



## Reducing Racial Disparities in School Discipline Requires More than Eliminating "Zero Tolerance" Policies

**F. Chris Curran**, University of Florida

Schools have a responsibility to maintain safe learning environments while also providing equitable opportunities for all students to learn. "Zero tolerance" discipline policies mandating definite, severe responses to disciplinary infractions gained popularity in the 1990s as a way to ensure school safety. But in recent years these draconian policies have come under increasing criticism in part because they contribute to racially disparate rates in suspensions and expulsions from school. Although systematic evidence is limited, some research supports the claim that zero tolerance rules do more harm than good and may be racially inequitable. A number of researchers and policymakers now call for these policies to be eliminated. Here I make the case that, in order to further racial equality, reforms must not only relax zero tolerance policies but also address the broader school disciplinary context.

### Zero Tolerance and Racial Inequities

Recent studies by a variety of researchers have documented the racial impact of zero tolerance policies:

- According to the Zero Tolerance Task Force of the American Psychological Association, heavy reliance by schools on suspensions and expulsions predicts a number of negative academic outcomes – including decreased academic achievement and dropout.
- Students of color, particularly black students, are subjected to exclusionary discipline at rates two to three times higher than white students, and a number of researchers have demonstrated that this racial gap cannot be explained by differences in behavior between black and white students.
- Zero tolerance policies may contribute to racial disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline. Recent work demonstrates that zero tolerance policies tend to result in black students being suspended disproportionately.

### Other Factors that Matter

Although considerable evidence supports the claim that zero tolerance policies are a source of racial disparities in education, simply eliminating these rules is unlikely to make school outcomes significantly more equitable. Emerging evidence reveals other important factors that shape discipline in schools:

- "Zero tolerance" is a popular colloquial expression for punitive school discipline, but my work shows that less than 15% of school districts codify any rules called "zero tolerance" in their student handbooks or policy documents. Similarly, few states have explicit "zero tolerance" laws.

- Tough rules that do exist tend to not be explicitly called “zero tolerance” and usually focus on severe infractions such as weapons, assaults, or drugs. Many are due to the federal Gun-Free Schools Act, which requires expulsion for students who bring firearms to school.
- Racial expulsion gaps are actually larger for infractions not falling under “zero tolerance” policies than for those covered by them. Using nationally representative data from the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, I demonstrate that, even though racial disparities exist for all kinds of expulsions, the black-white gap is larger for offenses not specified under zero tolerance policies.

In short, a problem exists, but the solution requires more than simply implementing current calls to eliminate “zero tolerance” rules. After all, many districts do not explicitly codify such policies and, racial disparities are greater for infractions not covered by zero tolerance policies.

### What Can Schools and Policymakers Do?

School leaders and policymakers can pursue several avenues to improve equity in student discipline.

- *Consider all rules and practices.* Rather than doing piece-meal reforms, schools should evaluate all rules and build a coherent system of discipline that furthers equitable student outcomes.
- *Modify rules and practices governing smaller infractions.* Because the pathway to suspension or expulsion begins with minor infractions in classrooms, teachers can be trained to deal effectively and equitably with minor infractions before they escalate.
- *Train teachers and school leaders to recognize and mitigate implicit bias.* Regardless of rules, subtly biased expectations and responses by school personnel can further disparities in discipline. Staff members can be trained to recognize and consciously resist such biases.
- *Support alternative disciplinary approaches.* Student behavior can be improved by reinforcements for positive behavior and by restorative approaches such as peer mentoring and tiered intervention systems. The successful implementation of such approaches requires districts to fund training and allow teachers and counselors time to learn new techniques.

The bottom line is straightforward: We know, by now, that black students and other students of color experience systematic inequities in school discipline. Many facets of school discipline, not just zero tolerance policies, contribute to these disparities. Effectively addressing racial disparities in school discipline, therefore, requires broader efforts to reform all of the interrelated rules and practices teachers, counselors, and school administrators use to keep students focused on their studies and away from disruptive behaviors. In addition, teachers and educators need to understand how implicit biases can twist the application of even the best rules in racially unfair ways. Clearly, America’s overall approach to discipline in schools needs a fresh look.

**Read more in F. Chris Curran, “Racial Disproportionalities in Discipline: The Role of Zero Tolerance Policies” in *Critical Examinations of School Violence and Disturbance in K-12 Education*, edited by Gordon A. Crews,(IGI Global, 2016).**