

Study links kids' neighborhood surroundings with survival expectations

March 12 2013, by Deann Gayman

What do you want to be when you grow up? It's a common question asked of children, and they can come up with all sorts of answers: A doctor. A firefighter. A teacher. Kids think about their futures as they emulate the adults around them.

But about 15 percent of children—most of whom live in impoverished neighborhoods—in a new national study do not expect to live to age 35. For those children, the research shows, it's often not "when I grow up." Instead, they think in terms of "if I grow up."

The study, by University of Nebraska-Lincoln sociologist Tara Warner and Bowling Green State University sociologist Raymond Swisher, added to mounting evidence suggesting neighborhoods matter in adolescent and young adult survival expectations.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Swisher and Warner examined factors thought to undermine youths' outlook on life, with particular attention to the effect of individuals' neighborhoods. They found that growing up in an underprivileged neighborhood and being exposed to violence were both highly linked to [insecurity](#) about future survival.

Other sources of low survival expectations included poor mental and [physical health](#), along with limited access to routine health care; being a member of a minority group; and individual behaviors such as impulsivity and violent perpetration.

Warner said most of the 20,103 youths surveyed were confident that they would survive into [adulthood](#), but those with lower expectations were more likely to live in less affluent neighborhoods.

"The most startling find is the long-term impact of growing up in a [poor neighborhood](#) on attitudes of future survival," said Warner, assistant professor of sociology at UNL.

Swisher and Warner said their study adds to the increasing evidence that living in [disadvantaged neighborhoods](#) has long-term effects, especially when children are exposed to violence.

"More recent research suggests that the most damaging aspect of living in a poor neighborhood may be exposure to violence," Swisher said.

"Concerns about avoiding violence and fears of victimization so overwhelm daily life for parents and their children, that longer-term concerns such as doing well and staying in school, or avoiding risky behavior fall by the wayside."

Warner said earlier research on youth survival attitudes piqued the authors' interest and provided the impetus for the current study.

"There had been some recent studies about survival attitudes and we were curious about where these attitudes come from in the first place," she said.

The study, "If They Grow Up: Exploring Neighborhood Context of Adolescent and Young Adult Survival Expectations" was published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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