

Study: A small number of teachers effectively double the racial gaps among students referred for disciplinary action

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The top 5 percent of teachers most likely to refer students to the

principal's office for disciplinary action do so at such an outsized rate that they effectively double the racial gaps in such referrals, according to new research released today. These gaps are mainly driven by higher numbers of office discipline referrals (ODRs) issued for Black and Hispanic students, compared to White students.

The study, published in *Educational Researcher*, was conducted by Jing Liu at the University of Maryland, College Park, Emily K. Penner at the University of California, Irvine, and Wenjing Gao at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Based on highly detailed school data, this first-of-its-kind study documents [teachers'](#) use of ODRs and examines the role referrals play in racial disparities in exclusionary school discipline. Office referrals are typically the first formal step in the discipline process and precede the potential use of further formal consequences, including suspension. The authors drew on data from the 2016–2017 to 2019–2020 [school years](#) involving more than 2,900 teachers and 79,000 students in grades K–12 in 101 schools in a large, diverse urban district in California.

"We were really surprised to find this small group of teachers engaged in extensive referring and how big an impact they had on expanding racial disparities," said Jing Liu, an assistant professor in [education policy](#) at the University of Maryland, College Park. "The positive takeaway was that the group of top referrers in our study represented a relatively manageable number of educators, who could be targeted with interventions and other supports."

The jump in [racial gaps](#) caused by top referrers is largely driven by referrals issued for more subjective reasons such as interpersonal offenses and defiance—as opposed to more objective reasons such as violence, drug use, and class skipping. The increased ODRs also partially, but not entirely, convert to increased racial gaps in student

suspensions, with a much larger conversion rate for the Black-White suspension gap compared with other racial group comparisons.

In May, the Biden administration issued a [letter](#) to school leaders indicating that schools that unfairly discipline students based on race could be in violation of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act.

Liu and his colleagues found that the top 5 percent of referring teachers issued an average of over 48 ODRs per year—roughly one ODR every four school days. That is several times greater than the rates of their average-referring colleagues, who issued less than one ODR for every two months of school. Top referrers accounted for 34.8 percent of all ODRs.

Top referrers effectively doubled the Black-White, Hispanic-White, and multiracial/other-White ODR gaps. The ratio of the Black-White gap in ODRs was about 1.6-to-1 when considering all referrers but jumped to 3.4-to-1 when including top referrers.

Prior research has shown that receiving referrals, especially frequent referrals, is a strong precursor for receiving suspensions, which can hurt student engagement, achievement, and long-run success. The body of research evidence also indicates that implicit or explicit racial bias contributes to racial disparities in exclusionary discipline.

"It is important for teachers to be aware of their referring frequency and the reasons for their referrals so they can be more aware of the potential impact of their actions on students and adjust how they approach student misbehaviors accordingly," said Liu.

"Schools leaders need to know that they can leverage information about referring frequency to identify the top referrers and the specific school contexts where extensive referring is concentrated," Liu said. "Targeting

support and interventions to these individuals and contexts might ultimately reduce the overall use of, and racial disparities in, exclusionary discipline."

The results from Liu and his colleagues suggested that teachers who are White, early career, and who serve middle schools are most likely to engage in extensive referring. As teachers accumulate more years of teaching experience, especially after three years, their likelihood of being a referrer or top referrer quickly drops.

"Given that top referrers tend to be teachers early in their careers, targeting professional development supports of classroom management skills for this group of teachers might also be a viable approach to reducing their referring frequency," said Liu. "Our analysis highlights that structural supports at certain school levels are warranted."

More information: Jing Liu et al, Troublemakers? The Role of Frequent Teacher Referrers in Expanding Racial Disciplinary Disproportionalities, *Educational Researcher* (2023). [DOI: 10.3102/0013189X231179649](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X231179649)

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