

# More discipline can lead kids to prison, new study finds

October 2 2019, by Andrew Sorensen

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Students in stricter middle schools are more likely to end up in jail or

prison later in life, according to a new working paper co-authored by Stephen Billings, associate professor at CU Boulder's Leeds School of Business.

Billings and two co-authors, Dave Deming and Andrew Bacher-Hicks from Harvard's Kennedy School, found attending a school with a higher [suspension](#) rate could mean a 15 percent to 20 percent higher likelihood of a child being incarcerated as an adult.

They found those impacts are strongest for males and minorities.

Deming and Bacher-Hicks first approached Billings about conducting a study on school suspensions after the Obama administration called for alternatives to harsh school discipline policies.

Billings specializes in data research on housing, schools, neighborhoods and crime. As he got into the topic of school suspensions, he also came across the so-called "school to prison pipeline."

"Often, this is a story of things like peers, gangs and how school environments may facilitate this interaction," he said. An under-explored component: how the suspensions play into a child's future outcomes.

Billings and his co-authors took a closer look at data from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District (CMS) in North Carolina. Because the district had a major boundary change in 2002, causing half of CMS students to attend a new school, it basically made for a perfect experiment.

The researchers found [middle school students](#) who were moved to schools with historically higher suspension rates were more likely to be suspended, whether they had disciplinary history or not.

Kids who were suspended, Billings and his co-authors found, were much more likely to be incarcerated between ages 16 to 21.

The study also found suspension rates can significantly change with a new principal, meaning school leaders' decisions around discipline can have major impacts on kids' outcomes.

Even if you don't have kids at a school with suspension problems, Billings said the study's findings are noteworthy for all of us.

"Everyone, including businesses, should care about the high cost of [school](#) policies that hurt human capital development," he said.

The bottom line, according to Billings, is that suspensions aren't a good strategy for dealing with bad behavior.

"School suspensions are not an effective policy to handle misbehavior among kids in the long-run even if it may provide immediate relief for disruptive kids in the classroom," said Billings. "We need other policies that better assist struggling kids."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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