

Urban kids who feel safe look to future, avoid danger

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New research shows that urban middle school students who felt safe in their neighborhoods were better able to resist instant gratification, and in turn engaged in fewer violent and other risky behaviors.

In a study, researchers from the University of Michigan School of Public Health surveyed students in two Flint, Mich., middle schools. Researchers assessed positive and negative neighborhood experiences, time perspective, and tendencies for violence and property crimes.

The ability to delay gratification is thought to have a large impact on an individual's life, including psychological health and economic success. This study showed that youth who felt safe and experienced fewer negative neighborhood events were less likely to engage in violent and destructive behavior. This relationship hinged, however, on the sense that good things come to those who are patient and make an effort even if they do not benefit right away.

"It is not just that people imitate the environment around them," said Daniel Kruger, research scientist in the U-M School of Public Health and lead author of the study. "Neighborhood social experiences actually change one's psychology, and this influences their behavioral patterns." If youths feel that their environment is too unsafe to expect their efforts to pay off far in the future, they will look for instant gratification.

Neighborhood interventions that provide a greater feeling of safety and stability could reduce risky and destructive behaviors and lead to a

sustainable healthy environment.

The researchers measured whether youths felt safe in their neighborhood, whether they saw the people in their neighborhood being helpful with each other or fighting with each other, whether they had been threatened or harassed, or had been the victim of a theft. The youths also reported whether they had been involved in fights or carried a weapon, and whether they had perpetrated a theft, trespassing, arson, or purposeful damage of school property.

Kids who delayed gratification were 40 percent less likely to be in a fight. Those who were focused more on short term rewards were three times as likely to carry a weapon and six times as likely to commit arson and intentionally damage school property.

The study appears in the latest issue of the *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*. Co-authors are Thomas Reischl and Marc A. Zimmerman, both of the U-M School of Public Health.

Source: University of Michigan

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