

In violent neighborhoods, adults too fearful to intervene with most young offenders

A study of young, violent criminals in New York City found that they used fear and intimidation to keep adults from interfering with their criminal activities.

Almost 40 percent of the young offenders interviewed said that adults' fear of teens was the defining characteristic of their relations.

As a result, in many situations, adults ignored criminal activity by teens and young adults, findings showed.

These results suggest that one of the usual prescriptions for ending youth violence – more informal social control by neighborhood adults – may not be realistic in some violent neighborhoods.

“There are these somewhat naïve notions that the key to reducing violence is to create these close ties with neighbors, where adults can provide informal social control over teens,” said Deanna Wilkinson, author of the study and associate professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

“That's not going to work in neighborhoods where relations between adults and young people are governed by fear.”

The study was published recently in the journal *Justice Quarterly*.

The data came from a larger study of 418 active violent offenders from two New York City neighborhoods that were among the worst in terms of poverty and violent crime. Researchers led by Wilkinson interviewed males between the ages of 16 and 24 who had been convicted of illegal handgun possession or a violent offense, or had been injured in a violent crime, or identified by screening to have been involved in violence in the last six months. The data were collected from 1995-1998.

Interviews covered a broad range of topics including family experiences, school, employment, neighborhood violence, guns, drug use and other issues.

This particular study focused on ties between young criminals and adults in their neighborhoods.

The results showed that adults in these high-crime neighborhoods faced a difficult situation in their relationships with young adults. The young offenders said they wanted the adults in their neighborhood to care more about them, and to provide more guidance and help. But those same young people also recognized that their own actions frightened adults away.

“Young offenders say neighborhoods have declined because adults have withdrawn and don't seem to care, but they admit they are part of the reason for that because they have made the adults afraid,” Wilkinson said.

About 29 percent of those interviewed said adults avoided or ignored youth, 14 percent said adults had no relationships with teens and 5 percent felt that adults hate teenagers.

“The majority of youth reported that the distance between teens and adults was motivated by fear and threat,” Wilkinson said.

Because of this fear, adults in these neighborhoods often ignored criminal activity by youth, the offenders reported.

The study found that 100 percent of youth reported adults ignored older youths fighting in the street, 74 percent said adults ignored youths selling drugs, 37 percent ignored property being vandalized and 20 percent ignored young children fighting.

These results suggest that adults are most likely to intervene in less serious crimes and when younger children are involved, Wilkinson said.

“Understandably, adults are more likely to get involved when they feel there is less danger to themselves,” she said. “Adults are intimidated by the older youths, and rightfully so.”

Bystanders or neutral parties got involved in only about 20 percent of the violent situations they witnessed, according to the youth who were interviewed – and rarely were their efforts effective in preventing violence.

Adults were also more likely to intervene when outsiders to the neighborhood were vandalizing property, selling drugs, or fighting, the study found.

Intervention was less likely when neighborhood youth were involved in crimes, because the adults are fearful of retaliation from young offenders they know.

“When the offenders are from the outside, the fear adults have is overcome by their desire to clean up the neighborhood,” Wilkinson said.

However, adults were more likely to intervene with young people with whom they had close personal ties, such as children of close friends.

“The adults that do intervene are the ones that these young people have known a long time, the ones that care about them,” Wilkinson said. “But even then there are limits – once youth are involved in serious, violent crimes, they begin cutting more ties to adults.”

Overall, the results show that adults have to consider a variety of factors when deciding whether to intervene to stop criminal activity of youth in their neighborhood.

“Adults look at the age of the youth involved, whether the offender is from the neighborhood, the severity of the crime, the likelihood of retaliation, and whether there is some kind of personal relationship,” Wilkinson said.

“It's not as easy as saying adults should be more involved in the lives of the adolescents in their neighborhood. There's a lot of factors adults have to consider.”

The best scenario would be for adults to try to intervene with children when they are still young and more willing to accept guidance from adults, she said.

While adults may be rightfully fearful of confronting violent youth in their neighborhoods, they can help in more subtle ways by being good role models, Wilkinson said.

These young people need to see adults who go to work and make a positive impact on society.

“We found that, in at least some situations, adults can influence the behaviors and thinking of teens and young men,” she said. “Despite their involvement in criminal activities, the youth in our study had aspirations for better lives free of the chaos of drugs and violence. We need to find ways to reach them when they are younger.”

Wilkinson is putting what she learned in this and other studies into practice to help battle youth violence in

Columbus . She recently initiated the OSU Youth Violence Prevention Advisory Board, which consists of 22 local justice, social service, community action, and prevention professionals to serve as a think tank for finding ways to turn violent youth and neighborhoods around.

“We are working toward developing new strategies for intervening with high risk youth in violent neighborhoods,” she said.

Source: Ohio State University

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