

Abstract for the 21st Nordic Demographic Symposium
**Why having better peers is not always a good thing:
The complex nature of peer effects**

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Study background

The influential Coleman report in the 1960s spurred a vast literature in sociology and related disciplines on the effects of school characteristics on students' life chances, and in particular the effects of peers. However, while high-achieving peers may be positive for students' (objective) achievements through a better learning environment, they may also harm (subjective) teacher assessments (e.g., theories of social contrast). Thus, peer effects are potentially complex.

Objectives

In this paper, I use the idiosyncratic variation in gender composition within schools across cohorts to estimate peer effects on objective test scores, teacher-graded test scores, school behavior, school absence, and criminal activity.

Data and methods

I use population-wide register data to investigate the effects of gender composition in Norwegian lower secondary schools (8-10th grade) for cohorts that graduate between 2002 and 2015. I identify the effects of gender composition using a school fixed effects model with controls for prior test scores and other individual and family characteristics (i.e., value-added school fixed effects).

Results

Girls have substantially higher achievement than boys do and classrooms with high share of girls has significantly less classroom noise. This suggests that the learning environment is better in a classroom with many girls. Nevertheless, I find that gender composition has no effect on criminal charges, school absence, nor school behavior. Nor does gender composition effect standardized national tests or examination grades. However, having many girls in the classroom *reduces* teacher-graded tests. Furthermore, when looking at effects separately by subject (math, foreign language, etc.), I find that the size of gender peer effects are linearly related to the (unadjusted) gender gap in achievement. The negative effects of the share of girls are stronger in subjects with the largest gap between boys and girls. I find similar results with regard to socioeconomic peer effects and ethnic peer effects.

Main conclusions

The results suggests that teachers grade students relative to their peer group, and that having high-achieving peers is a disadvantage with regard to academic achievements in 10th grade.