

# Latino youth who feel discriminated against are more depressed, less likely to help others

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Recent conversations in the United States have centered on discrimination issues; yet, little is known about how discrimination affects youths' mental health and their willingness to help others. Now, University of Missouri researchers found Latino immigrant youth who reported feeling discriminated against had more depressive symptoms and were less likely to perform altruistic behaviors six months and a year after experiencing discrimination.

"It's important to consider that experiencing discrimination starts to wear on cognitive and emotional resources that youth may have, which can lead to symptoms of depression, sadness and withdrawal," said Alexandra Davis, a doctoral candidate in the MU Department of Human Development and Family Science. "Once they are experiencing these withdrawal symptoms, it becomes harder for them to engage in selfless forms of helping because they have less resources available to give to others, and it works both ways. Experiencing discrimination and becoming more withdrawn and less engaged in helping behaviors, in turn, might contribute to depressive symptoms. It can become a cycle."

For the study, 302 Latino immigrants between the ages of 13 and 17 completed three questionnaires over the course of a year about discrimination experiences, [mental health](#) and [prosocial behaviors](#), such as volunteering or helping others. The youth had lived in the United States for five years or less. The study controlled for the teens' previous levels of depression and involvement in helping behaviors in order to observe changes over time.

"This study gives us a window into the experiences of Latino immigrant adolescents who recently arrived to the U.S.," said study co-author Gustavo Carlo, Millsap Professor of Diversity and Multicultural Studies in MU's College of Human Environmental Sciences. "The reports youth provided on discrimination are not necessarily experiences that have accumulated over a long period of time. This perceived discrimination over a short period of time is already having a significant impact on their mental health and their social functioning. We can only imagine what the effects of discrimination may be like over a longer period of time."

Individuals should be aware of how youth from marginalized groups perceive discrimination because it is undermining positive social behaviors toward others, the researchers said. Additionally, adolescence is a time when peers are important, perceiving isolation from their peers and barriers in their school can be impactful for their development. Facing these risk factors, barriers and challenges might impact their health and long-term well-being, Davis said.

"So many challenges and forces exist that impinge individuals' abilities to care for others, to be compassionate and empathetic toward others," Carlo said. "For Latino adolescents and racial and ethnic minorities, this research demonstrates that [discrimination](#) poses an uncontrollable, additional set of challenges in addition to the challenges everyone experiences, whether financial, academic or interpersonal."

Trained mental-health professionals and accessible mental-health services could help buffer [youth](#) against these [depressive symptoms](#), Davis said.

The *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* will publish the study, "The Longitudinal Associations Between Discrimination, Depressive Symptoms, and Prosocial Behaviors in U.S. Latino/a Recent Immigrant Adolescents," in January.

**More information:** [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26597783](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26597783)

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