

Positive social relationships in neighborhood tied to high academic results

December 5 2018, by Jared Wadley



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For African-American youths, their academic performance in middle school is influenced by more than what happens at home—their neighborhood experiences also affect how they perform in school.

A new study by researchers at the University of Michigan, Pennsylvania State University and California State University-Northridge suggests a complex relation between neighborhood [social dynamics](#) and a change in youths' grade point average during [middle school](#). For instance, teens who live in the most "positive" neighborhoods had better grades than counterparts who lived in risky neighborhoods.

Since a decline in [academic performance](#) can have long-term consequences, it's important to identify positive factors that would protect teens as early as grade [school](#), said study co-author Deborah Rivas-Drake, U-M professor of psychology and education.

Rivas-Drake and colleagues examined the extent that exposure to certain neighborhoods supported or inhibited [academic achievement](#) among African-American teens in 7th and 8th grades. The sample included 723 African-American families who completed surveys. Nearly 60 percent of parents reported that they were married.

Caregivers described their neighborhood based on safety, such as racial tensions, vandalism and drug use; informal social control, which involves the perception that neighbors would intervene to stop bad situations; cohesion and trust, such as sharing similar views with others; and resource availability, including after-school programs.

Youths in the cohesive and supported environments had higher academic achievement than counterparts living in a mixed neighborhood of low safety but positive relationships, the study indicated.

Researchers also say that neighborhoods rich in resources and cohesion may transfer similar positive processes to the schools.

"School environments that share similar positive features as the youth's surrounding [neighborhoods](#) may foster healthy development for African-

American youth by increasing academic achievement and efficacy," said lead author Dawn Witherspoon, associate professor of psychology at Penn State.

The study—which also involved co-author Meeta Banerjee, assistant professor of psychology at Cal-State Northridge—appears in the *Journal of Black Psychology*.

More information: Dawn P. Witherspoon et al. It's More the Exception Rather Than the Rule: African American Families' Neighborhoods and Youth's Academic Performance During Middle School, *Journal of Black Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0095798418806130](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798418806130)

Provided by University of Michigan

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