

Discrimination hurts, but how much?

September 14 2010, By Mark Wheeler

It's tough being a teen. Are you in or are you out? Are you hanging with the right crowd? Are you dressing and talking and acting the right way? For adolescents who are ethnic minorities, on top of this quest to "fit in" is the added layer — and the burden — of dealing with discrimination, say UCLA researchers.

In a new study, the researchers found that adolescents from Latin American and Asian backgrounds experienced more discrimination than their peers from European backgrounds and that the discrimination came not only from other adolescents but from adults as well. The level of discrimination also impacted these teens' grade-point averages and their health and was associated with depression, distress and lower levels of self-esteem.

The findings appear in the current online edition of the [Journal of Research on Adolescence](#).

For the study, lead author Virginia W. Huynh, a graduate student in the laboratory of Andrew J. Fuligni, a professor of psychiatry at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and [Human Behavior](#) at UCLA, recruited 601 high school seniors, equally divided between males and females, and asked them to maintain a daily diary for two weeks to record any discriminatory events or comments they experienced. They were also asked to separately record on a four-point scale any physical symptoms, such as [headaches](#), stomachaches or general pain.

Among the teens in the study, nearly 60 percent reported experiencing

discrimination from other teens, and 63 percent reported discrimination from adults; 12 percent reported experiencing discrimination on a daily basis. Adolescents from Latin American backgrounds reported more adult discrimination than Asian Americans, who, in turn, reported more adult discrimination than teens from European backgrounds. Latin American and Asian American teens also reported higher levels of discrimination by their peers.

The researchers found that teens who reported higher levels of peer or adult discrimination also reported more aches, pains and other symptoms, as well as a lower overall grade-point average. Thus, discrimination may not only tax adolescents' physical and psychological resources but may also affect their ability to achieve in school, the researchers said.

Although seniors in high school are close to adults in terms of their cognitive capacities and their ability to recognize discrimination when they see or experience it, they are also distinct from adults, said Fuligni, the study's senior author.

"These are the years when social identity is arguably more salient among teenagers who are struggling with defining who they are," he said. "Adding on a 'layer' of discrimination is not an easy thing for them to deal with."

By comparing the amount of discrimination the students experienced with their ratings of their physical well-being and their grades at the conclusion of the semester, the researchers were able to examine the relationship between discrimination and health among the adolescents.

The study furthers the understanding of the normal development of [ethnic minority](#) and immigrant [adolescents](#), the researchers say, because it shows that adult and peer discrimination may have implications for

adolescents' physical health.

"Discrimination significantly predicted lower GPAs, higher levels of depression, higher levels of distress, lower self-esteem and more physical complaints," Fuligni said. "So the bottom line? [Discrimination](#) is harmful."

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