

# THE EDUCATIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATION ON THE IMMIGRANT CHILD



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# **The Educational, Psychological, and Social Impact of Discrimination on the Immigrant Child**

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## Executive Summary

The past 15 years have seen a surge in research examining how and when immigrant children and the children of immigrant parents experience discrimination, and what the psychological and educational consequences are. Discrimination—simply defined as harmful actions toward others because of their ethnicity, nationality, language ability and accent, or immigration status—may take place at an institutional or individual level, and can have considerable consequences for the developmental outcomes of young children.

An example of institutional, or structural, discrimination is placing immigrant children into English as a Second Language (ESL) classes that are located in remote, dilapidated areas of a school building. Examples of individual discrimination include social exclusion or frequent negative comments from teachers. Studies show that immigrant children<sup>1</sup> most often perceive discrimination in the school setting. Immigrant children commonly report being treated unfairly, receiving verbal insults, being excluded from activities, or being threatened with physical harm by peers. By elementary school they also experience discrimination from teachers. Many report that their teachers do not call on them because of their ethnicity. By adolescence, immigrant students report that they have been graded unfairly, discouraged from joining advanced-level classes, and disciplined for things they did not do. Immigrant children and adolescents, meanwhile, experience discrimination outside the school, too, citing instances such as being hassled by store clerks or receiving poor service at restaurants.

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This report focuses on incidents of direct discrimination, as perceived and noticed by the child—incidents with identifiable educational, psychological, physical, and social repercussions. The effects of direct discrimination are not culturally specific, but instead are similar across many immigrant experiences. Children who are discriminated against by their peers, for example, are more likely to exhibit racial mistrust, problem behaviors, and greater anxiety, aggression, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms. Experiencing discrimination can provoke stress responses similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. Children who experience discrimination from their teachers are more likely to have negative attitudes about school and lower academic motivation and performance, and are at increased risk of dropping out of high school. In fact, experiences of teacher discrimination shape children's attitudes about their academic abilities above and beyond their past academic performance. Even when controlling for their actual performance, children who experience discrimination from teachers feel worse about their academic abilities and are less likely to feel they belong at school, when compared against students who do not experience discrimination.

Counteracting the effects of discrimination is challenging, especially given that the impact of discrimination on immigrant children is often compounded by other, contextual factors. Immigrant children are more likely than nonimmigrants to live in poverty and attend schools with fewer resources and in which they are in the ethnic minority—any of which could independently affect outcomes. Nevertheless, a growing body of research points to a number of factors that may help protect or buffer children from the detrimental effects of experiencing discrimination: a strong, positive ethnic identity; a supportive family environment; and the coping responses employed by the children themselves. For example, children who hold a positive view of their ethnicity and cultural heritage are protected from many of the negative

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1 This report uses the term “immigrant children” to describe children who are immigrants as well as those who are U.S.-born to immigrant parents.



effects of discrimination from both teachers and peers, including on their overall well-being and academic achievement. Adults who interact with immigrant children—including parents and teachers—should be made aware of the effects of discrimination, along with strategies to help young children cope with and buffer themselves from negative interactions. As the primary site where children perceive discrimination, the school can support immigrant children through anti-bullying policies, communicating effectively with immigrant families, and carefully evaluating services targeting immigrant children (e.g., ESL or English Language Learner [ELL] classes) to ensure they do not encourage institutional discrimination.

There are a number of avenues for further research in this developing field. One aim should be to disentangle the consequences of discrimination from those of other, associated, factors such as poverty and residential instability. Also, more work is needed to understand why some children are more affected than others by discrimination, and to draw connections to what researchers already know about protective factors. Finally, few studies to date have focused on the effects of discrimination on younger children, whose less-developed ethnic identities place them at greater risk of suffering discrimination's harmful outcomes. However, caution must be taken to design research methods that avoid exposing children to biases of which they may be unaware.

## I. Introduction: Defining Discrimination

Put simply, discrimination involves harmful actions toward others because of their ethnicity, nationality, language ability and accent, or immigration status.

Studying discrimination, as perceived and experienced by children, is a remarkably complex process. One reason is that the bases for discrimination often center on those characteristics that children share with their immigrant parents. For example, immigrant children and children of immigrant parents—including parents without legal immigration status—are also often in the ethnic minority in the United States (i.e., Asian, Latino/Hispanic, or Black). Thus, immigration status and ethnicity are confounded and frequently overlap. The result is that native-born white children may discriminate against immigrant children not because of their immigration status per se, but because of their more visually salient ethnicity. Other children may be the target of discrimination because of a parent's unauthorized immigration status, even if the children themselves were born in the United States and the other parent is a U.S. citizen.

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*It is important to examine how the child experiences discrimination.*

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The various types of discrimination add another layer of complexity. Discrimination may occur at the institutional (i.e., structural) level, or at the personal level. At the institutional level, for example, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes may be located in remote, dilapidated areas of a school building and/or plagued with frequent scheduling changes and unqualified teachers.<sup>2</sup> Immigrant parents may face discrimination in the workplace, in the community, and in encounters with law enforcement. Discrimination indirectly affects children when their immigrant parents lose their job or suffer wage disparities because of employer biases. At the personal, or individual, level, the immigrant child may suffer social exclusion from peer groups, unfair grading, verbal insults from teachers and peers, and physical assault. Instances of personal discrimination are often called “microaggressions,” reflecting their possibly subtle and often brief, but negative, nature.

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2 Susan Roberta Katz, “Teaching in Tensions: Latino Immigrant Youth, Their Teachers, and the Structures of Schooling,” *Teachers College Record* vol. 100, no. 4 (1999): 809–40.



It is important to examine how the child *experiences* discrimination. Immigrant children may or may not be aware of discrimination. For example, a Latino immigrant child may be placed in an ESL class not because she experiences language difficulties, but because of stereotypes about Latino immigrants' language skills. That child may be unaware that discrimination has occurred, and may assume instead that her language skills are poor. Conversely, the child may detect the discrimination and recognize she has been treated unfairly because she is an immigrant. Although both scenarios affect the child, they are psychologically different experiences that lead to different psychological and educational outcomes. Discrimination that directly targets the child, particularly when the child perceives it can have identifiable educational, psychological, physical, and social consequences. These effects are not culturally specific but are often shared by many different immigrant groups.

This report focuses on how children perceive and react to direct forms of both institutional and personal discrimination.

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*It is perhaps not surprising that children are most likely to experience discrimination at school, where they spend most of their waking hours.*

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## II. Types of Discrimination: Sources, Contexts, and Settings

Of the many ways children may experience discrimination, they are most likely to detect or perceive it in school—from their peers and teachers. Then, as they enter adolescence, they may encounter it in other public settings.

### A. Discrimination in Schools

It is perhaps not surprising that children are most likely to experience discrimination at school, where they spend most of their waking hours, from early childhood until late adolescence. Research has examined (1) the different forms of discrimination experienced at school, and (2) the structural characteristics that exacerbate immigrant children's experience of this discrimination.

Children most commonly perceive discrimination from their peers.<sup>3</sup> In one study of Mexican immigrant children in elementary school, more than 60 percent reported experiencing at least one instance of discrimination from school peers, most often in the form of unfair treatment or verbal insults.<sup>4</sup>

The immigrant youths—many of them Latino—interviewed for another study mentioned being teased

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3 Tumaini R. Coker et al., "Perceived Racial/Ethnic Discrimination among Fifth-Grade Students and Its Association with Mental Health," *American Journal of Public Health* vol. 99, no. 5 (2009): 878; Celia B. Fisher, Scyatta A. Wallace, and Rose E. Fenton, "Discrimination Distress during Adolescence," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* vol. 29, no. 6 (2000): 679–95; Laura A. Szalacha, Sumru Erkut, Cynthia Garcia Coll, Odette Alarcon, Jacqueline P. Fields, and Ineke Ceder, "Discrimination and Puerto Rican Children's and Adolescents' Mental Health," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* vol. 9, no. 2 (2003): 141.

4 This study, funded by the Foundation for Child Development (FCD), used a sample of Mexican immigrant children from a region in Kentucky where many Latino immigrants were newly arrived and where the school district reported approximately 14 percent Latino children. See Christia Spears Brown and Hui Chu, "Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes of Mexican Immigrant Children: The Importance of School Context," *Child Development* vol. 83, no. 5 (2012): 1477–85.



or harassed because of their ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> One Mexican immigrant, a fourth grader attending elementary school in Los Angeles, said, “They call me lots of names because I am Mexican.” Another Mexican immigrant from the same school told the researchers, “In PE class, a lot of kids call me a beaner.” Many children also reported being excluded from activities because of their ethnicity, and a small number reported being threatened with physical harm.<sup>6</sup> Several Chinese immigrant adolescents who speak English with an accent described being treated by their peers as if they were “perpetual foreigners.”<sup>7</sup>

Immigrant children also experience discrimination from teachers.<sup>8</sup> In the aforementioned study of Mexican immigrant students in elementary school, 42 percent perceived themselves to be the target of teacher discrimination at least once by the fourth grade.

Many immigrant youth in elementary school report that their teachers do not call on them because of their ethnicity<sup>9</sup>—a phenomenon that only becomes more common as they reach adolescence.<sup>10</sup> In one study, approximately half of the Latino adolescents interviewed reported that they had been graded unfairly, and one-quarter felt they had been discouraged from joining advanced-level classes and disciplined wrongly by teachers.<sup>11</sup> Immigrant students also state that teachers have low expectations of them, often assuming their English to be poor. They report having hostile encounters with teachers (who stereotype them as troublemakers) and being treated as invisible (perhaps by teachers attempting to take a “colorblind” approach to instruction).<sup>12</sup> By adolescence, immigrant youth say they experience ethnic discrimination from teachers approximately two to three times a year.<sup>13</sup>

When evaluating perceptions of discrimination among children and adolescents, it is important to examine how such perceptions are shaped by the school context. This context includes the ethnic composition of the school, as well as the explicit and implicit ways in which administrators and teachers value diversity, promote multiculturalism, and enforce antiharassment policies.

In terms of school composition, first- and second-generation immigrant children are frequently in the numerical minority. Children in the minority are at greater risk of being victimized by peers than are children in the majority. Further, children in the minority in less diverse schools are more likely to report feeling unsafe than minority children who attend more diverse schools.<sup>14</sup> At diverse schools, the balance of power is dispersed across several ethnic groups; in comparison with schools dominated by one ethnic group, this greater equality leads to fewer experiences of discrimination.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of its ethnic composition, a school’s climate can affect immigrant children’s perceptions of discrimination. One study finds that Latino immigrant students perceived less peer discrimination and had

- 5 Christia Spears Brown, Basirat O. Alabi, Virginia W. Huynh, and Carrie L. Masten, “Ethnicity and Gender in Late Childhood and Early Adolescence: Group Identity and Awareness of Bias,” *Developmental Psychology* vol. 47, no. 2 (2011): 463.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Su Yeong Kim, Yijie Wang, Shiyong Deng, Rocio Alvarez, and Jing Li, “Accent, Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype, and Perceived Discrimination as Indirect Links between English Proficiency and Depressive Symptoms in Chinese American Adolescents,” *Developmental Psychology* vol. 47, no. 1 (2011): 289.
- 8 Susan Rakosi Rosenbloom and Niobe Way, “Experiences of Discrimination among African American, Asian American, and Latino Adolescents in an Urban High School,” *Youth and Society* vol. 35, no. 4 (2004): 420–51.
- 9 Brown and Chu, “Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes.”
- 10 Melissa L. Greene, Niobe Way, and Kerstin Pahl, “Trajectories of Perceived Adult and Peer Discrimination among Black, Latino, and Asian American Adolescents: Patterns and Psychological Correlates,” *Developmental Psychology* vol. 42, no. 2 (2006): 218.
- 11 Fisher, Wallace, and Fenton, “Discrimination Distress during Adolescence.”
- 12 Katz, “Teaching in Tensions.”
- 13 Carol A. Wong, Jacquelynne S. Eccles, and Arnold Sameroff, “The Influence of Ethnic Discrimination and Ethnic Identification on African American Adolescents’ School and Socioemotional Adjustment,” *Journal of Personality* vol. 71, no. 6 (2003): 1197–232.
- 14 Sandra Graham and Jaana Juvonen, “Ethnicity, Peer Harassment, and Adjustment in Middle School: An Exploratory Study,” *The Journal of Early Adolescence* vol. 22, no. 2 (2002): 173–99; Janet Kistner, Amy Metzler, Deborah Gaitlin, and Susan Risi, “Classroom Racial Proportions and Children’s Peer Relations: Race and Gender Effects,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* vol. 85, no. 3 (1993): 446.
- 15 Jaana Juvonen, Adrienne Nishina, and Sandra Graham, “Ethnic Diversity and Perceptions of Safety in Urban Middle Schools,” *Psychological Science* vol. 17, no. 5 (2006): 393–400.





more positive ethnic identities when their teachers believed diverse classrooms were an opportunity for enrichment rather than a burden.<sup>16</sup> It appears that teachers who value diversity, in contrast to teachers who ignore and try to avoid cultural differences, create environments in which cultural backgrounds can be freely discussed, and establish classroom norms in which teasing and exclusion on the basis of ethnicity are not acceptable. As pointed out by early-education scholar Jennifer Adair, one way that teachers express a positive attitude about diversity is by valuing the unique languages spoken by children rather than focusing on “fixing” their language skills.<sup>17</sup> Not only can teachers’ attitudes and established classroom norms influence children’s perceptions of personal discrimination, whether from peers or teachers, but also the school climate can influence perceptions by the children of broader structural discrimination. For example, Latino immigrant children attending schools that value multiculturalism and diversity perceived less community-based discrimination than those in schools that ignore cultural diversity.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the school climate not only establishes norms for acceptable behavior at school, but also informs children’s experience of the broader community.

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It is important to note that although most of the research on children of immigrants focuses on Latino immigrants, its findings may be generalized to other immigrant groups. Indeed, children from smaller immigrant groups (e.g., Vietnamese) may benefit the most from schools that value diversity.<sup>19</sup> Previous studies indicate that individuals who attend schools where they have few or no peers from the same ethnic group (that is, who have solo status, also known as being a “token”) suffer in particular. They are more severely stereotyped by others, feel the burden of representing an entire cultural group, and perform worse academically.<sup>20</sup> The diversity of schools’ student bodies—and attitudes toward diversity—may help reduce stressors for students in very small immigrant groups.<sup>21</sup>

Although schools cannot control the composition of their student bodies, administrators and teachers play a large role in determining how multiculturalism and diversity are portrayed and valued. Significant messages are conveyed in how schools decorate communal spaces (such as hallways and libraries), how they celebrate holidays, and the assignments they give children. School administrations also have a certain level of control over how they train teachers and how they implement standardized testing. Research has shown that children attend to schools’ implicit messages about diversity, and that these messages affect how they experience and perceive discrimination.

## **B. Discrimination Outside Schools**

Children and adolescents from immigrant families also experience discrimination outside the school. More than half of the Latino adolescents interviewed for one study reported being hassled by store clerks and receiving poor service at restaurants because of their ethnicity.<sup>22</sup> One Latina girl in sixth grade

16 Brown and Chu, “Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes.”

17 Jennifer Adair, *The Impact of Discrimination on the Early Schooling Experiences of Children from Immigrant Families* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2015 forthcoming).

18 Brown and Chu, “Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes.”

19 Paul N. Konan, Armand Chatard, Leila Selimbegović, and Gabriel Mugny, “Cultural Diversity in the Classroom and its Effects on Academic Performance: A Cross-National Perspective,” *Social Psychology* vol. 41, no. 4 (2010): 230.

20 Yolanda Flores Niemann, *The Psychology of Tokenism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 100–18.

21 Delia S. Saenz, “Token Status and Problem-Solving Deficits: Detrimental Effects of Distinctiveness and Performance Monitoring,” *Social Cognition* vol. 12, no. 1 (1994): 61–74; Denise Sekaquaptewa and Mischa Thompson, “The Differential Effects of Solo Status on Members of High- and Low-Status Groups,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* vol. 28, no. 5 (2002): 694–707.

22 Fisher, Wallace, and Fenton, “Discrimination Distress during Adolescence.”



remembered a time that her family was waiting for service at a restaurant, only to see a white family who arrived after them receive immediate attention. Although perceptions of peer-based discrimination did not vary across childhood and adolescence, perceptions of discrimination from adults (including at school and in other public institutions) increase with age.<sup>23</sup> Discrimination from adults is perceived less frequently in early childhood than in later years because it is cognitively more difficult to detect. For example, it is more difficult to detect receiving poor service at a restaurant (which involves subtle behaviors and could be attributed to other factors besides discrimination) than being called a derogatory name by a fellow student. Young children (under about age 10) generally do not have the cognitive sophistication to detect structural, abstract, or highly subtle forms of discrimination.

Like schools, neighborhoods play a significant role in shaping immigrant children's experiences of discrimination. Neighborhoods influence the peer networks available to children and the community perspectives to which children are exposed. One study of Mexican immigrant children, for example, finds that the greater the ethnic concentration of the neighborhood, the less peer discrimination perceived over time (most likely because children are interacting with more peers in the same ethnic group).<sup>24</sup> This finding is similar to the beneficial effect of more diverse student bodies on the experiences of children with discrimination in schools. Further, high neighborhood cohesion appears to attenuate the associations between perceptions of discrimination and externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and vandalism.<sup>25</sup>

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Despite these and other findings, it is difficult to determine exactly how neighborhoods affect immigrant children's experiences of discrimination. First, the experiences of discrimination in neighborhoods are highly confounded with poverty and broader institutional discrimination. Immigrant children are more likely to live in poor neighborhoods and to experience family and residential instability than their nonimmigrant peers. These factors are not evidence of discrimination *per se* (although they are not independent of structural discrimination), but are obviously important for child outcomes. Another challenge is accounting for the different types of neighborhoods most likely to be home to different immigrant groups. For example, first- and second-generation Mexican immigrants are likely to live in diverse communities, whereas third-generation immigrants are more likely to live in ethnically homogenous Latino areas.<sup>26</sup> Immigrant families also self-select into neighborhoods, making conclusions about the direction of effects difficult. Future research on how neighborhoods influence the discrimination experienced by children must disentangle those factors specific to immigration from the general impacts of institutional discrimination, poverty, and family characteristics not related to race or ethnicity.

### C. Summary and Limitations

Research on the children of immigrants clearly and consistently shows that the majority of them perceive discrimination. One study of Mexican-origin children finds that, on average, they notice instances of dis-

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23 Greene, Way, and Pahl, "Trajectories of Perceived Adult and Peer Discrimination;" Szalacha et al., "Discrimination and Puerto Rican Children's and Adolescents' Mental Health."

24 Rebecca M. B. White, Katharine H. Zeiders, George P. Knight, Mark W. Roosa, and Jenn-Yun Tein, "Mexican Origin Youths' Trajectories of Perceived Peer Discrimination from Middle Childhood to Adolescence: Variation by Neighborhood Ethnic Concentration," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* vol. 43 (2014): 1–15.

25 Elizabeth M. Riina, Anne Martin, Margo Gardner, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, "Context Matters: Links between Neighborhood Discrimination, Neighborhood Cohesion, and African American Adolescents' Adjustment," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* vol. 42, no. 1 (2013): 136–46.

26 White, Zeiders, Knight, Roosa, and Tein., "Mexican Origin Youths' Trajectories."



crimination once or twice a year.<sup>27</sup> Most often, they note when their peers call them a name, insult them, or exclude them from activities. They also notice when their teachers have low expectations for them or assume their language skills to be poor. It is unclear when children begin to perceive discrimination, since there has been little research conducted on young children. But they do notice it at least by the fourth grade, and more easily read signs of personal than institutional discrimination.

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This last point is likely due to the limited cognitive abilities of children.<sup>28</sup> In their cognitive development, concrete concepts are understood before abstract concepts. Thus, children in elementary schools are more likely to notice concrete and overt mistreatment (like being called a “beaner”) than underlying structural bias (such as fewer economic resources being allocated to schools with heavy concentrations of immigrant students). Children under the age of 7, meanwhile, may be targets of discrimination but unaware of it, since they lack certain cognitive abilities required to perceive and understand discrimination.<sup>29</sup>

Regardless of how perceptions of discrimination change as children develop, it is important to reiterate the distinction between being aware versus unaware of discrimination, and the difficulties in accurately measuring incidents of discrimination. Children may be aware of discrimination (and “unfairness” generally) in school, but may be unknowingly subject to it in other places as well. It is difficult to accurately measure incidences of discrimination, and even more difficult to assess whether discrimination is intentional. For example, it is impossible to assess the true intent of teachers when they do not call on immigrant students. Their behavior is likely motivated by a complex set of beliefs that may be affected by implicit or subconscious biases.<sup>30</sup> Yet, measuring the intentionality of discrimination may be an unnecessary goal. A child’s perception that the teacher is biased, regardless of the true motivation, still affects the individual child.

The relevant research generally relies on subjective, self-reported, and retrospective data, collected when students are asked to think about their experiences over the past year or past week. Such retrospective reports are likely to omit many of the microaggressions that occur on a daily basis. Future research should pursue measurement techniques used in other fields, such as experience sampling (i.e., each experience is recorded as it occurs in a two- or four-week testing window) or momentary sampling (participants are contacted several times throughout the day or week and asked to report on their recent experiences). Further work is also needed to develop accurate measures of perceived discrimination in children in pre-school and the early elementary grades. The impacts of discrimination may be especially detrimental for very young children, but their experiences are largely ignored by researchers.

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27 Aprile D. Benner and Sandra Graham, “Latino Adolescents’ Experiences of Discrimination across the First 2 Years of High School: Correlates and Influences on Educational Outcomes,” *Child Development* vol. 82, no. 2 (2011): 508–19; Gene H. Brody et al., “Perceived Discrimination and the Adjustment of African American Youths: A Five-Year Longitudinal Analysis with Contextual Moderation Effects,” *Child Development* vol. 77, no. 5 (2006): 1170–89; Greene, Way, and Pahl, “Trajectories of Perceived Adult and Peer Discrimination;” Eric Anthony Grollman, “Multiple Forms of Perceived Discrimination and Health among Adolescents and Young Adults,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* vol. 53, no. 2 (2012): 199–214.

28 Christia Spears Brown and Rebecca S. Bigler, “Children’s Perceptions of Discrimination: A Developmental Model,” *Child Development* vol. 76, no. 3 (2005): 533–53.

29 Ibid.

30 There is a large body of psychological research examining how these implicit or subconscious biases affect behavior, independent of consciously held beliefs. See Linda Van den Bergh, Eddie Denessen, Lisette Hornstra, Marinus Voeten, and Rob W. Holland, “The Implicit Prejudiced Attitudes of Teachers Relations to Teacher Expectations and the Ethnic Achievement Gap,” *American Educational Research Journal* vol. 47, no. 2 (2010): 497–527.



### III. The Consequences of Personal Discrimination

Instances of personal discrimination can have broad psychological, physical, academic, and social consequences for immigrant children. This section will explore these consequences—both positive and negative. For example, children’s recognition of discrimination (in place of the assumption that such treatment is due to their own low intelligence or low ability) can help them maintain motivation and self-esteem, thereby developing a strong, positive ethnic identity.<sup>31</sup> A positive ethnic identity subsequently helps buffer the individual from life stressors and future discrimination. More substantial, however, are the negative repercussions of perceiving direct discrimination, which is associated with racial mistrust,<sup>32</sup> problem behaviors,<sup>33</sup> anger,<sup>34</sup> and depressive symptoms.<sup>35</sup> As noted earlier, research also shows that discrimination from teachers can ultimately diminish students’ academic motivation.<sup>36</sup>

These psychological, physical, educational, and social consequences are distinct from the consequences of more indirect forms of discrimination, whether directed at parents or occurring at a structural or institutional level. For example, if fewer economic resources are directed to the public schools within immigrant enclave communities than those in other communities, children of immigrants will experience educational disparities without necessarily being aware of them. An immigrant parent may be discriminated against in the workplace, either directly in the form of microaggressions or structurally in the form of biased wages. The parent will then bring home the stress from that discriminatory experience that can in turn compromise parenting abilities. Thus, the implications of discrimination can be widespread, diffuse, and systemic—and may or may not be perceived by the child. The consequences of these and other forms of discrimination that affect students indirectly or at a structural level are incredibly important, but beyond the scope of this report.<sup>37</sup>

#### A. Physical and Psychological Consequences

Studies have found that children’s perceptions of direct discrimination are strongly associated with numerous negative psychological and physiological consequences, even as they may also foster ethnic identity (as discussed in Section IV of this report).<sup>38</sup> Specifically, greater rates of discrimination are associated with lower self-esteem and life satisfaction;<sup>39</sup> a greater likelihood of hopelessness,<sup>40</sup> depression, and

31 Kerstin Pahl and Niobe Way, “Longitudinal Trajectories of Ethnic Identity among Urban Black and Latino Adolescents,” *Child Development* vol. 77, no. 5 (2006): 1403–15; Jean S. Phinney and Steve Tarver, “Ethnic Identity Search and Commitment in Black and White Eighth Graders,” *The Journal of Early Adolescence* vol. 8, no. 3 (1988): 265–77.

32 Velmarie L. Albertini, “Racial Mistrust among Immigrant Minority Students,” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* vol. 21, no. 4 (2004): 311–31.

33 David L. DuBois, Carol Burk-Braxton, Lance P. Swenson, Heather D. Tevendale, and Jennifer L. Hardesty, “Race and Gender Influences on Adjustment in Early Adolescence: Investigation of an Integrative Model,” *Child Development* vol. 73, no. 5 (2002): 1573–92.

34 Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff, “The Influence of Ethnic Discrimination.”

35 Brody et al., “Perceived Discrimination and the Adjustment of African American Youths;” Fisher, Wallace, and Fenton, “Discrimination Distress during Adolescence.”

36 Katz, “Teaching in Tensions;” Jeffrey C. Wayman, “Student Perceptions of Teacher Ethnic Bias: A Comparison of Mexican American and Non-Latino White Dropouts and Students,” *The High School Journal* vol. 85, no. 3 (2002): 27–37.

37 For more detailed information about forms of discrimination against young children of immigrants, see Adair, *Impact of Discrimination on Early Schooling Experiences*; Cecilia Ayón, *Economic, Social, and Health Consequences of Discrimination on Latino Immigrant Families: A Review of the Evidence* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2015 forthcoming).

38 See, for example, a recent meta-analysis that found that the links between perceived discrimination and negative outcomes (for example, depression) are stronger than the links with positive outcomes (for example, life satisfaction): Michael T. Schmitt, Nyla R. Branscombe, Tom Postmes, and Amber Garcia, “The Consequences of Perceived Discrimination for Psychological Well-Being: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Psychological Bulletin* vol. 140, no. 4 (2014): 921–48.

39 Eleanor K. Seaton, Cleopatra H. Caldwell, Robert M. Sellers, and James S. Jackson, “The Prevalence of Perceived Discrimination among African American and Caribbean Black Youth,” *Developmental Psychology* vol. 44, no. 5 (2008): 1288.

40 Vanessa M. Nyborg and John F. Curry, “The Impact of Perceived Racism: Psychological Symptoms among African American Boys,” *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology* vol. 32, no. 2 (2003): 258–66.



depressive symptoms;<sup>41</sup> greater anxiety;<sup>42</sup> and more delinquency and aggression.<sup>43</sup>

Not surprisingly, discrimination from peers seems to have more negative personal effects, whereas discrimination from teachers seems to have more negative academic effects. Because of its substantial impacts on self-esteem, discrimination from peers is associated with greater anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness, and lower self-worth than is discrimination from teachers or institutions.<sup>44</sup>

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psychological and physiological consequences.*

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Although much of the research on the effects of discrimination has focused on Latino adolescents in the United States and Canada, similar findings have been found among unique and diverse immigrant samples: Russian-speaking immigrant children living in Finland,<sup>45</sup> Somali refugees in the United States,<sup>46</sup> Puerto Ricans adolescents in New York,<sup>47</sup> Chinese-American adolescents,<sup>48</sup> dark-skinned adolescents in Brazil,<sup>49</sup> and Caribbean female adolescents in the United States.<sup>50</sup> The findings highlight similar ways that discrimination can affect children from a range of ethnic groups and with differing immigration experiences.

Ongoing research into the links between discrimination and negative psychological outcomes points to physiological correlates. Recent studies have looked at how Latino adolescents (most often Mexican-American) respond to the daily stress of discrimination. A 2010 investigation found that experiences of discrimination produce stress responses similar to post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>51</sup> Another study found an association between daily perceptions of discrimination and a greater overall output of cortisol (the hormone released in response to stress).<sup>52</sup> These physiological reactions are in turn associated with worse mental and physical health outcomes. It appears, then, that the negative consequences of discrimination are occurring deep within the body's physiological response system. Although previous findings have shown that discrimination affects the physical health of ethnic minority adults,<sup>53</sup> these recent works

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- 41 Greene, Way, and Pahl, "Trajectories of Perceived Adult and Peer Discrimination;" Brody et al., "Perceived Discrimination and the Adjustment of African American Youths;" Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor and Kimberly A. Updegraff, "Latino Adolescents' Mental Health: Exploring the Interrelations among Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, Cultural Orientation, Self-Esteem, and Depressive Symptoms," *Journal of Adolescence* vol. 30, no. 4 (2007): 549–67.
- 42 Szalacha et al., "Discrimination and Puerto Rican Children's and Adolescents' Mental Health."
- 43 Laura M. Bogart et al., "Association between Perceived Discrimination and Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Problem Behaviors among Preadolescent Youths," *American Journal of Public Health* vol. 103, no. 6 (2013): 1074–81.
- 44 Benner and Graham, "Latino Adolescents' Experiences of Discrimination."
- 45 Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti and Karmela Liebkind, "Perceived Discrimination and Psychological Adjustment among Russian-Speaking Immigrant Adolescents in Finland," *International Journal of Psychology* vol. 36, no. 3 (2001): 174–85.
- 46 B. Heidi Ellis, Helen Z. MacDonald, Julie Klunk-Gillis, Alisa Lincoln, Lee Strunin, and Howard J. Cabral, "Discrimination and Mental Health among Somali Refugee Adolescents: The Role of Acculturation and Gender," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* vol. 80, no. 4 (2010): 564.
- 47 Fernando Rivera, Irene Lopez, Peter Gurnaccia, Rafael Ramirez, Glorisa Canino, and Hector Bird, "Perceived Discrimination and Antisocial Behaviors in Puerto Rican Children," *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* vol. 13, no. 3 (2011): 453–61.
- 48 Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez, and Li, "Accent, Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype, and Perceived Discrimination."
- 49 Vilma Santana, Naomar Almeida-Filho, Robert Roberts, and Sharon P. Cooper, "Skin Colour, Perception of Racism and Depression among Adolescents in Urban Brazil," *Child and Adolescent Mental Health* vol. 12, no. 3 (2007): 125–31.
- 50 Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, and Jackson, "The Prevalence of Perceived Discrimination."
- 51 Elena Flores, Jeanne M. Tschann, Juanita M. Dimas, Lauri A. Pasch, and Cynthia L. de Groat, "Perceived Racial/Ethnic Discrimination, Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms, and Health Risk Behaviors among Mexican American Adolescents," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* vol. 57, no. 3 (2010): 264–73.
- 52 Katharine H. Zeiders, Leah D. Doane, and Mark W. Roosa, "Perceived Discrimination and Diurnal Cortisol: Examining Relations among Mexican American Adolescents," *Hormones and Behavior* vol. 61, no. 4 (2012): 541–48.
- 53 Elizabeth A. Pascoe and Laura Smart Richman, "Perceived Discrimination and Health: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Psychological Bulletin* vol. 135, no. 4 (2009): 531.



indicate that discrimination also has physical effects on youth in immigrant families.

## B. Academic Consequences

Students' perceptions of discrimination are also associated with negative academic outcomes. These outcomes are conceptualized in several ways: (1) objective performance measures, such as grades, academic achievement, and risk of dropping out of school; (2) academic motivation, or how determined children are to do well in school; and (3) self-perceptions, or how students *think* about their academic performance, including how much ability they believe themselves to have (i.e., self-efficacy) and to what degree they define themselves by their academic successes (i.e., academic self-concept). Experiencing discrimination is detrimental to all these academic outcomes.

Negative academic outcomes are most closely linked with discrimination from teachers, although discrimination from peers can also play a role.<sup>54</sup> Specifically, children who perceive discrimination in school are likely to perform worse academically,<sup>55</sup> be at greater risk of dropping out,<sup>56</sup> and believe that doing well in school is unimportant or not useful<sup>57</sup> and that schoolwork is not enjoyable. They also experience greater stress levels, which are in turn associated with a worse adjustment to school practices and expectations.<sup>58</sup>

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### *Students' perceptions of discrimination are also associated with negative academic outcomes.*

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By disengaging themselves from a domain in which they are receiving negative treatment,<sup>59</sup> children protect their self-esteem—but hinder their academic success (and future earning potential). Researchers have found that perceptions of discrimination from peers and teachers contributed to Latino students' reduced sense of belonging at school, and this was in turn associated with worse academic performance.<sup>60</sup> Students who perceive discrimination do not feel valued at school and do not feel that their voices are important—and are more likely to drop out of high school before graduation.

The author's own research has similar findings, even controlling for students' previous academic achievement.<sup>61</sup> In other words, controlling for how well children *actually* do in school, those who experience discrimination from teachers still feel worse about their academic abilities and feel a weaker sense of belonging at school. This finding indicates that how students see themselves treated by their teachers does as much to shape their attitudes about their academic abilities than does their actual academic performance.

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54 Aprile D. Benner and Sandra Graham, "The Antecedents and Consequences of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination during Adolescence: Does the Source of Discrimination Matter?" *Developmental Psychology* vol. 49, no. 8 (2013): 1602.

55 Susan Stone and Meekyung Han, "Perceived School Environments, Perceived Discrimination, and School Performance among Children of Mexican Immigrants," *Children and Youth Services Review* vol. 27, no. 1 (2005): 51–66.

56 Wayman, "Student Perceptions of Teacher Ethnic Bias."

57 Maykel Verkuyten and Peary Brug, "Educational Performance and Psychological Disengagement among Ethnic-Minority and Dutch Adolescents," *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* vol. 164, no. 2 (2003): 189–200; Maykel Verkuyten and Jochem Thijs, "Psychological Disidentification with the Academic Domain among Ethnic Minority Adolescents in the Netherlands," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* vol. 74, no. 1 (2004): 109–25.

58 Karmela Liebkind, Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti, and Erling Solheim, "Cultural Identity, Perceived Discrimination, and Parental Support as Determinants of Immigrants' School Adjustments: Vietnamese Youth in Finland," *Journal of Adolescent Research* vol. 19, no. 6 (2004): 635–56.

59 Verkuyten and Brug, "Educational Performance and Psychological Disengagement;" Verkuyten and Thijs, "Psychological Disidentification with the Academic Domain among Ethnic Minority Adolescents," 109–25.

60 Beverly S. Faircloth and Jill V. Hamm, "Sense of Belonging among High School Students Representing 4 Ethnic Groups," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* vol. 34, no. 4 (2005): 293–309.

61 Brown and Chu, "Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes."



Because of the consistent links between discrimination and negative academic outcomes, some have pointed to discrimination at school as an important contributor to the well-documented achievement gap between immigrants and their nonimmigrant peers.<sup>62</sup> This is particularly relevant for Latino immigrants. Studies consistently show that Latino students of all ages—and even in comparison to other immigrant groups<sup>63</sup>—are likely to score lower on academic achievement tests, be held back a grade, and nurture lower educational aspirations than their same-age peers. Discrimination relates to each of these academic indicators. (In some studies, although not all, when parental socioeconomic status is taken into account and controlled for, many of the educational disparities between ethnic groups are diminished, albeit not completely erased.<sup>64</sup> In other words, difference in socioeconomic status between ethnic groups can explain much of the group-level differences between Latinos and white/European Americans. Parental socioeconomic status, however, does not adequately explain the differences between individual children within an ethnic group. Individual experiences are important for explaining individual outcomes, and the impact of discrimination on *individual* children's achievement is important, regardless of his or her socioeconomic status.)

The associations between discrimination and academic outcomes are thus complicated by other factors. Consider the example of Latino children. They are more likely than their peers to perceive school-based discrimination, and this discrimination is associated with more negative academic outcomes. Meanwhile, their parents and families are particularly likely to suffer institutional and structural discrimination (such as harsh immigration enforcement, residential segregation, and discriminatory hiring practices), which in turn makes it likely that a large proportion of Latino immigrant children will live in poverty. Finally, living in poverty, particularly in families with low educational attainment (as in the case of many Latino immigrants), increases the likelihood of negative academic outcomes.

### C. Social Consequences

To a lesser degree, research has examined the negative social outcomes—e.g., risky behaviors and affiliation with deviant peers—associated with perceptions of discrimination.<sup>65</sup> These consequences can have extreme long-term implications if youth are arrested and/or expelled from school because of them. Students' experiences of school-based discrimination have also been associated with their feeling less socially competent in peer relationships.<sup>66</sup> Because peer-based discrimination involves being rejected by the peer group, it can leave immigrant youth socially isolated and segregated. This can in turn compound the feelings of low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety initiated by encounters with discrimination. Further, the negative social interactions that are inherently part of discrimination seem to beget more negative social interactions in the future.<sup>67</sup>

### D. Summary and Limitations

Taken together, the research demonstrates that the significant psychological, academic, and social consequences of the encounters that immigrant children have with discrimination are embedded within a broader social system in which these children are more likely to live in poverty and attend schools with

62 Grace Kao and Jennifer S. Thompson, "Racial and Ethnic Stratification in Educational Achievement and Attainment," *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 29 (2003): 417–42.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Melissa Y. Delgado, Kimberly A. Updegraff, Mark W. Roosa, and Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor, "Discrimination and Mexican-Origin Adolescents' Adjustment: The Moderating Roles of Adolescents', Mothers', and Fathers' Cultural Orientations and Values," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* vol. 40, no. 2 (2011): 125–39.

66 Jacqueline Oxman-Martinez, Anneke J. Rummens, Jacques Moreau, YeRi Choi, Morton Beiser, Linda Ogilvie, and Robert Armstrong, "Perceived Ethnic Discrimination and Social Exclusion: Newcomer Immigrant Children in Canada," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* vol. 82 (3): 376–88.

67 Luca Andrighetto, Federica Durante, Federica Lugani, Chiara Volpato, and Alberto Mirisola, "Obstacles to Intergroup Contact: When Outgroup Partner's Anxiety Meets Perceived Ethnic Discrimination," *British Journal of Social Psychology* vol. 52, no. 4 (2013): 781–92.



fewer resources than are their nonimmigrant peers. They may also find themselves in the minority both at school and in their neighborhood. These contexts place immigrant children further at risk by exacerbating the negative impacts of discrimination.

But our understanding of how discrimination affects immigrant children is limited. First, most of the existing literature is based on correlational studies, in which children's experiences with discrimination are compared with their current psychological well-being or academic attitudes. These studies provide only a one-time "snapshot" of children's development. A longitudinal approach, meanwhile, could control for earlier levels of psychological well-being and allow researchers to examine whether these predict later perceptions of discrimination—and whether discrimination predicts later reductions in psychological well-being.

In addition, immigrant children from a range of economic and social backgrounds need to be examined to differentiate the effects of direct, perceived discrimination from the effects associated with poverty or membership of an ethnic group labeled as a "minority." These factors often coexist: many children of immigrants experience discrimination, live in poverty, and are in an ethnic minority in their communities and schools. It is important to know how these factors affect children, both independently and in concert with one another, to make the most appropriate policy recommendations. Because of the naturally occurring confounds, research has not yet successfully teased apart these factors.

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*Our understanding of how discrimination  
affects immigrant children is limited.*

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## IV. Protective Factors

Although a majority of immigrant children and adolescents experience discrimination—and suffer psychological, academic, and social costs as a result—there are several factors that may help protect or buffer children from these costs. Children's ethnic identity, their families, and their coping responses can serve important roles in mitigating the effects of discrimination.

### A. Ethnic Identity

Children and adolescents' ethnic identities may be defined as the "thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behaviors" that are shaped by membership in an ethnic group—factors that together convey a sense of belonging to the group.<sup>68</sup> Questions of ethnic identity are complex and difficult to answer: is membership of an ethnic group an important and central part of a child's self-concept? How does the child perceive—or believe that others perceive—his or her ethnic group?

Research has consistently shown that ethnic identity serves as a buffer against the negative effects of discrimination. Specifically, a strong, positive ethnic identity can buffer the negative effects of teachers' and peers' discrimination on well-being,<sup>69</sup> depressive symptoms,<sup>70</sup> life satisfaction, academic self-identity,<sup>71</sup>

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68 Mary Jane Rotheram and Jean S. Phinney, "Introduction: Definitions and Perspectives in the Study of Children's Ethnic Socialization," in *Children's Ethnic Socialization: Pluralism and Development*, eds. Jean S. Phinney and Mary Jane Rotheram (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1987), 13.

69 Greene, Way, and Pahl, "Trajectories of Perceived Adult and Peer Discrimination."

70 Deborah Rivas-Drake, Diane Hughes, and Niobe Way, "A Closer Look at Peer Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Psychological Well-Being among Urban Chinese American Sixth Graders," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* vol. 37, no. 1 (2008): 12–21; Umaña-Taylor and Updegraff, "Latino Adolescents' Mental Health."

71 Brown and Chu, "Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes;" Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff, "The Influence of Ethnic Discrimination."





and academic achievement.<sup>72</sup> To be most beneficial, an ethnic identity must be both positively valued *and* a central and significant part of a child's self-concept.

Further, although immigrant youth face ethnic discrimination that places them at risk for academic disengagement, their ethnic identities may help them maintain positive attitudes about school. In a study of Dominican immigrants in the second and fourth grades, students whose ethnicity was more central to their identity rated school as more important than those whose ethnic identity was less central. Also, these same students exhibited greater academic motivation.<sup>73</sup> Another study of immigrant adolescents associated a strong, positive ethnic identity with more positive attitudes about education in general (e.g., a belief in the utility of education and academic success, and greater interest in school) and their school specifically (a greater sense of identity with their school and of being respected at school).<sup>74</sup> Importantly, teachers in this study who reported valuing diversity had immigrant students who expressed more positive ethnic identities.<sup>75</sup>

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*Research has consistently shown that ethnic identity serves as a buffer against the negative effects of discrimination.*

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The protective role of ethnic identity is complicated, however, because it may be shaped in part by perceptions of discrimination. For example, being openly discriminated against by peers can promote the development of a more salient ethnic identity as a coping mechanism.<sup>76</sup> In other cases, discrimination from peers may weaken a child's ethnic identity, perhaps because the child seeks to dissociate from the stigma of being part of an ethnic group.<sup>77</sup> When discrimination weakens ethnic identity, psychological well-being and academic outcomes are particularly likely to suffer. For immigrant children—who often maintain multiple identifications at once, including an ethnic identity and a new national identity—experiences of discrimination have been shown to decrease identification with the host country.<sup>78</sup> In other words, immigrant children who experience discrimination in the United States may be discouraged from feeling “American.”

The positive effects of ethnic identity in buffering against the negative impacts of discrimination also vary by age. Ethnic identity develops across late elementary school and early adolescence, and thus is not well developed in young children. Most young children feel positively about their ethnicity,<sup>79</sup> but are still developing a self-concept. Being able to incorporate ethnic group membership (and the abstract cultural heritage that accompanies it) into a view of the self requires social, cognitive, and personal development. Therefore, young children may have positive conceptions of their ethnic identity, but have not yet developed the dimensions of their identity critical to making it protective. Because younger children have only burgeoning ethnic identities, they may be particularly vulnerable to the pernicious effects of discrimination.

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72 Tabbye M. Chavous, Deborah Rivas-Drake, Ciara Smalls, Tiffany Griffin, and Courtney Cogburn, “Gender Matters, Too: The Influences of School Racial Discrimination and Racial Identity on Academic Engagement Outcomes among African American Adolescents,” *Developmental Psychology* vol. 44, no. 3 (2008): 637.

73 Jason S. Lawrence, Meredith Bachman, and Diane N. Ruble, “Ethnicity, Ethnic Identity, and School Valuing among Children from Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Families,” in *Contesting Stereotypes and Creating Identities*, ed. Andrew Fuligni (New York: Russell Sage, 2007), 136–59.

74 Andrew J. Fuligni, Melissa Witkow, and Carla Garcia, “Ethnic Identity and the Academic Adjustment of Adolescents from Mexican, Chinese, and European Backgrounds,” *Developmental Psychology* vol. 41, no. 5 (2005): 799.

75 Brown and Chu, “Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes.”

76 Pahl and Way, “Longitudinal Trajectories of Ethnic Identity.”

77 Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, and Solheim, “Cultural Identity, Perceived Discrimination, and Parental Support;” Andrea J. Romero and Robert E. Roberts, “The Impact of Multiple Dimensions of Ethnic Identity on Discrimination and Adolescents’ Self-Esteem,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* vol. 33, no. 11 (2003): 2288–305.

78 Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti, Karmela Liebkind, and Erling Solheim, “To Identify or Not to Identify? National Disidentification as an Alternative Reaction to Perceived Ethnic Discrimination,” *Applied Psychology* vol. 58, no. 1 (2009): 105–28.

79 Brown and Chu, “Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes.”



## B. Family Support and Socialization

Families play an important role in how immigrant children and adolescents forge their ethnic identities and comprehend discrimination. By discussing ethnicity and discrimination with their children, parents can help protect them from the effects of discrimination, though in practice the number and type of discussions vary. Discussions about having pride in one's ethnicity and cultural heritage, as well as ways to prepare for potential discrimination, are referred to as "ethnic socialization."

Ethnic socialization by parents can increase the amount of discrimination that children perceive, both directly and indirectly, as family discussions about ethnicity are related to the amount of discrimination perceived by children.<sup>80</sup> Research involving immigrant sixth graders found that when parents had discussions with their children aimed at preparing them for future ethnic bias, children were more likely to expect others to devalue their ethnic group.<sup>81</sup>

Although parental ethnic socialization can increase children's awareness of discrimination, it is also an important factor in helping them cope with the discrimination they experience. For example, when immigrant parents engage in conversations that encourage pride in their cultural heritage and ethnicity, their children are more likely to have ethnic identities central to their lives.<sup>82</sup> As previously described, a more positive and well-developed ethnic identity can buffer against the negative impacts of discrimination. There seems to be a delicate balance involved in conversations that, ideally, focus on the positive aspects of their family's ethnicity (by encouraging pride in their cultural heritage, ethnicity, language, and country of origin); address the possibility of future discrimination without dwelling too much on negative possibilities; and help children cope with discrimination.

Parents' discussions about the positive aspects of ethnicity may be especially important for young children. As previously mentioned, young children are somewhat more vulnerable to the effects of discrimination because they have not yet developed a protective ethnic identity. Parental ethnic socialization, when started in preschool, can help foster the development of this protective force.<sup>83</sup>

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*How individuals cope with discrimination is likely important in mitigating its negative consequences.*

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## C. Active Coping and Social Support

Finally, as with any stressor, how individuals cope with discrimination is likely important in mitigating its negative consequences. There are three primary ways that children cope with stressors such as discrimination. They can (a) seek social support by talking to a trusted teacher, friend, or parent, (b) confront the perpetrator or report the incident, or (c) withdraw from the situation or try to forget it. The more active approaches, such as approaching the perpetrator or seeking social support, have been shown to empower the individual, reduce stress, and increase motivation, while withdrawing or trying to forget it have been shown to lead to a sense of helplessness and diminished motivation.<sup>84</sup>

80 Vetta L. Sanders Thompson, "Variables Affecting Racial-Identity Salience among African Americans," *The Journal of Social Psychology* vol. 139, no. 6 (1999): 748–61; Diane Hughes and Deborah Johnson, "Correlates in Children's Experiences of Parents' Racial Socialization Behaviors," *Journal of Marriage and Family* vol. 63, no. 4 (2001): 981–95.

81 Deborah Rivas-Drake, Diane Hughes, and Niobe Way, "A Preliminary Analysis of Associations among Ethnic-Racial Socialization, Ethnic Discrimination, and Ethnic Identity among Urban Sixth Graders," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* vol. 19, no. 3 (2009): 558–84.

82 Ibid.

83 George P. Knight, Martha E. Bernal, Camille A. Garza, Marya K. Cota, and Katheryn A. Ocampo. "Family socialization and the ethnic identity of Mexican-American children." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 24.1 (1993): 99-114.

84 Janet K. Swim and Margaret A. Thomas, "Responding to Everyday Discrimination: A Synthesis of Research on Goal-Directed, Self-Regulatory Coping Behaviors," in *Stigma and Group Inequality: Social Psychological Perspectives*, eds. Shana Levin and Collette van Laar (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2006), 105–26.



Seeking social support is a helpful way for children to respond to discrimination. Social support from parents, teachers, and peers has been shown to help buffer the negative effects of perceived discrimination on children's and adolescents' academic well-being. Although parental social support is the most important, having more than one source of support is beneficial.<sup>85</sup>

The active strategies, such as reporting an incident of discrimination to a teacher or administrator, are also beneficial. Work with immigrant adolescents has shown that among youth who perceive discrimination to be stressful, those who confront the person, report the incident, or seek social support have higher self-esteem than those who do not. The association between self-esteem and coping strategies is bidirectional, however. Using longitudinal data, researchers found that self-esteem at a younger age predicts these more active coping styles later, and active coping at a younger age predicts later self-esteem.<sup>86</sup> Ethnic identity also predicts these active forms of coping. Adolescents with more positive and well-developed ethnic identities reported using more active coping styles in response to discrimination than youth with less positive ethnic identities.<sup>87</sup> Those adolescents with a less well-developed ethnic identity reported using more passive responses (such as withdrawing).

## V. Research Gaps, Challenges, and Future Possibilities

How immigrant children and the children of immigrants perceive and experience discrimination is a rather new field of study. As such, there are several gaps in our knowledge base that need to be addressed by future research. Some of these gaps reflect methodological challenges.

First, more research should focus on the earliest perceptions of discrimination. Because ethnic identity has been shown to be an important buffer against the negative impacts of discrimination, and younger children have only budding ethnic identities, they may be particularly vulnerable to discrimination. Conversely, the cognitive constraints of young children may leave them unaware of most types of discrimination. Researchers have yet to clearly examine children's experiences with discrimination at the preschool and early elementary school level. The challenge of this research lies in asking these sensitive questions to young children. There are ethical considerations around directly asking young children about biases of which they may not yet be aware. Therefore, researchers need to design either implicit measures or open-ended questions to be used with young children.

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*More research should focus on the earliest perceptions of discrimination.*

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Second, researchers should continue to examine why discrimination affects some children more negatively than others. Studies indicate that ethnic identity moderates the autonomic nervous system's responses to discrimination.<sup>88</sup> Thus, an individual's ethnic identity may determine whether discrimination is more or less harmful to the body's response systems. As the methods for collecting physiological, neurological, and biological data become more common, and the practice of developmental neuroscience evolves, these will offer fruitful contributions to the research.

85 David S. DeGarmo and Charles R. Martinez, "A Culturally Informed Model of Academic Well-Being for Latino Youth: The Importance of Discriminatory Experiences and Social Support," *Family Relations* vol. 55, no. 3 (2006): 267–78.

86 Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor, Delfino Vargas-Chanes, Cristal D. Garcia, and Melinda Gonzales-Backen, "A Longitudinal Examination of Latino Adolescents' Ethnic Identity, Coping with Discrimination, and Self-Esteem," *The Journal of Early Adolescence* vol. 28, no. 1 (2008): 16–50.

87 Jean S. Phinney and Victor Chavira, "Parental Ethnic Socialization and Adolescent Coping with Problems Related to Ethnicity," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* vol. 5, no.1 (1995): 31–53.

88 See, for example, Enrique W. Neblett and Steven O. Roberts, "Racial Identity and Autonomic Responses to Racial Discrimination," *Psychophysiology* vol. 50, no. 10 (2013): 943–53.



Third, future research must disentangle the consequences of discrimination *per se* from the consequences of other factors that are confounded with immigration, such as poverty and residential instability. The challenge of this research is that these confounds are difficult to control for beyond statistical analysis. For example, although it is possible to statistically control for household income when examining the impact of discrimination on depressive symptoms among certain immigrant groups, this approach has its limits: particular groups in particular communities are likely to have similar income ranges. To address these methodological complications researchers must use large samples with income data, data on general daily stressors (that may be related to poverty and immigration status, or unrelated to either), and data on subjects' perceptions of specific types of discrimination. Without these types of studies, it is impossible to know the true impact of perceived discrimination, independent of the impact of socio-economic and other structural factors. Knowing the *specific* role of discrimination is critical for making appropriate policy recommendations.

## VI. Conclusions and Implications

From the existing research, it is clear that immigrant children recognize discrimination from peers and teachers at least by middle childhood (around age 8), and at the institutional or societal level by adolescence. Discrimination affects the psychological well-being of immigrant children, their academic outcomes, and their social relationships. However, these negative effects can be mitigated in many ways, with important implications for both families and schools.

Families should discuss their cultural heritage and instill ethnic pride in their children. This is not something that all families do, as some parents want their children to focus on becoming “American.” But a strong, positive ethnic identity can be both independently beneficial and an important buffer against discrimination. Parents should also make clear that their children can seek family support and advice if faced with discrimination. This involves keeping open lines of communication with their children and checking in with them about their experiences at school, both with their teachers and with their classmates. Finally, parents should help children develop approach coping strategies in case they encounter discrimination. For example, they might discuss whom children should inform if something negative happens at school.

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*A strong, positive ethnic identity can be both independently beneficial and an important buffer against discrimination.*

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Beyond families, any adults who interact with immigrant children need to be aware of the negative consequences associated with discrimination. For example, if a child is showing symptoms of depression, anxiety, or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), doctors and school counselors are often the first points of contact. As part of their assessment protocols, health and mental health providers and other responsible adults might examine whether any experiences of immigration- or ethnicity-related discrimination are negatively affecting the child. If so, helping children cope with this discrimination (and helping the school reduce the discrimination that is occurring) may be the most effective way to address negative psychological symptoms and behaviors.

Schools can provide several levels of protection against discrimination. At the most fundamental level, schools should ensure that they are not perpetrating institutional discrimination by carefully evaluating services targeting immigrant children, like English as a Second Language or English Language Learner classes. Programs should be implemented so that children do not perceive themselves as stigmatized and segregated. For example, ESL classrooms should be as physically close as possible to children's regular classrooms, and children's language proficiency should be regularly tested. Schools also need to evaluate



how they place children into special education programs, to ensure that they are not relying on culturally biased criteria. Schools should also provide interpreters for parents who are not English proficient. ESL or ELL teachers need to be fully certified and trained and, if possible, have some level of engagement with the immigrants in their community. Adequate and appropriate teacher training helps ensure that immigrant children have equal access to high-quality pedagogy that is culturally sensitive.

On a broader level, schools should protect immigrant children who experience discrimination by implementing policies to monitor students' peer interactions and to deter and punish discrimination. Discriminatory behaviors should be handled in the same way as bullying, with students able to report instances of discrimination from both peers and teachers in a confidential and safe manner. Schools should also communicate clearly and efficiently about these incidents with families, keeping parents' language abilities in mind.

On a less concrete level, schools must attend to the messages they communicate on diversity. Principals, teachers, and support staff should implicitly and explicitly show their students that diversity and multiculturalism are valued. This can be demonstrated through displays in public spaces, curricular choices (for example, including reading choices from authors representing a range of ethnic/cultural backgrounds), and the statements of teachers in the classroom. Teachers should not take a "colorblind" approach or assume that discussions of ethnicity and culture are harmful. Instead, addressing ethnicity and culture head on can foster strong, positive ethnic identities among immigrant students in schools.

Schools should recognize that helping their growing populations of immigrant children mitigates the

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*Education policymakers...should be cognizant of the role of direct and indirect, personal, and structural discrimination in shaping children's academic outcomes.*

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negative effects of discrimination and is the first step toward ensuring these students' academic success—which in turn can help the performance of the school. As they formulate their accountability plans, schools should account for how they are addressing the cultural and ethnic identities of their students. This should be part of their objective to reduce achievement gaps, and treated as a key component of students' academic success.

Finally, education policymakers at the local, state, and federal level should be cognizant of the role of direct and indirect, personal, and structural discrimination in shaping children's academic outcomes. It is not enough to focus on curricular choices, proficiency exams, and standardized testing. Attention needs to be paid to how schools are funded, so that children who live in immigrant-enclave communities do not disproportionately attend low-income schools with poorly qualified teachers. Goals toward strict assimilation (such as banning second languages being spoken at school) should be reconsidered, as they can limit the development of children's ethnic identities. Considering that schools are the contexts in which immigrant children most frequently experience discrimination, policymakers must ensure immigrant children enjoy an inclusive and bias-free environment.



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## About the Author



**Christia Spears Brown** is an Associate Professor of developmental psychology at the University of Kentucky. Her research examines the perceptions of discrimination by children and adolescents on the basis of gender, race, and ethnicity. Most recently, she has focused on the discrimination faced by immigrant children and their parents, in research funded by the Foundation for Child Development and UK Center for Poverty Research.

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