

## Troubled Girls From Poor Neighborhoods More Likely To Have Sex In Early Adolescence

ScienceDaily (Sep. 18, 2008) — Young girls from poor neighbourhoods need to review more than the birds and bees with their parents – they need to hear about contraception and potential dangers of hanging out with older boys. A new study by researchers from the Université de Montréal, the University of New Brunswick and Tufts University, published in the journal *Child Development*, has found that girls living in poor neighbourhoods were more likely to engage in sexual intercourse in early adolescence and to be doing so with older boys.

"Young girls who live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more likely to initiate sex at an early age, especially those young women with conduct problems," said lead author, Véronique Dupéré, now a post-doctoral fellow at Tufts University, who completed the research at the Université de Montréal. "The results suggest that neighborhoods shape peer groups, which in turn influence when girls become sexually active."

Dupéré also found that teen girls from poor neighborhoods with a history of conduct problems were more likely to associate with deviant peers and to be initiated into sex by males that were three years older or more. "Girls with a history of conduct problems were found to be more likely to have deviant and older male friends when they lived in a disadvantaged context," said Dupéré. "Deviant peers are thought to provide a pool of willing partners and cultivate a sense that early sexual activity is desirable."

### Wide sample of teens

For this study, the research team used a sub-sample of boys and girls from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. A total of 2,596 Canadian adolescents were followed from the ages of 12 to 15 and one quarter of these participants were found to live in poor neighborhoods. In addition to neighborhood and peer characteristics, family characteristics were also considered, including socio-economic background and family structure.

The large majority of study participants were White. "Among this group, peer characteristics were found to represent a crucial factor for explaining why at-risk girls living in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to initiate sex early," said Éric Lacourse, senior author of the study and a Université de Montréal sociology professor. "During adolescence, peers exert significant influences on different aspects of adolescent behavior and our study results show that sexuality is no exception."

### At-risk girls vulnerable; boys unaffected

For this study, conduct problems were self-reported in late childhood or when participants were 10 or 11 years old. At-risk behaviors included physical aggression (e.g. bullying, fighting, kicking), destructive tendencies (e.g. vandalism, stealing) and violation of rules (e.g. running away, staying out all night). Subjects were considered to have conduct problems if they had engaged in three at-risk behaviors over

one year. Of the sample, 13 percent were considered to have conduct problems.

Living in a disadvantaged neighborhood – among boys – was not directly associated with the timing of sexual initiation. "Contrary to girls for whom peers were of primary importance, family and individual risk appeared more influential in boys' timing their first sexual experience," said Dupéré.

### Study helpful for sex ed

Identifying when and why young girls become sexually active, said Dupéré, is important in a public health perspective. "Other studies show that early initiators are more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases, undergo unwanted teen pregnancy and to report involuntary sexual experiences," she said.

"By identifying young adolescents who are particularly at-risk, this study provides valuable insights for future intervention efforts," added Dupéré. "To maximize effectiveness, prevention programs need to take the larger social context into account and make special efforts to enroll vulnerable young adolescents."

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### Journal reference:

. Dupéré et al. **Neighborhood Poverty and Early Transition to Sexual Activity in Young Adolescents: A Developmental Ecological Approach.** *Child Development*, 2008; 79 (5): 1463 DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01199.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01199.x)

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