

# The effects of discrimination could last a lifetime

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Given the well-documented relationship between low birth weight and the increased risk of health problems throughout one's lifespan, it is vital to reduce any potential contributors to low birth weight. A new study by Valerie Earnshaw and her colleagues from Yale University sheds light on one possible causal factor. Their findings, published online in Springer's journal, the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, suggest that chronic, everyday instances of discrimination against pregnant, urban women of color may play a significant role in contributing to low birth weight babies.

Twice as many black women give birth to [low birth weight](#) babies than white or Latina women in the U.S. Reasons for this disparity are, as yet, unclear. But initial evidence suggests a link may exist between discrimination experienced while pregnant and the incidence of low birth weight. In addition, experiences of discrimination have also been linked to depression, which causes physiological changes that can have a negative effect on a pregnancy.

Earnshaw and her colleagues interviewed 420, 14- to 21-year-old black and Latina women at 14 community health centers and hospitals in New York, during the second and third trimesters of their pregnancies, and at six and 12 months after their babies had been born. They measured their reported experiences of discrimination. They also measured their depressive symptoms, pregnancy distress and pregnancy symptoms.

Levels of everyday discrimination reported were generally low.

However, the impact of discrimination was the same in all the participants regardless of age, ethnicity or type of discrimination reported. Women reporting greater levels of discrimination were more prone to [depressive symptoms](#), and ultimately went on to have babies with lower birth weights than those reporting lower levels of discrimination. This has implications for [healthcare providers](#) who work with [pregnant teens](#) and young women during the pre-natal period, while they have the opportunity to try and reduce the potential impacts discrimination on the pregnancy.

The authors conclude that "Given the associations between birth weight and health across the life span, it is critical to reduce discrimination directed at urban youth of color so that all children are able to begin life with greater promise for health. In doing so, we have the possibility to eliminate disparities not only in birth weight, but in health outcomes across the [lifespan](#)."

**More information:** Earnshaw VA, Rosenthal L, Lewis JB, Stasko EC, Tobin JN, Lewis TT, Reid AE and Ickovics JR (2012). Maternal experiences with everyday discrimination and infant birth weight: a test of the mediators and moderators among young, urban women of color. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*; [DOI 10.1007/s12160-012-9404-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-012-9404-3)

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