

Teacher treatment of students factors into racial gap in school suspensions

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Elementary schools tend to discipline black students more harshly than white students, leading to a considerable racial gap in expulsion and suspension. That's among the findings of a new data analysis led by

researchers at Brown and Princeton universities.

The analysis found that teachers' different treatment of black and white students accounted for 46% of the racial gap in suspensions and expulsions from school among 5- to 9-year-old children. It showed that about 21% of the gap could be explained by differences in the characteristics of schools that black and white children attend predominantly, while differences in [student behavior](#) accounted for 9% of the gap.

The analysis was co-authored by Jayanti Owens, an assistant professor of sociology at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown, and published in the journal *Social Forces*.

The results come on the heels of a 2018 U.S. Government Accountability Office report showing that black K-12 students are 3.2 times more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled from school. The article also follows [recent research](#) showing a strong connection between high rates of suspension and expulsion and higher risk of poor school performance, school dropout, arrest, incarceration and unemployment.

Combined with previous research, the analysis provides evidence that different treatment of children as they enter school could play a large role in the early criminalization of [black students](#), Owens said.

"The idea that you can have two kids of different races misbehaving in similar ways and receiving different forms of punishment—one gets a slap on the wrist, say, and the other gets suspended—is a really important thing to understand socially," Owens said. "Subconsciously, we all have racial biases in different ways. This is one way in which those biases are manifesting in the classroom."

According to Owens, who led the analysis with Sara McLanahan of Princeton, sociologists have long focused on two different explanations for the racial gap in school suspensions and expulsions. One explanation, often referred to as "between-school sorting," touches on the fact that schools serving mostly students of color and those from low-income families are more likely to adopt "zero tolerance" policies for misbehavior, penalizing students with suspension or expulsion after just one offense.

The other explanation for the racial gap focuses on demonstrated differences across reported race in children's behavior before they enter school. Such differences in behavior are well documented in research, Owens said, and there are several reasons why they might exist: Students of color are less likely to have prior formal education experience than their white peers, and they're more likely to have been exposed to a stressful home environment. Those and other factors, Owens said, could lead to misbehavior or misunderstandings at school.

Owens said she was interested in exploring a third explanation for the racial gap, one that has been investigated independently through lab experiments: that teachers and principals punish students of color differently than white students, even within the same schools.

"I'm interested in the ways that the same behaviors can be interpreted and perceived differently based on race, gender and social class," Owens said. "I wanted to look at groups of kids who behaved in the same way but came from different races, and ask, 'Is there a difference in the way they are treated?'"

Drawing on teacher and parent reports, school records, and survey data on children who attended elementary school from 2003 to 2009, Owens and McLanahan set out to study the racial gap through the lens of these three explanations altogether for the first time, focusing specifically on

children between the ages of 5 and 9.

They found that the third explanation—different treatment of black and [white students](#), even those who attended the same school—accounted for nearly half of the racial gap. They discovered that gap was prominent even among students who attended the same schools: Black students had anywhere from a 10 to 19 percentage-point higher likelihood of being suspended or expelled than their comparably-behaved white peers, depending on the severity of their behavior problems, as reported by teachers and parents.

"Not only were black children more likely to be suspended, but these racial differences were happening in the same schools," Owens said. "It shows that the categories teachers use as reasons for punishment, like 'defiance,' 'disrespect' and 'noncompliance,' are ripe for racial discrimination. What does it mean to be disrespectful? It would be easy for a teacher to read the behavior of a kid as disrespectful when it may not have been intended that way."

Owens said the findings not only emphasize the need for bias training among teachers and school administrators but also cast a critical eye on schools' use of suspension, expulsion and other exclusionary discipline tactics, which have increased by almost 50 percent over the last 40 years, according to previous research.

"Our findings really put a spotlight on processes within schools," she said. "There's been a huge movement toward decreasing the use of out-of-[school](#) suspensions in particular urban districts. Tutoring, counseling and trust-building initiatives between teachers and students of all races—all of those things are likely to help close the racial gap."

More information: Jayanti Owens et al, Unpacking the Drivers of Racial Disparities in School Suspension and Expulsion, *Social Forces*

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