

Study may explain the nation's growing racial achievement gap

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For decades, researchers and scholars have studied what some call the "racial achievement gap" in academics and careers, without having a clear understanding why such a gap exists.

Edward Morris, associate professor of sociology and director of undergraduate studies at the University of Kentucky College of Arts and Sciences, and Brea Perry, associate professor of sociology at Indiana University, assert that [racial disparities](#) in [academic achievement](#) constitute "one of the most important sources of American inequality."

"Racial inequalities in adulthood—in areas as diverse as employment, incarceration and health—can be clearly traced to unequal academic outcomes in childhood and adolescence," the researchers wrote in an article published by the [Society for the Study of Social Problems](#) journal.

While the social science community has understood the potential impact of a racial achievement gap for decades, its root causes and mechanisms have not been clearly defined. The unique data collected from Kentucky's secondary schools and the uncommon analysis presented by Morris and Perry postulate that racially disparate discipline in the schools is a critical, understudied factor in racial differences in educational achievement, and success later in life.

Finding that racial disparities in the educational system can start very young, the researchers conclude that exclusionary discipline in the

schools—such as [school](#) suspensions and expulsions based on behavioral issues—have a great impact on early academic growth and later life achievements and successes. Their research confirms that [minority students](#) are more likely to be suspended from school than their white counterparts. It further confirms that suspensions are associated with significantly lower achievement growth, and that the effect is cumulative. The researchers postulate that lower achievement in school relates to less profitable employment and less success in adulthood.

Morris believes his study adds a critical new piece to the puzzle of racial disparities in achievement, because it demonstrates how suspensions and expulsions have important, racialized academic consequences. The study presents evidence that disparate suspension lowers school performance and contributes to racial gaps in achievement.

"The analysis revealed that school suspensions account for approximately one-fifth of black-white differences in school performances, demonstrating that exclusionary discipline can result in severe academic consequences for minority students," Morris said.

"We recognize discipline is vital to learning. However, unequal, exclusionary discipline severely restricts a student's ability to learn. For genuine progress to be made in closing the racial achievement gap, we must also make progress in closing the racial punishment gap."

Morris and Perry began their research with an exhaustive review of established research of the [racial achievement gap](#), concluding that while it is generally accepted that the gap results from a complex interplay of school, family and societal factors, school punishments have not been adequately evaluated. Their research, the first empirical study of these factors, was based on their belief that punishment is a logical explanation. Morris points out that:

- school punishment varies widely by race;
- exclusionary punishment extracts students from a learning environment, threatening academic progress; and
- school suspensions increased sharply in the 1990s, while progress on narrowing the [achievement gap](#) waned.

The researchers maintain that in the 1990s, reflecting a societal impatience with crime, schools became increasingly authoritarian and intrusive, maintaining school discipline by "criminalizing" infractions. School suspensions in America's public schools have doubled since the 1970s. In 2010 nearly 3 million children were suspended from school activities.

"In addition to security measures like cameras and random searches, zero tolerance policies require automatic suspensions for specified infractions, replacing milder punishments that do not remove the student from an academic setting, such as detention or loss of privileges. These policies disproportionately impact minority students, especially African Americans," Morris said.

But how do exclusionary disciplinary practices specifically affect the student?

Admitting that their research cannot conclusively prove a causal link between school suspensions and achievement, Morris said his and Perry's research reveals a strong relationship between the two. Their research and earlier investigations indicate that exclusionary discipline:

- does not improve behavior and may even exacerbate anger and apathy;
- weakens school and societal bonds; and
- can be correlated with low academic performance and higher dropout rates.

Morris pointed out a 2006 study that compared two groups of similar students, the only difference between the groups being one had been suspended, the second had not. After two years, the suspended group was nearly five grade levels behind the non-suspended group.

Established research suggests that African-American students are three times as likely as white students to be suspended. Nationwide, one in six African-American students in the public school system have been suspended at least once. Taking note of such research, two years ago the U.S. Department of Education set guiding principles for school discipline, encouraging schools to rely less on exclusionary discipline and reminding schools that school discipline may not be discriminatory.

Provided by University of Kentucky

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