

T's poverty, not the 'teenage drain,' that causes the most youth crime

A new analysis of crime stats suggests that economics trumps biology in causing violent behavior in teenagers.

While trading stories about the wide range of things that confused us when we were young children, a friend described how afraid he used to be of teenagers. He wasn't afraid of any actual young adults in his life, but rather the capital-T teenagers he heard about when his parents watched the local news on TV every evening. It seemed to his nervous ears as though the police were always on the hunt for some devious, dangerous Teenagers who had committed some crime or another in his town.

Compounding his confusion was the vague knowledge that all of the adults in his life were once themselves teenagers. If being a Teenager necessarily meant committing crimes, then what had his parents and grandparents and teachers done in their day, he wondered? And how did they all seem to have gotten away with it?

This childish confusion isn't too much of a stretch from the typical mainstream depiction of teens, and of the "teenage brain," infamously a work in progress. Teenagers are known the world over for their under-developed sense of right and wrong, their impulsive decision-making, their overly emotional responses, and their unavoidably reckless behavior.

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Psychological and sociological studies have examined the impact of all types of stimuli on teenagers' criminal behavior—like peer pressure, parental attitudes, dropping out of school, drinking, drugs, and, yes, violent video games. And in the criminal justice world, the "teenage brain" itself has been cited as a reason to end solitary confinement for adolescents and teenagers—not to mention the abolition of both life sentences and the death penalty for juveniles.

But as important as it is to keep the teenage brain in mind when we as a society decide how poor decisions should be punished, maybe it's not the most important factor in how those decisions get made in the first place. The results of a new study by Mike Males from the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice in San Francisco support the argument that teenage poverty, not teenage biology, is most to blame for teenage crime.

Males looked specifically at the more than 50,000 homicides in California from 1991 to 2002. As one would expect, teenagers perpetrated more of the homicides than other age groups—but only when he did not control for poverty. When he did control for poverty, teenagers committed more crimes than other age groups only in high-poverty areas. In the areas where teenagers had as much money as other middle-aged people, they tended to commit fewer

violent crimes. And in the areas where middle-aged people had as little money as other teenagers, those middle-aged people tended to commit just as many violent crimes.

In other words, financially secure teens act as responsibly as stereotypical middle-aged people; and poor middle-aged people act as recklessly as stereotypical teens. The financial situations of the would-be perpetrators had a lot bigger impact than what age they were at the time. And that impact was huge: The homicide rate among the poorest teenagers Males looked at was 18 times higher than it was among the wealthiest. He writes in his article:

In every case we have investigated of supposedly signature “adolescent risks”—fatal traffic crashes, firearms mortality, felony crime, violent crime, and, in the present study, homicide and firearms homicide—we find they are severely mitigated or disappear altogether once the economic playing field is leveled.

So how to level that playing field? Addressing youth unemployment could provide some hope. Teens’ unemployment, and under-employment, have always been a given: Young people typically don’t yet have the experience or education to get well-paying jobs. And in tough economic times like these, teenagers are also often competing for entry-level jobs with more experienced people who would otherwise be higher up the professional ladder.

The latest job numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed an unemployment rate for 16- to 19-year-olds of 17.1 percent. (By comparison, the overall unemployment rate for American workers, as of February, was 5.5 percent.) Lower income areas have always been associated with high crime, but recent research shows that areas with notable income inequality are, too—especially for people between the ages of 15 and 24.

“Within every race and community, adolescents suffer poverty rates two to three times higher than older adults do,” Males tells SAGE Open. “It is astonishing that researchers have compiled decades of theories and claims about teenagers’ supposed risk-taking, impulsiveness, brain deficiencies, and crime-proneness without examining whether these are due to young people’s low socioeconomic status, not young age.”

However, if his analysis is correct, it presents quite a formidable challenge to those policymakers and advocates who would try to affect change in the lives of disadvantaged individuals and lower-income, crime-ridden communities. As Males writes in his article, “Under this revised theory, young people do not ‘age out’ of crime, they ‘wealth out.’”