

Schools use corporal punishment more on children who are black or have disabilities

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In parts of the 19 states where the practice is still legal, corporal punishment in schools is used as much as 50 percent more frequently on children who are African American or who have disabilities, a new analysis of 160,000 cases during 2013-2014 has found. Corporal punishment—typically striking a child with a wooden paddle—continues to be a widespread practice in disciplining children from pre-K through high school, according to a new study by Elizabeth Gershoff of The University of Texas at Austin and Sarah Font of Penn State University. The paper is published this week as a Social Policy Report by the Society for Research in Child Development.

"Some Americans may think [corporal punishment](#) is as obsolete as the one-room schoolhouse," says Gershoff, an associate professor of human development and family sciences. "Yet public school personnel in 19 states—and private school personnel in 48 states—can legally hit children in the name of discipline."

The new report analyzes data gathered by the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education from all 36,942 public schools in the 19 states where school corporal punishment is legal. The study assessed which school districts are using corporal punishment, and which children are punished using corporal punishment within these public schools.

The study found that there are widespread disparities in the administration of corporal punishment by race, gender and disability status. For example:

- In Alabama and Mississippi, African American children are at least 51 percent more likely to be corporally punished than white children in over half of school districts.
- In eight states, boys are five times as likely to receive corporal punishment as girls are in at least 20 percent of [school districts](#).
- Children with disabilities are more than 50 percent more likely to be corporally punished than their nondisabled peers in many southeastern states. ?Disability status is defined as students who qualified as having a disability (physical, cognitive, or emotional) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

"We documented that African American children, children with disabilities and boys are much more likely to be corporally punished," says Gershoff. "These disparities violate several federal [civil rights](#) laws that prohibit discrimination and suggest hidden biases may factor into which children get paddled at school."

The Supreme Court ruled in 1977 that school corporal punishment was constitutional. At that time, only a few states had banned corporal punishment in public schools. Today, 31 states ban it from public schools. Corporal punishment is used to discipline schoolchildren for behaviors ranging from serious incidents such as setting off fireworks in school to minor misbehaviors such as using cellphones and not completing homework.

The authors report that juvenile crime has not increased in states that have removed corporal punishment from schools. This suggests that it is possible to find appropriate ways to discipline children in schools that do not cause physical or emotional harm and, at the same time, do not result in an increase in crime.

The authors note that whereas hitting an animal to the point of injury is a felony in most U.S. states, hitting a child to the point of injury as

punishment in a public school is exempt from child maltreatment laws in some states where corporal punishment in schools is legal. In such cases, a behavior that would be considered abuse when inflicted by a parent on a child cannot be prosecuted if inflicted by a school employee. The Society for Adolescent Medicine estimated that in 2003, when more than 270,000 children were corporally punished in schools, 10,000-20,000 children had to seek medical attention as a result of corporal punishment in [public schools](#). This included treatment for bruises, hematomas, broken bones and nerve and muscle damage.

"Dozens of research studies have confirmed that corporal punishment does not promote better behavior in children," says Gershoff. "A recent international study found that children subjected to school corporal punishment had lower gains in academic achievement over time."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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