

inequality - public policy

Racial Inequality in Public School Discipline for Black Students in the United States



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Summary+

Racial bias and limited teacher training all influence how teachers and administrators react to Black student misbehavior. In addition, recently implemented institutional practices like [zero-tolerance policies](#) and increased emphasis on school security have also contributed to increases in the rate of disciplinary measures, especially suspension, for Black students. Experience with school discipline can significantly harm student academic achievement and increase the likelihood of Black students dropping out of school. More involvement with school discipline on the student's part is also associated with more serious consequences including decreased likelihood of

enrollment in higher education and increased likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system. Improved teacher training programs can help teachers more effectively respond to misbehavior and thereby decrease the disparity between how Black and White students are disciplined. Alternatives to discipline like [restorative justice](#) can also aid in decreasing this disparity.

Key Takeaways+

- Black students tend to experience harsher disciplinary measures at higher rates than their peers in public schools in the United States; Black students are 4 times more likely to experience suspension than their White peers.
- Because strong disciplinary measures can negatively impact individual student outcomes, racial inequality in school discipline perpetuates larger racial inequities in economic and educational achievement.
- Recent increases in [zero-tolerance policies](#) and school security are associated with increased rates of discipline for Black students.
- If implemented consistently, alternative disciplinary measures for students and training programs for teachers could help to decrease the disproportionate rate of Black students experiencing school discipline.

Key Terms+

Implicit bias—A bias or prejudice that is present but not consciously held or recognized.¹

In-school suspension (ISS)—An instance in which a student is temporarily removed from his or her regular classroom(s) for at least half a day but is kept under the direct supervision of school personnel.²

Out-of-school suspension (OSS)—An instance in which a student is temporarily removed from his or her regular school, generally for disciplinary purposes, for at least half a day (but less than the remainder of the school year) and sent to another setting (e.g., home or behavior center).³

Restorative justice—A set of informal and formal strategies intended to build relationships and a sense of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing and respond to wrongdoings, with the

intention to repair any harm that was a result of the wrongdoing. Preventative strategies include community or relationship building circles, and the use of restorative language. Some responsive strategies include the use of restorative questions within a circle or conferencing format, again with the intention of repairing the wrong that happened as a result of the behavior.⁴

School resource officer (SRO)—A law enforcement officer with arrest authority, who has specialized training and is assigned to work in collaboration with school organizations.⁵

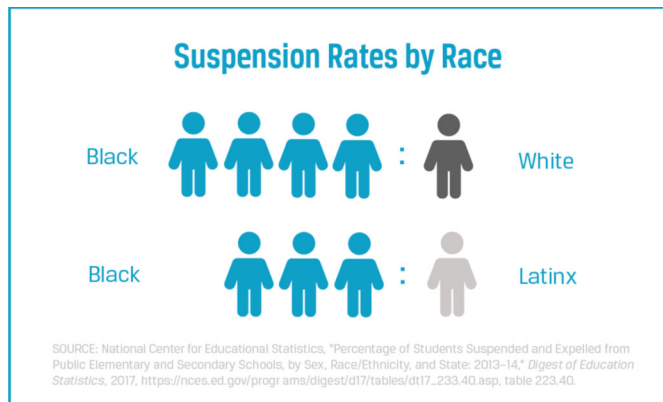
Zero-tolerance policies—School or district policies that mandate predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses.⁶

Context

Education is often portrayed as a doorway to opportunity and a way of teaching youth the appropriate social behavior to make them productive citizens. In school, students are expected to exhibit certain behaviors that preserve specific societal values and customs, thus accomplishing the goals of education.⁷ School disciplinary measures—such as *in-school (ISS)* and *out-of-school suspension (OSS)*, expulsion, referral to law enforcement, and school-related arrests—attempt to discourage serious misbehavior and create a positive, safe learning environment for all students.⁸ While these measures have the potential to do good, it is common to see disciplinary measures taken to the extreme in both force or frequency. In these instances, discipline can also negatively impact the academic performance and future employment opportunities of the students who receive discipline. Reports suggest suspension can lead to future instances of misbehavior and suspension among impacted students.⁹ In most instances, when speaking of suspension, studies are referring to out-of-school suspension (OSS) except when noted.

The potential for negative repercussions in the lives of disciplined students leads some to demand a more careful prescription of school discipline, especially as many discipline practices result in unequal treatment of BIPOC students and students living in poverty. School discipline tends to disproportionately impact students with disabilities, students of racial and ethnic minority

status,^{10, 11} and students of lower socioeconomic status.¹² Within this group, Black students tend to encounter the highest rates of disciplinary measures in both public and private schools.¹³

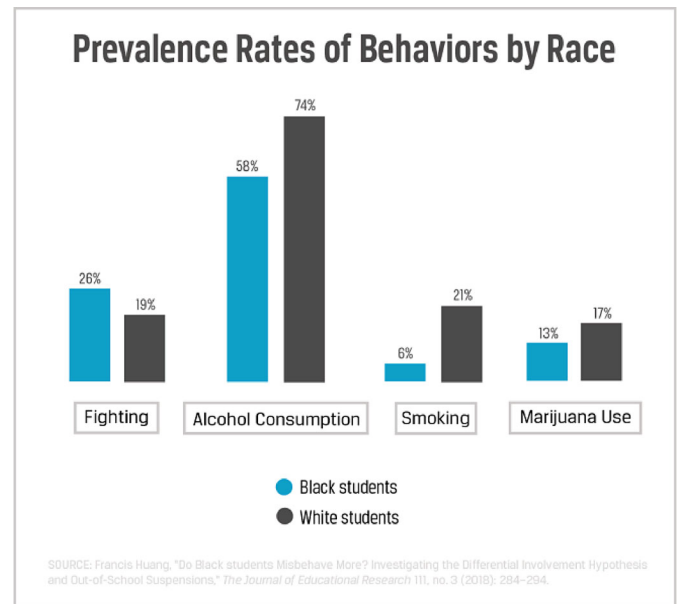


Though research demonstrates that Black children are not more likely to misbehave than White children,^{14, 15, 16} Black students, especially male Black students, are much more likely to encounter stronger disciplinary measures for the same offenses as their White peers.¹⁷ Multiple studies suggest that Black students sometimes commit different misbehaviors but not necessarily more misbehaviors or more severe misbehaviors than White students and varying misbehaviors cannot fully explain the disparity in suspension rates.^{18, 19} Yet in 2013–2014, Black students were 4 times more likely to experience an *out-of-school suspension (OSS)* than their White peers and 3 times more likely than their Latin peers.²⁰ Black students were also over 2 times more likely to be referred to the principal's office.²¹

White students actually had higher levels of early controlled substance use (i.e., alcohol, smoking, marijuana) compared with Black students in terms of both actual behaviors and endorsed attitudes. Studies have suggested that White students are suspended more for observable behaviors such as smoking and cutting class and that Black students are

suspended more for subjective actions such as disrespect, suggesting racial bias.²²

Although some other countries also suspend Black students at higher rates,²³ the discrepancy in suspension rates for Black and White students is most significant in the United States.²⁴ In Great Britain, for example, 5% of White students were temporarily suspended compared to 5.56% of Black students in 2017.²⁵ In the United States, 15 different states all suspended over 15% of their K-12 Black student population in the 2013 to 2014 school year compared to approximately 3.4% of their White students.^{26, 27}

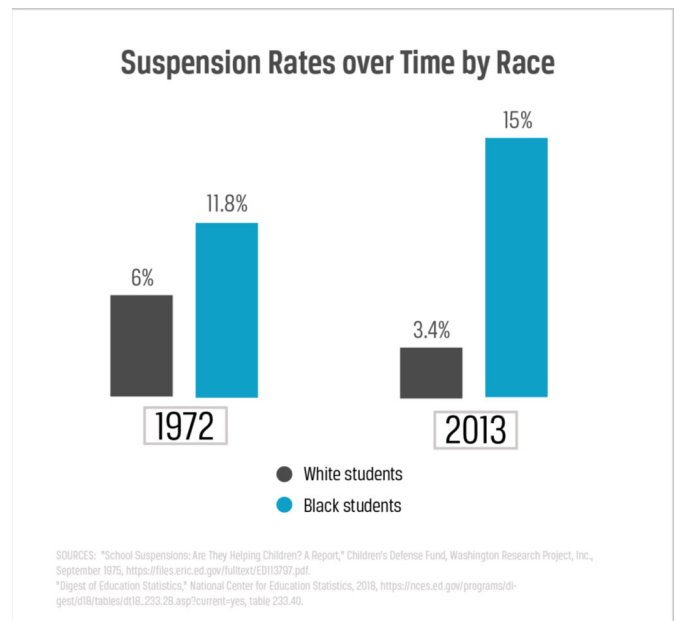


Additionally, while inequality in discipline is a trend across the nation, different parts of the country reflect different levels of inequality. For example, in Indiana in 2013, Black students were almost 4 times more likely to experience OSS than White students, but in Illinois they were almost 8 times more likely.²⁸ In general, schools with elevated Black student suspension rates of 5% or higher tend to be larger schools with populations over 1,300 students, schools with more students receiving free lunches (indicating a low-income student body), and schools with a higher percentages of Black students.²⁹ In addition to the general racial disparity, characteristics like darker skin tones and lower socioeconomic status further increase the likelihood of getting suspended in school and out of school.^{30, 31}

The disciplinary measures used in US public schools today have greatly evolved over the last century, steering away from corporal punishment like spanking and towards insitutional consequences like suspension.³² Beginning in the 1960s, suspension became one of the most popular forms of school discipline.³³ In the 1980s and 90s, public support for more aggressive discipline and stronger security measures in schools increased as the war on crime and war on drugs, as well as various school shootings carried out by student perpetrators, spurred anxiety in

citizens across America.³⁴ This support for intensified discipline is manifest in the federal Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990 that mandated a one-year suspension for any student who brought a weapon to school and the federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which enacted harsher imprisonment time or fines for drug distribution near schools.³⁵ This shift in public opinion to favor stronger discipline for youth³⁶ resulted in public schools implementing stricter punishments.

Though public support for stronger punishment for juveniles theoretically affects all students, the implementation of such policies influences racial minorities to a higher extent. As sanctions for stronger punishment measures have taken hold, Black students have disproportionately experienced the consequences of these policies; in 1972, 11.8% of Black students were suspended from school whereas in 2013, 15% of all Black students were suspended.^{37, 38} Additionally, 20% of all Black male students experienced an OSS.³⁹ In comparison, 6% of White students were suspended in 1972 whereas in 2013 3.4% of White students were suspended.^{40, 41} Black students only make up 15% of the primary and secondary school body but represent the largest percentage of students who experience *out-of-school suspension*.^{42, 43} As a result, although originally intended to target all students equally, school discipline has significantly impacted Black students at higher rates than their peers.



Contributing Factors

Racial Bias of Teachers and Administrators

Racial bias on the part of teachers and administrators increases the likelihood that a Black student will experience some form of school discipline. Although it is not always the case, Black students are also statistically more likely to experience social, economic and family issues. For example, as of 2019, 26.4% of Black youth were living in poverty compared to 8.3% of White youth.^{44, 45} The stereotypes associated with these economic challenges can cause teachers to assume all Black students are poor and thereby more prone to misbehave because they come from perceived "broken homes."⁴⁶ Past stereotypes have perpetuated the association of poverty and Black culture; as a result, teachers assume students have inherited specific behavioral tendencies from their community. Because of these assumed tendencies, Black students are assumed to be incapable of helping themselves or resolving conflicts. As a result, teachers assume that disciplinary measures can correct poor behavior on the part of Black students, making up for the presumed lack of structure or discipline in their home communities.⁴⁷

Teachers who misunderstand a Black student's behavior are more likely to prescribe harsh disciplinary measures. In general, relating to students from a different socioeconomic, racial, or family situation can be challenging for any teacher, regardless of ethnicity.⁴⁸ Considering that most teachers are White, teachers may be more likely to misunderstand or misinterpret a Black student's behavior because of their held implicit and explicit racial biases. Studies have suggested that Black students are less likely to be suspended by a Black teacher than a White teacher.^{49, 50, 51} However, as of 2019 only 7% of public school teachers are Black and 80% are White.⁵² Active factors point to the fact that teachers are more likely to engage with and orient themselves towards members of their own ethnic background. Some studies have suggested there are differences in the actions

taken by Black and White teachers in their allocation of time, interactions with students, use of examples, use of instructional methods, and in the design of classroom materials.⁵³ White teachers in particular may not consider the impact their own race and the race of their students has on the classroom experience and how their students' experiences may be different than their own experience when they were a student.⁵⁴ For example, one study found that less experienced White teachers suggested interactions with African American male students were aggressive while African American male students perceived their conversations simply as expressive communication.⁵⁵

Bias held by teachers and administrators can lead these individuals to often unconsciously administer harsher and more frequent disciplinary measures to Black students. Historically, Black youth have often been labeled as more prone to being "aggressive," being "troublemakers," or having an "attitude," and are often believed to have more inherent behavioral problems than White individuals.^{56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62} These harmful generalizations influence how educators view and treat Black students in schools and how they prescribe discipline.^{63, 64, 65, 66} One study found that when a Black student misbehaves, teachers and administrators are more likely to believe the student is prone to violent behavior or "acting out" more in class. Meanwhile, a White student's misbehavior tends to be attributed to external and individual circumstances, and as a result, a White student receives less harsh disciplinary measures.^{67, 68, 69} Another study suggested that teachers are more likely to believe that male Black students who misbehave are more likely to have recurring misbehavior than their White peers.⁷⁰ When teachers and administrators view the actions of Black students through this generalized lens, they are more likely to prescribe stronger disciplinary measures for students.^{71, 72, 73} Another study showed that preschool teachers watched Black students more closely compared to their White counterparts. In the study, teachers monitored Black male students about 44% of the time compared to 32% for White boys and 13% for White girls.⁷⁴ Thus, biases influence teachers to be more observant and aware of a Black student's misbehavior than a White student's misbehavior and as a result, Black students are more likely to be prescribed disciplinary measures for misbehavior.

Racial bias can also affect how administrators prescribe disciplinary measures for student misbehavior. Administrators have a large role in determining the consequences and the severity of

the punishments students receive.⁷⁵ Multiple studies have shown differences in the severity of discipline prescribed by administrators upon students of different races.^{76, 77} One study suggested that 19% of these differences were due to an administrator's **implicit biases**.⁷⁸ School principals, for example, who are already inclined to use punishment over preventative measures for misbehaving students (which data show is 57.1% of principals) tend to disproportionately prescribe more severe disciplinary outcomes for Black students than White students.⁷⁹ A principal's perceptions of Black students combined with his or her preference for more punitive disciplinary measures significantly contribute to suspension rates and the educational disparity between Black and White students.⁸⁰

Limited Teacher Training

Teachers lacking sufficient training also tend to resort to stronger disciplinary measures for Black students. Research suggests that this may be due, in part, to the fact that many teachers lack the needed experience and training to effectively meet the needs of students from various backgrounds. Teachers, especially less experienced teachers, may rely on disciplinary measures because they feel they do not have the necessary support to pursue alternatives for classroom management in addressing a Black student's behavior.⁸¹ Eleven percent of Black students attend schools where more than 20% of teachers are in their first year of training, compared to 5% of White students.⁸² This is significant because schools with more experienced teachers tend to suspend Black students at lower rates than those with less experienced teachers.⁸³

Prioritization of Security Measures

Recent increases in spending on security in many schools appears to contribute to increased use of disciplinary measures for Black students.^{84, 85} Although it is difficult to analyze school spending on a national level due to variance in state budget codes and fiscal reporting, there is enough data

to conclude that most schools have increased their security spending.^{86, 87} One way school security has escalated is in the growing use of **school resource officers (SROs)**, law enforcement agents placed in schools to resolve security and discipline issues in schools. When officers are placed in schools, teachers may call upon SROs to administer discipline and solve conflict rather than handle the situations themselves.⁸⁸ In 2015–2016, 41% of public schools used law enforcement officers designated to maintain order in schools compared to only 22% of schools in 1997.^{89, 90} These officers use practices like patrolling school grounds, hall sweeps, locker checks, or dog sniffs to "crack down" on student misbehavior.⁹¹ The increase of police forces in schools is significant because school police are not accountable to the school board and lack extensive training on adolescent behavior and mental health; consequently they may respond more dramatically to issues regarding student behavior and thereby administer harsher punishments.⁹²

Prioritizing school security significantly increases suspension rates for Black students. Schools with higher percentages of minority students tend to spend a larger portion of their budget on school security.⁹³ These schools also prescribe more frequent and severe disciplinary measures for students and have a larger presence of SROs.^{94, 95} Like administrators and teachers, SROs are also likely to hold their own racial biases, leading them to respond more aggressively toward a Black student's misbehavior.^{96, 97} This tendency is supported by the fact that most SROs reported that student "attitude" was the factor that most influenced their decision whether or not to arrest a student, which contributes to the racial disparity in discipline because Black students are often perceived as having more "attitude" than other students.^{98, 99} Because Black students are 11% more likely to attend a school with a law enforcement officer, SROs are more likely to engage in administering discipline to Black students.^{100, 101} Spending on security measures creates a climate of distrust and hostility, and can lead to the criminalization of Black youth with serious punitive consequences.^{102, 103} These measures, in turn, can result in more extreme consequences, like school arrest, especially for Black students.¹⁰⁴ For example, one report suggested Black students are 2.3 times more likely to be referred to law enforcement or be subject to a school-related arrest than their White peers.¹⁰⁵ Another report suggested that while Black students represent 16% of enrolled students, they represent 31% of students arrested, compared to White students who represent 51% of enrolled students but are only 39% of those arrested.¹⁰⁶ The correlation between increased security measures, including increased use of SROs, can result in higher rates of suspension and arrest for Black students.

Focusing resources on increasing security measures has costs for school districts and schools. Some argue this spending could instead be invested into rehabilitative measures or used for social workers and counselors rather than law enforcement officials. Urban schools spend 2.6 times more of their expenditures on school security than social work.¹⁰⁷ However, research shows that increased spending on school counselors can decrease the occurrence of student disciplinary problems, particularly for minority and low-income students. One study found that improving the counselor to student ratio resulted in a 9.4% decrease in the probability of a disciplinary recurrence for all Black students and up to a 25.6% decrease in the probability of a disciplinary recurrence for Black male students.¹⁰⁸ Despite this, schools with predominantly minority students are less likely to have a full or part-time counselor.¹⁰⁹ A government report based on data from the Department of Education suggests that minority students are 20–40% more likely to attend a school with a law enforcement officer but no guidance counselor.¹¹⁰ As a natural consequence, prioritizing security measures over other less invasive alternatives increases the likelihood of Black students being subject to stern discipline.

25.6%

The Cost of Security

Research shows that increased spending on school counselors can decrease the occurrence of student disciplinary problems, particularly for minority and low-income students. One study found that improving the counselor-to-student ratio led to a 25.6% decrease in the probability of disciplinary recurrence for Black male students. Despite this, schools with predominantly minority students are less likely to have a full or part-time counselor. Prioritizing security measures over other less invasive alternatives increases the likelihood of Black students being subject to harsh discipline.

Karen J. DeAngelis, Brian O. Brent, and Danielle Ianni, "The Hidden Cost of School Security," *Journal of Education Finance* 36, no. 3 (2011): 312-37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23018098>.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

The implementation of **zero-tolerance policies** tends to increase the severity of punishment and discipline for students, especially for Black students. Zero-tolerance policies mandate specific, severe consequences in schools like expulsion or **out-of-school suspension** for specific behaviors or offenses regardless of individual student circumstance.¹¹¹

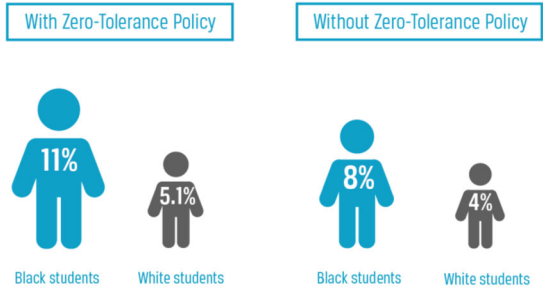
These policies were originally meant to target violent or criminal activities like weapon possession, but many school administrators have interpreted, implemented, and enforced such policies to punish more subjective behaviors, including disrespect and disruption in the classroom.^{112, 113, 114, 115} Such policies have been defended with arguments claiming that strong punishment will deter other students from similarly disruptive behavior, while critics argue these policies fail to address underlying factors impacting student behavior and hurt chances for future student success.^{116, 117} As a result of **zero-tolerance policies**, school administrators have increasingly turned to prescribing harsher disciplinary measures to handle both major and minor offenses, even punishing students for possession of items like a butter knife or toy gun.¹¹⁸

Implementation of **zero-tolerance policies** tend to increase the frequency and severity of disciplinary actions Black students receive. Data implies these policies impact Black students at a higher rate than White students experiencing school discipline. One study of an urban school suggested that following implementation of zero tolerance policies, the percentage of Black students recommended for expulsion more than doubled, going from 2.1% to 4.61%.¹¹⁹ In comparison, the percentage of White students recommended for expulsion

increased from only 0.3% to 0.5%.¹²⁰

Additionally, in another school with zero-tolerance policies, the average number of days a Black student was suspended was approximately 8 days longer than the number of days a White student attending the same school was suspended.¹²¹ Another study reflected that schools with zero-tolerance policies in Virginia administered long term suspension, a suspension of at least 9 days, to approximately 11% of Black male students compared to about 5.1% of White male students.¹²² In comparison, schools without zero-tolerance policies administered long-term suspension to about 8% of Black male students compared to approximately 4% of White male students.¹²³ Due to lack of data and the varying interpretations and applications of zero-tolerance policies, it is difficult to gauge whether schools with higher Black student populations, higher student populations in general or schools located in urban areas are more likely to implement zero-tolerance policies. Where they are implemented, zero tolerance policies have not been found to effectively deter misbehavior and can even further negatively impact student educational experiences.¹²⁴ Zero-tolerance policies, which punish students and disregard student circumstances, correlate with stronger disciplinary measures for Black students at disproportionate rates.¹²⁵

Long-Term Suspension Rates by Race and Disciplinary Policy



SOURCE: Daniel Losen, "Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion," in *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015), 187.
https://www.google.com/books/edition/Closing_the_School_Discipline_Gap/08MzBqAAQBAJ77h6-em8qpw-16dq-antel-v1-losen,+%E2%80%9Cclosing+the+School+Discipline+Gap+Equitable+Remedies+for+Excessive+Exclusion,+E2%80%9D+in+Closing+the+School+Discipline+Gap+Equitable+Remedies+for+Excessive+Exclusion+New+York+Teachers+College+Press,+2015&pg=PP16printsec=frontcover

Consequences

Lower Academic Performance

Disciplinary measures, especially both in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-school suspension, have been proven to significantly harm academic performance,¹²⁶ especially among Black students. Students who experience suspension may struggle to keep up academically because of missed days of classroom instruction¹²⁷ and feel less connected with their peers and teachers.¹²⁸ Suspension in general can also have an intense psychological effect on students and has been associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms,¹²⁹ which can often decrease a student's confidence in the classroom and negatively impact the student's academic outcomes.¹³⁰ Research suggests this effect is magnified for students of color because it reinforces negative stereotypes regarding their academic potential.¹³¹ Additionally, since Black students get suspended more often than White students, they are more likely to experience the negative effects of suspension on their academic



Source: Holmes, Katerina. *Crop Ethnic Student Doing Task*. November 17, 2020. Photograph. Pexels. <https://www.pexels.com/photo/crop-ethnic-student-doing-task-5905863/>.

performance.^{132, 133, 134} One study suggests that suspension accounted for one-fifth of the difference in Black and White student academic performance.^{135, 136} Another suggested that all Black students at schools that suspend more than 10% of the Black student population perform at lower academic rates than those in schools with lower suspension rates.¹³⁷ Thereby, suspension rates for Black students can be an important predictor for a Black student's achievement.

Higher School Dropout Rates

Because they experience stronger disciplinary measures in schools, Black students are more likely to drop out of high school. Missing class time due to out-of-school suspension can cause students to feel frustrated, isolated, and disengaged and can harm a student's academic achievement.¹³⁸ In general, students who experience an out-of-school suspension at least once are 2 times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers.¹³⁹ Referring to the way suspension exacerbates preexistent racial disparities, one study found that Black males who experienced at least one suspension had a 54% high school graduation rate compared to White males who also experienced suspension and had a 64%

Graduation Rates for Students with and without Suspension

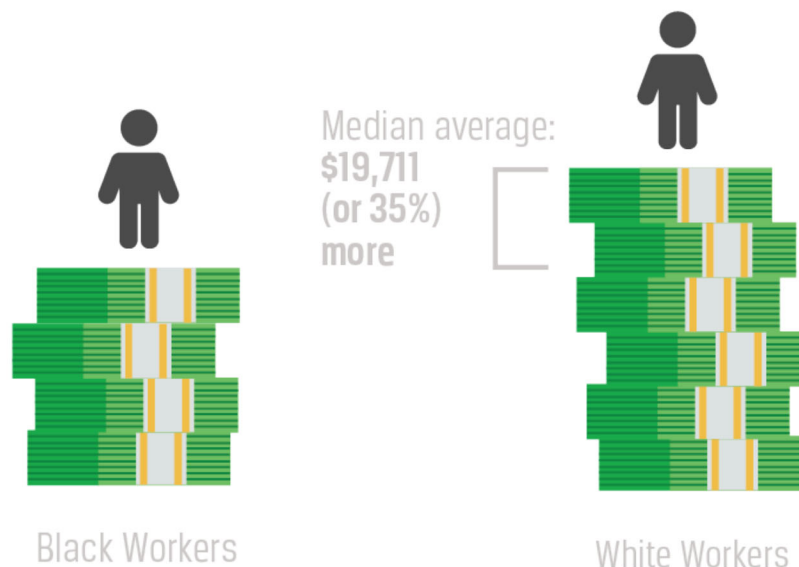


SOURCE: Daniel Loser, "Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion," in *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015), 187. [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Closing_the_School_Discipline_Gap/D8McBgAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=ariel-J.+Loser,+%E2%80%9CClosing+the+School+Discipline+Gap:+Equitable+Remedies+for+Excessive+Exclusion,%E2%80%9D+in+Closing+the+School+Discipline+Gap:+Equitable+Remedies+for+Excessive+Exclusion+\(New+York:+Teachers+College+Press,+2015\)/pg-PP1#printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Closing_the_School_Discipline_Gap/D8McBgAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=ariel-J.+Loser,+%E2%80%9CClosing+the+School+Discipline+Gap:+Equitable+Remedies+for+Excessive+Exclusion,%E2%80%9D+in+Closing+the+School+Discipline+Gap:+Equitable+Remedies+for+Excessive+Exclusion+(New+York:+Teachers+College+Press,+2015)/pg-PP1#printsec=frontcover)

graduation rate. Furthermore, White males without suspension had an 87% graduation rate and Black males without suspension had an 82% graduation rate.¹⁴⁰ In contrast, Black females who had experienced any out-of-school suspension had a 65% graduation rate and White females who experienced any OSS had a 61% graduation rate. Black females who had never been suspended had an 87% graduation rate compared to White females who had never been suspended had an 86% graduation rate.¹⁴¹

Increased likelihood of student dropout due to suspension has significant economic implications for Black students, including higher unemployment, fewer job opportunities, and lower income.¹⁴² If students are suspended, they are more likely to drop out and thereby more likely to be unemployed. For example, the unemployment rate for those without a high school diploma was 1.66 times the rate for those with a high school diploma.¹⁴³ This issue particularly impacts Black students, considering Black workers without a diploma had the lowest median annual earnings compared to other minority groups in 2019.¹⁴⁴ White workers without a high school diploma had a median average annual income \$19,711 more (35% more) than their Black peers without a diploma.¹⁴⁵ In addition, one study suggested that involvement in school discipline resulted in \$9,033,294 in lost wages over a lifetime for Black male students and \$5,875,759 in lost lifetime wages for Black female students.¹⁴⁶ It also suggested that having Black male suspended students redo years of school can cost a state more than \$7,000,000 per year. Thus, the impact of increased dropout rates due to school discipline on economic attainment can play a serious role in contributing to the racial wealth gap in the United States.¹⁴⁷

Average Income for High-School Dropouts by Race



SOURCE: "Indicator 30: Earnings and Employment," National Center for Education Statistics, February 2019, figure 30.2, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rfd.asp.

Lower Enrollment in Higher Education

Suspension and other disciplinary measures can result in students being less likely to apply and enroll in higher education for Black students.¹⁴⁸ Suspension may result in Black students developing a negative perspective regarding their own academic potential and the educational system as a whole and choose not to pursue higher education.^{149, 150} In addition, school administrators and teachers, believing Black students who have been suspended have less potential than their peers, may not invest the same resources into supporting these students and encouraging them to pursue higher education.¹⁵¹ One study in Florida discussed the effects of suspension on students and suggested that a single suspension decreases the chances that a student of any race enrolls in post-secondary school by 19% and makes them over 2 times less likely to complete their post-secondary education.¹⁵² Referring to the Black student demographic

specifically, Black females who were suspended were 1.64 times less likely to complete any college compared to their Black and White peers who had no suspensions.¹⁵³ Another study suggested that police presence and other additional disciplinary measures could further stigmatize students of color in their schools and reduce student confidence in their academic abilities.¹⁵⁴ The study suggested that increased funding for security measures correlated with a 4% decrease in enrollment in higher education possibly due to the negative impact of stricter security policies on school atmosphere and student experiences.¹⁵⁵ These security measures can lead to students forming an association between harsh punishment and hostility with school rather than seeing it as a positive place for growth. Considering student engagement has been found to be a strong predictor of how likely a student is to enroll and continue in higher education,¹⁵⁶ decreased engagement due to suspension can significantly impact a student's achievement not only in high school but in his or her academic future after high school.

When applying to higher education institutions, students with a history of suspension on their record are less likely to be accepted into college.¹⁵⁷ Many colleges may still include questions regarding suspension in their application, which could harm a student's chances of acceptance, although it was recently removed from the Common App. One study found that after controlling for other variables, students who experienced *out-of-school suspension* had a 10% lower college acceptance rate than their peers.¹⁵⁸ Even when students who experienced suspension do attend college, one study suggests that only 7% of Black males (compared to 9% of White males) who experienced at least one suspension end up attaining a bachelor's degree.¹⁵⁹

Involvement with the Criminal Justice System

Black students who experience stronger disciplinary measures are subsequently more likely to experience contact with the juvenile justice system, including written referrals, arrests, and detentions. The disciplinary measure that most correlates with involvement in the criminal justice system is suspension. Students attending schools with higher in-school and *out-of-school suspension* rates are already 15 to 20% more likely to be arrested or incarcerated as adults.¹⁶⁰ In

addition, students who experience suspension are 2 times more likely to be arrested, and suspension increases the probability of Black students exhibiting criminal behavior by 28%.^{161, 162} Data also suggest that only Black students have a 40% increased risk of engaging in criminal offenses after dropping out due to school suspension, even when controlling for socioeconomic status.¹⁶³ Black students are also disproportionately involved with law enforcement at schools, which can increase their likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system. Black students make up only 15% of student populations but are 27% of students referred to law enforcement.¹⁶⁴ They also are 31% of students subjected to a school related arrest.¹⁶⁵ This suggests that the criminalization of Black youth through more punitive school discipline enforced by law enforcement can result in increased involvement in the criminal justice systems even after controlling for poverty and urbanization.^{166, 167} It is important to note that these disparities cannot be explained solely by differences in delinquent behavior.¹⁶⁸

Practices

Improved Teacher Training and Professional Development

Training teachers on topics including emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support has been suggested to significantly decrease the racial discipline gap. This training can occur in a variety of settings, including annual or monthly workshops and online courses; some have even suggested incorporating these trainings into the teacher certification process.¹⁶⁹ Multiple studies have suggested that providing specialized training in building trust with students, adolescent development and multicultural sensitivity in topics including classroom management strategies, emotional support, and instructional support could reduce misbehavior and the racial disparity in school discipline.^{170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175} For example, teachers who received coaching regarding classroom management and school discipline were over 2 times less likely to refer Black

students for disciplinary measures than those without the training.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, a lack of adequate training and resources for teachers contributes to the racial discipline gap in public schools.

Black teachers, in contrast, can prove to be valuable role models and compassionate mentors for students considering they may have a better understanding of the collective experience of Black students.¹⁷⁷ Black teachers may make additional efforts to set high and clear expectations for students and may help Black students feel less alienated.¹⁷⁸ Any teacher, regardless of race, can be intentional in considering a Black student's experiences and include Black students in their teaching style. For example, one study suggested that Black students better connected with teachers when they asked direct questions and established a strong sense of an inclusive, diverse community in their classroom.¹⁷⁹ In contrast, misunderstanding of a Black student's behavior can create negative teacher-student relationships, which could increase the likelihood of student misbehavior and of teachers administering punishment to those students.^{180, 181}



Source: Fischer, Max. *Man in Gray Suit Jacket Raising His Right Hand*. August 28, 2020. Photograph. *Pexel*.

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/man-in-gray-suit-jacket-raising-his-right-hand-5212342/>.

In order to combat teacher bias and difficulty with classroom management, training can help teachers better engage with Black students and decrease the frequency of referrals for suspension and other disciplinary measures. Traditionally, training for teachers has been implemented in single-session workshops, but they have been limited in effectiveness often

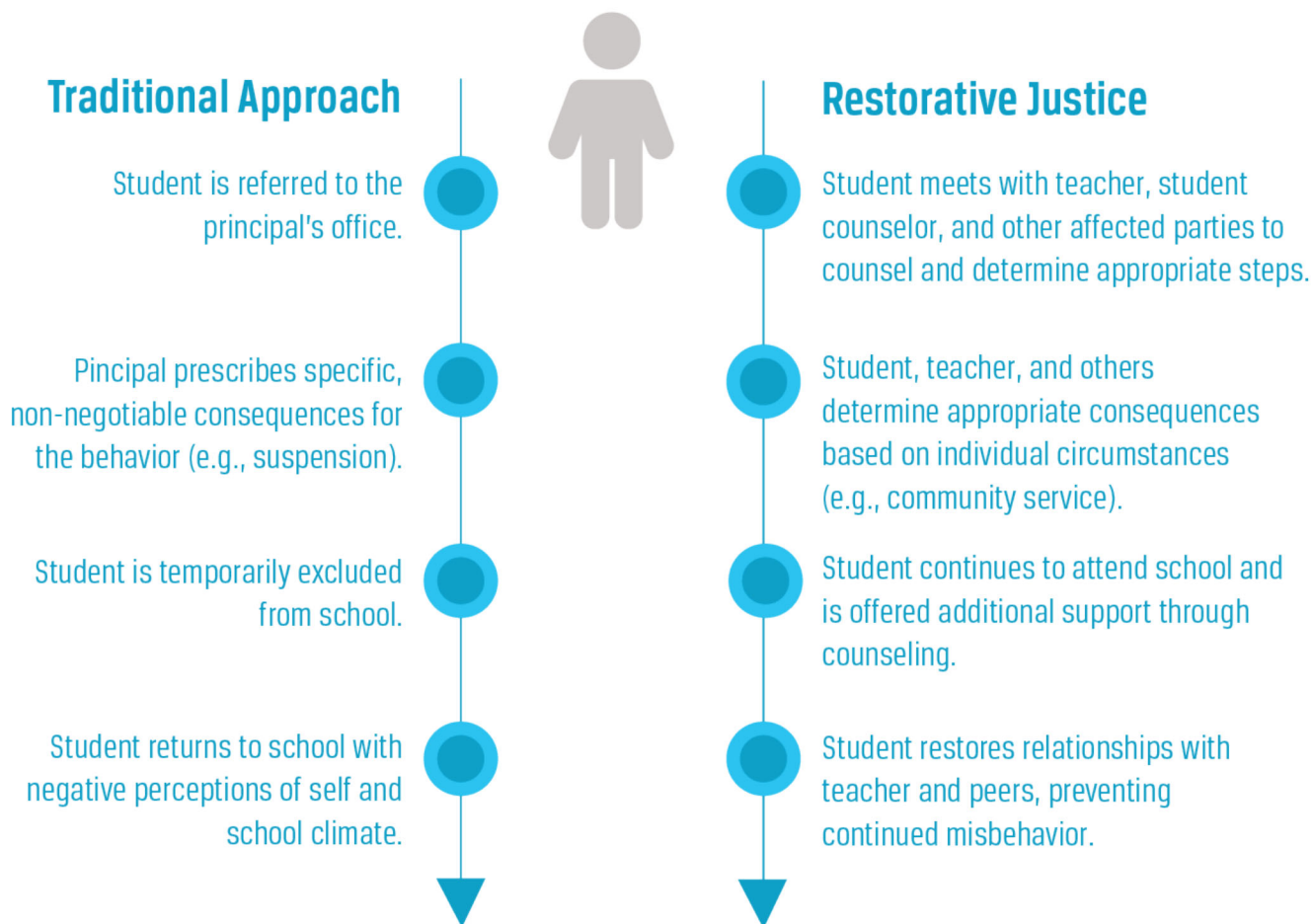
rates before the program was implemented; thus, some teachers in the test group may have already referred students for suspension at lower rates.¹⁹⁶ In addition, the study consisted of a small sample group of schools of students in low- to middle-class neighborhoods, and no other studies have focused solely on the impact on racial disparity in discipline, so it is unknown whether these policies would have the same impact in other states or in districts in a more upper middle class student body.¹⁹⁷ It is also important to recognize that these trainings are not equity-explicit and do not train teachers specifically on racial bias. For this reason, the reduction in suspension referral of Black students could be tied to alternative factors rather than solely the training. The training is also very intensive and expensive, which could prove to be difficult to implement for schools with large student populations that are already struggling to adequately provide enough teachers and dealing with other stresses and financial demands.¹⁹⁸

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is an alternative to exclusionary policies like suspension as a way to decrease likelihood of continued misbehavior in general and lessen the negative impact of disciplinary measures on students.¹⁹⁹ Restorative justice involves emotional training and community building

counseling practices to prevent and resolve student conflict and misbehavior. Rather than being excluded from schools, students who participate in these measures create a shared sense of authority and ownership regarding the classroom climate with their teachers.²⁰⁰ As a preventive measure, some schools implement social and emotional learning into their curriculum in order to provide students with methods to cope with behaviors, emotions, and challenges that can result in misbehavior.²⁰¹ Measures are also taken after students have committed misbehaviors. Students participate in peer-to-peer mediations or attend conferences with the victim, their victim's family, their own parents, and other key supporters who are all led by a trained facilitator.²⁰² Similarly, circles involve the offender, the victim, family members, and other community members like social service staff or neighbors, and each individual is allowed to address the occurrence and possibilities for reparations.²⁰³ These practices have begun to be implemented and as of 2017, 50% of schools with over 50% minority students of the student body reported using restorative circles as a disciplinary measure.²⁰⁴ In these conversations, students are expected to discuss the conflict, possible means of reparations, and plans to avoid further future conflict. These restorative measures can help to mitigate the consequences that Black students experience when they are disproportionately impacted by harsh disciplinary measures and can help them to feel valued.²⁰⁵

DeAndre talks back to his teacher after arriving late to class.



This practice has been shown to have mixed results in regards to impacting the racial discipline gap. Restorative justice has been suggested to result in an improved school climate and decreased instances of misbehavior and the number of days lost to suspension, particularly for Black students.^{206, 207, 208} As a result, students spend more time in school and are able to engage with teachers and fellow students. Multiple studies have suggested that restorative justice measures can significantly decrease the size of the discipline gap between Black and White students by as much as 54%.^{209, 210} For example, in one Denver school district, the gap nearly decreased by 2 times from 9 to 5% due to the introduction of restorative justice.^{211, 212} On the other hand, one study suggested that although practices did decrease the overall rate of suspension, the rate of Black student suspension remained largely stagnant while the White student suspension significantly decreased.²¹³ The variety in the impact of these policies could be due to

additional factors including remaining implicit racial bias, under-resourcing, and poor implementation.^{214, 215, 216, 217}

The program has also been criticized for lacking extensive practices to prevent misbehavior and neglecting some of the deeper issues involved with school discipline like teacher bias or systematic racism in disciplinary policies.²¹⁸ The term "restorative justice" itself is fairly broad and largely ill-defined, which may make it difficult to effectively implement on a large scale. Just like the My Teaching Partner–Secondary training, the restorative justice practice does not include specific training focused on racism, which may account for why a discipline gap often still exists even after the training is implemented.²¹⁹ On the other hand, some administrations may not be as willing to implement restorative justice because they consider it to be too demanding for teachers and "too soft" on students.^{220, 221} Even when it is implemented, studies have suggested that it may take up to five years to significantly shift a school's climate and practices.²²² However, overall restorative justice appears to be a promising practice that could help at least lessen the disparity between the discipline of Black and White students.

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Footnotes

United States

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Emily Peterson is a history major with minors in social impact and media arts. She grew up in New Jersey where she engaged with peers from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. She was always interested in social issues and became even more passionate after working with refugee students and their families in high school. She is passionate about racial justice, educational opportunity, and immigration reform. She hopes to work in the nonprofit or political sector in educational advocacy in the United States for students of color.

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