

Study finds relationship between racial discipline disparities and academic achievement gaps in US

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An increase in either the discipline gap or the academic achievement gap between black and white students in the United States predicts a jump in the other, according to a new [study](#) published today in *AERA Open*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association. This is the first published peer-reviewed nationwide study of this topic.

According to the study—conducted by Francis Pearman (Stanford University), F. Chris Curran (University of Florida), Benjamin Fisher (University of Louisville), and Joseph Gardella (Drexel University)—a 10 percentage point increase in the black-white [discipline](#) gap in a school district predicts an [achievement](#) gap that is 17 percent larger than the average black-white achievement gap. The researchers also found that an increase in the [achievement gap](#) between black and [white students](#) predicts a larger than average discipline gap.

The study also confirmed previous research that has documented that black and Hispanic students are more likely to face suspension or expulsion for discipline infractions than their white peers, and that black and Hispanic students perform worse on average than White students on standardized assessments.

For the *AERA Open* study, the scholars analyzed disciplinary and achievement data for grades 3 through 8 in [school districts](#) across the

United States for the 2011-12 and 2013-14 school years. Disciplinary data came from the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection, achievement data from the Stanford Education Data Archive, and socio-demographic information on school districts from the Common Core of Data and the American Community Survey.

"For black and white students, our results support nationally what has been found by earlier research conducted at the state and local levels—that discipline gaps and achievement gaps are two sides of the same coin," said study coauthor Pearman, an assistant professor of education at Stanford University. "As one goes up, so does the other. Initiatives aiming to close either the [racial achievement gap](#) or the discipline gap may have an indirect consequence of closing the other."

In December 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education rescinded federal guidelines put into place in 2014 to address school discipline disparities.

"As a result of this decision, efforts by school districts nationwide to implement policies designed to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline may soon wane," said Pearman. "Our findings should caution against such moves. Curtailing efforts that address racial inequities in discipline may exacerbate existing inequities in achievement."

The authors also found a [positive relationship](#) between the discipline and achievement gaps between Hispanic and white students, but once other differences between school districts were controlled for—such as income and education levels in the surrounding community—the relationship disappeared.

"We were surprised to learn that the relationship between achievement and discipline gaps among Hispanic and white students was not attributable to the racial discipline gap, but rather to other factors," said

Pearman. "Our results suggest that potential mechanisms connecting suspension to discipline—such as teacher biases or feeling isolated at school—may be most salient for black students."

"Our findings should encourage parents, teachers, and school leaders to pay attention to racial disparities in discipline and achievement in their school districts," said Pearman.

"If your district is suspending students of color at higher rates compared to white students, then your district likely is also failing to meet the academic needs of students of color," Pearman said. "Likewise, if your district struggles to meet the academic needs of students of color relative to its white students, then it will likely have a racial discipline problem too."

The authors noted there are several approaches that school leaders can use to address either or both gaps. These include teaching approaches that help raise the academic achievement of racial and ethnic minority students, such as culturally relevant teaching and ethnic studies programs, as well as the use of positive behavior interventions and supports and the adoption of disciplinary practices that do not exclude students from [school](#).

Provided by American Educational Research Association

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