

# Factors Influencing Teenage Attitudes Toward Authority in Suburban and Urban Areas

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding what causes teenagers to question authority is crucial when raising the next generation to be law-abiding yet outspoken, active citizens. Relationships with parents and peers, affluence, gender, age, and religion are all factors that have been linked to attitudes toward authority. This study aims to identify differences between the previously mentioned factors in both urban and suburban areas. 215 student subjects from an urban school district and 111 student subjects from a suburban school district were surveyed about their opinions toward authority and asked about situations in which they might stand up to authority. Results showed that, in both contexts, there are correlations between attitudes toward authority and socioeconomic status, age, and closeness with parent(s). Distinct correlations were not found between attitudes toward authority and either gender or religion.

## INTRODUCTION

By confronting authority when necessary, people change society, improving civil rights and justice for the members of their society. However, obeying authorities is often appropriate too, because without that cooperation a community can fall into anarchy and no one's rights are protected. It is crucial to understand the factors that influence people's responses to authority, particularly among minors, so they can develop sound judgment when interacting with authorities.

This study aims to answer the question *Which factors influence responses to authority in high school students in urban and suburban areas?* Most people assume that students in an urban area are more likely to challenge authority than suburban students. Current research shows that responses to authority are socioeconomic status (SES), age, family, gender, religion, and peer relationships play a role in teenage responses to authority. However, the recent research still requires clarification and support.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

Student subjects came from two different school districts—one urban and the other suburban. The sample from Urban District (UD) was composed of 215 students from two different high schools, and 111 students were surveyed from three different high schools in Suburban District (SD). Because of district policies in SD, parent consent was gathered from SD parents.

The first part of the survey helps to identify and classify students to gather demographics of each group. It asks about relationships with parents, free lunch status, grade, age, gender, and religious affiliation. The second part of the survey addresses the students' actual attitudes toward authority and the impact that parents have on student attitudes. Some questions provide abstract statements that students respond to.

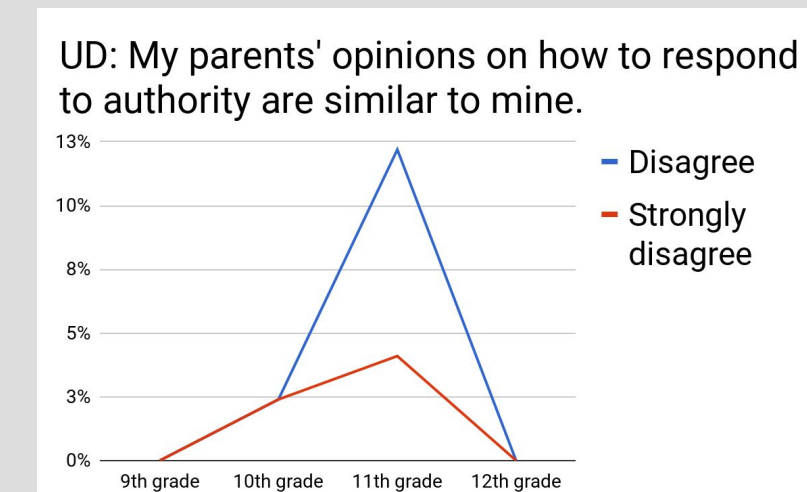
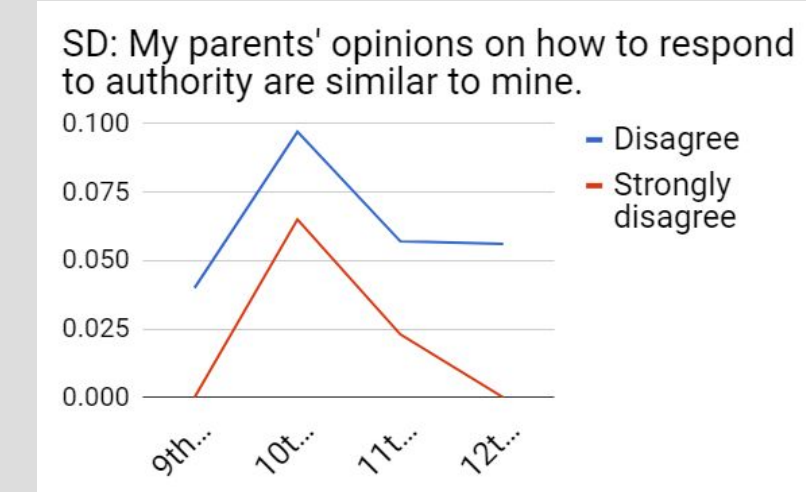
Hypothetical questions are also asked in order to gain insight on what kinds of institutional authority people are willing to resist, for example teachers, police officers, or bosses. Data collection took place mostly online or via paper surveys.

## RESULTS

### SES

Hypothetical situations	SD Low SES	SD Middle/Upper SES	UD Low SES	UD Middle/Upper SES
teacher	23.1%	3.8%	10.9%	25.0%
police	46.2%	45.0%	29.4%	47.7%
boss	53.8%	50.0%	49.0%	54.5%
Help a homeless person	76.9%	53.8%	63.6%	70.5%

### Age



### Parent-Child Relationships

Hypothetical situations (students)	Very close/Close	Not very close/Not close at all	Close with one but not the other
teacher says to stop talking	5.5%	14.3%	16.7%
teacher gives detention for being late to class	9.9%	---	33.3%

Abstract teachers (students)	Very close/Close	Not very close/Not close at all	Close with one but not the other
UD			
Always	49.1%	28.2%	71.4%
Usually	48.1%	62.3%	28.6%

## DISCUSSION

### SES

The most prevalent pattern found in this data shows that the smallest grouping in each district (low SES in SD and high SES in UD) most often stood up to their teachers showing that perhaps it is not the relative affluence itself that influences behavior but one's SES relative to the dominant SES of the population. In other words, being outside the majority in terms of SES compels students to advocate for themselves regardless of income level.

### Age

Perhaps the most interesting age-related finding is that in middle grades, opinions vary most from parents'. This is consistent with Thompson's<sup>1</sup> conclusion that children in middle adolescence begin to be influenced by more than just parents and friends. The present findings suggest that, by late adolescence (12th grade), students return to a view more in line with their parents' opinions.

### Parent-Child Relationships

Though it is expected that being close with one parent would be a sort of middle ground between not being close with either parent and being close with both, the data prove that one-parent students stand up to authority the most. Possibly, a broken trust-relationship with one parent causes students to question authority while a good relationship with the other parent gives students the confidence to challenge authorities. Further research is needed to confirm the findings of the present research and seek explanations as to why one-parent students are more likely to stand up.

## CONCLUSIONS

As high school students from urban and suburban areas were asked about gender, religion, peer pressure, socioeconomic status, age, and parental relationships, the last three--socioeconomics, age, and closeness with parent(s), revealed the most consistent correlative patterns.

Subsequent research may benefit from this project when considering causes for certain attitudes toward authority. Future research can expand on whether these factors affect attitudes toward authority or only correspond to them. The current study could also be used as a template for studying factors that affect the attitudes toward authority found in non-adolescents.

## REFERENCES

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