

Black students feel less welcome at schools with excessive suspensions

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Black students who attend high schools where they are disproportionately suspended more so than white students feel their school is less fair and less welcoming, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

The study used data from almost 20,000 students in 58 high schools across Maryland to analyze the "discipline gap," excessive out-of-school suspensions of black students that previous research has shown occurs across the country. Regardless of gender, grade level or socioeconomic status, black students at high schools in Maryland with a discipline gap perceived less fair and inclusive treatment for students by race, the study found. Black students at schools with a larger discipline gap also felt less like they belonged and less cultural inclusion. A discipline gap didn't have any of the same effects for [white students](#). The study was published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

"This is the first study that objectively characterizes schools based on excessive suspension of black students and asks what message this differential treatment sends to kids about their place in the school. This can have an impact on students whether they are suspended or not," said lead researcher Jessika Bottiani, PhD, a research fellow at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. "Having a sense of belonging at school is linked to students' engagement in school and their academic achievement."

Black students have experienced more frequent and severe discipline for

decades, including office referrals, suspensions and expulsions, even though misbehavior by black or white students occurs at roughly the same level, according to prior research. Despite other gains in race relations, the national rate of suspensions of black youth in high schools and middle schools has almost doubled since the 1970s (from 12 percent in 1973 to 23 percent in 2012), while the suspension rate for white students only increased from 6 percent to 7 percent over that period.

Black students were suspended up to six times more often than white students at some of the schools in the study. Latinos and students of other races weren't included in the study because of small sample sizes of those students. The study also didn't analyze any possible differences in the discipline gap between urban or rural schools, although it did analyze differences by school size, socioeconomic status and racial diversity of the schools.

Researchers analyzed state and federal data, including school reports to the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, from 7,064 black students and 12,622 white students at urban, suburban and rural high schools in Maryland during the 2011-2012 school year. In schools with a larger discipline gap, black students also reported higher levels of adjustment problems, including acting impulsively, getting mad easily or threatening to hurt someone. The study didn't analyze whether those adjustment problems could increase misbehavior and lead to more suspensions, but there may be a snowball effect, Bottiani said.

"If black students are being treated as if they are more aggressive or have more adjustment problems, that may trigger a stereotype threat where they begin to see themselves that way and act that way," she said.

Only four of the 58 high schools in the study had a lower rate of out-of-school suspensions for [black students](#) than white students. Black students at schools with more racial diversity were more likely to say they felt a

sense of belonging at their school, the study found. White students also benefited from racially diverse schools, with fewer of them reporting adjustment problems, possibly because increased opportunities for cross-cultural interaction helped develop empathy, Bottiani said. The study was conducted only with students in Maryland, so the findings may not be representative of the United States as a whole, although previous research has shown a persistent discipline gap across the country.

Increased training for teachers and administrators on classroom behavior management may help curb implicit bias to create more fair and inclusive school environments that respect diversity, the study stated. Mindfulness and stress management training for school staff also may help resolve classroom disputes early without resorting to suspensions, Bottiani said.

Schools also should consider discipline alternatives besides out-of-school suspensions, which have been consistently linked to many negative outcomes for students regardless of race, including a greater likelihood of juvenile delinquency and school drop-outs, the study stated. The involvement of black youth in school committees or other efforts to reform discipline practices also could increase feelings of belonging and fair treatment at school.

"Something needs to be done to disrupt the harm that is being caused by the discipline gap," Bottiani said. "Suspensions need to be the consequence of last resort, and there has been a movement toward restorative practices that should continue."

More information: "A Multilevel Examination of Racial Disparities in High School Discipline: Black and White Adolescents' Perceived Equity, School Belonging, and Adjustment Problems," Jessika H. Bottiani, PhD, Catherine P. Bradshaw, PhD, University of Virginia, Tamar Mendelson, PhD, Johns Hopkins University; *Journal of Educational Psychology*;

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