

# Decline in Unstructured Socializing among Youth

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## Key Takeaways

- + There is growing evidence that a decline in unstructured socializing time has contributed to lower rates of youth offending, especially during the 2010s and early 2020s.
- + Given that approximately 60% of murder arrests among youth (aged 15 to 19) involve co-offenders, a decline in unstructured socializing time with peers may have implications for homicide trends.
- + Corresponding with the timing of the decline in unstructured socializing and teenage independence, there was a 35% decline in the rate of youth-perpetrated aggravated assaults from 2009 to 2024.
- + A specific link between the decline in unstructured youth socializing time and recent homicide trends is still missing.

## Theorized Association

Youth crime and delinquency is a social activity; research shows the majority of perpetrators are “co-offenders,” committing crimes alongside peers. The precise degree of co-offending varies by the offense type.<sup>1</sup> More than 60% of youth (aged 15 to 19) accused of murder were implicated with co-offenders in recent Supplementary Homicide Report data.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, youth tend to offend during unstructured socializing time, away from the prying eyes of adults.<sup>3</sup> Given this dynamic, the rise and fall of youth criminal offending over time is partially the result of variation in unstructured socializing, time during which youth gather away from adults and with their peers.<sup>4</sup>

Researchers have argued that the recent decline in unstructured socializing time is linked to the related concept of declining youth independence.<sup>5</sup> Increases in youths' social isolation, either away from peers<sup>6</sup> or spending time online rather than meeting in person,<sup>7</sup> would also be associated with the decline of unstructured socializing. While these concepts are distinct, declines in youth independence and social isolation from peers are broadly implicated in the decline of unstructured socializing time, the concept featured in the criminological research literature.

## Established Evidence and Relevance to Recent Trends

The association between youth unstructured socializing and crime/delinquency is robust. Research in the United States<sup>8</sup> and in recent international assessments<sup>9</sup> demonstrates that unstructured socializing time is not only associated with youth involvement in crime and delinquency, but that this association often exceeds the predictive power of other established theories of youth offending. Research that explicitly examines the correlates of recent teen offending trends highlights the role of unstructured socializing.<sup>10 11</sup>

Although research on the impact of unstructured socializing has focused largely on youth involvement in minor delinquency, some limited evidence highlights a connection to violence. Unstructured socializing has been implicated in gang involvement and violent offending,<sup>12</sup> as well as exposure to violence.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that such socializing is a risk factor for youth involvement in homicide as both offenders and victims.

Recent arrest patterns support that theory, as they are also suggestive of an impact of unstructured socializing on certain types of violent offending. Declines in indicators of teen independence and socializing correspond<sup>14</sup> temporally with a steep decline in youth arrests. In addition, between 2009 and 2024, there was decline of roughly 35% in the aggravated assault rate of 15-to-19-year olds.<sup>15</sup>

## Limitations in Explaining the 2022-2025 Homicide Decline

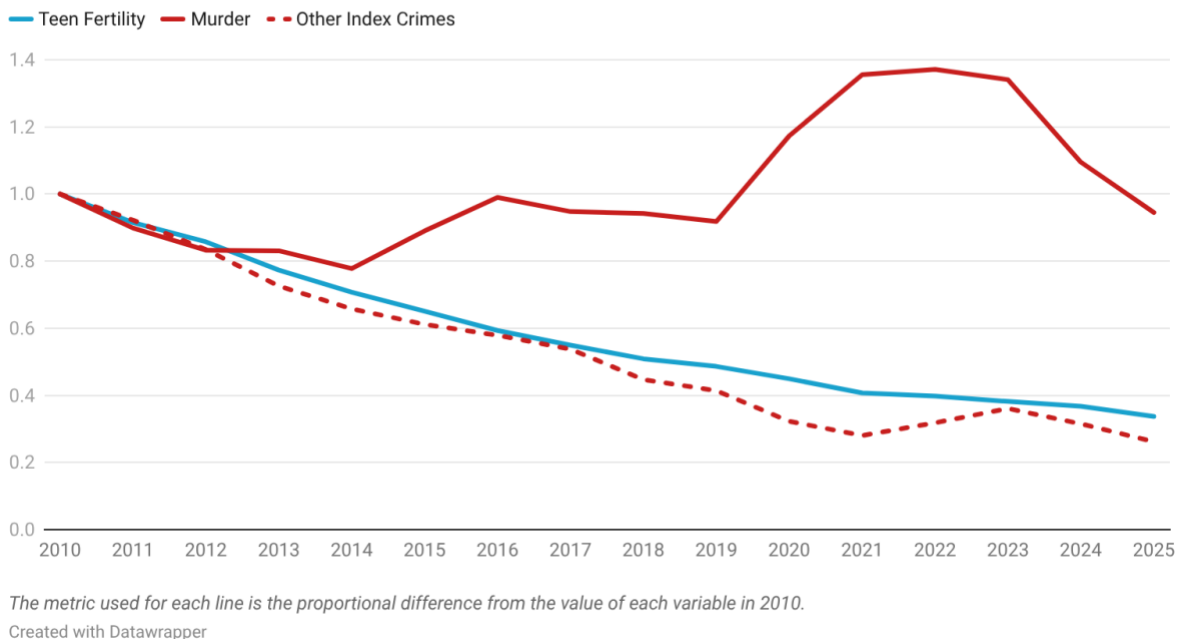
Given available research, a specific impact of the decline of unstructured youth socializing on the overall homicide decline, or on recent youth homicide trends, is unclear. Studies of the downward trend in unstructured socializing have not examined homicide offending. While it is certainly possible that the general correlates of crime/delinquency are predictive of involvement in homicide, this is not guaranteed.

For example, a study on youth offending from 2019 to 2021, a period that includes the historic homicide spike of 2020,<sup>16</sup> documented a steep drop in unstructured socializing and a 29% decline in general delinquency.<sup>17</sup> In other words, youth involvement in homicide *increased* even as unstructured socializing and overall delinquency *declined*.

The figure below illustrates this dynamic from 2010 to 2025. The trends here are the implied youth (aged 10 to 19) murder offending rate, mean offending rate for other index crimes, and a proxy of declining teen independence and unstructured socializing time (the fertility rate of teens aged 15 to 19). This proxy measure is related to a decline in dating and engaging in sex examined in previous discussions of declines in teen independence.<sup>18</sup> The metric in the graph is the proportion of each respective value in 2010.<sup>19</sup> The decline in teen fertility is closely associated with the mean trend in youth criminal offending for most offenses. Yet, for murder, youth involvement departed from its downward trajectory in 2015 and remains elevated, still not reaching its lowest point in 2025.

### [ Trends in Youth Fertility, Murder, and Other Index Crimes, 2010-2025 ]

Youth (15-19) fertility and the mean implied offending rate for offenses other than murder (among those ages 10 to 19) declined by at least two-thirds during this period. The implied youth murder rate remained higher in 2025 than its previous low in 2014.



<https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/ueUni/3/>

Overall, there is a much clearer association between the decline in unstructured socializing time and crime trends *other than murder*. It is certainly plausible that youth homicide offending during the early 2020s *would have been even higher* if not for the decline in unstructured socializing. However, the precise impact of unstructured socializing time on recent homicide trends has yet to be established.

## Future Directions

More research is needed to account for recent trends in youth homicide involvement. Countervailing forces to the decline of unstructured socializing time, such as the expansion and contraction of illicit drug markets, may potentially account for the rise and fall of homicide during the past decade.<sup>20</sup> Yet the association between the trends in drug overdose and homicide trends have only been observed in aggregate data,<sup>21</sup> without a specific link to changes in homicide circumstances involving more drug involvement. Research on homicide circumstances in the Supplementary Homicide Reports may shed some light on unstructured socializing time, drug markets, and the unexpected rise/precipitous fall of murder rates during recent years.

### Prepared for CCJ Homicide Decline Research Summit

The United States has experienced a sharp decline in homicide since the middle of 2022. This dramatic and largely unexpected shift has sparked a high-stakes debate about what is driving it. To examine the plausibility of dozens of potential factors, CCJ convened a two-day summit in September 2026 with about 50 researchers from criminology, economics, public health, psychology, sociology, and related disciplines. This brief was prepared to inform discussions during the convening.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Zimring, F., & Laqueur, H. (2015). Kids, groups, and crime: In defense of conventional wisdom. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 52(3), 403-413. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427814555770>
  - <sup>2</sup> Tuttle, J. (2026). Racial and ethnic differences in the homicide age-crime curve in the United States, 2022 to 2024. *Homicide Studies*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/10887679261436422>
  - <sup>3</sup> Osgood, D., Wilson, J., O'Malley, P., Bachman, J., & Johnston, L. (1996). Routine activities and individual deviant behavior. *American Sociological Review*, 8(1), 635-655. <https://faculty.washington.edu/matsueda/courses/587/readings/Osgood%20et%20al.%201996%20Routine%20Activities.pdf>
  - <sup>4</sup> Osgood, D. (2023). Delinquency, unstructured socializing, and social change: The rise and fall of a teen culture of independence. *Criminology*, 61(4), 681-704. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1745-9125.12358>
  - <sup>5</sup> Osgood (2023).
  - <sup>6</sup> Twenge, J., Spitzberg, B., & Campbell, W. (2019). Less in-person social interaction with peers among U.S. adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and links to loneliness. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(6), 1892-1913. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0265407519836170>
  - <sup>7</sup> Thulin, E., & Vilhelmson, B. (2019). More at home, more alone? Youth, digital media and the everyday use of time and space. *Geoforum*, 100, 41-50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.02.010>
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- <sup>9</sup> Buil-Gil, D., Birkbeck, C., Enzmann, D., Arback, K., Bazon, M., Budimlić, M., Cooper, D., Dąbrowska, M., Fernández-Molina, E., Gentle-Genitty, C., Grijalva-Eternod, A., Guzik-Makaruk, E., Haymoz, S., Hazel, N., Kaakinen, M., Kivivuori, J., Povh, I., Langeland, C. ...Marchall, I. (2026). Unstructured spare time as an international predictor of adolescent crime. *PLoS One*, 21(5), e0349291. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0349291>
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- <sup>11</sup> Svensson, R., & Oberwittler, D. (2021). Changing routine activities and the decline of youth crime: A repeated cross-sectional analysis of self-reported delinquency in Sweden, 1999-2017. *Criminology*, 59(2), 351-386. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1745-9125.12273>
- <sup>12</sup> Hughes, L., & Short, J. (2014). Partying, cruising, and hanging in the streets: Gangs, routine activities, and delinquency and violence in Chicago, 1959-1962. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 30, 415-451. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-013-9209-y>
- <sup>13</sup> Zimmerman, G., Messner, S.t., & Rees, C. (2014). Incorporating unstructured socializing into the study of secondary exposure to community violence: Etiological and empirical implications. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 29(10), 1802-1833. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260513511702>
- <sup>14</sup> Twenge, J., & Park, H. (2019). The decline in adult activities among U.S. adolescents, 1976-2016. *Child Development*, 90(2), 638-654. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.12930>
- <sup>15</sup> Tuttle, J. (2026). The age-crime curve is dead, long live the age-crime curve! An examination of the FBI's 2024 arrest data. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 49(2), 190-201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2025.2571411>.
- <sup>16</sup> National Center for Health Statistics Public Affairs. (2021). New CDC/NCHS data confirm largest one-year increase in U.S. homicide rate in 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/releases/20211006.html>.
- <sup>17</sup> Baumer, E., & Staff, J. (2025). The countervailing impacts of significant 2020 events on youth delinquency. *Criminology*, 63(2), 472-509. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1745-9125.12410>.
- <sup>18</sup> Osgood (2023).
- <sup>19</sup> Implied offending rates were calculated by assigning the proportion of total reported offenses based upon the proportion of arrests for a given criminal offense, standardized by population per 100,000. Arrest statistics are derived from the FBI (<https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/arrest>). The motor vehicle theft arrest data for 2013 were linear imputed due to an apparent error in estimates arrests of those aged 13-14. Offense data are derived from the 'Summary Reporting System' offense estimates produced by the FBI (<https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/downloads>) for 2010 through 2024. The 2025 crime data were extended using the preliminary estimates by the FBI for violent offenses (<https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/fbi-releases-historic-early-look-at-annual-crime-data>) and the proportional change in property offenses for 2025 are estimated using the Crime Index (<https://crimeindex.org/>). The fertility and population data were derived from a CDC database (<https://wonder.cdc.gov/>), using the 2024 population estimates to impute the missing 2025 data.
- <sup>20</sup> Tuttle, J. (2026). The US murder rate fell to historic lows in 2025 – here's why. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/the-us-murder-rate-fell-to-historic-lows-in-2025-heres-why-276826>
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