

Happiness can deter crime, a new study finds

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Happy adolescents report less involvement in crime and drug use than other youth, a new UC Davis study finds.

The paper, "Get Happy! Positive Emotion, Depression and Juvenile Crime," is co-authored by Bill McCarthy, a UC Davis sociology professor, and Teresa Casey, a postdoctoral researcher at UC Davis, and will be presented today at the [American Sociological Association](#) Annual Meeting in Las Vegas.

"Our results suggest that the emphasis placed on [happiness](#) and well-being by positive psychologists and others is warranted," McCarthy said. "In addition to their other benefits, programs and policies that increase childhood and adolescent happiness may have a notable effect on deterring nonviolent crime and drug use."

The authors used 1995 and 1996 data from nearly 15,000 seventh- to ninth-grade students in the federally funded National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the largest, most comprehensive survey of [adolescents](#) ever undertaken.

They found that about 29 percent of the youth surveyed reported having committed at least one criminal offense, and 18 percent said that they had used at least one [illegal drug](#). The researchers then correlated these reports with self-assessments of emotional well-being.

Consequences of happiness are rarely examined by [sociologists](#), and no previous studies have investigated its association with juvenile crime, the

authors said.

Many explanations of adolescents' decisions about crime focus either on reflective thought that discourages offending, or [negative emotions](#) — such as anger or rage — that contribute to it.

McCarthy and Casey argue that positive emotions also have a role. "We hypothesize that the benefits of happiness — from strong bonds with others, a positive self-image and the development of socially valued cognitive and behavioral skills — reinforce a decision-making approach that is informed by positive emotions," they write in their study.

Their research finds that happier adolescents were less likely to report involvement in crime or drug use. Adolescents with minor, or nonclinical, depression had significantly higher odds of engaging in such activities.

The study also found that changes in emotions over time matter.

Adolescents who experienced a decrease in their level of happiness or an increase in the degree of their depression over a one-year period had higher odds of being involved in [crime](#) and of using drugs.

Most adolescents experience both happiness and depression, and the study finds that the relative intensity of these emotions is also important. The odds of [drug use](#) were notably lower for youth who reported that they were more often happy than depressed, and were substantially higher for those who indicated that they were more depressed than happy.

Provided by University of California - Davis

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