

Schools with higher black, minority populations call cops, not docs

July 22 2015

Poor schools that have more black and minority students tend to punish students rather than seek medical or psychological interventions for them, according to a Penn State sociologist.

"There's been a real push toward school safety and there's been a real push for schools to show they are being accountable," said David Ramey, assistant professor of sociology and criminology. "But, any zero-tolerance policy or mandatory top-down solutions might be undermining what would be otherwise good efforts at discipline, and not establishing an environment based around all the options available."

According to the study, schools and school districts with a greater percentage of black student population had significantly higher rates of expulsions and suspensions, as well as higher rates of referrals to law enforcement and arrests.

Schools and districts with greater black populations also have lower enrollment in government programs designed to stop discrimination against students who have a disability, such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—IDEA.

The way schools are governed may influence whether students are punished or referred to medical help.

"Schools in high disadvantaged districts tend to be centralized, so all the

schools in that district tend to develop the same practices," Ramey said. "Schools that are in less disadvantaged districts tend to have more autonomy."

A disadvantaged district is defined as one with low high-school graduation rates, high unemployment, more single mother-headed households, low median income and a high percentage of adults employed in low-paid sales and retail jobs.

School districts with higher populations of Hispanic students were less likely to seek criminal action against students, but were also less likely to consider medical treatments for behavioral problems, added Ramey, who released his findings in a recent issue of *Sociology of Education*.

Parental reaction to the increased media attention on school shootings and violence at inner city schools in the late 20th century is one reason that school officials adopted zero-tolerance policies, such as immediate suspensions and expulsions.

"In the late '90s crime declined massively, but, media coverage of crime did increase in scope," said Ramey. "We started seeing reports of [school shootings](#) and terrorism and that created a push to create the perception of safe schools, which included police in the schools and metal detectors at the doorway."

The study builds on prior research that looked at how educators assessed the behavior of individual students based on race.

"The bulk of my earlier research looked at how, for the same minor levels of misbehaviors—for example, classroom disruptions, talking back—white kids tend to get viewed as having ADHD, or having some sort of behavioral problem, while black kids are viewed as being unruly and unwilling to learn," said Ramey.

Ramey collected data from 60,000 schools in more than 6,000 school districts for the study. He gathered data for the study from the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection and National Center for Education Statistics. The government also provides enrollment statistics for IDEA and Section 504 programs

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Schools with higher black, minority populations call cops, not docs (2015, July 22)
retrieved 7 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-07-schools-higher-black-minority-populations.html>

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