

# Believing the system is fair predicts worsening self-esteem and behavior for youth

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Disadvantaged youth who believe that the American social system is fair develop lower self-esteem, engage in risky behaviors, and are less attentive in the classroom over the course of middle school, finds a study led by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

The findings, published in the journal *Child Development*, are the first evidence that young people's beliefs about the fairness of the system predict important developmental factors.

"For youth disadvantaged by our social and economic system, believing it is fair can have long-term negative ramifications across a range of outcomes," said Erin Godfrey, assistant professor of applied psychology at NYU Steinhardt and the study's lead author.

Early adolescence is an important developmental period in which youth are thinking increasingly about the world around them and their place in it. For youth who are marginalized due to their race, ethnicity, or [socioeconomic status](#), thinking about this social stratification is central to their development. However, most research on the effects of societal disadvantage and marginalization on youth development does not incorporate [young people's](#) own views.

The current study investigated how beliefs in the fairness of the American social system are related to changes in self-esteem, depression, risky behavior, and classroom behavior. The study included 257 [middle school students](#) from families of [low socioeconomic status](#), as measured by their eligibility for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. More than 90 percent of youth in the sample were racial/ethnic minorities.

When the students were in 6th grade, the researchers rated how fair they think the American system is and whether everyone has the chance to get ahead in our society. The researchers then assessed their self-esteem, depressive symptoms, experience with discrimination, [risky behaviors](#) (e.g. cheating on a test or lying), and [classroom behavior](#) (e.g. ability to follow teacher instructions or stay quiet) at three time points over the course of middle school.

The researchers found that believing the system is fair was associated with better outcomes at the start of middle school, but worse overall outcomes over the course of middle school. By the end of the 7th grade, youth who believed the system was fair in 6th grade had lower self-esteem, engaged in more risky behaviors, and were less able to follow directions in the classroom. For risky behavior, this reversal was particularly pronounced for youth who reported experiencing more discrimination.

"One explanation for this pattern may be that 6th graders have not yet developed a full understanding of status differences or do not yet identify as a member of a marginalized group. However, early beliefs about the fairness of the system may become a liability over time as youth become increasingly cognizant of how the larger socioeconomic system puts them and their group at a disadvantage, and as their identity as a marginalized group member becomes more and more salient," Godfrey said.

The researchers note that the results have important implications for interventions that can raise youth's awareness of structural barriers and inequities. For instance, after-school and community-based programs that create awareness of these barriers and provide avenues for youth to address them may be powerful ways to improve the

outcomes of marginalized [youth](#).

In addition, the researchers recommend that schools directly engage with controversial topics such as race, discrimination, and socioeconomic inequality. Addressing these topics has been shown to improve academic outcomes among disadvantaged high school students, but educators could start earlier to promote well-being in the [middle school](#) years.

Provided by New York University

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