

Glaring racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions, a warning about the role of on-site law enforcement

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A new University of Pittsburgh study of Allegheny County schools shows severe racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions with a rate that is double for African-American students compared to their non-

Black classmates.

The new report from Pitt's Center on Race and Social Problems is titled "[Just Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Greater Pittsburgh: Local Challenges and Promising Solutions.](#)"

It uses the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Safe Schools Reports data from 2012 to 2016 for 51 [school districts](#), covering all grades.

As the new school year begins with more law enforcement officers assigned to schools, the Pitt researchers also expressed concerns about the "criminalization of school discipline," whereby school [law enforcement officers](#) getting involved in common student discipline increases the likelihood that a student will become involved with the juvenile justice system.

"More than 80 percent of our districts have problems with either overall [suspension](#) use, racial disparities in those suspensions or both," said James Huguley, Pitt assistant professor of social work and first author of the report. "Our region has a problem that is not only a social justice issue, but also an economic one that is hampering our well-being and our future."

The report, funded by The Heinz Endowments, also offers a solution—an eight-point plan for a successful reform model, portions of which are already being used successfully in the Woodland Hills School District.

"The Heinz Endowments is excited about the reforms underway in the Woodland Hills School District because they represent the type of work we support to promote just policy and practice in our schools and to help all of our children achieve the potential we know they have," said

Endowments President Grant Oliphant. "We have to end these suspension practices that limit education and future employment opportunities for our children and threaten to rob our communities of their talent and imagination. We've got to do better than this in our region."

Key findings from the report include:

- Across Allegheny County, suspension rates dropped by 16 percent in the comparison of 2012-13 to 2015-16. The top three school districts for reductions (per 100 students) were Penn Hills, Sto-Rox and Cornell. The three districts with the biggest increase were Propel Schools, Duquesne City and Wilkinsburg.
- For Black students in Allegheny County, the suspension rate was 41 suspensions for every 100 students, compared to a rate of only 5.6 for non-Black students. The racial disparity stemmed from exceedingly high suspension rates in urban school districts, where Black students tend to be concentrated, and exceptionally high racial disparity rates in White suburban districts.
- Suspensions have serious negative academic and economic consequences for students and communities. Pitt's findings show that a 10-point difference in suspensions per 100 was linked to an approximately 3 percent lower graduation rate. Economically, suspensions in a single graduating cohort will cost Allegheny County more than \$9 million in lost tax revenue plus \$30 million in total social costs over the course of these students' careers.

As a solution, the report proposes the model called Just Discipline, which departs from the punitive model and instead focuses on a relationship-driven method to build community and then leverage that community to engage the offender in repairing the harm. It requires, among other things:

- an adjustment of policies to reduce the possibility that minor offenses such as willful defiance or dress code violations will lead to suspensions;
- a focus on community and relationship building as the foundation of a strong behavioral climate;
- full-time in-school facilitators to focus on relational dynamics within the school and to become keepers of the school culture that undergirds the school's behavioral fabric; and
- the acknowledgement of implicit racial bias and racial injustice histories and how they affect the schooling experiences of students of color.

Huguley, who co-authored the report with Pitt Associate Professor of Psychology in Education Ming-Te Wang, said there is reason for optimism. He said that overall suspension rates are down across the region. He also noted that some of the districts are already adapting new policies and shifting practices, and that schools that are making the efforts to move toward positive change will reap the benefits.

Provided by University of Pittsburgh

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