

Family history, neighborhood affect teen behavior problems

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Girls' behaviors worsen more than boys' when neighborhood conditions deteriorate, a new University of Michigan study indicates. Boys are adversely influenced by family factors, such as parental education, a family member's incarceration and parents' work behavior, said Irene Ng, the study's author.

"For males, it is not so much low income per se, but low income as a result of lack of employment for heads of households and in the context of family disruption that negatively influences behavior," said Ng, a graduate student at U-M's School of Social Work.

Ng studied family history and neighborhood impacts on 17 behavior problems such as mood changes, cheating or lying, bullying or cruelty to others, deliberately destroying things, and hanging around with kids who get into trouble. These problems were studied collectively, not individually. Girls had more problems than boys when neighborhood conditions didn't improve.

Her findings will be presented today at the annual Society for Social Work and Research conference in San Antonio, Texas.

Using results from a sample of 873 adolescents aged 14 to 17, the study showed that single parenthood—rather than family income and wealth—adversely affects adolescent behavior problems. Greater monitoring by the primary caregiver reduces youth deviance, she said.

For sons, the head of household working few hours in a non-traditional family structure and incarceration history in the family have adverse consequences, the study indicates. This is not the case for daughters.

Ng looked at neighborhood variables, including one rated by primary caregivers and another based on census characteristics. Both boys and girls are adversely affected by poorer neighborhood conditions, but the effects were greater for girls.

The study's findings have several implications. Although anti-poverty policies may not directly influence adolescent behavior, strategies to lower poverty levels by supporting family relationships and vitalizing neighborhoods could reduce adolescent deviance, she said.

Furthermore, criminal prevention and rehabilitation efforts should be part of the solution to reducing behavior problems of adolescent children of criminals, Ng said.

Source: University of Michigan

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