

[Back to regular view](#) [Print this page](#)

Why can't kids play outside?

November 2, 2007

DEBORAH DOUGLAS ddouglas@suntimes.com

'Damn. Damn. Damn.' In the famous words of "Good Times" matriarch Florida Evans, our kids can't even go trick-or-treating without bullets flying.

Leticia Barrera shouldn't have had to think twice about taking her kids out to knock on doors for candy Wednesday night in the Back of the Yards, but she did. Barrera conferred by phone with her husband, who was out of town. They decided to let the kids go ahead and have some fun. She would just get them back in the house before the sun went down and the gangs came out.

Barrera didn't make it. Her three kids saw her get shot outside their home in the 4800 block of South Seeley. She was four months pregnant, and it was her birthday.

More parents are having those same misgivings. In the last several months, Chicago has repeatedly asked itself what "the community" is going to do to stop senseless killings of children. A new study tells us what people across the nation have been doing: Locking their kids up in the house.

Almost half of America's children live in neighborhoods where their parents are afraid to let them play outside. Hispanic and black parents are the most wary. A third or more of black and Hispanic kids are kept inside the house because their parents think their neighborhoods are too dangerous or that neighbors might be a bad influence.

Twenty-two percent of black parents and 25 percent of Hispanic parents told the Census Bureau that their kids have no safe place to play. Among white parents, 10 percent believed this, and 17 percent of Asian parents reported their kids have no safe play areas.

Chicago parents are flummoxed. They don't know what to do, but they do know they are tired of the usual suspects who parade in front of cameras on their behalf, then disappear when the lights go off. And they know the neighbor kids might be bad news. I vet letters and phone calls almost weekly from readers saying that some of the mothers who proclaim their child's innocence in some of these crimes are blind to their child's badness.

Gone are the days of coed games of hide-and-seek and tag or girls practicing jacks until they mastered their twelvesies. Boy, was it fun running around until dusk kissed our cheeks and parents called us home. Today, unless kids are programmed to the hilt or have scheduled play dates, they are doomed to go stir-crazy inside.

It has become so common for kids to stay inside that when they're spotted walking down the street, many adults assume they're unsupervised and up to no good. In Chicago, some parents crash "good" neighborhoods, like those in Oak Park, just so their kids can enjoy the pleasures of trick-or-treating in a safe environment.

You can bet being holed up in the house is one reason why are kids are so fat. Anchored by video games and stacks of homework, they can't burn off excess energy and stay naturally lean like kids used to be. Darell Hammond, CEO of Kaboom, which helps build safe play areas for kids across the country, knows all about it. "If we don't get solutions quick, time is running out," Hammond said. A generation of kids will be lost, "not just through obesity, [but] the sense of safety, security and belonging will be lost. That's going to have an emotional and psychological impact on how they raise their kids in a generation."

Now Barrera's husband will have to live with the knowledge that his wife is gone because he wanted his kids to enjoy some childish fun. And we're left with a generation of bored kids who won't know what it's like to play in the mud or lie in the grass and wonder about life or invent new games to play -- just because their parents must keep them close to keep them alive.

Deborah Douglas is a Sun-Times editorial board writer. This column represents her views and not necessarily the views of the board.