



Unfair Punishment at School Can Push America's Minority Students into Troubled Lives

Michael Rocque, Bates College

Failure at school can lead to crime and sanctions from the criminal justice system, including imprisonment. When students falter in their studies, they may drop out of school and find themselves on life paths that lead to prison, though it is unclear whether dropping out by itself leads to crime.

But dropping out is not the only issue. Research shows that children and teenagers who are disciplined at school – pulled out of classrooms and even suspended from school altogether – are unusually likely to end up on unfortunate life paths. That might seem unsurprising. However, African American students are more likely to be disciplined than other students – and the best evidence suggests that school punishments are not always fair. Many minority young people may be inappropriately disciplined in ways that disengage them from school and push them toward troubled lives.

Who Gets Punished in Schools?

Harsh disciplinary practices, including suspension from school, happen surprisingly often in the United States. Two or three of every ten students has been sent out of class to the school office. In the 2009-10 school year, there were over 400,000 serious disciplinary events in public schools, nearly three-quarters of which were suspensions.

Minority students, especially African Americans, are disciplined more frequently than white children. Studies of school discipline across the years in many places usually find that African Americans are disciplined three times more often than whites. Black children are only 18% of the school population, but a recent report by the U.S. Department of Education found that they experienced 35% of suspensions and 39% of outright expulsions from schools.

Why are black school children disciplined more often? Are African-American students, especially boys, simply more rowdy, more likely to get into fights, and less attentive to teachers? While this may be the case, school punishments for African American students often seem to be excessive:

- *Social factors such as class and intelligence predict anti-social behaviors of many kinds – but those factors do not account for racial disparities in school punishments.*
- *African-American children do not engage in more serious forms of misbehavior.* In fact, research by Russell Skiba and his colleagues shows that African-American boys are referred to the school office more often than children from other groups for minor acts such as littering or making too much noise.

- *Inappropriate behavior does not bring the same punishments for children of different racial backgrounds.* In collaboration with Raymond Paternoster, I have been fortunate to work with data that helps me see whether children who “act out more” according to independent ratings are more likely to be referred to the office. What we have found is clear and troubling. Racial disparities persist in school discipline even when we take into account how children’s behavior is rated along with school and teacher factors.

In sum, minority students are disciplined more often than their behavior would lead us to expect – and this happens even to very young children in elementary school. Although scholars do not fully understand why, unjustified racial gaps in school discipline have persisted.

Why Unfair Discipline Matters

The more engaged and active students are in school, the better they do overall. And the better children do in school, the less likely they are to find themselves in trouble with the law later in life. School punishments (particularly unfair ones) can push lives in the opposite direction.

- If minority students are, for example, unfairly suspended or expelled from school, they will likely perform worse at schoolwork – which, in turn, puts many on the path to dropping out, delinquency, run-ins with the police, and even imprisonment.
- Discipline that seems arbitrary and not equitable can cause students to lose respect for schools and their rules. When children feel alienated as early as elementary school, they can turn away from learning and set off toward lives of failure and difficulty.

What Can be Done?

There is no magic wand, but solid evidence suggests several steps that schools can take.

- *Eliminate “zero-tolerance” rules that require automatic suspensions.* Such policies were put in place after crises like school shootings – requiring suspension, for example, if any weapon is found in a child’s backpack, no matter how it got there. These rules do not make schools safer and can trap some children unfairly, especially minorities.
- *Train teachers to avoid misunderstandings.* Researchers believe that inappropriate punishments sometimes happen when white teachers misunderstand what minority children are saying or mistakenly see threats in culturally different styles of play.
- *Help students build skills to handle conflicts.* An ounce of prevention can substitute for a pound of punishment. Schools can help youngsters learn problem-solving skills to reduce the conflicts that trigger harsh punishments.

Most importantly, we need to fully recognize the unfortunate consequences of inequitable school punishments. Racial conflicts – and gaps in life prospects for adolescents and young adults of different races – may be partly rooted in harsh and arbitrary school discipline. A society that aspires to equal opportunity for all cannot ignore this issue.

Read more in Michael Rocque, "Disproportionate Minority Discipline: Does Race Matter?," *American Journal of Education* 116, no. 4 (2010): 557-581, and Michael Rocque and Raymond Paternoster, "Understanding the Antecedents of the 'School-to-Jail-Link': The Relationship between Race and School Discipline," *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 101, no. 2 (2011): 633-666.