

Racial discrimination increases risk for childhood obesity

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Children who experience racial discrimination are more likely to later have a higher body mass index (BMI) and larger waistline, according to a new study published in *JAMA Network Open*. The findings illustrate that

racial discrimination may be a risk factor for young people developing obesity—above and beyond other socioeconomic factors such as family income.

"Exposure to racial discrimination must be acknowledged as both a social determinant of obesity and a significant contributor to obesity disparities among children and adolescents," said Adolfo Cuevas, assistant professor of social and behavioral sciences at the NYU School of Global Public Health and the study's lead author.

Childhood obesity is a major public health issue in the U.S., [affecting nearly one in five children and teens](#). Black and Hispanic youth experience even higher rates of obesity, which research shows may stem from factors such as poverty, neighborhood access to healthy foods, and single-parent households.

A growing body of research finds that another known stressor, racial discrimination, puts people at risk for a range of health issues, including sleep problems, high cortisol levels, and poor mental health. While racial discrimination has been linked to higher BMI in adults, less is known about its impact on children and adolescents.

The researchers examined data from 6,463 children ages 9 to 11 from across the U.S. who took part in the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study from 2017 to 2019. They first measured [young people](#)'s experiences of racial discrimination by asking them to reflect on whether they were treated unfairly by others based on their race or ethnicity. A year later, they measured the participants' BMI (calculated using weight and height) and waist circumference.

The researchers found that kids who experienced greater racial discrimination had higher BMI and larger [waist circumference](#) a year later, even when adjusting for known socioeconomic [risk factors](#) for

obesity, including household income and parents' level of education. They conclude that reducing exposure to racial discrimination and its detrimental effects on well-being early in life could help limit the risk of weight gain across the lifespan.

"We tested discrimination at one time point, but it's important to recognize that [prolonged exposure](#) to racial discrimination has the potential to further increase the risk of obesity. Therefore, preventing or at least mitigating the impact of [discrimination](#) sooner than later could potentially reduce the risk of obesity," said Cuevas, who is also a scholar in the Center for Anti-Racism, Social Justice and Public Health at the NYU School of Global Public Health.

"It is crucial for researchers, clinicians, educators, and policymakers to join forces with communities to establish evidence-based strategies aimed at preventing exposure to [racial discrimination](#) in order to improve [obesity](#) at the population level," he added.

In addition to Cuevas, study authors include Brennan Rhodes-Bratton and Shu Xi of NYU; Danielle Krobath, Jesulagbarami Omolade, and Aniyah Perry of Tufts; and Natalie Slopen of Harvard.

More information: Adolfo G. Cuevas et al, Association of Racial Discrimination With Adiposity in Children and Adolescents, *JAMA Network Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.22839](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.22839)

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