

# What is the Impact of Racial and Ethnic Discrimination on Adolescents' Well-Being?

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## INTRODUCTION

Racial and ethnic disparities, or the differences between minorities and whites, are common across multiple domains in the United States. For example, compared to whites, African Americans and Latinx\* individuals have, on average, worse educational performance and lower educational attainment, lower labor force participation, and higher rates of teenage pregnancy, poverty, and morbidity and mortality. Asian Americans also face disadvantages that leave them vulnerable to mistreatment. In addition to the stereotype of being “model minorities” who are expected as a group to excel academically, Asian Americans are often viewed as “perpetual foreigners,” even if they and their families were born in the U.S.

These racial and ethnic disparities are likely rooted in experiences of discrimination that occur quite early in individuals' lives. Disparities in health and well-being, in fact, begin to emerge in childhood and adolescence, with repercussions across life. Adolescence is therefore an important time to study racial and ethnic discrimination because the developmental processes that young people experience at this time of life form the foundations for perceiving this type of discrimination, making meaning of it for their lives, and dealing with its consequences.

In this brief, the authors report on a meta-analysis—a statistical analysis of data from multiple studies that are pooled into one larger dataset—that examined whether adolescents' perceptions of racial and ethnic discrimination are linked to their well-being. Specifically, they focus on the impact of discrimination on socioemotional distress (such as depression and low self-esteem), academic success, and risky health behaviors (such as substance use or risky sexual behaviors). The authors identified data from 214 peer-reviewed articles, theses, and dissertations on 91,338 unique adolescents; the researchers focused on 11 indicators of well-being.

\* Latinx is a gender-neutral term used instead of Latino or Latina.

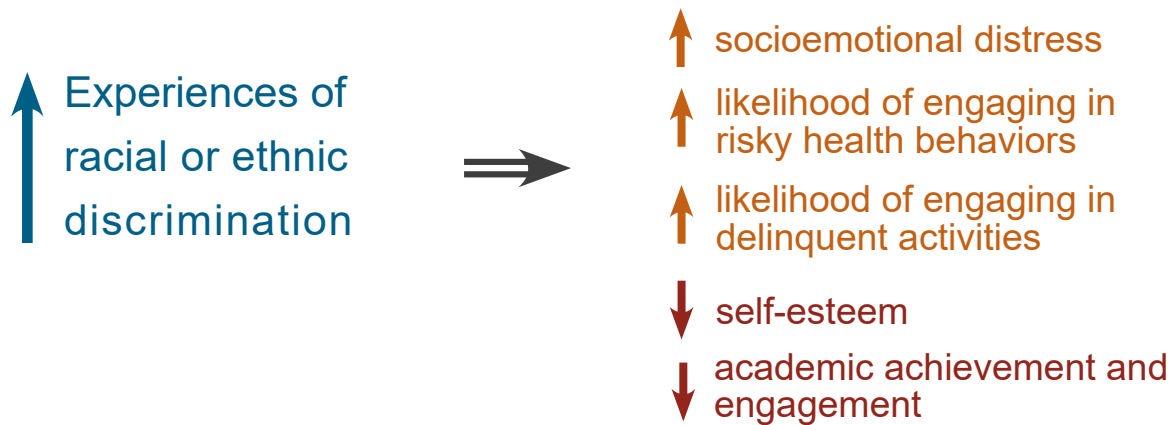
## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Historically, legislative action such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, judicial rulings such as *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, and larger initiatives such as the European Union's antidiscrimination directives have sought to address differential treatment across racial and ethnic groups. However, the research described in this brief shows that adolescents of color continue to experience racism and discrimination, and these experiences take a negative toll on their growth and development. In addition, racial and ethnic disparities in morbidity and mortality make racial and ethnic discrimination a concern for public health. Evidence from this meta-analysis suggests that interventions must focus early in development because mistreatment tied to race or ethnicity negatively impacts mental and physical health during adolescence. Finally, given that racial and ethnic discrimination perpetrated by peers and educators often occurs in schools, greater attention should be placed on educational policies that promote equality, inclusion, and meaningful interactions across racial and ethnic divides.

## KEY FINDINGS

- > More experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination are associated with:
  - > higher levels of socioemotional distress;
  - > higher likelihood of engaging in risky health behaviors and delinquent activities; and
  - > lower self-esteem and lower academic achievement and engagement. *See figure*
- > Racial and ethnic discrimination pose the greatest risk for Latinx\* youth, who had higher socioemotional distress and lower academic achievement and engagement compared to African American and Asian youth.
  - > Latinx boys who experienced discrimination show a particularly heightened risk of poor academic performance.
- > Younger adolescents are more likely than older adolescents to experience socioemotional distress because of racial and ethnic discrimination.

## IMPACT OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION ON THE WELL-BEING OF ADOLESCENTS



This figure shows that more experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination were associated with adolescents having higher distress, higher likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, and lower self-esteem and academic success.

### REFERENCE

Benner, A.D., Wang, Y., Shen, Y., Boyle, A.E., Polk, R., & Cheng, Y.-P. (2018). Racial/Ethnic discrimination and well-being during adolescence: A meta-analytic review. *American Psychologist*. Published online ahead of print.

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