



“TOXIC” SCHOOLS? STUDY SUGGESTS STRESSFUL SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS CAN IMPACT STUDENT HEALTH



In the past year, schools have been the focus of intense health-related concerns involving the transmission and contraction of COVID-19. But a [recent study](#) by Courtney Boen of the University of Pennsylvania, Karen Kozlowski of the University of Southern Mississippi, and NEPC Fellow [Karolyn Tyson](#) of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill raises the possibility of a different and longer-term set of ways in which schools can detrimentally impact student health.

Drawing upon data from more than 10,000 7th through 12th graders who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health starting in the 1990s, the research finds that students who feel unsafe at school or express a sense of disconnection with their teachers and classmates face higher levels of long- and short-term risks to their physical and mental health. The authors explain that the “toxic schools” attended by these students are disproportionately attended by Black students and by students from low-income families.

By first controlling for factors such as race and the socioeconomic status of families and schools (which are also associated with health outcomes), the authors pinpointed what appears to be a connection between schools with low levels of perceived safety/student belongingness and poorer physical health outcomes in young adulthood. For physical health, they used an index of physiological challenges including high blood pressure, obesity, and elevated levels of cholesterol. Mental health was assessed using study participants’ responses to a series of questions about depression—which is in turn associated with poorer physical

health.

Although previous studies have examined the connection between school environment and health, this study makes several new contributions. It uses survey data to quantitatively index “school toxicity,” and it adds to a growing body of research documenting the toxic school phenomenon and its “lasting impacts on markers of physiological functioning and mental health.”

Identifying the problem also points to a lever for improving well-being. “The findings presented here suggest that early investments in improving the social, safety, and socioeconomic contexts of schools may reduce population health inequality from adolescence through adulthood,” the study authors conclude.

For more information, see *“Toxic” Schools? How School Exposures During Adolescence Influence Trajectories of Health Through Young Adulthood*, published last year in the peer-reviewed journal, *SSM - Population Health*.

NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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