

Black students receive fewer warnings from teachers about misbehavior

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University of Illinois social work professor Kate Wegmann found in a new study that black middle school students receive fewer warnings from their teachers about misbehavior, giving them fewer opportunities to correct their behavior on their own before the consequences escalate to exclusionary punishments such as office referrals and expulsion. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A new study of racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline found that black middle school students were significantly less likely than their white peers to receive verbal or written warnings from their teachers about behavioral infractions.

"While at first glance, disparities in teacher warnings seem less concerning than being expelled or sent to the principal's office, warnings represent opportunities for students to correct their behavior before the consequences escalate and they're removed from the [learning environment](#)," said University of Illinois social work professor Kate M. Wegmann, who led the study.

Wegmann and her co-author, graduate student Brittanni Smith, examined data from more than 4,100 students at 17 schools. The students were sixth- through ninth- graders at schools in two North Carolina communities.

Students were surveyed about the various types of misconduct they had engaged in at [school](#) over the prior 30 days—including tardiness, turning in homework late, arguing with teachers and physical fights with other students—and the frequency of these infractions.

Students also were asked about the types of discipline they received, including verbal warnings from their teachers, written warnings sent to their homes or phone calls to their parents. They also reported on exclusionary forms of discipline they may have experienced, such as being sent to the principal's office and school suspensions.

Although the researchers found as hypothesized that black students were more likely than their white peers to experience exclusionary forms of discipline, some of the most significant differences were in black students' likelihood of receiving written or verbal warnings.

Wegmann and Smith analyzed the data using two techniques. First, they calculated and compared the percentages of black or [white students](#) reporting each type of misbehavior and any disciplinary consequences they experienced. This method has been used in previous studies to identify discipline disparities.

Using this technique, they found that while black students composed only 23% of the study population, these students accounted for 37% of the school suspensions and more than 35% of the office referrals.

Likewise, about half of those students who reported three or more suspensions or who had at least three warnings sent or called to their homes were black, according to the study.

Using a second data analysis technique called binary logistic regression, the researchers investigated disparities by race and sex among the behavioral infractions and the forms of discipline. Unlike the traditional percentage comparison method, binary logistic regression accounts for individual characteristics like the number and frequency of infractions reported when estimating the odds of receiving a form of discipline.

Regardless of the number or frequency of their infractions, black students were less likely than their white peers to be warned about their behaviors in the classroom or in messages to their parents, the researchers found. Even among those students who reported three or more incidents of misbehavior, [black males](#) were less likely than white males to be warned by their teachers about misconduct.

Black males were 95% less likely than white males to receive verbal warnings directly from teachers, and [black students](#) of either sex were 84% less likely to have multiple warnings directed to their parents, according to the study.

Black males were more likely than all other students to have been suspended from school three or more times, according to the study.

"These findings point toward a trend of heightened consequences with little or no forewarning for black male students, even when behavioral infractions are accounted for," the researchers wrote.

Although black females were not more likely to be suspended than white females, they were more likely to be warned verbally or in writing and to be sent to the principal's office for similar types and frequency of misbehavior.

More information: Kate M. Wegmann et al, Examining racial/ethnic disparities in school discipline in the context of student-reported behavior infractions, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2019.05.027](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2019.05.027)

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