable donations. Even in this age of multitrillion-dollar government budgets, that indirect support is significant. If we chose to eliminate or even cap just these exemptions, our public coffers would swell by tens of billions of dollars yearly—on a par with the entire federal appropriation for housing and education.

The charitable sector is one of the anchors of American public life. Its vast scope makes any quick catalog of its functions incomplete, but it includes areas as diverse as education, global health services, shelter for the homeless, preservation of public and private land, athletics, arts and culture, and some of our most important scientific research. We support this broad array of services because absent a robust charitable economy, these functions would either cease or devolve to government—an unpalatable option in a time of rising public debt and dwindling faith in the efficacy of government. In effect, we have privatized these public functions in the belief that charities can perform these tasks better and with greater efficiency than government. The public—and private—investment in the social sector is one of the critical elements of the American social compact, yet it is one of the oddities of public life that each year we renew this investment without ever pausing to ask the same questions that we ask of every other public and private investment: What are we getting in return, is the investment structured correctly, is the money going to the right places? Remarkably, we don't think much about the nonprofit sector at all. Our attention to it is largely scandal-driven (think of the United Way and ACORN) and ephemeral, due to a web of factors including the cloaked nature of the public investment, the fact that the public rarely perceives the millions of disparate charitable businesses to be a unified industry, and the fact that the sector includes sacred institutions of American life such as churches and schools.

We live in a society that is obsessed with results—from businesses, from government, from sporting events. Markets are endlessly debated, scrutinized, reduced to reams of data. Governments rise and fall on issues of accountability and results. Managers are fired, players traded, teams dismantled if a squad falls short of the expectations of ownership or of fans. Yet in this results-obsessed country, the public rarely demands measures of how effectively charities are in implementing their services and meeting their service goals. And, as we shall see throughout this book, when the public generally and funders more specifically do not press for results-oriented organizations—and indeed value qualities that are inversely related to effectiveness—charities respond accordingly. The implications are extensive, not just for the prudent use of resources, but for how we as a society tackle our most challenging problems and how we serve the poor, the infirm, the hungry, the homeless, and others who do not have full voice in our public life. This book's story of charitable ineffectiveness is not one of greed or incompetence—though there are chapters on that—but one of misguided incentives and failed market structures. And it begins with one of the most venerated names in American charity.

With Hurricane Katrina bearing down on New Orleans in August 2005, the American Red Cross geared up for action. For the Red Cross, born in the blood of the American Civil War

and tested through countless disasters, this was its Super Bowl, the biggest challenge of the new century. Contingency plans were activated; shelters opened; tens of thousands of meals, bottles of water, and other necessary supplies pre-positioned; thousands of volunteers drafted. Relief trucks began to roll even before the storm hit. The action, coordinated from the Red Cross's emergency operations bunker in Washington, D.C., had all the hallmarks of military precision, not surprising given the Red Cross's propensity to hire retired military supply-chain experts. And the size of its effort has rarely been seen outside a military operation. In many ways, it was the largest peacetime call-up in American history, ultimately activating 250,000 employees and volunteers across a thousand miles of the southern United States.

The Red Cross's brethren at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also sprang into action, dispatching about eighty of its best disaster-recovery experts to support this mobilization. Among them was Thomas Riess, a veteran logistician from Germany. When Riess, used to working with relatively few resources in third-world countries, found upon arriving at the Red Cross site in Mobile, Alabama, astonished him. The human resources and material aid were tremendous, but the system of quality control was in absolute tatters. Volunteers were assigned to tasks without adequate training or any attempt to match their skills to the work. Goods poured into the Mobile warehouse, but often without regard for need. Included in the supply flow were Uno card games, stale Danish pastries, buns marked "perishable" that had to be destroyed, and radios without batteries. Whatever came in was shipped out to the field, regardless of its usefulness to the relief effort. Riess reported a lack of centralized planning and communications and a lack of accountability and record keeping: goods coming into the warehouse were not registered or recorded; pilfering was common. His colleagues observed similar chaos. Mike Goodhand, head of logistics for the British Red Cross, described the American Red Cross efforts in Mississippi as "amateurish." He noted one case where a Red Cross vehicle manager admitted to him that he had no idea as to the whereabouts of his entire fleet of more than a hundred cars and trucks.

The disorganization Goodhand and Riess witnessed was replicated across the region. Shelters were under- or incorrectly supplied, goods rotted in warehouses, the wrong things went to the wrong places, cash disappeared, supplies walked away. Too many key management positions were occupied by volunteers who were ill prepared and ill equipped to handle the flood of challenges. Rental cars, generators, air mattresses, and computers disappeared. At one point, it was reported that fully half of the goods supplied to the Red Cross could not be traced to confirm that they made it to their intended destination. The Red Cross supply-chain and inventory control management systems cracked. In the end, the British Red Cross and the ICRC characterized the effort as a "dangerous combination of ignorance and arrogance."<sup>5</sup>

The Red Cross failures during Katrina unfortunately do not stand out in any way. Not only did these failures largely duplicate the Red Cross's shortcomings after 9/11, they mirror, on a much larger scale, the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness displayed by hundreds of other nonprofits seeking to respond to the disaster. Katrina was a gold rush for the nonprofit community; hundreds of organizations descended on the Gulf Coast, hoping to aid in the relief and rebuilding of the area and share in the billions of dollars washing through. But many of them lacked the capacity and expertise to contribute significantly to the recovery.



and their uncoordinated efforts ultimately led to confusion, delay, and the thinning of financial resources. These problems were magnified by the policies of the IRS, which fast-tracked more than four hundred new Katrina-related charities in the wake of the storm, in some cases granting tax-exempt status within hours of receiving an application. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of those new charities, organized during a flood of good intentions, have since failed, disappeared, or been diverted to other purposes.

It was neither the government nor the nonprofit community that reacted most effectively to Katrina. It was the private sector. Private companies were on the ground with disaster relief efforts before the American Red Cross, FEMA, and even the U.S. military. Walmart proved especially effective during Katrina, moving tens of millions of dollars in emergency supplies into the area, creating fast-action distribution centers, and rapidly responding to local conditions and needs. Its advantages were numerous: it had the scale and staffing to quickly mobilize a two-hundred-person emergency response center that could coordinate relief efforts around the clock; the company had the expertise in supply-chain management to move the right goods to the right places, and it had unrivaled local knowledge from its operations in three thousand communities around the country. In many places, Walmart was the first on the ground with goods and services, and its reports from the field became critical to government responders. At the time, Sheriff Harry Lee of Jefferson Parish in suburban New Orleans said, "If [the] American government would have responded like Wal-Mart had responded, we wouldn't be in this crisis."<sup>6</sup> Later, reacting to both internal and external criticism, the Red Cross announced its intention to redesign its supply-chain management system, this time to be driven by the expertise of businesses like Walmart.

It's tempting to shrug off this story as unrepresentative, the product of one unlikely-to-be-rivaled event. Katrina was a flood of biblical proportions that exposed the failings of numerous institutions, both inside and outside the charitable sector. Unfortunately, the modern history of the Red Cross is marked by the same type of organizational breakdown (and post-event confession of failures) across many major disasters. Those breakdowns have not affected every part of the enterprise, however; its fund-raising ability, especially during crises, has been nothing short of spectacular. Within weeks of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, for example, the Red Cross raised more than \$450 million in the United States and more than \$1 billion in total across its worldwide network.

But the more difficult task for the Red Cross in Haiti has been spending. Two years after the Haiti earthquake, the Red Cross was still sitting on more than \$150 million in unspent and unallocated donations, a surprisingly large amount given the acuteness of Haiti's needs and the fact that most of the distributed funds went to intermediate organizations such as the United Nations, Habitat for Humanity, and the International Organization for Migration.<sup>7</sup>

On the surface, it is hard to figure out why the Red Cross fails so consistently. It is among the most storied and best resourced charities in this country. The organization's staff is handpicked from the top levels of business, government, and the military, and though slow-footed and devoutly bureaucratic, it has avoided many of the pitfalls and scandals that have tripped up other charities. Rather, the roots of the Red Cross's failures during Katrina and other crises lie in its inability—a failing shared by virtually all charities—to make the necessary internal investments that are the hallmark of all good organizations, be they for-profit businesses, charities, or government agencies.

This inability was clearly illustrated in the days after 9/11.<sup>8</sup> As in Katrina, the Red Cross during 9/11 proved unable to respond quickly and effectively. Resources were not adequately deployed, and blood and relief supplies were not moved quickly enough from place to place. In an acute embarrassment to the organization, the Red Cross proved unable to support the Pentagon victims, even though the scene of the attack was only about two miles from Red Cross headquarters and its emergency response center. Bernadine Healy, then president of the Red Cross, was aghast to find on September 12 that no volunteers or supplies had gone to the Pentagon—no specialized teams, no emergency response vehicles, not even cots or food for the firefighters. Yet despite the organizational limitations of the Red Cross, as during Katrina, money poured in via the Liberty Fund, set up by the Red Cross to aid the victims. All in all, more than \$543 million was donated to the fund, a remarkable outpouring of support by the American public and an amount that quickly far outstripped what the Red Cross could reasonably spend on the relief needs of what was ultimately a finite pool of victims of the attack. Recognizing that the Red Cross's failures during 9/11 reflected poor infrastructure, inadequate telecommunications, and insufficient supply-chain management, Healy made the understandable judgment to help the next victims by using excess funds from the Liberty Fund to build the capacity of the Red Cross to respond to large-scale disasters, and to increase the available blood supply from its then-depleted levels—so that in a future crisis, the Red Cross would not duplicate its failings. When that decision became public, however, a huge outcry ensued, with many in the public, the media, and Congress insisting that all the Liberty Fund money had to be spent on the 9/11 victims, regardless of the actual need. At the inevitable public hearing, members of Congress shouted down Healy when she tried to explain the decision, and within days she resigned amid speculation about possible fraud prosecutions. The point was not lost on her successors, who hastily reversed course, announcing that Liberty Fund dollars would be spent only on victims of 9/11 and appointing the former senator George Mitchell to oversee the process and calm the waters.

The widespread fury was both predictable and misguided. Healy's goal of investing in infrastructure in order to avoid a repeat of the 9/11 failures was entirely understandable, but the dismay over the spending plans reflects a bedrock and simplistic assumption that has long shackled the charitable world: that money spent on direct services is the only worthy use of charitable funds, while money invested in organizational effectiveness is to be kept as close to zero as possible. It is an equation widely accepted by the donating public, by the press, by charity watchdogs, by government regulators, and by most charities themselves. To keep overhead costs down, charities forgo necessary investments with devastating and sometimes deadly results. When Katrina came four years after the 9/11 hearings, the results were entirely predictable: telecommunications failed, inventory and supply-chain management fell apart, the same antiquated systems bent and broke under the stress of the crisis. Equally predictably, many of the same pundits and members of Congress who decried the liberation of the Liberty Fund excoriated the Red Cross for its Katrina failings, never acknowledging or perhaps even recognizing that the failure to invest in 2001 had direct implications for the breakdowns in 2005.

The overhead imperative is so deeply ingrained in the charitable world that it is hardly ever questioned, even though the causal link between overhead spending and organizational effectiveness is probably the inverse of what most people assume. Organizations that invest

effectively and fully in infrastructure, technology, training, strategic planning, building new programs and initiatives that mature over time, research, and self-evaluation will almost certainly bring the most value to their communities of interest. Yet the demands of the donating public ensure that the number of such organizations is kept to a minimum. When even the highest-revenue charity in the country is bound together by rubber bands and duct tape, it is a sign of profound misunderstanding of how to build effective charities.

The struggles at the Red Cross are representative of, yet probably understate, the challenges within the charitable sector as a whole. Compared with virtually every other American charity, the Red Cross is well resourced, strategically focused, and outcome-oriented. Most American charities, by contrast, struggle with lack of resources, muddled strategies, operational challenges, and lack of clarity around impact; even the most doe-eyed defender of charitable institutions would hesitate to dispute these facts. But it is only now becoming clear how much charities are being weighed down by market forces—of which the low-overhead imperative is just one—and how few can demonstrate measurable success.

The difficulty of identifying effective charities is well captured in the creation story of a New York-based charity evaluation organization called GiveWell. In the summer of 2006, eight friends working in the financial services industry decided to pool their efforts and make a common commitment for their end-of-year charitable giving. All of them were single, in their twenties, and doing very well financially for having relatively little professional experience. They worked for a publicity-shy hedge fund called Bridgewater Associates, a company little known outside the clubby financial world but one of astonishing reach and wealth. Bridgewater, now reputed to be the world's largest hedge fund, manages about \$160 billion in assets—a number roughly equivalent to the combined gross domestic product of Kuwait and Bulgaria. The group of friends, informally headed by two recent Ivy League graduates, Elie Hassenfeld and Holden Karnofsky, agreed to research and share information on different charities. Given the mind-numbing number of charities, they decided to focus on one industry per person (Karnofsky chose New York educational charities; Hassenfeld picked water charities in Africa) and limit themselves to charities awarded three or four stars by Charity Navigator, a reputable rating agency. They thought it would be easy; this was, after all, what they did every day for a living—research, analyze, and recommend the best investment opportunities.

Throughout the late summer and fall, the group met regularly in a conference room at Bridgewater to discuss their findings; in between sessions they searched the Web for data and called and asked for information from a vast number of charities. They discovered that the Charity Navigator rankings were unhelpful, as they were based largely on ratios of overhead to programmatic spending that they quickly realized had no correlation to organizational effectiveness and impact. They also found out that even if they wanted to rely on these ratings, it was unwise to do so because Charity Navigator depended on self-reports from the charities, which could easily, and frequently did, game the ratings. They read annual reports and IRS filings. They were mailed glossy brochures full of vivid pictures and stirring anecdotes. UNICEF even sent an oral rehydration package as proof of its good work—along with a donor card. None of the materials, from dozens of organizations, hinted at what they were trying to find out: Do the charitable programs effectively solve the targeted social

problems? Their frustration wasn't for lack of trying, on the part of either the Bridgewater group or the staff of some of the charities they contacted. When pressed for more information from the Bridgewater group, the charities often furnished their own confidential internal reports and data—the inadequacy of which led the group at Bridgewater to understand that the charities themselves did not know whether they were helping or hurting a given situation. In a small number of cases their inquiries were met with hostility tinged with paranoia. As part of his inquiry, for instance, Karnofsky contacted Smile Train, a prominent charity that sponsors cleft palate surgery for third-world children. He was looking for basic information on effectiveness: In what parts of the world was Smile Train operating? How many of the Smile Train children come from financially disadvantaged families? Was Smile Train able to track the children after surgery to assess the impact of the operation? Smile Train steadfastly refused to provide any of the answers, eventually telling Karnofsky that he would have to pursue the questions directly with the organization's president. Eventually, he received a call from the Smile Train CEO, who told him that no donors had ever sought this information before and openly accused him of spying for Operation Smile, a rival medical charity. Needless to say, Karnofsky never received any of the requested information. After six months of inquiry, the Bridgewater group found itself no closer to identifying effective charities than when they had started. In the end, they threw up their hands and made the best guess possible with their year-end charitable gifts, an unfulfilling outcome perhaps but one that closely tracks the thought process behind billions of dollars in giving each year.

The exercise, frustrating as it may have been, was a revelation to the Bridgewater group; they concluded that there had to be a better way of evaluating charities and helping donors find effective outlets for their contributions. In the summer of 2007, Karnofsky and Hassenfeld left Bridgewater to set up GiveWell, an organization dedicated to identifying demonstrably effective charities where donor money could be put to good use. The approach was based upon the methodologies they had learned at Bridgewater: in-depth, research-driven evaluations supported by facts and data, not formulas and marketing brochures. By its nature, it is slow and handcrafted work that cannot be mass-produced, certainly not by a team that originally comprised only two people. Hassenfeld and Karnofsky determined to focus their work on a few charitable segments where they figured there would be reliable data (HIV, malaria prevention, water, and education, to name a few) and only on top-tier charities willing to provide access to relevant data.

Over the past five years, GiveWell, by now expanded to seven employees, has produced over five hundred investment grade reports, both on entire charitable sectors and on individual charities. After all this work, it has identified only eight organizations that can fully demonstrate material and effective impact and efficiently use additional funds. This is not to say that each one of the other 98.5 percent of charities is a failed organization, but it is to say that none of these charities can concretely demonstrate that they can effectively deliver promised results. In 2009, the GiveWell group decided to rate only charities that met a minimal standard of transparency—that the charity published on its Web site some meaningful self-evaluation. There was no requirement that the self-evaluation be positive, simply that the charity offer some proof of its commitment to making results publicly accessible. Only fifteen out of more than four hundred charities reviewed passed over the low bar—even though the organizations they targeted for review were culled from lists of the

most respected and prominent charities in America. When Hassenfeld and Karnofsky dug deeper, they met resistance from startling quarters. Many nationally prominent charities simply refused to share relevant data with them. The Harlem Children's Zone and the Carter Center—organizations with outsized reputations for being effective, businesslike, and data-driven—both stonewalled the GiveWell team. Heifer International and the Millennium Villages Project required confidentiality and then still provided no pervasive research. The projects a deeply unsettling image of many of the stars of the charitable world—Geoffrey Canada (Harlem Children's Zone), Jimmy Carter (Habitat for Humanity), and Jeffrey Sachs (Millennium Villages Project)—as unable or unwilling to show whether their organizations are effective. It is hard to know what is worse, that Karnofsky and Hassenfeld can only find a handful of highly effective charities after years of intensive effort or that the organizations that failed their test are among the best that the charitable world has to offer.

The GiveWell staffers are not muckrakers. It is not their purpose to expose the failed, the muddled, the hopelessly un-strategic; rather, it is their goal to drive donations to the most measurably effective charities and create incentives for other charities to adopt similar standards of evaluation. In this, they have a long way to go. As we shall see, the market incentives of the nonprofit world push charities toward happy anecdote and inspiring narrative rather than toward careful planning, research, and evidence-based investments, a crippling effect.

I experienced some of these skewed incentives in my own work in the charitable sector. I joined National Public Radio (NPR) as chief operating officer in 1999 and became its chief executive officer in 2006. During my nine years running the company, NPR more than doubled its audience, despite the general national decline in radio listening, and more than tripled its revenues. We launched numerous successful digital initiatives, ranging from NPR satellite radio channels to the award-winning NPR Music site. From the outside and by all reasonable measures, NPR was a high-performing organization, one doing almost uniquely well in a difficult media environment. On the inside, however, I found myself endlessly embroiled in diplomatic logjams with the NPR board and the public radio stations that controlled the board.

Public radio was in the midst of a media revolution, a transformation almost as profound as that brought on by the printing press. I knew that NPR needed to change just to survive. I wanted to see results demonstrating how NPR was reshaping itself to be more competitive in the digital age, results that were not merely anecdotal but specific and measurable: the reach of NPR to tens of millions of people, the growth of online and digital services, the impact of new programming to reach more diverse audiences, the financial health of the organization. We implemented a strategy to broaden NPR's reach beyond radio to the Internet, mobile phones, satellite radio—to meet and serve the audience wherever it was going to be—and to expand the historic definition of NPR's audience by creating new programming for young audiences and audiences of color. In many ways, this clashed with the historic view held by many public radio stations that NPR should be an organization that served public radio stations first, with other activities viewed as either irrelevant or threatening. The NPR board was sympathetic to that view. The board was made up of donors and public broadcasting system politicians—station managers elected by their peers. They were not indifferent to

measures of the organization's health, but they valued system peace over anything else. The results didn't matter as much for them.

This book is not my story. This is a story about how the charitable sector has lost its way. The NPR board, as it turns out, was far more in tune with the culture of the nonprofit world than I was. As a country, we direct enormous resources to and place substantial social responsibilities on the charitable sector, yet the vast majority of nonprofits can't demonstrate any commensurate return on this investment. The glossy fund-raising brochures, the moving videos, and the carefully crafted inspirational anecdotes often mask problems that range from inefficiency and ineffectiveness to outright fraud and waste. There is little credible evidence that many charitable organizations produce lasting social value. Study after study tells the opposite story: of organizations that fail to achieve meaningful impact yet press on with the strategies and services despite significant, at times overwhelming, evidence that they don't work. These failures are often well known within the nonprofit community but are not more generally discussed because the studies either are buried or tend to be so organization- and issue-specific that broader sector-wide conclusions are easy to avoid.

It's no joy to write these words, no fun to suggest that hundreds of thousands of people may be toiling in vain, but it is critical to ask how this can be, how the well-intentioned efforts of so many can result in so little concrete progress toward common social goals. The answer starts with the absence of market mechanisms that reward good work and punish failure. Those mechanisms are missing because the funders, the true customers of charitable organizations, are generally indifferent to results, for a number of reasons we shall explore. And even when donors do care, there is little available to guide them in their funding decisions. Few charities even try to measure their results in a meaningful way, and neither government regulators nor online charity monitors provide useful alternatives.

This could have been a bleak book. My early research was not promising. I found stories after story of organizational and service failure, of charities that refused to evaluate their programs or, worse, swept unfavorable results under the rug. But over time, another story began to emerge, of a nascent movement to rethink how the charitable sector works, to build market mechanisms to reward effective charities and discourage the ineffective ones, and to create tools that will allow people to turn themselves from donors to investors. It is a small movement, operating in the millions at the edges of a trillion-dollar industry, but it's a sign of what the charitable sector can become. This book begins with the story of charitable failure, a narrative of systematic shortcomings, but it ends with a glimpse of those who are beginning to reshape the charitable world and show us what it can be.

## *Big Promises, Small Outcomes*

### Ineffectiveness in the Charitable Sector

**B**Y CASUAL MEASURES, Ryan Hreljac is like any other twenty-one-year-old Canadian. He loves hockey and virtually any sport that requires a ball, stick, or some form of legalized contact, is obsessed with video games, and enjoys *The Simpsons* perhaps a bit too much. If you observed him in the classrooms of the University of King's College in Halifax, or saw him on the streets of his hometown of Kemptville, Ontario, he would probably escape your notice with the possible exception of his six-foot, six-inch frame, which has made him a passable basketball player, at least by Canadian standards.

But Ryan is no ordinary young man, a fact that began to emerge when he was just six. At an age when sharing Thomas trains with a sibling might be considered a surpassing act of social virtue, Ryan launched a personal crusade to provide safe drinking water to communities around the world. It was all triggered by his first-grade teacher, Mrs. Prest, who told her impressionable charges about the needs of poor people in Africa and how little they would take to help: a penny for a pencil, a dollar for a day's supply of food for an entire family, and \$70 to build a safe water supply for a school or small village.

That evening, as he tells it, Ryan lobbied his parents to let him do odd jobs around the house so he might raise the money necessary to build a well. Perhaps the Hreljacs doubted the effectiveness of a six-year-old's housekeeping efforts, because it took a few days of incessant pleading before they agreed to the proposition. But once empowered, Ryan washed windows and vacuumed his way to his goal, reaching \$70 after what must have seemed an eternity to a six-year-old but was only four months in adult time. His mother proudly took him to the offices of WaterCan, a charity that builds wells in third-world countries, to present the money, but they were in for a rude surprise. Mrs. Prest, as it turned out, had things wrong. A no doubt mortified WaterCan executive had to tell young Ryan that \$70 would only pay for a hand pump, not the well itself. He was short about \$1,930 of the \$2,000 that would take to finance a new well in Africa.

By all rights, that should have been that; at his prior earnings rate of about \$17.50 a month, it would take Ryan ten years (roughly a lifetime and a half from his perspective) to raise the entire sum. But the unwelcome news did not daunt Ryan. He took on new chores and unknowingly began to act as a nonprofit executive, waging a vigorous fund-raising campaign among friends, family, and neighbors and leveraging the Canadian government's standing offer of matching funds. It took months of effort, but Ryan, through astonishing focus and hard work and no doubt more than a little bit of youthful charm, collected the necessary funds. In January 1999, after Ryan had turned seven, the Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief drilled his well, fittingly enough, next to a primary school in northern Uganda.

Ryan did not stop there. He continued to raise money for safe water, and in 2001, at the advanced age of ten, he formalized his efforts into a charity called Ryan's Well Foundation.

Since then, Ryan's Well has raised over \$2 million and funded over 630 water projects in sixteen countries on three continents. By its own calculations, the charity has brought safe water and sanitation services to more than 700,000 people. Even as he progressed through school, Ryan became a public ambassador for the cause of improved sanitation and safe drinking water, traveling extensively not only in furtherance of specific projects but also to educate the public on the critical and urgent need for safe water supplies.

When Mrs. Prest lectured her young charges about the need to improve drinking water supplies in Africa, she hit upon perhaps the world's biggest and most persistent public health challenge. Almost 900 million people worldwide lack access to safe drinking water, and even supposedly safe sources are often subject to contamination and supply degradation. Two and a half billion people lack access to basic sanitation for the adequate disposal of human waste. Over two million tons of untreated refuse—an unthinkable tidal wave amounting to four billion pounds of garbage, sewage, and industrial and human waste—are dumped *every day* into water supplies around the globe. The consequences of contaminated water are painful and wide-ranging. Waterborne illnesses include cholera, typhoid, guinea worms, hepatitis, and diarrhea. Children in the third world, it is estimated, have on average about a thousand parasites in their bodies. The health tolls of this parasitic invasion are staggering. Roughly speaking, more than four million cases of serious diarrhea are reported each year, leading to about two million deaths—virtually all of them among children—surpassing even war as the principal cause of man-made and preventable death.<sup>1</sup> Somewhere in the third world, for every child who has died from diarrhea in the minute or so it has taken to read this paragraph.

It is a little surprising that the world's water supply is so precarious. The problem is not lack of know-how—the Romans maintained a usable public water supply two thousand years ago<sup>2</sup>—nor is it a lack of understanding of the consequences of adulterated water, though our understanding of that is of far more recent vintage. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the prevailing view in educated circles was that miasma—impure air caused by open sewage, decomposing vegetation, and rotting corpses—was the source of cholera and other terrible diseases that from time to time decapitated the growing urban centers of Europe. It was a compelling theory, given the observed patterns of outbreaks and the vast amounts of noxious and polluted air roiling these cities, but it had the misfortune of being flat wrong. To be fair to the scientific classes of modern Europe, the best minds of science were not terribly occupied with the issue, since cholera, while clearly horrible, was understood to be a poor man's disease. The indifference of the medical class changed quickly when the great 1832 London epidemic made clear that cholera was actually nondiscriminatory, felling the upper classes, the medical community, and the working classes with an indifferent equality. In response, the public health authorities in London began a relentless campaign to mitigate foul air. Still, virulent outbreaks plagued major Western population centers through much of the nineteenth century. In one particularly nasty pocket epidemic in 1854 in Soho, more than five hundred people died over ten days in one small neighborhood, making it one of the worst occurrences of sudden mortality in recorded history.

The miasma theory led to numerous false starts in the fight against cholera, but ironically it did produce the greatest public works project of the nineteenth century, a project that ultimately revolutionized public health in England and around the world. In the summer of 1858, London suffered a searing heat wave: temperatures crawled into the nineties and



refused to leave. The heat was accompanied by a relentless drought, and waste, typically washed away by the rain, piled up across the city. The Thames became so foul and noxious that people could not bear to be near it. "The Great Stink," as it became known, made London virtually uninhabitable, and Parliament fled the city. Within weeks, the city fathers declared their intention to completely rebuild the London sewage system, which had been designed to drain off rainwater, not to handle vast amounts of solid waste. The rebuilding of the sewage system was a feat of civil engineering on an extraordinary scale. Under a relentlessly busy metropolis, the City of London set out to build twelve hundred miles of tunnels to carry off every bit of waste for more than three million people. The system had to accommodate expected developments such as population growth, urban sprawl, and the expansion of the London Underground and be sufficiently capacious to accommodate what the former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld would one day refer to as the "known unknowns"—the knowledge that there inevitably will be unknown future developments which in this case turned out to be gas and electrical lines that would power one of the most important and vibrant cities in the world. All this had to be accomplished on the modest budget of £3 million. The project required 318 million bricks and necessitated the redistribution of more than 3.5 million cubic yards of earth. It was a spectacular success. The sewage works built during the 1860s still drain the city more than a century and a half later. And when the German doctor Robert Koch discovered the cholera microbe in 1883 and revealed that it inhabited water supplies, London was already enviably positioned to ensure clean water supplies to its population.<sup>3</sup> In the wake of Koch's discoveries, most of the great developed cities invested significantly in sewage disposal and clean water facilities. By the twentieth century, contaminant-free water was increasingly an expectation of modern life.

Unfortunately, for much of the world, where running water and sewage systems are not available, this expectation is increasingly an illusory one. The press of human demand, the depletion of natural aquifers, and unregulated dumping of industrial and agricultural wastes will only get worse as the earth's population grows from six billion to nine billion over the next fifty years. As if the health effects were not crippling enough, the problems of inadequate water and sanitation have repercussions in other areas, such as education, women's rights, and the environment. Each day, millions of people, almost always women and children, undertake the laborious and sometimes dangerous task of fetching water from distant sites in forty-pound jerricans. The time-consuming task of retrieving and boiling water effectively shackles the bearers to the water cans, meaning that opportunities for education, work, or advancement are narrowed or sacrificed.

The charitable community has energetically responded to this water crisis. Dozens and dozens of charities have been launched to provide safe drinking water in crisis zones. Not just Ryan's Well, but Water for People, Water Missions International, WaterAid, Lifewater International, Living Water International, Water.org, and WaterCan. The list stretches on, trademark lawyer's joy but a marketer's despair. All these charities have been organized around the simple plan of drilling new wells in population centers and giving communities, often for the first time, direct and immediate access to clean drinking water.

In part, the explosion in water charities reflects the urgency of a genuine public health crisis. But the charitable sector is also reacting to the seeming simplicity of the solution. The technology has long existed to provide water even in the world's most challenging

communities. With a little bit of elbow grease, a modest amount of money, and perhaps just a little sacrifice, it seems as if the problem can be quickly solved. As described by the Adversity Conspiracy (an international effort to reframe Christmas from getting to giving) and repeated endlessly around the Web: “[Ten dollars] will give a child clean water for life. That’s not an estimate. It’s a fact. And here’s another fact. Solving this problem once and for all will cost about \$10 billion. Not bad considering Americans spent \$450 billion on Christmas last year. Or put in very immediate terms, as the charities sometimes do, the cost of once and forever solving a problem that fells two million children each year is equivalent to three weeks worth of American war spending in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of these promises, hundreds of millions, maybe even billions, of dollars have been poured into the fight for clean water, and many of the players claim victories, big and small. Even the smallest charities claim to have solved water problems for huge swaths of Africa, Asia, and Central America. Lifewater brags of bringing clean water to 2 million people, WaterAid has solved the problem for more than 7.5 million, and Water.org contented itself with the notion of sustaining “millions” of people with clean water. When these efforts are taken together, along with those of much larger governmental groups, the picture of an effective international movement begins to emerge. Add up the claims and the global community should be well on the way to meeting the UN goal of reducing the at-risk population by half by 2015.

Indeed, the stories of success offered by these charities can be deeply moving. Water Missions International, a Christian-inspired water and sanitation engineering charity operating in about nine third-world countries, tells this story about one of its projects:

A community in Kenya called Wachakaheri “Tangi Nyeusi” meaning Black tank serves the marginalized Samburu and Turkana tribes. The site had an old diesel pump that had not been functioning for over seven years. Community members used to walk for 8km to fetch water that was unsafe. 410 Bridge [a U.S.-based Christian charity that works extensively in Kenya] funded the installation of a solar power system and renovation of the Tank.

When WMI team arrived, the area looked deserted and we could hardly believe that a population of 4,000 people lived in this area. Some community members were just gazing and mocking us for wasting our time on an unfeasible project. On the fifth day, when we hooked on the solar powered system and water started flowing, the man who had been watching us was overwhelmed. With joy and disbelief, he climbed on top of the black tank and started shouting at the top of his voice. Within no time we saw a stream of women and children flocking in with containers, the 4,000 population became a reality! We could not believe the number of people. After fetching water, they took us to their huts commonly known as “Manyatta” and it was a joy to fellowship with them, now a church stands on that site.<sup>6</sup>

It’s a compelling image: a man standing on top of the tank exulting at the arrival of freshwater in his village for the first time in the better part of a decade; the community streaming forth to share in his joy and a moment that promises to transform their lives in innumerable ways, big and small. It would take an iron heart to see that and not feel hope for the future of that community.

It is hard, however, to reconcile that picture with a global water situation that is not improving but in fact rapidly worsening. Some of that is due to factors outside the control of any charity: population explosion, rapid urbanization, governmental inefficiency, and corruption, to name just a few. But beyond the global trends, the data show that the particular efforts of the nonprofit community have largely failed, despite the claims to the contrary. Studies of most public water programs—whether a standpost project, a borehole project, or a public well project—show little or no impact on public health.<sup>7</sup> Despite the compelling story lines, the water charity community, in the aggregate, has been singularly ineffective in relieving the problems of waterborne diseases.

The difficult truth is that while the charities promote stories of villagers celebrating gushing well tapped minutes before, the “real image,” writes Edward Breslin, the CEO of Water for People, “should be the one that plays itself out every day all over the world of the woman walking slowly past a broken handpump, bucket at her side or on her head, on her way to (or from) that scoop hole or dirty puddle that she once hoped would never again be part of her life.”<sup>8</sup> Drilling a clean well is far easier than maintaining one. Infrastructure maintenance has typically lagged in third-world countries, particularly in rural areas. The World Bank has estimated that about one-third of all water infrastructure projects in South Asia have been abandoned due to lack of maintenance.<sup>9</sup> Many water charities propose a community-based maintenance model, but fully 50 percent of the boreholes dug in eastern Africa and maintained in this model have fallen into disrepair. Drilling the hole is simply the first step in a process that requires training, tools, parts, and the supply lines to support them. The water charities lack the resources, the expertise, and indeed the intention to deal with what is actually a complex, long-term problem.

What’s more, drinking water is one source of infectious microbes but by no means the primary source. Fecal matter and other pollutants can congregate not just in water but in food, on hands, and in fields. Sanitation, food quality, and hygiene are all important variables in the public health fight. Indeed, water is less important in this equation as a drinking source than as a cleansing agent, permitting cleaning of hands, clothes, and food supplies. The evidence is substantial that bringing a water source into the home improves public health because it allows for frequent cleaning of children’s hands. Providing a public water point does not.<sup>10</sup> Even a new, more accessible public water point does not lead to greater use of water, more frequent washing, or better hygiene habits. Thus, a supply of clean water by itself does not solve the public health challenge.

This uncomfortable story of the failure of water drilling in the long and short terms is not found in the glossy literature or on the Web sites of the water organizations. Indeed, the entire business model of these charities is built around ignoring these problems. Money is usually raised for the drilling of wells, not for the more expensive and far less glamorous task of monitoring and infrastructure maintenance, or for the more complicated public health challenges that persist even when a public water point is available. It’s relatively easy to engage people with stories of children delighting in the first burst of water from a new well; it’s far harder to get donors excited when the primary visual is of a sanitary engineer checking or rethreading a pump long in operation. When Ryan Hreljac presented his harrowing story of how he earned \$2,000 to WaterCan in 1999, he brought every dollar necessary to dig that well in Uganda and not a single penny to ensure that the pump remained in operation over time. The

heartwarming story from Water Missions International obscures but does not completely hide the fact that a well was already in place, a well that had sat idle for seven years. The evidence of the maintenance crisis—tens of thousands of abandoned wells across the developing world—is well known within the development community but largely unreported to the general public. The real story is displaced by one of exaggerated victory—all to ensure the flow of contributions for the underserved and needy, even when those contributions don't provide meaningful long-term help to them.

Much of the charitable industry is driven by just such marketing requirements, by the need to tell affecting stories rather than prove real, long-term results. Charities, like every other business, respond to market forces, which in their case means focusing on what generates donations. In a revealing article in the December 2009 issue of *Outside* magazine, Nicholas Kristof, the crusading columnist for *The New York Times*, argued that the charitable sector needs to be more aggressive in promoting stories like Ryan's vignette. Forget "logical arguments," forget descriptions of large-scale needs, forget careful impact studies, he wrote: "what generates contributions, the bread and butter of charities, are stories of individual empowerment, of individual hope, and the promise that the donors can make a difference in someone's life."<sup>11</sup> Kristof is almost certainly right about what drives donor dollars, as we will explore later in the book, but his argument neglects the negative effect that this has on program development. When the WaterAid America site promises that \$25 is enough to provide one person with "water, sanitation and hygiene programs," it signals that it will be putting all of its efforts into drilling holes, not creating long-term, provable, and measurable solutions to the water crisis. Twenty-five dollars will not do that.

Surprisingly, the most pointed critique of the water charity industry has come from within its own leadership. In 2010, Breslin, the CEO of Water for People quoted above, posted on his Web site a lengthy and detailed report accusing the water charity industry of everything from ineffectiveness to outright fraud. In his open letter, Breslin argued that the resources exist to solve the clean water and sanitation crisis, but that water charities have largely failed to make a dent because their resources have been focused on drilling new holes, not on ensuring the long-term effectiveness of existing investments. "The images that dominate the sector—pictures of children happily gulping water from a new tap or the counter-image of women collecting water from dirty puddles—do not tell the whole story ... Africa, Asia and Latin America have become wastelands for broken water and sanitation infrastructure. Go to schools throughout the developing countries and you will often find a broken handpump around the corner, or a disused latrine that filled years ago. Sector agencies intuitively know this but the general public is shielded from these hard truths as perceptions of failure could threaten 'the cause' of reaching the underserved."<sup>12</sup> The water crisis, according to Breslin, is not one of inadequate resources but of misallocation of resources, lack of accountability, and a perverse incentive system that obscures the real results in the name of keeping the tap open—not the water tap, but the dollar flows from donors.<sup>13</sup> In one case in Malawi involving Water for People, he notes that "reports have been exaggerated to keep funds flowing, with claims of diarrheal reduction that are absolutely unsubstantiated but remain unquestioned by financial donors." Breslin's world is haunted with misleading marketing, failing projects, and buried results.

PlayPumps International is one such failed project. PlayPumps are essentially merry-go-

round water pumps, powered by the joy of children. As the children play on the merry-go-round, pumps connected to the apparatus drive water up into a large storage tank, the sides of which are covered with a combination of paid advertising and public service announcements. The concept thus kneads together several enticing ingredients: the provision of a clean and easily accessible water supply, the building of community playgrounds for children, prominent messaging on matters of public importance, and a business model cleverly built on local advertising. It's a charity marketer's dream. The concept was first described in 1990 but did not become fashionable for almost a decade. But once it did, it went through the roof. First Lady Laura Bush announced a major grant for PlayPumps at the Clinton Global Initiative in 2006, and contributions and awards flowed to the PlayPumps company from the U.S. government and the Case Foundation, among others, as part of a plan to install four thousand PlayPumps in Africa by 2010. It is hard to exaggerate the significance of this type of platform for a small organization like PlayPumps. The Clinton Global Initiative is a huge stage, and having the First Lady trumpet the promise of this technology to boot is like winning a Grammy and an Oscar on the same night. Thousands of the devices were installed across Africa within a few years, often replacing perfectly adequate hand pumps before a young engineer from Engineers Without Borders Canada pointed out in a series of embarrassing blog posts that the emperor had no clothes:<sup>14</sup> the pumps were expensive, broke frequently, and could not be repaired at the local level; the business model never worked because there was no advertising economy in rural villages; and, worst of all, kids did not use the merry-go-rounds very often, apparently favoring soccer and other more locally familiar activities. Lacking kid power, the pumps could only be powered by local women laboriously pushing the heavy wheel around and around. Rather than creating an effective mash-up of water supply and play, the PlayPumps displaced functioning water sources with cumbersome, difficult to use, and hard to maintain albatross. The blog posts stopped the program in its tracks, and the Case Foundation issued a mea culpa report,<sup>15</sup> but not before thousands of PlayPumps had been installed across sub-Saharan Africa at the cost of tens of millions of dollars and much social disruption. All of this could have been easily averted by research and field testing, an approach that is all too rare in the charitable world.

Edward Breslin's analysis and the PlayPumps debacle should have been a wake-up call for the charity water industry, but they seem to have achieved little other than perhaps making Breslin a lonely figure at industry conferences. There have been no serious debates, no outcry from donors, no observable change in business practices or programmatic approaches from the industry. Breslin's message does not resonate, because all the marketplace signals go the other way. Positive reinforcement comes to these organizations from all directions. For example, virtually every charity referenced in this section is a four-star charity, the highest rating offered by Charity Navigator, the most widely followed of the charity watchdog organizations. These ratings reflect traditional measures such as administrative ratios and compensation policies, neither of which bear any demonstrable relationship to actual impact on target populations, and yet they are widely accepted as the most valuable independent standards of charitable success. Positive market signals also come from donors who by and large are not that different from the six-year-old Ryan Hreljac; they are drawn to the exuberant image of water flowing for the first time, not to the less captivating, though no less important, picture of tightening bolts, oiling joints, and replacing corroded parts. With the

unchanging incentives, it is natural that the charities continue to focus on drilling holes. All institutions are creatures of economic forces, and the incentives for water charities, and indeed for the entire charitable sector, encourage easy wins, short-term solutions, and unfortunately, minimal or indeterminate impact.

Ryan Hreljac is a metaphor for charitable success—and charitable failure. Inspired and inspiring, he has dedicated his still young life to one of the most important issues of our time: a global public health crisis that also has implications for gender equality, economic opportunity, and social justice. The world needs more Ryan Hreljacs, but it also needs organizations that rigorously pursue effective solutions to problems. The difficulty of generating scalable solutions to a problem of enormous complexity can frustrate the best of intentions, and it would be both unfair and cynical to say that Ryan's lifelong efforts have been for naught. Cynicism is better left for our next story of charitable failure.

Big-city police chiefs, for all their power and resources, are largely an anonymous breed trotted out from time to time to decry the latest urban mayhem and declare the intent of the police to bring perpetrators to swift justice. They tend to be bureaucrats, skilled in city politics, reassuringly bland before the cameras. Not Daryl Gates. For fourteen years as chief of the Los Angeles police, Gates cultivated an image as a hard-charging, straight-shooting leader whose skills were honed as a beat cop rather than as a city hall politician. He was a relentless innovator. He fathered the SWAT (special weapons and tactics) program to handle particularly volatile and dangerous armed confrontations and developed a model citywide communications system that substantially reduced police response time.<sup>16</sup> And he authored an aggressive, military style of policing to combat a rising level of gang and drug violence. He torturously named CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) units hammering gangs with intensive door-to-door sweeps, and his penchant for dramatic tactics was captured in the use of armored assault vehicles tipped with steel battering rams. President George H. W. Bush called him “an all-American hero.”

But his aggressive approach courted controversy, which plagued the LAPD throughout his tenure. His CRASH teams—later immortalized in the movie *Colors*, starring Sean Penn and Robert Duvall, and in the federal courts by the Rampart Division scandal—were both successful in taking numerous gang members off the streets and notorious due to widespread complaints of false arrests and excessive use of force and for creating general hostility between the then mostly white LAPD officers and their largely black and Latino targets. The tense and deteriorating relationship between Gates and the black community reached a low point with the Rodney King incident in 1991, when a high-speed police chase ended in a vicious facedown beating that left King with a broken cheekbone, eleven broken bones at the base of the skull, and a broken leg. The level of hostility between the black community and Gates personally was captured by two very different public personalities: Ice Cube, who rapped, “Don't let me catch Daryl Gates in traffic / I gotta have it to peel his cap backwards” and the former secretary of state Warren Christopher, whose investigative commission in 1991 blamed the excessive force used by the LAPD on a lack of top leadership and management controls.

Gates, while universally described as courtly and pleasant in person, also had a penchant for incendiary rhetoric. After his officers were criticized for using a carotid choke hold that

caused injury and sometimes death, Gates commented, “We may be finding in some black [that] when it is applied, the veins or arteries do not open up as fast as ... on normal people. In 1990, Gates told a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing that “casual drug users ought to be taken out and shot.”<sup>17</sup> His views on drug issues were colored by both personal and professional experiences. Gates’s rise to the top of the LAPD more or less coincided with the intensification of the nationwide war on drugs, and he was an implacable, take-no-prisoners warrior in the fight; some of his most vitriolic rhetoric and most violent police operations occurred in this context. The fact that Gates’s son struggled for years with drug addiction served as a sad, painful backdrop to his professional life.

Ironically, it was in the war on drugs—the arena where he earned his reputation as a tough, grinding battlefield commander—that Gates devised his most durable, perhaps his most important, and certainly his most community-oriented and pacific strategy. In 1983, in partnership with the Rotary Club of Los Angeles, he took the fight against illegal drugs to a new, unexpected front, the elementary school classroom. His weapon, a new nonprofit called Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.), was an innovation in solving the drug problem from the demand side. It envisioned a curriculum for students as young as fifth graders about the dangers of drugs, both illegal drugs and legal ones such as tobacco and alcohol. The D.A.R.E. model is highly structured, involving ten to twenty weekly hour-long sessions featuring lectures, class discussion, and role-playing. The goal of the program is to educate students about the dangers of drugs, build good decision-making and peer pressure resistance skills, and boost students’ self-esteem. Critical to the concept of the program is that all the teachers of the D.A.R.E. curriculum are police officers who have received at least eight hours of specialized training in child development, classroom management, elementary school teaching, and communications skills. Thus D.A.R.E., in addition to creating a strong classroom experience, sought to forge an understanding between children and the police force. Ironically, Gates, who had stood strong as the old guard against the innovations of community policing, had birthed a unique relationship between the police and the younger members of his public.

The timing of D.A.R.E. could not have been better. In addition to having the built-in institutional support of the third-largest and perhaps most storied police force in America—the force made iconic by *Dragnet* and *Adam-12* and lampooned by O. J. Simpson of all people in *The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!*—D.A.R.E. hit all the right political notes during the Reagan and the first Bush administrations’ war on drugs. It had the proper mix of political theology—a strong stand against the evils of drugs, action at the local level—and it leavened to some degree other more punitive programs that were the foundations of the enforcement effort. Significant federal funding followed, and D.A.R.E. grew at extraordinary rates. By the end of the 1990s, it had become by far the largest drug education program in the country, penetrating 75 percent of American school districts. At its apex, D.A.R.E. annually reached thirty-five million children in the United States alone and was present in fifty-four countries around the world. While those numbers are slightly lower today, it remains by far the most expansive and prominent American drug prevention organization.

By most measures, D.A.R.E. is a great example of the power of the charitable sector, an organization that has built a novel and needed program and scaled itself dramatically to reach its vast target audience. D.A.R.E. has leveraged substantial cooperation and funding from

individuals, nonprofits, and government to create a wide and strong base of support. Its Web site and literature are filled with warm anecdotes from police officers, parents, and students testifying to the success of the program. It is widely known and largely admired, so much so that President Obama has, as did presidents before him, annually declared a National D.A.R.E. Day in early April. There is only one minor blemish to this picture: virtually every piece of quantitative evidence demonstrates that the D.A.R.E. program doesn't actually work.

With its astonishingly rapid spread around the country and its connection to the broad and politically charged war on drugs, D.A.R.E. not surprisingly drew substantial scholarly scrutiny. D.A.R.E. in fact did not spring fully developed from the fertile mind of Daryl Gates; it was based upon the intriguing, but largely untested, social influence theory of a well-known psychologist named William Hansen. Hansen's model was built around the concept of resistance-skills training, giving youth the skills to reject negative social pressures. While D.A.R.E. had these respectable theoretical roots, it was unheard of for an educational program to be so extensively implemented without trial runs and careful testing. Many in the educational research community were understandably suspicious that D.A.R.E.'s growth owed more to political convenience and the personal influence of Gates than to good and careful educational policy, and they set out to test its effectiveness.

In the early 1990s, researchers began to release the first studies on the impact of D.A.R.E. and the results were not promising. In 1991, a Kentucky study for the National Institute on Drug Abuse found "no statistically significant differences" between the drug habits of youth who went through the program and youth who did not. In 1993, a Research Triangle Institute report declared that D.A.R.E. has "a limited to essentially non-existent effect" on drug use, and a Canadian government study found "no significant effect on the use of ... marijuana, acid, heroin, crack, glue and P.C.P."<sup>18</sup> Most of the reporting, which generated substantial debate about D.A.R.E., was challenged by the program's advocates as preliminary in nature or lacking in the long-term statistically valid tracking that could form the foundation for a firm evaluation of the program.<sup>19</sup> That was not available until 1998.

"Assessing the Effects of School-Based Drug Education: A Six-Year Multilevel Analysis of Project D.A.R.E." was—and still is—the most comprehensive study of D.A.R.E.<sup>20</sup> The study was much anticipated by D.A.R.E. proponents since the lead investigator, Dennis Rosenbaum, the head of the Department of Criminal Justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago, was a longtime advocate for the program and because it was such a comprehensive undertaking. Over six years, researchers followed different groups of students, some of whom were randomly assigned into D.A.R.E. programs and some of whom were randomly placed into control groups. Six years is a long time to wait for a report, so one can imagine the excitement and perhaps trepidation with which it was anticipated. It is only a little harder to imagine the profound disappointment when the report landed with a big negative thrust. Overall, the study found that D.A.R.E. had no material effect on participants, certainly not in the long term. In just one or two subcategories, the study found D.A.R.E. to have some modest positive short-term effects, but the positive effects disappeared completely by the critical high school years. The researchers even found a small "boomerang" effect on suburban students; that is, suburban students who went through the D.A.R.E. program were *more* likely to gravitate toward drugs than their control group peers. The researchers offered a number of theories for this unexpected and unintended consequence, with the most



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