



RECOGNIZING TRAUMA: WHY SCHOOL DISCIPLINE REFORM NEEDS TO CONSIDER STUDENT HOMELESSNESS

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SUMMARY

Michigan students who are currently or were formerly homeless are disproportionately disciplined by Michigan public and charter schools. Black students and elementary students experiencing housing instability are particularly impacted.

INTRODUCTION

Michigan thrives when its children thrive. While policymakers, educators, and families all know this to be true, widespread use of suspension by the state's public schools is leaving lasting scars on students. Compared to other states, Michigan schools have some of the highest suspension rates in the country. Two school districts rank among the top 10 nationally for suspensions among elementary schoolchildren¹ and the state's out-of-school suspension rate in school year 2015-16 was two percentage points higher than the national average (7% vs. 5%, respectively).² Extensive research has linked both suspensions and expulsions to negative educational and life outcomes for children, including lower rates of proficiency on state math and English Language Arts examinations and increase in the risk of dropping out of school. Even 12 years later, suspended youth are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree and are more likely to have been arrested or on probation than their peers who were not suspended.³ By comparison, research shows that positive school culture and the implementation of restorative justice and trauma-informed approaches reduce both in-school discipline referrals and out-of-school suspensions.⁴ In a study of 18 school districts across multiple geographies, districts that implemented restorative practice experienced an 8% decrease in middle school out-of-school suspensions, as well as a 43% drop in the number of Black youth referred to the juvenile justice system for school offenses.⁵ Similarly research has highlighted the importance of school culture in efforts to reduce disciplinary actions.⁶

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Greater economic and housing instability is associated with higher rates of disciplinary action.** Housed students who were economically disadvantaged were suspended at rates close to three times those of their housed peers who were not economically disadvantaged (11% vs. 4%, respectively). Homeless students faced even higher rates of disciplinary action at 16%.
- **The association between homelessness and higher rates of disciplinary action persisted even after stable housing was found.** Michigan students who were currently housed but had experienced homelessness at any point in the last eight years were disciplined at rates even higher than their currently homeless peers (18% vs. 16%, respectively).*
- **A strong intersection exists between race, economic security, and housing stability when it comes to disciplinary action rates for Michigan's students.** While across all races and ethnicities the same pattern persists, with formerly homeless students facing the highest rates of suspension and expulsion, Black students are disproportionately impacted. The U.S. has a long history of criminalizing Black people, and the pattern extends to the inequitable application of school discipline policies. Among students who were formerly homeless, Black students faced disciplinary action at close to four times the rate of their Asian formerly homeless peers (27% vs. 7%).
- **Even very young elementary students who experienced homelessness faced high rates of suspension.** In SY 2017-18, 9% of ever-homeless children in second grade and under were suspended or expelled. This disciplinary action rate is on par with high school students who had never experienced homelessness (8%).

* Eight years is the number of years data on former homelessness were available from the Michigan Department of Education.

One key finding that repeatedly emerges in the research on how to improve school disciplinary practices is the importance of recognizing and understanding experiences of trauma in children.⁷ The fight-or-flight response, which can be easily triggered in children who have experienced trauma, is often misunderstood as a disciplinary issue. Approaching reactions driven by trauma in children with harsh disciplinary consequences does not improve the behavior in question and often re-traumatizes the child.⁸ One cause of trauma that is increasingly common among children is homelessness.⁹ In Michigan, roughly 1 in 10 students (9.5%) have experienced homelessness by the time they graduate or leave high school. This risk is even greater for Black and Hispanic students, with 15.7% and 13.6%, respectively, experiencing homelessness at some point during their K-12 years.¹⁰ Efforts to improve behavioral interventions in school are benefited by identifying the students who are most at risk of experiencing disciplinary actions. As the state looks to identify ways to reduce unnecessary disciplinary action and incorporate practices of restorative justice, it is important to understand factors that may contribute to inappropriate use of suspension and expulsion. One potential factor that has not yet been explored in Michigan is the relationship between experiencing homelessness and the likelihood of facing disciplinary action.

This brief uses data from the Michigan Department of Education[†] to explore suspension and expulsion rates among students who have experienced homelessness compared to their housed peers. The analysis finds both currently and formerly homeless students face much higher rates of disciplinary action.[‡] Policy recommendations for disciplinary practices that meet the developmental needs of children and teachers and promote thriving educational environments draw on models implemented in other states.

ECONOMIC AND HOUSING INSTABILITY AND THE RISK OF DISCIPLINARY ACTION

Recognizing the alarmingly high rates of suspensions in Michigan school districts, in 2014 the Michigan Board of Education enacted new policies to encourage school districts to move toward restorative practices.¹¹ As a part of these ongoing efforts, starting in SY 2017-18, universal reporting of disciplinary actions was required of all school districts.¹² These data show that stark differences in disciplinary action rate exist across the spectrum of housing and economic stability for students in Michigan, highlighting the need to address current structures that disadvantage.

On average, 8% of students in Michigan faced disciplinary action in the form of either suspension or expulsion in school year 2017-18. These rates differed dramatically based on students' experiences of economic and housing instability, with greater levels of instability associated with higher rates of disciplinary action. Just 4% of always-housed students who were not economically disadvantaged were suspended or expelled compared to 11% of always-housed students who were economically disadvantaged and 16% of currently homeless students.

Formerly homeless students faced the highest rates of disciplinary action across economic and housing stability indicators. Eighteen percent of students who were housed but had experienced homelessness at some point within the last eight years (formerly homeless) faced disciplinary action. This is two percentage points higher than students who were currently homeless, suggesting the increased risk of disciplinary action that homeless students face persists beyond their acute experience of housing instability.

The association between economic and housing instability and increased rates of disciplinary action persists across race and ethnicity. Among Black, white, Hispanic, Asian, and students of other races/ethnicities, formerly homeless students faced the highest rates of disciplinary action, followed by currently homeless students, always-housed and economically disadvantaged students, and lastly always-housed students who are not economically disadvantaged.

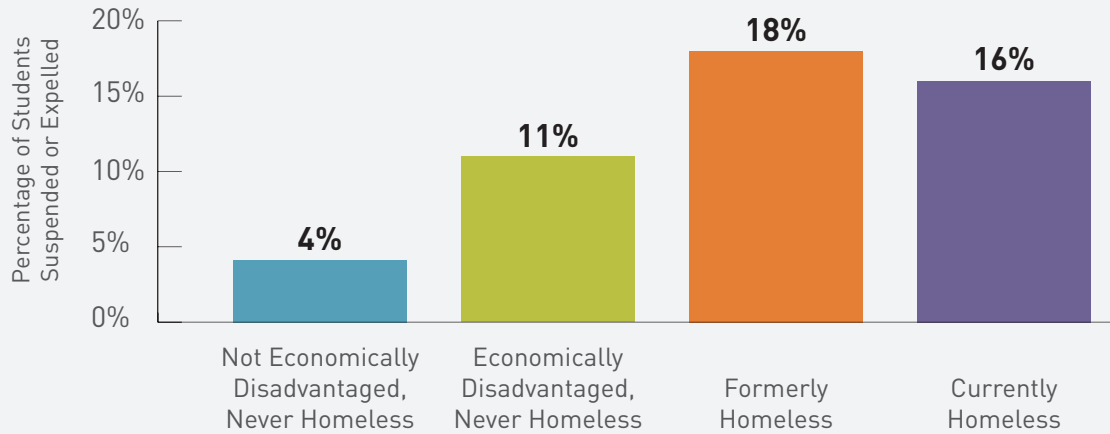
[†] This research result used data structured and maintained by the MERI-Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC). MEDC data are modified for analysis purposes using rules governed by MEDC and are not identical to those data collected and maintained by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and/or Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Results, information and opinions solely represent the analysis, information and opinions of the author(s) and are not endorsed by, or reflect the views or positions of, grantors, MDE and CEPI or any employee thereof.

[‡] Disciplinary action rate in this report is a measure that includes all in- and out-of-school suspensions as well all expulsions.

Disciplinary Action by Economic and Housing Status

PERCENT OF STUDENTS SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED

All Michigan Schools | SY 2017-18



Percent of Students Suspended or Expelled by Race and Ethnicity

All Michigan Schools | SY 2017-18

	Not Economically Disadvantaged, Never Homeless	Economically Disadvantaged, Never Homeless	Formerly Homeless	Currently Homeless
Black	10%	18%	27%	24%
White	3%	8%	14%	13%
Hispanic	4%	8%	15%	12%
Asian	1%	3%	7%	3%
Other Race/Ethnicity	5%	10%	16%	12%

Source: Michigan Department of Education unpublished data tabulated by Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan, School Year 2017-18

Note: Percentages represent children enrolled in any Michigan public or charter school in SY 2017-18. Currently Homeless students are those who have been identified as homeless in SY 2017-18. Formerly Homeless students are those who are not currently identified as homeless, but who have been identified as homeless at any point between SY 2009-10 and SY 2016-17. Always Housed, Economically Disadvantaged are those students who are identified as economically disadvantaged in SY 2017-18 who have never been identified as homeless between SY 2009-10 and SY 2017-18. Always Housed, Not Economically Disadvantaged are those students who are not identified as economically disadvantaged in SY 2017-18 who have never been identified as homeless between SY 2009-10 and SY 2017-18.

Despite following the same overall pattern by economic and housing stability groups, Black students experienced disciplinary action at rates much higher than their peers in parallel economic and housing stability groups. Schools suspended or expelled always-housed and economically disadvantaged Black students at rates higher than both homeless and formerly homeless students in all other racial and ethnic groups. Even more striking, at the extremes, schools suspended or expelled formerly homeless students who are Black at rates 27 times higher than the lowest suspension rate by race, economic and housing stability (27% for students who are Black and formerly homeless vs. 1% for students who are Asian, always housed, and not economically disadvantaged).

The stark differences seen in these data highlight how current systems and disciplinary practices specifically disadvantage Black students and students who experience greater levels of economic and housing instability. This is not unique to the state of Michigan. Inconsistent application of school discipline policies resulting from both individual and institutional racial and economic biases have been highlighted elsewhere. Studies from Houston and New York City also show that schools use disciplinary action at much higher rates for students who are Black and those who have experienced homelessness or economic disadvantage.^{13 14 15} The effects of these suspensions and expulsions reverberate for years, increasing likelihood of juvenile justice involvement¹⁶ and depleting a student's sense of school belonging.¹⁷ These data highlight the importance of identifying the structural factors that perpetuate such starkly different outcomes across racial and economic groups in order to further the success of Michigan's children.

DISCIPLINARY ACTION AND CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

In addition to recognizing that poverty, homelessness, and race increase the likelihood some students will face suspension and expulsion, it is also important to consider the age of children.

While suspension and expulsion are often thought of as issues primarily of concern among older students, in Michigan, these practices also impact students in elementary school. In school year 2017-18, 6% of always-housed students in third through fifth grade

were suspended or expelled from school — a rate only 2 percentage points lower than the rate for always housed high school students (8%). This highlights the need to ensure disciplinary reforms are also reaching elementary schools in the state, particularly given the local control of each school district in setting policy.

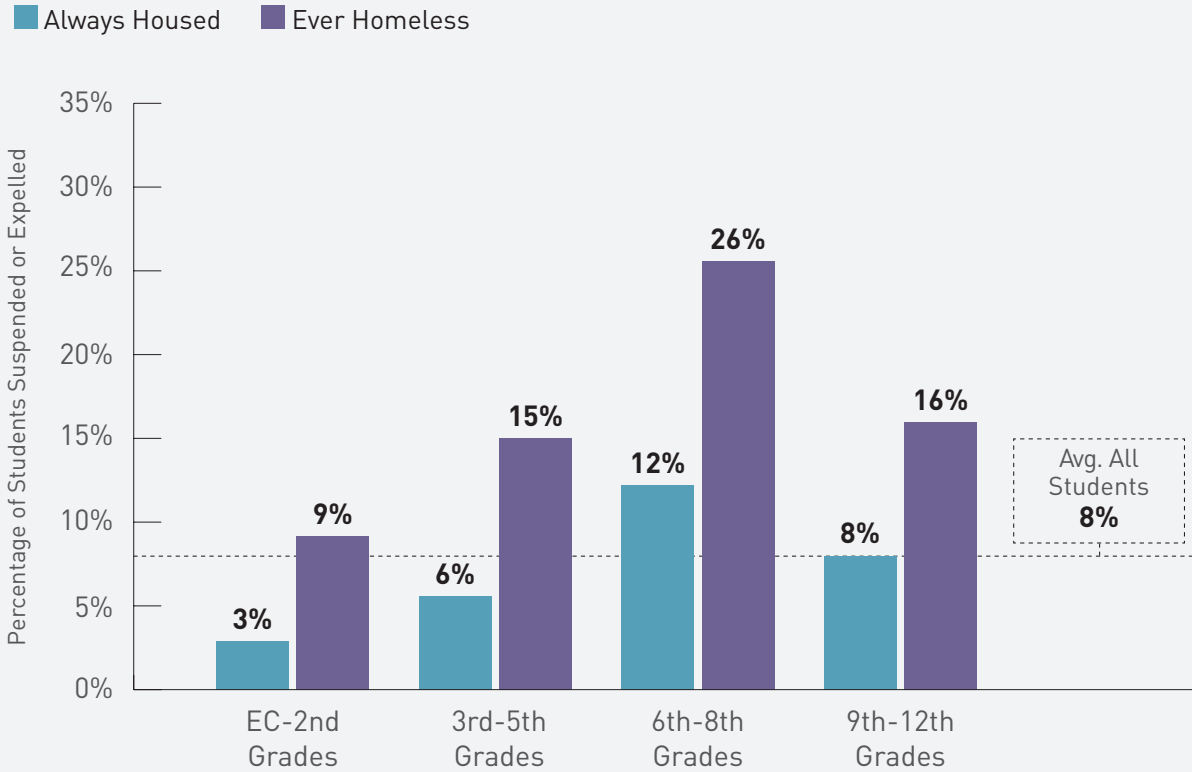
Elementary students who have experienced homelessness face particularly high rates of suspension and expulsion. Among children in early intervention through second grade who had ever experienced homelessness, 9% were suspended or expelled. This is a rate higher than the average for all students and higher than housed high school students. Likewise, ever-homeless elementary students in third through fifth grade also saw dramatically elevated rates of disciplinary action, with 15% of children being suspended or expelled in school year 2017-18 alone. The alarmingly high rates of suspension for elementary school students who have ever been homeless raise the question of whether the use of suspension or expulsion are age appropriate, particularly for children below third grade. Developmental research suggests the fight-or-flight response, which can be easily triggered in children who have experienced trauma, is often misunderstood as a disciplinary issue. Approaching reactions driven by trauma in children with harsh disciplinary consequences does not improve the behavior in question and can often re-traumatize the child,¹⁸ leading to worse behavioral outcomes and negative associations with school.

For both always-housed and ever-homeless students, middle schoolers in Michigan experienced the highest disciplinary action rates at 12% and 26%, respectively. It is particularly notable that one-quarter of ever-homeless middle schoolers were either suspended or expelled in just one year. Middle school is a critical point of development for children that sets the stage for high school, as this is typically when puberty begins to have profound impacts on cognitive, social, and emotional capabilities.¹⁹ Identifying opportunities to connect students who are struggling to needed supports rather than punitive consequences can have lasting impacts on future educational success. In fact, a study performed in Midwestern school districts found sixth-grade psychological interventions reduced disciplinary incidents by 34% and can have long-term benefits on mental health and educational attainment.²⁰

Disciplinary Action by Housing Status and Grade Level

PERCENT OF STUDENTS SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED

All Michigan Schools | SY 2017-18 | Disciplinary action includes both suspensions and expulsions



Source: Michigan Department of Education unpublished data tabulated by Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan, School Year 2017-18

Note: Percentages represent children enrolled in any Michigan public or charter school in SY 2017-18. Always Housed are students who have never been identified as homeless between SY 2009-10 and SY 2017-18. Ever Homeless students are those who have been identified as homeless at any point between SY 2009-10 and SY 2017-18.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While Michigan is taking steps to shift toward restorative rather than punitive disciplinary actions, much of the policymaking is left to individual school districts.²¹ These data therefore add critical new information for local policymakers and educators thinking about how best to implement disciplinary practice changes in their schools. Homelessness is traumatic,²² but children are remarkably resilient. With appropriate supports, restorative justice practices, and improved understanding of the impact trauma can have on children, Michigan schools can bring down discipline rates and open new paths

of success that build on student potential for all children, regardless of their race or experience of economic and housing instability. To succeed, however, policymakers, school district leadership, and teachers must confront how widespread homelessness is in the state and its impact on children. An estimated 1 in 10 students in the state will experience homelessness by the time they graduate or leave school. For Black and Latino students, these rates are even higher, at 16% and 14%, respectively. This makes homelessness an educational issue that must be addressed directly by school policies — particularly school discipline policies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A child’s experience of homelessness should be added as an eighth factor that all schools must consider prior to the removal of any student from school.

Presently, schools are required to consider seven factors prior to any school removal, but the experience of homelessness is not yet one of those factors. Data show that both currently and formerly homeless students in Michigan face a significantly higher risk than their always-housed peers of being suspended or expelled. These disciplinary actions also have a greater potential to have far-reaching negative impacts on the lives of students who have experienced homelessness. Removals with no ongoing services or alternative placement can jeopardize parental employment and job searches, as well impact food access, mental health, and academic supports. Adding homelessness as an eighth factor of consideration would also serve to provide a structure through which McKinney-Vento liaisons could be involved prior to any removal from school. Liaisons may already know the family and, if not, they can assess barriers and needs, as well as connect students to internal school resources and cross-agency supports. The liaison may be able to assist in exploring alternatives to removal that address the trauma underlying a student’s behavior.

End the use of long-term suspensions and expulsions, as well as cumulative suspensions or removals exceeding 10 days, in elementary school (PK-fifth grade), except in extreme cases that fall under the state mandate. Research on child development and trauma suggest that in the vast majority of cases, harsh disciplinary practices for young children lead to more harm than good, often perpetuating the negative behavior and setting the stage for future disciplinary issues.²³ Ending the use of suspensions and expulsions for young children would encourage schools to identify developmentally appropriate alternatives that help students to more effectively process and manage strong emotions.

Raise awareness in schools about supports available from [Michigan’s Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Technical Assistance Center \(MiMTSS TA Center\)](#).²⁴ In order to address behavioral issues without the use of suspensions or expulsions, teachers and schools may need additional training and resources. MiMTSS TA Center can provide schools with technical assistance including training on Positive Behavioral Interventions

and Supports (PBIS), which integrates with social-emotional and mental health supports to reduce student suspension and expulsion and improve academic and behavioral outcomes for students.

Ensure schools and districts do not have attendance, homework, and credit-earning policies that create barriers to full school engagement for students experiencing homelessness. Challenges caused by homelessness may prevent students from being able to submit assignments when they are due or to meet policies that exist around attendance. Policies that result in suspensions may add to the disproportionate numbers identified in this report. Schools and districts should review and modify policies that create additional barriers to full school engagement for students experiencing homelessness. District policies around credit earning options could leverage the flexibility inherent in the Michigan Merit Curriculum legislation, including the use of personal curriculum,²⁵ to help teachers, schools, and districts meet homeless students’ needs. Improvements in these areas would not only help homeless students succeed but would also prevent classroom tensions and stress that may lead to behavioral issues.

Leverage American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) funding to train specific individuals for emergencies or high-conflict interactions to provide de-escalation in schools. Given the complexity of homeless-induced trauma, it is critical to have trained individuals onsite to help remedy dire situations. Chicago has introduced Social-Emotional Learning Specialists, who assist school staff in behavior management and social-emotional development, regularly check suspension data in schools, and follow up if data are concerning.²⁶ This would support and expand upon the state’s existing work on social emotional learning.

Expand programs and funding that increase mindfulness and mental health supports and infrastructure in schools, and ensure students who have experienced homelessness are able to participate in program activities. Ensuring that students who have experienced homelessness have access to mindfulness and other mental health supports is of particular importance because homelessness is linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety, both of which have been associated with an increased risk of disciplinary action.²⁷

Incorporate training on school discipline, trauma, and homelessness into the credentialing process for homeless liaisons and continuing education credentials for school administrators. Presently, a lack of awareness about homelessness and its mental health impacts is a barrier to ensuring students who have experienced homelessness are connected to appropriate supports. Providing training to both frontline liaisons and school administrators would promote the development of a positive school culture and climate that embraces mental health and social-emotional learning as a key part of education.

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