

'Getting-by girls' straddle gap between academic winners and losers

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Everyone notices the academic superstars and failures, but what about the tens of millions of American teens straddling these two extremes? A new study from the University of California, Berkeley, has spotlighted a high school subculture that has made an art of slacking – even with ample educational resources – and may be destined to perpetuate the nation's struggling lower-middle class.

UC Berkeley sociologist Michele Rossi studied white [teenage girls](#) in their last year of a well-funded [high school](#). What she found was a group she dubbed "getting-by [girls](#)," whose coping strategies include paying attention in class, placating teachers and other authority figures, copying one another's schoolwork or cheating, avoiding challenges and bringing home B-average report cards.

But while getting-by girls put in just enough effort to meet the demands of schoolwork, athletics, school clubs and partying, their practice of sufficing keeps them from making the most of the academic resources at their disposal. The U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that reading, math and social science scores among 17-year-olds have flatlined since the 1980s while scores among [middle school](#) and elementary students have risen. Peer groups and school culture are said to have a major impact on academic achievement, particularly in high school, and Rossi's two-year investigation reinforces this dynamic.

"These girls under-perform academically not because they lack ability, or self-esteem, or good teachers," said Rossi, who will present her

findings Aug. 16 at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco. "They under-perform because their white lower middle-class culture values sociability, and doing enough to have enough. In a high school context, this culture clashes with an upper-middle class culture that prizes striving and individual advancement."

Rossi's findings come at a time when political attention and resources, as well as media coverage, are sharply focused on the educational needs of low-income, at-risk students on the one hand, and the more affluent, highly competitive students (and their parents) vying for spots in top-ranking universities on the other.

They also provide a rare insight into the attitudes and aspirations of the children of America's struggling lower-middle class. A recent report by the Hamilton Project found that lower-middle-class families are more likely to be headed by two-income married couples, with at least one parent having attended college, but who still face many of the same financial insecurities as those living in poverty.

Looking at "how class differences shape young white women's aspirations and strategies for social mobility," Rossi interviewed 56 girls in the 12th grade of a racially and socio-economically diverse East Coast public high school. She also interviewed 30 of their mothers. At that time, the school district's per-pupil spending was \$13,000, higher than today's national average per-pupil spending of \$11,000.

Parents of the getting-by girls typically held mid-level positions in a large company or ran small, independent businesses. By contrast, the upper-middle-class parents of the students referred to as "overachievers" were professionals or executives who held advanced and/or bachelor's degrees from a selective institution, and the working class or poor parents of the under-achievers, referred to in the study as "nowhere kids," had a [high school education](#) or GED at best.

Defining themselves as "regular kids" or "slackers," the getting-by girls distanced themselves from the privileged, competitive overachievers they refer to as "AP kids," "honors kids" and "dorks," (and whom they consider pushy, uptight or neurotic) and the low-income, low-performing students they refer to as "losers," "burnouts" or "kids who act ghetto." That does not mean, however, that they occupy higher moral ground.

"Getting-by girls are good kids who do not get into trouble. Their teachers, coaches, school administrators and school staff like them. Their friends' parents like them," the study says. "However this does not mean that all getting-by girls always follow the rules ... Rather when they do violate rules or expectations or defy authority, they do not get caught."

Next, Rossi, a doctoral student in sociology at UC Berkeley, plans to follow up with the getting-by girls she studied to see how they have fared in the wake of the Great Recession of 2007-09, and if their attitudes and aspirations have changed in the face of a more competitive employment market.

"The getting-by girls' emphasis on fun and cultivating social ties is appealing, as is their resistance to the cut-throat competitiveness and pursuit of self-interest they see among their 'overachiever' peers," Rossi said. "However, in an increasingly polarized job market, where educational attainment – particularly in STEM fields – is the key to 'good' jobs, it is not clear there is a place for them."

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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