

Black students disproportionately disciplined with suspensions and detentions in elementary school

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A study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (JAACAP)* reports that among elementary school-aged

children, Black children and multiracial children who were at least partly Black, are at a much higher risk of receiving detention or suspension in school even when accounting for typical predictors of school discipline.

"Disciplinary practices such as detention and [suspension](#) can lead to a number of academic, social and psychological issues," said Matthew Fadus, MD, a Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellow at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, MA, USA. "There is extensive evidence in the United States to indicate that Black [children](#) and children from [lower-income families](#) are disproportionately affected by these practices.

"We wanted to know if these disciplinary disparities could be better explained by predictors of school discipline such as caregiver income and education, family conflict and caregiver reports of misbehavior. This study was unique in that it allowed us to control for these variables among more than 11,000 students."

The study consisted of 11,875 [elementary school students](#) aged 9 and 10-years-old, who were part of the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study—a 10-year longitudinal study of brain development. Children were recruited across 21 sites in the US, with participants closely resembling the country's geographic, demographic and socioeconomic makeup.

Caregivers of students provided information such as household education and income, the presence of a secondary caregiver at home (e.g., primary caregiver's spouse, partner, or other family members), utilization of special education services at school, and ratings of their child's behavior and levels of family conflict at home. Caregivers additionally provided details about whether the child received a suspension or detention in the last year and the reason(s) for these disciplinary actions. The study accounted for these predictors of school discipline while comparing the rates of suspension and detention among

Black, white, Asian, Hispanic, and Multiracial students (with sub-categories of race within this category).

The results revealed that, with all other things being equal, Black children and multiracial children who were at least partly Black were over three times more likely to receive [detention](#) or suspension compared to their white peers.

Co-author, Brittany Bryant, DSW, LISW-CP, Assistant Professor at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, SC, USA said: "What we have found suggests there must be other factors influencing disciplinary actions among these children. Given that we were able to control for so many variables in this study, it is likely that individual biases and a long history of systemic racism in the US may be contributing to our findings."

Earlier studies have indicated that suspensions and detentions are not only ineffective disciplinary measures but are also stronger predictors of school drop-out than GPA or socioeconomic status and are significant risk factors for future involvement in the juvenile justice system. Detentions and suspensions disproportionately affect children of lower-income families and families with single caregivers and can further perpetuate a cycle of poverty and limited academic achievement.

"A major concern is that the children in the study are so young, just 9- and 10-years-old, and they are receiving detentions and suspensions during a particularly vulnerable and foundational time when they are beginning to develop their attitudes towards school and authority figures more broadly," said senior author Lindsay Squeglia, Ph.D., an Associate Professor at Medical University of South Carolina.

The researchers hope this study helps provoke healthy discussion of race and discipline in American schools and influences educators and [school](#)

administrators to examine their own potential biases in disciplinary practices.

"We believe the results as a whole are not reflective of any one child's individual behavior or moral shortcomings, but instead are the result of a long history of societal inequities and systemic racism in the US," concluded Emilio Valadez, Ph.D., co-author and postdoctoral researcher at the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland.

More information: Matthew C. Fadus et al, Racial Disparities in Elementary School Disciplinary Actions: Findings From the ABCD Study, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2020.11.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.11.017)

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