

# Study examines evidence of racial disparities in special education

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Special education programs are designed to meet the needs of all students with cognitive, behavioral or physical disabilities, regardless of their race or ethnicity. However, a best-evidence synthesis lead by Paul Morgan, professor in the department of education policy studies at Penn State, recently found evidence that black children may not be receiving

special education services they are entitled to, even when displaying the same clinical needs as white children.

The synthesis was published recently in the Sage journal *Exceptional Children*. Morgan also recently presented the findings to the White House's Office of Management and Budget, the President's Domestic Policy Council, and the U.S. Department of Education.

The team's findings run counter to federal legislation as well as policies currently being considered to address minority over-representation in [special education](#). "We found very little evidence in prior studies that [minority children](#) are over-represented in special education as a result of their race or ethnicity," Morgan said. "On the contrary, our synthesis of the best-available studies indicates that [white children](#) are more likely to be identified as having disabilities and to receive special education services than [black children](#). These disparities are evident even when black children were displaying the same disability-related symptoms as well as being otherwise similar on other background characteristics."

The research team identified 22 studies meeting the review's inclusion criteria that reported on black children's disproportionate representation in special education. The team found that studies with weaker designs were more likely to report that black children were over-represented in special education. According to Morgan, these studies have been used to direct federal legislation and policymaking, even though they often didn't adequately control for potential confounding factors including greater exposure to poverty.

"We discovered that more rigorous studies, including those that controlled for poverty exposure as well as individual-level academic achievement, consistently showed that black children were less likely to receive special education services than otherwise similar white children," said Morgan.

Morgan says that federal policies currently being considered by the U.S. Department of Education do not seem to be taking into account the best-available empirical evidence. "The policies are being designed to address minority over-representation in special education, but our findings show a clear pattern in which minority children are not being appropriately identified and helped. These disparities in care and treatment may be contributing to racial achievement gaps."

The team's findings are similar to reports in public health of racial and ethnic disparities in disability identification, including for conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning disabilities and other conditions.

The results also have important implications for special education practice, research, and policy. "The review indicates that methodological limitations in existing studies help explain conflicting findings as to whether minority children are over- or under-represented in special education," Morgan explained. "Methodologically stronger studies find that black children are under-represented in special education. This suggests the need for [federal legislation](#) and policies that result in more equitable service delivery, possibly through universal screening efforts.

"Black children, because of many societal inequities, often experience lower quality health care and are at greater risk for disabilities. Not providing care and treatment to children with disabilities on the basis of their race or ethnicity is discriminatory, and may be exacerbating educational inequalities, including [achievement gaps](#) and school dropout."

**More information:** P. L. Morgan et al. Are Black Children Disproportionately Overrepresented in Special Education? A Best-Evidence Synthesis, *Exceptional Children* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0014402916664042](#)

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