

Resisting peer pressure

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The company an adolescent keeps, particularly when it comes to drugs and criminal activity, affects bad behavior. Right?

It all depends, according to a new Northwestern University study "Being in 'Bad' Company: Power Dependence and Status in Adolescent [Susceptibility](#) to Peer Influence" which appears in the September issue of [Social Psychology Quarterly](#).

The research, conducted in a primarily Hispanic, low-income neighborhood, looked at diverse groups of friends that included both academically high- and low-achieving kids.

According to the study, some [adolescents](#) in the mixed groups were insulated from the influence of peers who were delinquent or low academic achievers. "Opposite to what a lot of researchers think would happen, some kids in the groups, for example, were doing drugs, while others were not," said Robert Vargas, a doctoral student in sociology at Northwestern and author of the study.

Neighborhood violence and territorial boundaries were likely to be part of the dynamics affecting the bad behavior of the kids who were negatively influenced by peers.

"It wasn't that these kids thought the bad behavior was 'cool,' but rather neighborhood violence constrained their friendship choices," he said.

In the neighborhood where Vargas conducted his research, the territorial

border of the major [gangs](#) in the neighborhood made it difficult for kids to walk to a friend's house who lived on "the other side" of the neighborhood.

"The young [gang members](#) in the neighborhood were very territorial and would attack young people perceived to be in the rival gang when they crossed the border," he said. "Those fearful of being caught in the crossfire tended to avoid crossing the gang boundary, greatly restricting access to certain friends."

[Young adults](#) from such [neighborhoods](#) often don't have the power to find other friends or leave their friendship groups to avoid negative peer pressure. "The effects of neighborhood violence and fears of crossing gang boundaries influences these young people to hang out with people they otherwise would avoid," Vargas said.

Neighborhood violence, the study suggests, victimizes many more than those being directly attacked.

In terms of policy implications, Vargas said, "The study demonstrates the need for policymakers and educators to move beyond public campaigns that convey to adolescents that undesirable acts are 'not cool,' and consider factors that make adolescents dependent on friends or adults.

"As adolescents were influenced by individuals they depended on most, policymakers and educators should consider trying to make [young people](#) more dependent on positive role models by, for example, requiring community service hours."

Provided by Northwestern University

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