

Study: Virginia schools suspend black male students at twice the rate of white males

December 18 2013, by Angela Ciolfi

A joint report released today by the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and Charlottesville's Legal Aid Justice Center finds that in Virginia schools, black male students are twice as likely to be suspended as white male students. It also finds that most black students are being suspended for relatively minor misbehavior, such as being loud or disruptive in class.

The joint report also unveils the results of a new study demonstrating that use of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, developed by U.Va. professor Dewey Cornell, is associated with lower rates of school suspensions, including a smaller racial discipline gap. Schools using the guidelines have substantially lower rates of school suspensions, especially among black males.

Specifically, the report finds that:

- Schools implementing threat assessment had smaller [racial disparities](#) in their long-term suspension rates; and
- Threat assessment was associated with lower rates of out-of-[school](#) suspension overall: 15 percent fewer [students](#) received short-term suspensions and 25 percent fewer students received long-term suspensions in schools using threat assessment.

"In previous longitudinal studies, we found that suspension rates were markedly reduced when schools adopted the Virginia Student Threat

Assessment Guidelines," said Cornell, who led a Curry School team in conducting the study. "Our new cross-sectional study suggests a statewide impact involving more than 600 secondary schools with fewer suspensions for thousands of students."

The threat assessment guidelines are used in several thousand schools in more than a dozen states, Cornell said, and also have been used in Canadian schools and as a model for programs in several European countries.

"Studies have found no support for the hypothesis that black students misbehave more often," said Angela Ciolfi, the legal director of JustChildren, a child advocacy program of the Legal Aid Justice Center that provides free legal representation to low-income children families in Central Virginia. "In fact, racial disparities in suspension rates have raised increasing concern nationally because the data shows just the opposite – that [black students](#) are more likely to be suspended for more subjective and less serious reasons."

The new report also provides practical tips for educators and law enforcement professionals implementing threat assessment and makes several policy recommendations, including requiring that schools ensure suspended and expelled students continue to make academic progress during periods of disciplinary removal.

In response to the tragic shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., Virginia became the first state in the country to mandate the formation of threat assessment teams in all its schools. Although the term "threat assessment" is unfamiliar to most educators, it is a violence prevention strategy that begins with an evaluation of persons who threaten to harm others and is followed by interventions designed to reduce the risk of violence.

A key aspect of threat assessment is its emphasis on considering the context and meaning of the student's behavior and taking action that is proportionate to the seriousness of the student's actions. This approach regards a threat as a sign of frustration or conflict that might be amenable to intervention, rather than simply a violation of rules that must be punished.

Currently, more than 1,000 of Virginia's schools are using the guidelines.

Provided by University of Virginia

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