

# Does living in the United States promote teenage risk taking?

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Teenagers are known for taking unnecessary risks, from reckless driving

to smoking marijuana, but some seek out risky experiences more than others. A new study of sensation-seeking behavior led by a researcher at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health with colleagues from Columbia University's Department of Psychiatry and the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine, shows that children growing up in the United States versus Puerto Rico were more likely to seek out new and risky behaviors. Results of the study, the first to look at sensation-seeking patterns in young children and teenagers, are published online in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

"Sensation-seeking behavior in adolescents has been shown to be a factor in health risks from suicide and frequent illegal drug use to problem gambling and unprotected sex," noted first author Silvia Martins, MD, PhD, associate professor of Epidemiology. "Our study shows that sensation-seeking behaviors don't follow the same trajectory from childhood to adolescence in all populations: context matters."

The researchers studied likely predictors of sensation-seeking trajectories in nearly 3,000 [children](#) all of Puerto Rican background, approximately half of whom lived in Puerto Rico and half in the South Bronx. Children were asked to agree or disagree with statements like "Sometimes you like to do things that are a little scary," and "Riding very fast and doing tricks on a skateboard are fun." Results were measured on a ten-item sensation-seeking scale.

In children living in both settings, the researchers observed a spike in sensation-seeking behavior was first seen at ages 10 and 11, with rates climbing to age 17. More than three-quarters of the children were in the "normative" and "low-sensation-seeking" classes, in which sensation-seeking scores increased as expected with age. However, 16 percent had sensation seeking scores that increased faster than expected with age, and 7 percent started with high sensation-seeking scores that decreased

over time.

Rates of sensation-seeking were consistently higher in the South Bronx than Puerto Rico, and youth in the South Bronx generally reported sensation-seeking at an earlier age. "Children born into families of migrants scored higher in sensation-seeking either because they inherited a 'novelty-seeking' trait from their parents," explains Martins, "or because they were exposed to family environments and different parenting practices that promoted certain behaviors." Martins also noted that besides poverty, children living in the South Bronx very frequently face exposure to violence, peer delinquency or [stressful life events](#) compared to their counterparts in Puerto Rico.

The researchers also found that boys and young men had higher levels of sensation-seeking than girls and young women—a finding Martins says is likely linked to testosterone, which is associated with the behavior, as well as culturally-mediated gender differences.

"There is growing understanding that sensation-seeking is not just a personality trait or a rite of passage," says Martins. "There is growing evidence that this behavior is mediated by factors, including where a child grows up."

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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