

# Kids stress over public acts of discrimination, study finds

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In a sign of the times, new USC research shows that some kids stressed out over recent public acts of discrimination show increased behavioral problems.

The study focused on Los Angeles-area teens from communities of color or families with limited education. Many of the youths reported concern that discrimination is a growing societal problem. The more worried the teens were, the worse their substance use, depression and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms became, the study shows.

The findings are a snapshot into the adolescent mind during a time of rising U.S. political tensions and concern about increasing discrimination in society. It also coincides with the beginning of new social policies proposed by the Trump administration, which the scientists note might affect [mental health](#) for the youngsters.

The researchers conclude that although the link between societal discrimination concern and adverse behavioral outcomes are modest, they are sufficiently significant to warrant greater public health attention. The study by scientists at the Keck School of Medicine at USC appears today in *JAMA Pediatrics*.

"Teens who stand to suffer most from prejudice in society are stressed out about the social climate, and our study found that as their concern grew, so too did their behavioral problems," said Adam Leventhal, the lead author. "This proved true even for the teens who say they rarely experience discrimination in their own community, suggesting that what's happening in society at large weighs on them. The impact of polarizing social policies on teens' mental health needs to be addressed."

Political and social schisms in the headlines are not lost on young people. Recent developments that shape their perceptions—and affect mental health—include incidents of police violence on minorities, hate crimes against Muslims and backlash to same-sex marriage, events which prompted the study. In addition, tensions increased during the 2016 presidential campaign and ensuing statements and policies by the Trump

administration, such as building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, repeal of the Affordable Care Act and travel bans targeting foreign countries, which are perceived as hostile to minorities.

Concern over discrimination might lead young people on the cusp of adulthood feeling distressed, distracted and hopeless—especially for people of color or from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities who fear they may be targets of prejudice.

To gauge how [young people](#) respond, the researchers investigated the level of concern about discrimination in society as reported by 2,572 11th-grade students in 10 public high schools in L.A. County in 2016. After the baseline survey, they tracked how the magnitude of concern increased in 2016-17 and how that manifests in [behavioral problems](#) by 12th grade.

The researchers asked the students to respond to surveys that measured their level of concern, worry and stress about discrimination on a five-level scale that ranged from "not at all" to "extremely" concerned. Respondents were roughly equal proportion of males and females. Latinos constituted 47 percent of the sample size, Asians 19 percent, African-Americans 4 percent and whites 17 percent.

The scientists found that at the start of the study in 2016, 29.7 percent of teens were very or extremely worried about societal discrimination, which increased to 34.7 percent one year later, especially for minority students. They also found significant associations between increased level of concern about discrimination and six different adverse behavioral outcomes. In some cases, the associations were stronger in minorities or socioeconomically disadvantaged teens. For example, teens with less educated parents who were unconcerned about societal discrimination in 2016, but became extremely concerned by 2017, were using marijuana or drinking alcohol at three times the rate of teens

whose concern was unchanged during the study.

"Concern, worry and stress attributed to increasing societal discrimination during the recent socio-politically charged period was common and associated with adverse behavioral outcomes in this adolescent cohort," Leventhal said.

Caveats to the findings include the fact that the investigators did not independently verify the subjects' self-reported behaviors or obtain mental health diagnoses. Also, the study stops short of establishing causal links, instead focusing on the associations between attitudes and behavioral outcomes.

Nonetheless, the study concludes that while some of the behavioral health associations were modest, even slight increases in the risk of adolescent behavioral health problems may pose important public health consequences given that discrimination in society can be a nationwide phenomenon. They say that public health attention and policy changes may be needed to address how public [discrimination](#) may affect adolescent [health](#).

**More information:** *JAMA Pediatrics* (2018).  
[jamanetwork.com/journals/jamap ... pediatrics.2018.2022](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamap...pediatrics.2018.2022)

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