

LOCAL / Education

Black preschool kids get suspended much more frequently than white preschool kids, U.S. survey says



A student in Kalamazoo, Mich., boards a bus on the first day of school. A survey says gaps between suspension rates remain among preschool students of different racial groups. (Mark Bugnaski / Kalamazoo Gazette)

By **Joy Resmovits**

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Schools suspend [minority students](#) at much higher rates than their peers, starting from the beginning, preschool.

The Civil Rights Data Collection, a national survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, gathered information on more than 50 million students at more than 95,000 schools and found that although suspensions decreased by almost 20 percentage points between the 2011-2012 and 2013-2014 school years, gaps between the suspension rates of different groups remained, according to results released late Monday.

The survey included 1,439,188 preschool students in 28,783 schools. Of those, 6,743, or 0.47%, were suspended once or more than once. Although black girls represent 20% of preschool enrollment, 54% of preschool girls suspended once or more were black. And black preschool children overall were 3.6 times as likely to be suspended as white preschoolers.

The results don't "paint a very good picture," said Liz King, senior policy analyst and director of education policy at the Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights. She called parts of it "startling."

Across all grades, 2.8 million students were suspended once or more. Black students were nearly four times as likely to be suspended and almost twice as likely to be expelled as white students. Students with disabilities were also twice as likely to be suspended as general education students.

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The findings came amid a nationwide debate over school discipline and just what statistics like these mean.

School districts across the country have reexamined the way they chastise students for misbehaving, in part because of previous civil rights survey results.

In 2013, the Los Angeles Unified School District [banned suspensions](#) for "willful defiance." As a result, the district's suspension rate dropped to 0.55% last school year from 8% in 2007-2008. Instead, teachers were supposed to use "restorative justice," tactics that include conflict resolution, to keep their classrooms orderly. But teachers [have said](#) that they haven't been trained in these techniques sufficiently.

Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, a new law, states are required to review school disciplinary statistics to reduce an "overuse of suspension."

The disparities invite further investigation, said Catherine Lhamon, the assistant secretary of Education responsible of the Office for Civil Rights. "Data by itself is not a reason to think there's intentional discrimination, but they are a reason to ask further questions," she said.

So why are there major disparities in school discipline?

Jason Okonofua, a social psychologist at [Stanford University](#), began trying to answer this question in his research after reflecting on his own experiences. As a kid growing up in Memphis, Tenn., he attended seven public schools and noticed that in some schools, teachers were more rigid; in others, they were more supportive. After 10th grade, though, came a bigger difference: He won a scholarship to an East Coast prep school, where he was one of just several black kids, in contrast to the majority-black schools he attended in Memphis.

At the prep school, he said, teachers treated students like adults. “Seeing how different school atmospheres can bring about different outcomes got me interested in this particular topic,” he said.

Okonofua found in his studies that the disparities stem from problems in the relationships between teachers and students. Minority students, he found, expect to be the victim of bias — which leads them to be less cooperative. On the other hand, he said, if a teacher feels disrespected and believes the student is a troublemaker, the student will get punished more severely, causing the cycle to continue.

Okonofua had 190 teachers review information about a student misbehaving. He presented a scenario in which a student interrupted class by walking around, but some teachers read about a boy named Jake — a white name — and others read about Darnell, a black name. After that first infraction, they opted to discipline either boy almost the same way. But when presented with an additional scenario — this time, Jake/Darnell fell asleep in class — some teachers punished Darnell more harshly.

The federal survey also tracked access to high-level courses and found that half of high schools didn’t offer calculus and that more than one quarter didn’t offer chemistry. Although 56% of schools with low minority populations offered calculus, one third of those with high black and Latino populations did.

“Right now we’re talking a good game about college and career readiness, but not all students attend schools that offer courses that are necessary for college readiness,” said Daria Hall, interim vice president for government affairs and communications at the Education Trust, a Washington-based advocacy group. “You look across all of this information and it becomes very clear why we have gaps in achievement.”

And there are also gaps in the people in front of high-needs classrooms. About 10% of teachers in minority schools were first-year educators, compared with 5% of those in schools with lower populations of black and Latino students.

The preview of the data provided to reporters included percentages and proportions of students who were disciplined across the country. A more comprehensive set of results that include state, district and school-level information will go online Tuesday morning, officials said.

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