New Study Finds the Reasons for Suspension and Expulsion to Be Complex, But Race is Still Central

An important new study to be presented at the American Educational Research Conference this week shows that race continues to be an important factor in determining who receives out-of-school suspension and expulsion, and that racial disparities in school discipline are most likely due more to school characteristics than to the characteristics of behaviors or students.

Professor in Counseling and Educational Psychology at the IU School of Education Russ Skiba led the study, exploring factors affecting disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion for African American students. Skiba is director of The Equity Project, offering evidence-based information on equity in special education and school discipline, based in the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP). The study, “Parsing Disciplinary Disproportionality: Contributions of Behavior, Students, and School Characteristics to Suspension and Expulsion” was conducted with Associate Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at the IU School of Education Robin Hughes, doctoral students Megan Trachok, Timberly Louise Baker, and statistician Choong-Geun Chung.

“For overall rates of suspension and expulsion, the study found that discipline is not just a function of difficult students receiving punishment, but is more complex,” Skiba said. Type of misbehavior, student characteristics including race and socioeconomic status, and school characteristics, such as the principal’s views on school discipline, all predict which students will be suspended or expelled.

In particular, the study found race to be a key factor. “It continues to be a powerful predictor of the severity of school punishment, independent of poverty status or the type of behavior students engage in,” Skiba said. “In particular, schools with more African American students are more likely to use more exclusionary forms of discipline such as suspension or expulsion.” Skiba added that the researchers found poverty rates and more disruptive behavior didn’t account for the racial disparities. Instead, the characteristics of schools themselves, including principal attitudes regarding discipline, are most important in accounting for racial differences.

Skiba said the results are consistent with other recent reports, including a report released last month by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights that found national data indicate African American students are far more likely than peers to be suspended. “It is especially troubling that these results support previous research in showing that schools with higher proportions of African American
students use more punitive procedures, regardless of the socioeconomic level of the schools,” Skiba said.

"It’s no surprise that schools face tough and complex decisions in trying to keep schools safe and orderly,” Skiba said, but he added the results also have important implications for addressing racial differences in discipline. “If we really wish to make a difference in reducing racial and ethnic disparities in suspension and expulsion, these findings suggest that we would do better reflecting upon school policies and practices than focusing on characteristics of students or their behavior."

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