

Even in good communities, roaming teens a recipe for violence

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Even in better neighborhoods, parents should be wary about letting teens gather with nothing to do and with no adult supervision, a new study suggests.

In a long-term study of Chicago neighborhoods, researchers found that informal teen gatherings significantly increased the likelihood of [violent behavior](#) by the [adolescents](#).

While levels of violence differed according to the types of neighborhoods involved, findings showed that communities that often had groups of unsupervised teens also had higher levels of violence - including many relatively "good" neighborhoods where residents trust and help each other and watch each other's children.

"Even if you trust all your neighbors and all the teens are 'A' students, it is best to assume that groups of teens just hanging out can lead to problems, including violence," said Christopher Browning, co-author of the study and associate professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

Other research has shown that "unstructured socializing" by teens can lead to general delinquency, but this study is the first to suggest that it may also be associated with violent behavior.

"The findings tap into the debate about how much structure is appropriate for kids today," Browning said.

Browning conducted the study with David Maimon, a former Ohio State graduate student now at the University of Maryland. The results appear in the current issue of the journal [Criminology](#).

The study relies on data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods Community Survey and Longitudinal Cohort Study. The survey and study were designed to examine how the environments of 80 different Chicago neighborhoods affected their residents lives in a variety of ways. The same residents were interviewed three times between 1994 and 2002.

This study included 842 young people who were between the ages of 8 and 13 during their first interview. Violent behavior by these young people was measured during the third interview.

The results showed a complex relationship between teen violence and the kind of neighborhood that the teens lived in, Browning said.

The researchers measured levels of what sociologists call "collective efficacy" in each neighborhood. High levels of collective efficacy means that neighbors trust each other, are willing to help each other and intervene to control public spaces and help keep each other's kids in line.

As expected, neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy tended to have lower levels of violence, if all other factors are controlled for.

But the study showed that parents in these high-collective-efficacy neighborhoods were also more likely to let their teens out unsupervised.

"Parents feel more relaxed about sending their kids out without adult supervision, because they trust their neighbors," Browning said.

The study showed that groups of unsupervised teens, even in many of these "good" neighborhoods, led to higher levels of violence.

"These neighborhoods may be better at managing their streets, parks, and other public venues, but letting teens out unsupervised is offsetting many of those benefits," Browning said.

Those neighborhoods that scored the very highest on levels of collective efficacy were able to keep teen violence down, even with higher levels of unstructured socializing.

But Browning cautioned that "it's probably best not to try to gauge how much collective efficacy is enough to prevent teen violence.

"Parents are better off assuming that more structure is better for their teens."

Browning said the study took into account a wide variety of characteristics that are also associated with violence, such as prior levels of violence of each adolescent, their levels of impulsivity, and the violence levels of each child's peers.

Even when these factors were taken into account, the study found that unstructured socializing still had an independent impact on levels of violence.

The results suggest that it is important to build relationships in communities so that neighbors trust each other and are willing to help each other monitor activities in the area, Browning said.

But even for those who live in such "good" neighborhoods, it is still important to provide adult supervision of youth activities, including after school programs.

"Communities need both the shared willingness to control adolescent behavior in public space and the capacity to provide adolescents with options other than unsupervised 'hanging out,'" Browning said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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