

Safer by the dozen:
The association of child-dense neighborhoods with violence in the city of Camden

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Communities where a large fraction of the population is under the age of 21 years of age are considered to be child-dense. The city of Camden, NJ is one such community. According to the 2000 census figures, nearly one of three residents of Camden is under the age of 21 (contrast this to Cherry Hill where one of four residents is under the age of 21). Child-dense communities are the precursors of youth bulges. Youth bulge refers to a cohort of youth between the ages of 16 and 25 which is large compared to the adult population.

A number of researchers have explored how youth bulges contribute to social and political upheaval (Goldstone, 2002). Despite the frequently negative characterizations of child-saturated communities, a growing body of evidence suggests that child-saturated environments can be good for youth and society. In fact, recent studies using large nationally representative data sets suggest that, after controlling for poverty, children in child-dense neighborhoods are more likely to engage in volunteering than their counterparts in less child-dense neighborhoods (Hart, Atkins, Markey & Youniss, 2004; Hart, Atkins & Youniss, under review). Hart et al (2004) found that in communities marked by high-poverty and child-density, youth were less likely to participate in volunteering.

The deleterious effects of extreme neighborhood poverty on the health and well-being of individuals living in those communities has been well documented. For example, it is a well-established finding that socio-economically distressed neighborhoods are associated with higher rates of violent crime than more affluent neighborhoods (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Collective efficacy, which refers to the amount of informal social control and social cohesion that exists in a neighborhood, has been found to mediate the association between poverty and crime in a neighborhood (Sampson & Morenoff, 1997).

In the present study, the authors used survey data collected from a sample of residents from each census tract in Camden, 2000 census data, Camden crime data, and discharge data from the Camden hospitals to explore the association of neighborhood factors (i.e., neighborhood poverty, collective efficacy, and child-density) to violent assault. Our analyses indicate that child-density is inversely associated with violent assault.

