

Minority students' disabilities less likely to be identified in U.S. schools

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Three Penn State researchers and their colleague replicated an earlier but provocative study that found that minority children are less likely to be identified as having disabilities as they attend U.S. schools.

Penn State's Paul Morgan, director of the Center for Educational Disabilities Research, Population Research Institute (PRI) affiliate, and professor of education and demography; Marianne Hillemeier, associate director of PRI and professor of health policy and administration and demography; and Steve Maczuga, PRI research programmer/analyst; along with George Farkas, a professor of education at the University of California, replicated an earlier finding that [minority children](#) are under-identified as disabled, despite being otherwise similar including in regards to academic and behavioral functioning. Their new results were published in *Educational Researcher*, one of the educational research field's highest-impact journals.

This new study replicates the earlier study by analyzing much larger nationally representative

datasets. The study, which includes individual-level data from about 400,000 recently surveyed U.S. students, also extends the earlier work by showing that [racial disparities](#) in disability identification are occurring in high school as well as elementary and middle school, and for a wider range of disability conditions than previously reported. Children who are [language minorities](#) were also found to be less likely to be identified as having disabilities.

In most prior studies, researchers concluded that minority children were being over-identified as disabled and suggested that schools may be using discriminatory identification practices. Concerns that minority children were being misidentified as disabled subsequently led to [federal legislation](#) and policies requiring U.S. schools to monitor the extent to which minority children are over-represented in special education.

However, the prior empirical work used to justify federal legislation and policies had largely not accounted for alternative explanations, including minority children's well-known greater exposure to the risk factors for disability (e.g., poverty, low birthweight, lead exposure) that in turn would result in elevated likelihood of experiencing cognitive and behavioral impairments and attending academic and behavioral difficulties in school.

New work by Morgan and his colleagues, which better accounts for minority children's greater risk factor exposure and experience of academic difficulties, repeatedly finds that minority children are less likely to be receiving [special education](#) services for identified disabilities. The researchers find this to be the case among otherwise similar white, English-speaking [children](#), including those displaying the same severity of academic difficulties in school.

In this study, Morgan and his team analyzed data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), nationally representative data

often considered to be the "Nation's Report Card." The NAEP contains student-level academic achievement scores in various subjects, including in reading, mathematics and science. The researchers adjusted for student-level academic achievement, exposure to poverty, gender and English Language Learner status, as well as variability in access to school-level resources. These analyses allowed for contrasts among students who differed in their race or ethnicity but who were observationally similar, including in their academic achievement.

Their results replicate and extend the team's prior findings. For example, analyses of the NAEP indicated that racial disparities in disability identification were evident throughout the achievement distribution, among otherwise similarly achievement males; across elementary, middle, and high [school](#); and for low-incident conditions (e.g., autism, intellectual disabilities) as well as high-incident conditions (e.g., speech or language impairments, learning disabilities). These disparities have been occurring since at least 2003, and are both longstanding and widespread in the U.S.

"Our results repeatedly showed that when we accounted for student-level academic achievement, as well as other factors, white and/or English-speaking students were identified as disabled more often than similar peers who were racial, ethnic or language minorities," said Morgan. "These findings suggest that students with [disabilities](#) who are minorities may not be receiving the help to which they have a civil right."

More information: Replicated Evidence of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Disability Identification in U.S. Schools. *Educational Researcher*. doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17726282

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