

Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of Disciplinary Exclusion from School

By Daniel J. Losen¹ and Jonathan Gillespie²

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Does anybody know how many students were suspended from school in their child's district? Should we care?

In most schools and districts in the nation, the answer to the first question is that most do not know, even though out-of-school suspension is no longer a measure of last resort in a large number of school districts across the country. As this report will show, many districts are frequently resorting to suspension for violations of even minor school rules.

Well over three million children, K-12, are estimated to have lost instructional "seat time" in 2009-2010 because they were suspended from school, often with no guarantee of adult supervision outside the school. That's about the number of children it would take to fill every seat in every major league baseball park and every NFL stadium in America, *combined*.

Besides the obvious loss of time in the classroom, suspensions matter because they are among the leading indicators of whether a child will drop out of school, and because out-of-school suspension increases a child's risk for future incarceration. Given these increased risks, what we don't know about the use of suspensions may be putting our children's futures (and our economy) in jeopardy.

Furthermore, the high risk of getting suspended is not borne equally by all students, which raises civil rights issues and questions about fundamental fairness. This report will demonstrate that, while children from every racial group can be found to have a high risk for suspension in some school districts, African American children and children with disabilities are usually at a far greater risk than others. For example, one out of every six enrolled Black students was suspended, compared with about one in twenty White students.

This national report, based on suspensions of students in K-12 in 2009-2010, represents the first major effort to fill the knowledge gap around school discipline as it stands in thousands of districts in nearly every state. Based on data released in March 2012 by the U.S. Department of Education, we analyze the risk of out-of-school suspension for every

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racial/ethnic group, as well as for students with and without disabilities.

The report begins by providing national- and state-level estimates, but perhaps the most valuable information presented is the detailed analysis of nearly 7,000 school districts from every state in the nation. In this national database, using the companion spreadsheets, readers will easily locate the highest suspending school districts for each racial group, and for students with and without disabilities. This report demonstrates that, in most districts, the highest risk for suspension is revealed when the data are disaggregated by race and combined with gender and/or disability status.

Key Findings from Analysis at the National, State, and District Levels

National

- National suspension rates show that 17%, or 1 out of every 6 Black school-children enrolled in K-12, were suspended at least once. That is much higher than the 1 in 13 (8%) risk for Native Americans; 1 in 14 (7%) for Latinos; 1 in 20 (5%) for Whites; or the 1 in 50 (2%) for Asian Americans.
- For all racial groups combined, more than 13% of students with disabilities were suspended. This is approximately twice the rate of their non-disabled peers.
- Most disturbing is the fact that one out of every four (25%) Black children with disabilities enrolled in grades K-12 was suspended at least once in 2009-2010.
- Students with disabilities and Black students were also more likely to be suspended repeatedly in a given year than to be suspended just once. The reverse was true for students without disabilities and for most other racial/ethnic groups.

State

- Suspension rates, based on the sample, varied dramatically between states; for example, North Dakota had an estimated rate of 2.2% for all students, whereas South Carolina suspended 12.7% of enrolled students.
- Although Blacks had the highest suspension rate in most states, in Montana, Whites (3.8%) were suspended more often than Blacks (3.4%).
- The highest suspending states (based on the sample) differed by racial group.
 - Illinois was highest for Blacks, at 25%.
 - North Carolina, at 18%, was highest for Native Americans.
 - Connecticut had the highest rate for Latinos, at 14%.
 - Whites and Asian Americans were highest in Wyoming, at 10% and 6%, respectively.
- When rates of the risk for being suspended were compared for Blacks and Whites, Illinois had the largest racial gap in the nation (21.3%). Illinois also suspended nearly 42% of all Black students with disabilities.

District

- Approximately 839 districts out of 6,779 in the sample suspended over 10% of the enrolled student body at least once.
- Several of the nation's largest districts suspended 18% or more of their total enrollment, including Memphis, Tennessee; Columbus Ohio; Henrico, Virginia; and Chicago, Illinois. Almost 200 districts suspended more than 20% of all enrolled students.
- For the largest districts, when suspension rates were further disaggregated by gender with race and disability, rates for male students of color with disabilities sometimes exceeded 33%.
- For each racial group, we provide the 10 highest suspending districts in the country. Among the highest districts were Spokane, Washington, for Native Americans (44.7%); Ravenswood City Elementary, California, for Asian Americans (18.8%); Hartford, Connecticut, for Latinos (44.2%); Pontiac City, Michigan, for Blacks (67.5%); and Miami Unified, Arizona for Whites (40.5%).
- Although over 300 districts suspended over 25% of the Black children enrolled, high suspension rates for Black students were not the norm in every district. Of the 4,504 districts in the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) sample that enrolled at least 10 Blacks and at least 1,000 students in all, the risk of suspension for Blacks was 3% or less in over 1,400 districts.
- Similarly, over 300 districts suspended over 25% of the students with disabilities, without regard to race, but well over 600 districts suspended 3% or less of this subgroup.

Although the text of this report only scratches the surface, all readers have access to a companion set of spreadsheets that contain extensive state- and district-level information. These spreadsheets come with instructions on how to sort and filter the district data, using the national sample or within a given state.

Besides providing the data broken down by race/ethnicity, disability status, and, to a limited extent, gender, the report summarizes relevant research findings regarding the use of suspensions. These include the factors that contribute to its high use and large disparities in that use, and whether there are more effective alternatives. These findings suggest that factors controlled closely by the schools influence the high rates and observed disparities in suspensions. They may include differences in school leadership, differences in school policy, lack of effective support and training for teachers, and possibly racial and disability bias.

Equally important is that researchers find that the frequent use of suspension brings no benefits in terms of test scores or graduation rates. Thus the oft-repeated claim that it is necessary to kick out the bad kids so the good kids can learn is shown to be a myth. In fact, research suggests that a relatively lower use of out-of-school suspensions, after controlling for race and poverty, correlates with higher test scores, not lower.

The good news is that school discipline reform not only is possible, but that at least two states have responded thus far to the research. For example, the data used in the study do

not reflect changes in Connecticut, where a state law designed to encourage schools to use out-of-school suspensions only as a measure of last resort began implementation in 2010-2011. Moreover, on July 24, 2012, the Maryland State Board of Education passed (pending final approval) regulations that call for a similar measure. The Maryland regulation, which is designed to keep students in school, contains measures directing each school system to adopt a rehabilitative philosophy that focuses on positive behavior and reserves using suspension from school as a measure of last resort. Under the new regulation, the state will also monitor districts for large racial disparities and require identified districts to implement a plan designed to eliminate the disparities within three years.³

As addressed in the discussion section, there are many alternatives to using out-of-school suspension frequently to try to create effective learning environments. The data presented here leave no doubt that we face a challenging, entrenched problem, but we have good reason to believe that much can be done to remedy that problem and thereby make a significant difference in the lives of all students. We do know how to educate children successfully without relying on the ineffective, harmful practice of suspending the very students who often have the most to gain from staying in school. Therefore, we urge all schools to reject the high-suspending status quo and revert to a commonsense policy of using school exclusion only as a measure of last resort. Furthermore, we as a nation must pay closer attention to the profound disparities along the lines of race, disability, and gender highlighted in this report. Toward this end, **we offer the following sets of recommendations.**

For Parents and Children’s Advocates

1. Request data on discipline from your school and district, and seek policy changes that would require annual reporting of disaggregated data on school discipline down to the school level, if not already required.
2. Bring your concerns about large racial, disability, and gender disparities and frequent use of suspensions to local and state boards of education.
3. Provide support for teachers to receive the training and assistance they need to be effective with diverse learners.

For Federal and State Policymakers

1. Require states and districts to publicly report disaggregated data annually, including number of students suspended, number of incidents, reasons for out-of-school suspensions, and days of lost instruction.
2. Include suspension rates among the factors schools and districts use to measure performance.

³ See http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/maryland-education-board-gives-preliminary-approval-to-student-discipline-reforms/2012/07/24/gJQAKivs6W_story.html.

3. Step up federal civil rights enforcement to address the large disparities in discipline by race, disability, and gender in high-suspending districts.
4. Provide greater support for research on promising, evidence-based interventions and target more funds for the implementation of systemic improvements in approaches to school discipline, as well as for teacher training in classroom management.
5. Consider replicating the actions taken to reduce suspensions in several states, such as Connecticut and Maryland, and the legislative proposals before California's state legislature.
6. Include classroom management skills as part of teacher evaluations, and ensure that teachers and principals have sufficient training and professional development opportunities in this area.

For Educators

1. Use disaggregated discipline data to guide and evaluate reform efforts, including measures to ensure a review of disparities by race, disability, and gender.
2. Invest in accurate reporting and use data on discipline in early warning systems.
3. Seek changes to school policies and practices where suspension rates are high, and as part of efforts to turn around struggling schools and districts.

For the Media

1. Highlight the connections between effective discipline and improved educational outcomes.
2. Request that districts provide disaggregated discipline data on a regular basis and report it to the public. For example, the new CRDC data for 2011-2012 will soon become available, as all districts are required to report it to the U.S. Department of Education, beginning in September 2012 and continuing over the next several months.
3. Question the justification for and research behind discipline policies that leave large numbers of children out of school and unsupervised.

For Researchers

1. Include discipline data in the evaluation of school improvement efforts.
2. Partner with states and school districts to conduct longitudinal studies on the impact of frequent out-of-school suspensions, and to document promising practices.
3. Encourage the use of research-based approaches to school discipline.
4. Conduct cost/benefit analyses of the frequent use of out-of-school suspensions.

