

Zero tolerance ineffective in schools, study finds

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Zero tolerance policy in schools - which can mandate automatic punishment for weapons, drugs, profanity and various forms of disruptive behavior - is failing to make students feel safe, contends a new study by two Michigan State University researchers.

The policy, established in the mid-1990s to address gun violence in schools, has become plagued by inconsistent enforcement and inadequate security, according to the study, which appears in the May issue of the journal *Urban Education*.

As a result, the very [students](#) zero tolerance was designed to protect overwhelmingly say the policy is ineffective, said Laura McNeal, assistant professor of teacher education and lead researcher on the project.

"Zero tolerance policy represents what happens when there is a disconnect between law on the books and law in action," said McNeal, who has a law degree. "We need to reform existing policies such as zero tolerance to ensure every child receives a high-quality education in a safe and supportive learning environment."

McNeal and Christopher Dunbar Jr., associate professor of educational administration, interviewed and collected data from above-average students at 15 urban high schools in the Midwest. While much has been written about students punished under zero tolerance, this study is one of the first to bring in the voices of well-behaved students, the researchers

said.

Zero tolerance is a result of a 1994 federal law that requires all states receiving federal money to require school districts to expel for at least one year any student found to have brought a weapon to school. School districts across the nation installed zero-tolerance policies that sometimes went further - expelling students for cursing, defiant behavior and bringing over-the-counter medications, for examples.

McNeal said zero tolerance has been starkly criticized by the media, educators and parents for failing to improve school safety.

The students surveyed in this study said zero tolerance is rife with problems, including too few security guards; security guards who are underpaid, lazy or corrupt; nonworking metal detectors; and administrators who show favoritism.

To address the problem, McNeal and Dunbar recommend:

- Creating a non-bias approach to zero tolerance by establishing a universal handbook that clearly defines what constitutes a violation and the appropriate punishment.
- Improving security. This includes hiring school security guards with professional training and paying them appropriately.

Dunbar said students in the study actually favor a zero tolerance policy - but only if it is fair and effective.

"How can children be expected to excel," he said, "in an environment that promotes trepidation and high anxiety due to safety concerns?"

Provided by Michigan State University

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