

# Extent of discrimination in discipline of students with disabilities unclear

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Federal legislation and regulation currently require U.S. schools to monitor for whether students with disabilities who are also racial or ethnic minorities are being inappropriately disciplined. Yet a new analysis of existing studies led by Paul Morgan, professor of education in the Department of Education Policy Studies in Penn State's College of Education, finds that it is actually unknown whether U.S. schools

discriminate based on disability status when disciplining students.

According to the researchers, most of the available studies have not compared similarly behaving students. To date, Morgan said, no studies have contrasted the risk of suspension for students with [disabilities](#) who are also racial or ethnic minorities to that of students with disabilities who are white while also accounting for at least one covariate.

Morgan recently provided invited testimony on these findings to the Pennsylvania Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights.

"It is a longstanding concern that students with disabilities, including those who are of color, are disproportionately more likely to be suspended or disciplined," Morgan said.

In the analysis, Morgan and his team evaluated the extent to which U.S. schools may be disciplining students with disabilities, including those of color, in ways that are discriminatory.

The research team coded 147 risk estimates from 18 studies. They found that the risk estimates that best accounted for alternative explanatory factors mostly failed to indicate that students with disabilities were more likely to be suspended or disciplined than similarly situated students without disabilities.

Morgan said there was no rigorous evidence that students with disabilities who are of color were more likely to be disciplined than students with disabilities who are white.

"What we found was that there is not much scientific evidence to indicate that schools are discriminating on the basis of disability status or, for students with disabilities, on the basis of race or ethnicity in the

use of disciplinary practices," Morgan said.

Morgan believes that a better understanding of the current [scientific evidence](#) will result in a stronger body of work examining whether U.S. schools are using discriminatory disciplinary practices.

The analysis recently appeared in *Exceptional Children*.

**More information:** Paul L. Morgan et al. Are U.S. Schools Discriminating When Suspending Students With Disabilities? A Best-Evidence Synthesis, *Exceptional Children* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0014402919868528](#)

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