

It may seem absurd, but each year thousands of preschool children are suspended from school. Kids as young as four years old are sent home for so-called misbehavior, such as kissing another student or wearing the wrong shoes. What's even more alarming than a child that young being suspended for such minor things? Nearly half of all children suspended are black.

A recently released [report](#) from the Civil Rights Data Collection of the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights examined all 97,000 public schools across America and found that more than 8,000 public preschoolers were suspended at least once in the 2011–12 school year. According to the report, although black students represent 18 percent of preschool enrollment, they represent 42 percent of students suspended once and 48 percent of students suspended more than once.

The report is the first time the Department of Education has collected data on preschool discipline. Although black parents don't need an official study to know that these stats are true, the numbers have been eye-opening. "To see that young African American students—or babies, as I call them—are being suspended from pre-K programs at such horrendous rates is deeply troubling," Leticia Smith-Evans, interim director of education practice at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, [said in a statement](#).

Even more problematic? Suspensions often lead to the "school-to-prison pipeline," a national trend the ACLU has called disturbing. The organization also notes that the pipeline allows students to be "funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems."

"This critical report shows that racial disparities in school discipline policies are not only well documented among older students but actually begin during preschool," U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder said at a recent event in Washington, D.C. "Every data point represents a life impacted and a future potentially diverted or derailed," said Holder. "This administration is moving aggressively to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline in order to ensure that all of our young people have equal educational opportunities."

Not only is the targeting of black children wrong, but the Department of Education's urgency is surely linked to the reality that suspended students are less likely to graduate "[on time and more likely to be suspended again](#)." However, they are at greater risk of repeating a grade, dropping out, and becoming involved in the juvenile justice system.

While the report doesn't offer concrete reasons why black students are singled out and suspended, [previous studies](#) show that teacher bias accounts for some of the disparity. Children who live in high poverty also show [aggressive or impulsive behavior](#) that lands them suspensions.

[Zero-tolerance](#) policies also play a key role in all suspensions.

Those zero-tolerance rules began in 1994 after Congress required states to adopt laws that guaranteed one-year expulsions for students who brought firearms to school. For states to receive federal funding, districts had to adopt these laws. All 50 states did so. Over the years, schools have altered their policies to include zero tolerance for an array of infractions, including minor ones such as violating dress code. The result? The outrageous pre-K suspension rates we currently have.

Susan M. Glisson, executive director of William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Miss., calls these pre-K suspension rates "a sad commentary that even childhood doesn't protect one from inequities." But, says Glisson, "empowered parents and engaged civic stakeholders can arm themselves, beginning by talking about race to children."

Schools have a role to play too. The Departments of Education and Justice recently released guidelines to school districts on zero-tolerance policies and discipline tactics. The guidelines are included in a [resource package](#) for educators that consists of four components: a "Dear Colleague" letter on civil rights and discipline; a 37-page guiding principles document that includes ways to improve school climate and discipline; a directory of federal school climate and discipline resources; and the Compendium of School Discipline Laws and Regulations that compares laws across states.

Fortunately some states, such as Arkansas, Connecticut, and Colorado, haven't waited for Washington to dictate new rules.

In 2012, Colorado passed a law that limited the use of zero-tolerance discipline policies and emphasized restorative practices. The Colorado School Discipline Report Card, an analysis by the [Advancement Project](#) and [Padres and Jovenes Unidos](#) in Colorado, showed the impact of the new law and cited that suspension and expulsion rates decreased, as did law enforcement referrals.

For all the progress, the Colorado report states that disparities still persisted in discipline rates for minorities.

“Nevertheless, it is unacceptable that, in some cases, the gains being made are not benefitting students of color, who have been most affected by harsh and inequitable disciplinary measures in the past,” the authors of the Colorado study said. “Going forward, there is an urgent need to place particular emphasis on improvements with regard to students of color, particularly with regard to the most severe disciplinary consequences, such as referrals to law enforcement.”

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