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University Relations

### **Might not be a Tomorrow: Atlanta youth anticipate early death**

ATLANTA— As Atlanta officials aim to tackle the city's safety problems this year, some of their toughest criminals to stop maybe young offenders whose desires to commit crimes are being fueled by an anticipation of dying early.

Georgia State University Criminal Justice experts Timothy Brezina, Volkan Topalli and economist Erdal Tekin, have released a unique study that indicates that although young criminals are aware of the risks of violent injury, death or punishment, the possibility of a shorter life span encourages them to focus more on the "here and now."

"It turns out that if you boil it all down the more you think you are going to die young the more likely it is that you are going to engage in criminality and violence," Topalli said. "This is the opposite of what most people think, because most people think that if you think you're going to die soon you become depressed and you wouldn't commit crimes."

The research "Might not be a Tomorrow", is among the first Criminal Justice studies to simultaneously include one-on-one offender interviews with an econometric analysis of nation-wide adolescent data to provide a better understanding of why young people tend to pursue high-risk behaviors associated with immediate rewards, which include crime and violence.

The professors interviewed more than 30 young offenders in some of Atlanta's toughest neighborhoods, specifically focusing on Central West Atlanta, a community that has suffered high rates of drug trafficking, serious street crime and youth violence. Those interviews, which lasted from 45 to 120 minutes, focused on the participants'

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perception of risk, with an emphasis on the risk of future injury, early death and the extent to which these perceptions influenced their attitudes and behaviors related to offending.

“Many had been shot or stabbed and bore visible scars of physical trauma,” Brezina said. “They also expressed what criminologists refer to as a “coercive” worldview; in their eyes, they occupy a dog-eat-dog world where it is acceptable if not necessary to use force to intimidate others and to prevent victimization.”

The bleak outlook on life and sense of “futurelessness” of young offenders has been shaped by some of their earliest memories and reinforced by other people in their lives and the witnessing of violence, Topalli said. Prior research has found that when young people believe they have no future, it is argued, they have little to lose by engaging in crime or violence.

“They live in neighborhoods that are kind of like war zones,” Topalli said. “They grew up hearing gun shots, seeing people die and hearing ambulances and police cars. Just about every young person we talked to had seen a dead body, and either has fired a weapon or has been fired upon in some context. Over 70 percent of them have been victimized themselves, which is far greater than the larger population. The majority of them won’t die early, but the illusion is that you will and it’s reinforced by the culture.”

The professors also analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, also known as Add Health, which was specifically designed to investigate adolescents’ health and risk behaviors and is considered the largest and most comprehensive survey of adolescents ever undertaken. The data includes responses from more than 20,000 adolescents between seventh and 12th-grade and their parents. Detailed questions were included about the delinquent behavior of adolescents, like whether they had committed crimes such as theft, robbery or shooting in the nine to 12 months prior to the interview and whether they thought they will live to 35 or be killed by the age of 21.

The study’s findings state that when the perceived chance of being killed by age 21 is greater than 50 percent, the probability of offending behavior increases by 3.3 percent. The probability of offending behavior increases by 3.4 percent when the perceived chance of living to age 35 is less than 50 percent.

“The results from the Add Health study mirrored the results from the interviews,” Topalli said.

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Georgia State researchers say the findings have implications for public policy. And not only do the researchers have plans to expand the research, Georgia State University is establishing a Center for Crime and Violence Prevention Policy, to deal with issues like youth/gang violence, urban drug markets and crime trend forecasting.

“It seems unlikely that threats of harsher criminal justice penalties will deter these fearless offenders. They assume life is short anyway and willingly accept the risks associated with a criminal lifestyle—even death,” Brezina said. “An alternative approach is to confront the pervasive violence and other social ills that so many inner-city children confront in their daily lives—conditions that deflate hope and breed crime in the first place.”

The study “Might Not be a Tomorrow” is published in the December edition of *CRIMINOLOGY*, a top international journal in the field of Criminal Justice.

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