

# Examining motherly fears

October 3 2011

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Neighborhood poverty is likely to make a mother more fearful about letting her children play outdoors, according to a new study by sociologists at Rice University and Stanford University.

"It's no secret that children play outdoors less now than in recent decades, and research shows maternal fear as one reason why," said Rachel Tolbert Kimbro, Rice assistant professor of sociology. She co-authored a paper in the October issue of the journal *Family Relations* with Ariela Schachter, a Ph.D. student in sociology at Stanford.

"This study addresses reasons why mothers do or do not let their children play outside," Kimbro said.

Kimbro and Schachter theorize that a mother's fear of her child playing outside is a major component of her decisions regarding the child's free [playtime](#). They tested maternal, household and [neighborhood characteristics](#) that may be related to maternal fear and discovered the following:

- A mother's household [economic status](#), education, employment and physical/mental health all influence maternal fear.
- [Perception](#) of a neighborhood's collective efficacy (shared values and goals, social support) is associated with maternal fear. Mothers who believe they live in neighborhoods with shared values and goals are less likely to be fearful of their child playing outdoors, and vice versa.

- [Poverty](#) and the percentage of blacks in a neighborhood are associated with increased maternal fear.

"It's not entirely surprising that poverty aligns with greater maternal fear," Kimbro said. "When considering the characteristics associated with many impoverished neighborhoods – lack of playgrounds, poor sidewalks and the potential for crime – it makes sense that mothers might be more fearful."

Kimbro said that contrary to what one might expect, mothers are more concerned with issues of social support than crime rates.

"The fear of children playing outside is not completely rational," she said. "You might think that a logical response is to keep your child inside when crime rates are higher, but our research shows that factors closer to the mother, such as how she feels about her neighbors, are more likely to influence her feelings of fear."

"Children's outdoor play is an important indicator of overall healthy development," Kimbro said. Although neighborhood poverty strongly influences maternal [fear](#), mothers of sound mental health living in impoverished areas are less likely to be fearful of their children playing outside.

"Our results suggest that efforts to minimize depression among mothers living in poverty could have significant, positive impacts on parenting behaviors and particularly in the promotion of children's outdoor play," Kimbro said.

The study, "Neighborhood Poverty and Maternal Fears of Children's Outdoor Play," is the third paper to come from Kimbro's broader research project exploring the links between neighborhoods and children's outdoor play using data from the Fragile Families and Child

Well-Being Study.

Provided by Rice University

Citation: Examining motherly fears (2011, October 3) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-motherly.html>

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