

Most prior research on discrimination looked at adults, study says

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Racial and ethnic discrimination takes a toll on adolescents and is linked to their depression, poor self-esteem, lower academic achievement, substance use and risky sexual behavior, according to a meta-analysis published in the American Psychological Association's flagship journal, *American Psychologist*.

In what the researchers termed the first such study to look at the impact of perceived racial and ethnic discrimination on adolescents using meta-analyses, youth of Asian and Latino backgrounds were at greater risk for these factors than African American youngsters. And the effects on Latino youth's [academic performance](#) was more pronounced compared with African American adolescents, the study found.

"Much of what we know about the pernicious effects of racial/ethnic discrimination is based on adult populations. Our work represents the first efforts to quantify in a meta-analytic frame the strength of effects of racial and ethnic discrimination on adolescents' academics and risky health behaviors," said lead author Aprile D. Benner, Ph.D., associate professor of human development and family Sciences and faculty research associate at the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin. "The consistent relations we identified are of particular concern, given the long-term linkages between depression, anxiety, substance use, aggression, hostility, and [poor academic performance](#) and engagement with an individual's risk of illness or early death."

The study included 214 peer-reviewed articles, theses and dissertations comprising 91,338 adolescents. The researchers analyzed 11 distinct indicators of well-being.

Understanding racial and ethnic differences begins quite early in life, the study noted. Infants as young as 6 months can sense it, and children begin grouping themselves by race or ethnic background as early as the preschool years. Awareness of cultural stereotypes tied to skin color or ethnicity emerges in middle childhood, and by age 10, many children can recognize both overt and covert discrimination, according to prior research.

Overall, this study found that perceived racial/ethnic discrimination was consistently linked to poorer mental health, lower academic achievement and more engagement in risky or negative behaviors. Other demographic differences included a finding that Latino youth tended to exhibit higher levels of depression than their white and African-American peers in response to discrimination, and that discrimination was more detrimental to Latino males' academics, compared with Latinas and African-descent males. The researchers theorized that Latinos experience a type of discrimination in which they are viewed as "perpetual foreigners." Additionally, they suggested that African-American youth may benefit from their families' use of socialization strategies to prepare their children for the biases they may face in their daily lives.

"The psychological, behavioral and academic burdens posed by racial and ethnic discrimination during adolescence, coupled with evidence that experiences of discrimination persist across the life course for persons of color, point to discrimination as a clear contributor to the racial and ethnic disparities observed for African-American, Latino and Native American populations compared with their white counterparts," Benner said. "While the past three decades have seen a major increase in attention to issues of racial and ethnic discrimination in adolescence, we

have identified substantial gaps that should be addressed in future research."

These include thinking more critically about how the field measures racial and [ethnic discrimination](#) in these populations; investigating and clearly reporting factors that might protect youth from the negative effects of discrimination; and placing a greater focus on the intersection of discrimination tied to race or ethnicity with mistreatment linked to other social identities that are vulnerable to stigmatization.

More information: Aprile D. Benner et al. Racial/ethnic discrimination and well-being during adolescence: A meta-analytic review., *American Psychologist* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/amp0000204](https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000204)

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