

# Children's race, not disability status, may predict more frequent suspension

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Among students in Kindergarten through eighth grade, students who are black are more frequently suspended than white students of similar behavioral, academic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Credit: Rido/shutterstock.com

Suspension is one way schools discipline students, but the high number of and disparities in suspensions in the U.S. has sparked controversy and policy debate.

New research, led by Paul L. Morgan, Harry and Marion Eberly Fellow, professor of education and demography, and director of Penn State's Center for Educational Disparities Research, has found that, among students in Kindergarten through eighth grade, students who are black are more frequently suspended than [white students](#) of similar behavioral, academic and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, students with disabilities, including those of color, were not more frequently suspended after accounting for the study's other explanatory factors. The findings were recently published in the *Journal of School Psychology*.

Being suspended has been reported to increase the risk for later life-course adversities. Students

who are suspended frequently are at especially high risk. For example, other work finds that students who are suspended two, three or four times are much more likely to later be arrested than students who are suspended only once.

"Students who are suspended are at increased risk for lower academic achievement, school dropout, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse and adult criminality," said Morgan.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act provides legal protections to students with disabilities and requires U.S. states monitor for disparities in discipline.

"The purpose of these protections is to make sure that students are not missing out on services that they need. The protections also make sure that students with disabilities are not being inappropriately disciplined due to a lack of effective support," Morgan explained.

Morgan and his research team took a new approach examining disparities in school [suspension](#) by investigating how frequently students were suspended, rather than whether or not they were suspended.

The investigators analyzed 6,740 students who were participating in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten cohort 1998-1999, a data set collected and administered by U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. Data collection started with the 1998-1999 kindergarten class and followed them through eighth grade.

The investigators found that by the end of eighth grade, students who are black received almost twice as many suspensions as otherwise similar students who are white. Prior behavior, family socioeconomic status and school economic composition did not explain these racial disparities,

although these factors themselves increased the risk for more frequent suspension.

Students with disabilities were initially at greater risk for more frequent suspension, but their risk was subsequently explained by the study's other factors. Neither students of color with [disabilities](#) nor those with specific disability conditioners were at greater risk.

"It's a complex issue, because schools need to maintain a safe learning environment for all students, but at the same time schools should not be using suspension in ways that are discriminatory," Morgan said. "The results provide suggestive evidence of bias in how students of color are being suspended, at least as indicated by their more frequent suspension not being explained by many other factors including behavior at [school](#) entry, growing up in poverty, or attending schools in more economically distressed communities."

**More information:** Paul L. Morgan et al. Are students with disabilities suspended more frequently than otherwise similar students without disabilities?, *Journal of School Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jsp.2018.11.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2018.11.001)

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