

# Negative stereotypes about the poor hurt their health

July 30 2012, By Karene Booker

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(Medical Xpress) -- Adolescents who grow up in poverty are more likely to report being treated unfairly, and this perception of discrimination is related to harmful changes in physical health, reports a new Cornell study published in the July issue of *Psychological Science*.

One of the first studies to explore the role of discrimination as a factor in the well-known link between poverty and poor health, the research suggests that the stresses associated with experiencing social class discrimination have a sizable negative impact.

For their analysis, the researchers used data from 272 adolescents participating in a longitudinal study on rural poverty that included questions about their perceptions of differential treatment and measured blood pressure, overnight levels of [stress hormones](#) and [body mass index](#) -- all markers of wear and tear known as allostatic load resulting from chronic overactivation of the [stress response](#) system.

As expected, poverty was associated with higher levels of allostatic load, indicated by increased body mass index, blood pressure and [levels of stress](#) hormones. The researchers found that perceived discrimination accounted for 13 percent of these negative effects of poverty on allostatic load.

"Perhaps the most interesting thing about these findings is that discrimination may have serious, long-term [adverse health effects](#) among adolescents," said author Gary W. Evans, the Elizabeth Lee Vincent

Professor of Human Ecology in Cornell's College of Human Ecology. He conducted the study with lead author Thomas Fuller-Rowell, Ph.D. '10, now a Robert Wood Johnson [postdoctoral fellow](#) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Anthony Ong, associate professor of human development, also in the College of [Human Ecology](#).

"I think most of us would intuit that discrimination or prejudice is harmful and would make people feel bad, influence self-esteem, etc.," said Evans. "The fact that discrimination may also be capable of elevating chronic [physiological stress](#) in relatively healthy, young adults is potentially a very important finding. Elevated allostatic load has been linked to a litany of very serious health outcomes, including elevated chronic diseases and premature mortality."

While a growing body of research confirms disparities in health across socio-economic groups, the underlying reasons for this are still not well understood. By suggesting that social class discrimination, through its effects on the stress-response system, may be an important factor in health disparities, the new findings fill a gap in the research and may point to new approaches to improving health.

"It is surprising that social class discrimination is so ignored within the public discourse and the research literature," Fuller-Rowell said. "There is considerable attention paid to how racial stereotypes play out in daily life and influence how we think about and treat people, but these types of discussions are almost nonexistent in relation to social class stereotypes."

This needs to change, he said, so that people can begin to understand the potential negative effects of their stereotypes about wealth and social class.

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