

FAMILY

Can We Just Let Teens Exist in Public?

When malls ban unaccompanied minors and when cities enact curfews, they restrict adolescents’ ability to participate in society.

By Julie Beck



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in without an adult. Before the poster, every weekday afternoon, clots of teens would move through the arteries of the store, occasionally blocking them. The kids would laugh among themselves, swatch makeup on their arms, peruse the candy offerings. I suppose they made the shopping experience a little more chaotic, but I personally never saw them do anything worse than talk loudly, or loiter in the way of someone trying to reach the face wash. They reminded me of me and my friends when I was young—hanging out in a store just for something to do, somewhere to be. And then the sign went up, and the teens disappeared.

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My Target is just one of many U.S. businesses that have issued restrictions in recent years on unaccompanied minors. These policies are frequently enacted in places where teens like to congregate, such as malls, restaurants, movie theaters, and theme parks. Some places ban teens entirely, or just on certain days or during certain hours. Comprehensive data on how many businesses have these rules are hard to come by. But the anecdotes are piling up. Kathleen Blum, who leads shopper insights at the market-research firm C+R Research, told me that she’s seen “an uptick” in such policies over the past few years.

In some places, minors are also subject to new curfews. Last year, for example, both Cincinnati and Washington, D.C., instituted curfew zones in busy neighborhoods, beginning at 6 p.m. in D.C. and 9 p.m. in Cincinnati. Chicago began banning youth

from downtown Millennium Park for 6 p.m. on weekends in 2022. According to



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Neither curfew laws nor business bans are brand-new phenomena. Steven Mintz, a historian of childhood at the University of Texas at Austin, told me that curfew laws in particular have ebbed and flowed over the decades with the anxieties of the times. Sometimes, he said, such policies are motivated by a desire to protect children from danger or substance use; other times, they stem from fear of what unsupervised teens might do.

This latest wave of restrictions seems to rest on the questionable assumption that teens are inherently a threat and that banning them would instill order. Some of the recent curfews were enacted or enforced after violence broke out at large gatherings of young people. Blum said that, in her experience, a major reason that businesses ban unchaperoned youth is to prevent shoplifting—and businesses have reported an increase in shoplifting incidents over the past few years, in National Retail Federation surveys. Perhaps wholesale bans feel justified to those who make them, given that children are still developing and teens’ brains can make them impulsive. But young people are not the only ones who commit violence and not the only ones who shoplift. And recent research on child development challenges the widely held idea that adolescents are universally more risk-seeking than adults, suggesting that this is true of only a subset of youth. Evidence does not support the idea that juvenile curfews reduce crime. Policies that restrict all teens also risk being selectively enforced



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A fair policy would attempt to limit or punish unacceptable behavior, whomever the perpetrator; curfews and unaccompanied-minor bans instead punish all teens. “When some teens act badly, there’s some kind of permission among policy makers and business leaders to therefore ban all teens,” John Wall, a co-director of Rutgers University’s Childism Institute, which researches methods for empowering children, told me. These measures restrict kids from moving and assembling freely, and they are, in Wall’s view, discriminatory. Some limitations on children can be beneficial; compulsory schooling, for example, guarantees young people the right to an education, and age requirements for driver’s licenses are in place because younger children cannot operate cars safely. But “existing in public and engaging with businesses do not require any such special capacities,” Wall said. “The reason for children being excluded is simply because of their childhood, not for any compelling state interest.” Children, of course, do not have the same legal rights as adults, and businesses have a lot of latitude to deny service to customers. This is why restricting anyone under 18 on the offhand chance that they *could* be rowdy is possible. But that doesn’t make it just.

Coming of age requires learning independence, figuring out who you are and how you relate to the world. This is hard to do if you’re forbidden from even buying a chicken sandwich without a grown-up looking over your shoulder. Good decision



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Wall said that he sees the recent business bans and curfews as part of a longer historical trend of “children’s gradual disappearance from the public realm.” For Mintz’s part, he recalled his own childhood in the 1960s and the freedom he had to wander alone or with his peers. That freedom has slowly faded over the decades as the cultural standard of parenting has shifted toward more supervision and as more adolescents spend their time shuttling to and from home, school, and chaperoned activities. Kids on their own in public have come to seem like a problem to be solved. “Historically, adolescence was often tolerated—sometimes grudgingly—as a noisy, inconvenient presence in public life,” Mintz said. “What feels new is how little room there is now for young people to simply *be* in shared spaces without adult oversight.”

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The boomlet of restrictions on minors is coming at the same time as a wave of concern about adolescent isolation. A recent World Health Organization report found that loneliness rates are higher among teens than among other age groups. More than 40 percent of teenagers say that they do not consistently get the social support they need, according to a 2024 CDC report. How much time teens spend on their phone and the risks that poses to their mental health has been a topic of much discussion. The more that teens roam their community, a 2022 psychology study suggests, the happier and more socially connected they are—yet curfews and business bans make it



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The kind of society that does this is one in which too many people see the raising of the next generation not as a communal responsibility but as something for parents to handle at home, out of sight. It’s one that deludes itself that youth might wake up on the morning of their 18th birthday endowed with all of the social skills they need to be considerate members of society, without having practiced along the way. It’s one that tells teens, over and over, that they are not neighbors, but nuisances.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Julie Beck is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and is the creator of “[The Friendship Files](#).”

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