



Pittsburgh Wants to “Predict” If You Deserve to be a Parent at the Birth of Every Child

By Brian Shilhavy | October 15, 2019

PARENT TEST

PASS



baby goes home

FAIL



baby to foster care

Imagine a day where every child born in a hospital gets ranked on whether or not their parents will be good enough parents to take care of them, and a risk score is attached to that child based on how the government views the child’s parents.

If the risk score is too low, the parents do not get to take their child home. The child is seized by the government and assigned new parents through the multi-billion dollar foster care system.

Does this sound like something terrible from a science fiction movie? Or something that might happen in other tyrannical countries where parents have little or no choice over how their children are raised?

This system is actually already in place and is already being used in many states all across the U.S.

Richard Wexler from the *National Coalition for Child Protection Reform* published an **excellent piece** last week on the topic of “Predictive Analysis” in child welfare, and how Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh and surrounding suburbs, is now using a system like this to label every child born in the county with a “risk score” which supposedly tells Child Protective Services how likely parents are to abuse their newborn children.

From ***Pittsburgh’s child welfare agency goes full Orwell:***

It is perhaps the ultimate Orwellian nightmare: From the moment your child is born, the child and family are labeled with a “risk score” – a number that supposedly tells authorities how likely you are to abuse your newborn. The big government agency that slaps this invisible scarlet number on you and your newborn promises it will be used only to decide if you need extra help to raise your child, and the help will be voluntary.

But once you’re in the database, that score stays there forever. And if, someday, the same big government agency wants to use the score to help decide you’re too much of a risk to be allowed to keep your child, there is nothing to stop them. The scarlet number may haunt your family for generations. The fact that your child was supposedly born into a “high risk” family may be used against the child when s/he has children.

Welcome to the dystopian future of child welfare – and childbirth – in metropolitan Pittsburgh, Pa.

As we have reported in previous articles, in places where *Predictive Analysis* software is used for risk assessment for child abuse, poor minorities are targeted as more likely to have a high risk score.

From [Wexler’s article](#):

For a couple of years now, Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh and surrounding suburbs, has been using something called the Allegheny Family Screening Tool (AFST), a predictive analytics algorithm, to help decide which families should be investigated as alleged child abusers.

The algorithm is weighted heavily toward punishing parents for being poor. In her brilliant book, *Automating Inequality*, Prof. Virginia Eubanks calls it “poverty profiling.” [In her review of *Automating Inequality*](#), Prof. Dorothy Roberts (a member of NCCPR’s Board of Directors) extends the analysis to show how predictive analytics reinforces racial bias.

County Starts “Hello Baby” Program in January 2020

According to Wexler, starting in January, 2020, the county plans to start a program it calls “[Hello Baby](#)” which will assist them in getting newborn babies into their database. To NOT have your baby included in the database, one has to “opt out,” but how to opt out is apparently not clearly defined yet.

Here’s how the county says it will work.

During some of the most chaotic hours of a family’s life, those hours in the hospital after a baby is born, when one medical professional, volunteer or other hospital-affiliated person after another is traipsing in and out of the room, the family will be handed a packet of information about the help available through “Hello Baby.” A nurse may also discuss the program with the family.

The program offers three tiers of services. Tier 1 is automatically available to everyone without having to surrender their data. That tier is simply information about help that’s already out there. Tiers two and three provide more intensive help to individual families. But

to get that help you must accept having the child labeled by an algorithm as at moderate or high risk of abuse.

The program automatically assumes you have given permission for this massive invasion of family privacy – it’s the equivalent of a “default setting” on an app you may download without realizing how much data you surrender in return. (Or just think of all the data you may have given to Facebook to share at will because you didn’t find the right button among the settings.)

The “Hello Baby” document is vague about the whole opt-out process. You get one notice – in the form of a postcard mailed to your home a few days after the child is born. Along with a reminder of the benefits of “Hello Baby” somewhere on that postcard will be a notification that you must specifically opt out of being run through the database – otherwise you and your child are slapped with that risk score whether you really wanted to participate or not.

The material made available by Allegheny County does not mention how much time you have to opt out before your name is run through the database. Nor does it say anything about expunging a risk score if you choose to opt out after the county has already done it.

Can We Trust Government with “Risk” Data?

In his article Wexler points out how government officials are dancing around ethic problems and trying to assure the public that the system will be voluntary, and that they will never misuse the data.

The biggest problem with this promise, of course, is that it depends on health officials and CPS to police themselves.

As an example of how this kind of data can be misused to take children away from their parents, Wexler mentions [a case in New York earlier this year](#) where a mother had her children rated as “at risk” simply because she disclosed that during her pregnancy with twins, she used cannabis for medical purposes.



Shakira Kennedy with her twins. [Image source.](#)

Shakira Kennedy wrote about her experiences in the [New York Daily News](#):

I am a 28-year-old loving mother and a taxpaying citizen. I have a beautiful 7-year-old daughter in a gifted and talented program and two beautiful twin baby boys. I would do anything for my children.

Unfortunately, during my pregnancy with the twins, I suffered from extreme morning sickness and could not keep food or water down. I sought the best medical care, and my doctors told me I needed to gain weight for the health of my babies.

But the medicine they prescribed didn't work. Nothing did, until I tried cannabis.

Making sure to tell my doctor everything, I disclosed that I smoked cannabis and it helped me eat normally. That's when I became a victim of circumstance. When my children were born, they tested negative for marijuana. But still the hospital called ACS.

I made clear to ACS that I had to use marijuana under unique circumstances — but that I would not continue to use it. I asked to schedule a drug test to prove that it would no longer be in my system.

They made me go to court or face the loss all three of my children. Then, instead of ongoing drug-testing, I was compelled to go to an outpatient rehab program three days a week for an addiction I don't have.

Now, I have complete strangers from ACS coming into my home and telling me what to do as a parent.

Unless I am able to win my case in Family Court and get my record sealed at a later hearing, I will be blacklisted for alleged child neglect — and unable to get any job near children until my twins turn 28. ([Source.](#))

With a long history of CPS using whatever means they can to abduct children, Wexler has a healthy skepticism when it comes to trusting government sources who say they will never misuse risk assessment data.

County officials solemnly promise not to use the data that way – they say they'll use it only to target help, and won't make it a part of child abuse investigations. But even the promise has a loophole:

As the county's "Hello Baby" overview puts it:

*The County pledges that this Hello Baby analytic model will only be used to provide voluntary supportive services as described here **and updated over time.*** [Emphasis added.]

But there is no institutional safeguard in place. There is nothing to stop the leaders of the agency that created "Hello Baby" and crave having data on every child from birth from changing their minds whenever they damn well feel like it.

When might that be? How about the first time there's a child abuse tragedy and word leaks out that the family had been labeled "high risk" at the time of the child's birth? That's when the demands will come to make this information available immediately to child protective services and to use it to immediately trigger a CPS investigation – or worse.

Read the full article at the [National Coalition for Child Protection Reform blog](#).