

Poor rural youth in Haiti are rich in family ties, rooted in their own culture

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Haitian teens, especially those who live in the country's rural areas, are among the poorest persons in the Western Hemisphere, but they are rich in their family relationships and strongly rooted in their own culture, a University of Illinois study finds.

"It's true that rural Haitian teens didn't directly suffer the major trauma of the 2012 earthquake, but they deal daily with the effects of poverty—not enough food, no money to go to school, a lack of electricity much of the time, little access to clinics or hospitals," said Gail M. Ferguson, a U of I professor of human development and [family studies](#) who studies the cultural identity and well-being of adolescents in the Caribbean, including the effects of exposure to U.S. [culture](#).

In the course of a lifetime, chronic exposure to poverty can have the same impact as an earthquake-sized trauma, she said.

"However, these teens report having a strong sense of family obligation and an attachment to Haitian culture, which probably protects them and contributes to their resilience," she said.

In the study, the researchers used a survey to measure strength of family obligations and cultural orientation among 105 early adolescents (10 to 14 years) in rural Haiti. Among other findings, she learned that teens, especially boys, believe very strongly that they should respect and obey their parents and assist them when they need help without being paid for it.

"Can you imagine how helpful that would be for a family with few resources? That attitude in itself contributes to a close parent-child relationship, which is a positive factor in adolescent development," she said.

Affinity for the teens' own culture, which has been found to be a protective factor in other populations, was nearly three times as high as American orientation among survey participants.

"Haitian culture is known for its creativity and its close community bonds. The arts, particularly visual arts and a love of story, provide an emotional outlet for Haitian youth, helping to channel their emotions, desires, and needs," she said.

This connection to Haitian culture is strong despite the influence of U.S. culture through migration, trade, and technology. The U.S. is the primary destination for Haitian emigrants who continue to communicate with relatives and friends back on the island. Before the earthquake, American tourists comprised more than 69 percent of visitors to Haiti; since then, U.S. aid workers have been a significant presence on the island, the researcher said.

Although some scholars decry what they see as a global homogenization due to the spread of American cultural elements overseas, Ferguson finds that rural Haitian youth are not oriented toward American persons, products, media, or sports. They may be mostly uninterested in U.S. culture, have little access to it, or both, she said.

"If anything, rural Haitian teens may be more oriented toward the rich and hip lifestyles within urban Haitian culture," she noted.

However, rural teen boys who interacted more frequently with U.S. tourists and [aid workers](#) had a slightly higher orientation toward

American culture. She anticipates that Haitian youth will "add rather than swap" as they become exposed to other cultures, holding on to what is valuable in their own culture while adding identification with parts of other cultures that are appealing to them.

More information: "Ayiti Cheri": Cultural Orientation of Early Adolescents in Rural Haiti is available pre-publication online in the *Journal of Early Adolescence*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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