

## Spending unsupervised time online with friends encourages delinquency and drug and alcohol use among teenagers.

*The rise of digital communication through smartphones and other devices in the past decade has transformed the way in which adolescents communicate with one another; friends are now essentially always present and available. In new research, **Jim Clark** and **Ryan C. Meldrum** find that this connectivity – when unstructured and unsupervised by adults – is linked to adolescent delinquency and substance abuse.*



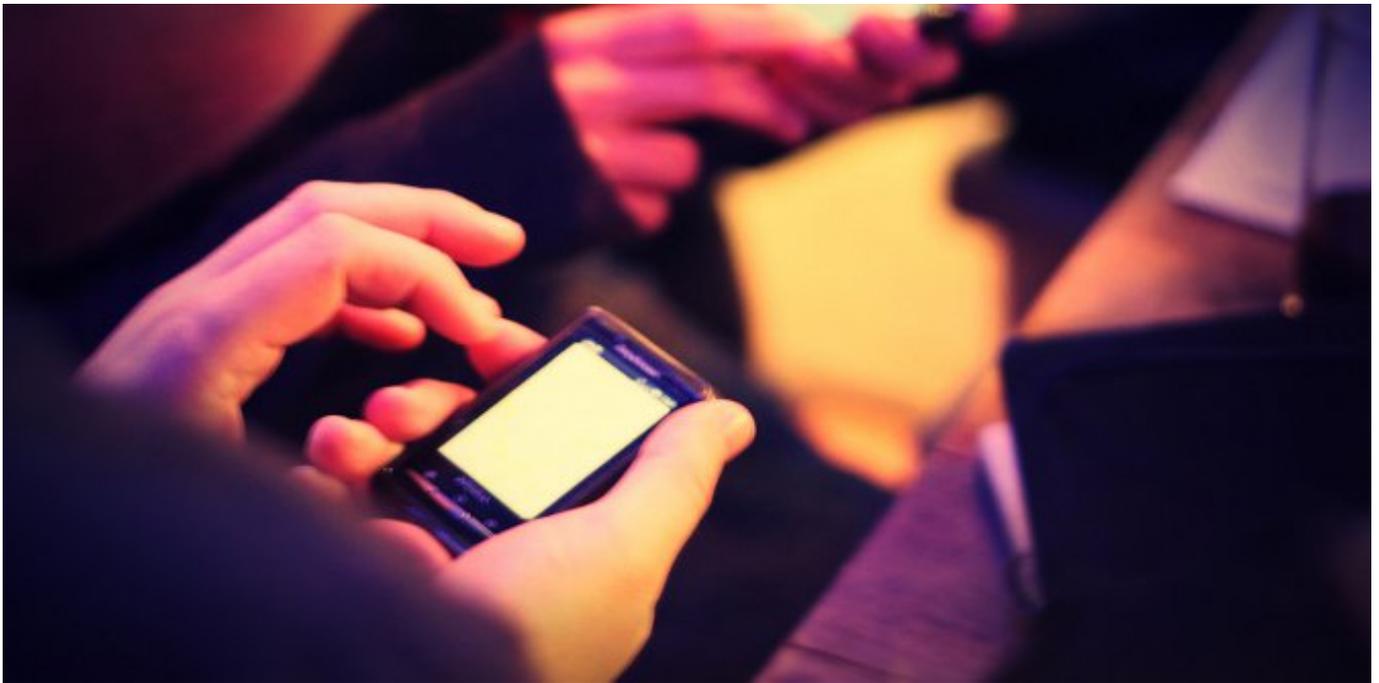
The growth in digital communication, such as texting, social media, and smart phones, has significantly altered the way in which youth now commonly socialize with one another. Indeed, adolescents' texting far surpasses their other modes of communication, including face-to-face interactions outside of school. The advance of digital communication has also meant that youth have greater access to informal contact with friends. This is because texting, posting on social media, and email may be incorporated into other activities. Thus, friends are almost always present and available for social interactions. This near round-the-clock access to peers through virtual communication has impacted the processes and intensity of peer influence on social behaviors, including antisocial behavior.



Research demonstrates that unstructured, unsupervised time spent with friends is strongly related to delinquency. Given the increasing prevalence of virtual forms of socializing with peers by today's youth, an important issue to consider is the extent to which this form of unstructured socializing may generate opportunities and inducements for delinquency and substance use. Moreover, virtual forms of socializing can be instant, discreet, and carried out away from the watchful eyes of parents and teachers, which may serve to increase the possibility that this kind of socializing could be related to delinquent behavior and substance use. In new research, we find that these virtual forms of socializing, which lack the presence of authority figures, are associated with delinquency and substance abuse.

Our study focuses on virtual time spent socializing with peers during adolescence in relation to self-reports of delinquency and substance use. We surveyed a sample of several hundred adolescents who attended one of two selected schools, one middle school and one high school. Each participant completed an anonymous, self-administered, questionnaire during normal school hours. The survey could be completed in approximately 30 minutes, was limited to closed-ended questions (most of which had ordinal or nominal response categories), and used optical scanning technology that allowed for machine coding. The data used are uniquely suited to investigate the relationships of interest in that they contain items intended to directly measure time spent virtually socializing with peers.

We asked youth to report on a typical Saturday how many hours they spend engaged in a list of activities including spending time with parents, spending face-to-face time with peers, and in virtual socialization with peers (e.g., time talking on the phone with friends, text-messaging with friends, or e-mailing with friends). For each of the items, response categories ranged from zero hours to five or more hours. To measure juvenile delinquency, we asked youth to report on the frequency of engaging in seven behaviors, two pertaining to substance use (marijuana and alcohol), and five pertaining to delinquency, (theft less than \$50, theft of more than \$50, vandalism, assault, and trespassing). In addition to considering each of the seven items separately for the analyses, we also constructed a variety index based upon these items. Further, we measured a number of variables that are associated with delinquency to use as statistical controls in our analysis, including age, sex, race/ethnicity, family structure, school performance, and self-control.



**Credit:** [Phil Campbell \(Flickr, CC-BY-2.0\)](#)

The results of our regression analysis indicated that virtual time spent socializing with peers is positively associated with both marijuana use and alcohol use. Virtual time spent socializing with peers is also positively associated with the variety index of delinquency and substance use. Less support was found for an association between virtual time spent socializing with peers and the individually measured delinquent behaviors.

Our findings indicate something intriguing about the specific situational elements of peer association that contribute to substance use and delinquency. Virtual peer association resembles face-to-face unstructured association in many fundamental ways; such as the absence of authority figures in both forms of association may contribute to delinquency. However, prior research on the impact of peer association on delinquency posits that group delinquency tended to be an ad hoc or extemporaneous response to situational inducements, such as opportunity. Much like a pickup game of basketball, juvenile delinquency was theorized to be largely immediate, spontaneous and poorly organized.

Virtual peer association does not offer the same immediate opportunities to engage in delinquency. For example, it is relatively easy for youth in face-to-face socializing with peers to smoke marijuana together, commit acts of vandalism, start a fight, or shoplift. However, youth in virtual communication may be limited by geographical proximity to peers, thus tempering the spontaneous nature of delinquent acts as well as limiting the opportunity of youth to engage in meaningful assistance or support in commission of crimes. Therefore, in contrast to the conception of situations conducive to delinquent behaviors as immediate, extemporaneous, and ephemeral, time spent with peers in virtual communication may be conducive to delinquency simply because it lacks the presence of authority figures.

Moreover, the link between virtual socialization with peers and delinquency seems to indicate a more deliberative process, involving some level of planning or discussion. For example, youth may use virtual communication to make arrangements to meet at a specific time and location to smoke marijuana or provide assistance in a theft. While our study cannot directly address the question about the degree of spontaneity in group offending, it does suggest the possibility that some level of planning or organization occurs, even for relatively minor acts of juvenile delinquency. While replication is warranted, our work suggests future research may want to give greater consideration to the intersection between technology and peers and the role that each plays in the etiology of delinquency, substance use, and other maladaptive behaviors.

*This article is based on the paper, [‘Adolescent Virtual Time Spent Socializing With Peers, Substance Use, and Delinquency’](#), in *Crime & Delinquency*.*

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Dr. Ryan C. Meldrum is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at Florida International University in Miami. His research focuses on various aspects of juvenile delinquency and young adult offending, with an emphasis on the role of peer associations and self-control. His recent publications have appeared in journals such as *Criminology*, the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, *Crime and Delinquency*, *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, and the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. He also recently co-authored the book *Self-Control and Crime Over the Life Course* published by Sage Publications.



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