

# How the Stress of Racism Affects Learning

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For 15-year-old Zion Agostini, the start of each school day is a new occasion to navigate a minefield of racial profiling. From an early age, walking home from elementary school with his older brother, Agostini took note of the differential treatment police gave to black people in his community: “I [saw] people get stopped ... get harassed ... get arrested for minor offenses.” Almost a decade later, Agostini said he now faces the same treatment as a sophomore at Nelson Mandela School for Social Justice in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. “Me being a black male, I'm more likely to be stopped and frisked by a cop. Then, [I'm] going to school with more cops ... [messing] with me at 7 in the morning.”

The strain of these interactions is heightened by the daily routine of passing through a metal detector, emptying pockets, and removing clothing that frequently makes him late to his first-period class. “The fact is now I'm [tardy] because I'm being scanned four times because of the metal in my necklace or my keys. I missed whatever [the teacher] was explaining ... a lot goes on in [chemistry], and because of that I'm behind.” All of this combined takes a toll on his schoolwork, he said. “It does make it extremely hard to focus on the classwork ... You're upset, or sad, or just emotional about what just happened. It takes a while to settle.”

A [recent study](#) from Northwestern University corroborates Agostini's experience, suggesting that the stress of racial discrimination may partly explain the persistent gaps in academic performance between some nonwhite students, mainly black and Latino youth, and their white counterparts. The team of researchers found that the physiological response to race-based stressors—be it perceived racial prejudice, or the drive to outperform negative stereotypes—leads the body to pump out more stress hormones in adolescents from traditionally marginalized groups. This biological reaction to race-based stress is compounded by the psychological response to discrimination or the coping mechanisms youngsters develop to lessen the distress. What emerges is a picture of black and Latino students whose concentration, motivation, and, ultimately, learning is impaired by unintended and overt racism.

Emma Adam, a professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern and the study's senior author, said [prior research](#) had established racial differences in levels of cortisol—a hormone that increases when the body is stressed—between black and white youth, and linked this to the impact of discrimination. In the current research review, she and her co-authors set out to connect the dots. “We had observed these [dissimilarities] and knew that sleep and stress hormones have strong implications for cognition ... we also knew that there was a strong racial gap in academic attainment.”

Two sources of stress encountered by black and Latino students and examined in the report are perceived discrimination—the perception that you will be treated differently or unfairly because of your race—and stereotype threat, the stress of confirming negative expectations

about your racial or ethnic group. According to the paper, among this population of students, perceived discrimination from teachers was “related to lower grades, less academic motivation ... and less persistence when encountering an academic challenge.” The study also found that the anxiety surrounding the stereotype of academic inferiority undermined students performing academic tasks.

Over time, Adam said, children develop strategies to reduce the racial stressors, but these, too, have consequences for academic success. Students might devalue the importance of doing well on tests or decide that doing well in school isn't a part of their identity—“If you don't care, then you're not going to feel as stressed in those academic circumstances,” she said, “but obviously that [affects] your performance.”

While conceding that many factors contribute to academic achievement—school quality and teacher quality among them—Adam said knowing how race-based stress affects the body holds possible answers to addressing achievement disparities. “Promoting positive ethnic racial identity would be one way to reduce those feelings of separation or exclusion and improve students' ability to focus in the classroom. Reducing student exposure to racial discrimination and improving race relations in the U.S. more generally are the ultimate solutions to this, but in the meantime, there are ways to help students deal with the stress.”

L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy, an associate professor of sociology and Black Studies at the City College of New York, said exploring the role that stress plays in the lives of black and Latino youth is a good addition to much of the research literature on academic gaps that focuses on socioeconomic factors, family background, and neighborhood characteristics. He added that the paper's conclusion—negotiating racial indignities leads to stress, and in turn, makes it harder for students of color to sleep and stay on task—is a useful contribution to the educational dialogue.

“It opens up the door for us to think about some of the interventions that we can do at the school level ... talking to children about how to process stress ... as well as the interpersonal work that we have to do [thinking] about what everyday racism looks like,” Lewis-McCoy said. “Not just race as an institutional practice, or racism in terms of [school segregation], but the [routine] experiences of those people who are black and Latino.”

He expressed some concerns, however, with the study's premise that black students confronted with racial hurdles regularly disconnect from school or no longer desire an education. To the contrary, he found in researching his book *Inequality in the Promised Land*—a look at race and suburban schooling—that black children often sought ways to circumvent race-based obstacles. “Young people are facing discrimination on the playground ... in who gets called on in the classroom and what type of feedback they receive ... in which colleges or post-education opportunities they're offered,” Lewis-McCoy said, noting that children living with discrimination learn to pivot when “they don't have adults who acknowledge that or work with them to change the arrangements.” The CUNY professor said the common belief that race-based stressors lead black students to disassociate from academic achievement is “actually a

wrong interpretation of their actions. We can't assume that every blocked opportunity leads to someone retreating. In fact, I think the narrative and the arc around black education is often finding success in spite of barriers.”

Agostini, the New York City teen, identifies with the stress of racial inequity—or what he calls the “psychological trauma” of constant racial harassment. He said it can take him up to a day to recover. “It’s not something that easy to shake. Being a person of color, you’re constantly ... being targeted just because you’re a person of color. It makes it hard to deal.”

But as Lewis-McCoy states, Agostini has found tools to combat the racial discrimination he’s experienced, channeling his emotions into action. He is a member of the Urban Youth Collaborative, a citywide coalition of youth organizers working on school-based social-justice issues. Looking ahead, he hopes to break the cycle of racial targeting for future students like himself.

“I hope to be an example [via] protests, and actions, and rallies, and whatever I have to do,” he said. “I don’t want other black and Latino students being pushed out of school ... I want them to be able to go to school and get their education ... I want them to be able to walk home from school ... I want them to be able to just chill in the park and just hang out with their friends ... I want to change people's lives for the positive.”

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