



WHAT IS THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE?

A recent video of a rough takedown and arrest, in which a police officer (referred to in schools as “School Resource Officer”) in a South Carolina school flips over a high school student and her desk, has brought the “School-to-Prison Pipeline” topic into the headlines. The School-to-Prison Pipeline refers to the school policies and procedures that drive many of our nation’s schoolchildren into a pathway that begins in school and ends in the criminal justice system.

Behavior that once led to a trip to the principal’s office and detention, such as school uniform violations, profanity and “talking back,” now often leads to suspension, expulsion, and/or arrest. Today, largely as a result of “zero tolerance” policies that mandate harsh punishments for even minor misbehavior in schools, 3.3 million children are suspended or expelled from school each year, approximately double the rate of the 1970s. Further, harsh school discipline policies disproportionately impact students of color, students with disabilities and students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/questioning (LGBTQ). [Data](#) from the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights shows that black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than their white peers. Similarly, students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive out-of-school suspensions as students with no disabilities and LGBTQ youth are much more likely than their peers to be suspended or expelled.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to understand more about the School-to-Prison Pipeline, learn about its history and evolution and begin to plan some activities to teach others about it and take action.

See these additional ADL resources: *Current Events Classroom* “[60 Years Later: The Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education](#),” [Fulfilling the Promise of Brown: School Discipline, Education Equity and the Achievement Gap Webinar](#), and [ADL, Deeply Concerned By Video of Officer Throwing Student in South Carolina Classroom, Calls for Reform](#).

Grade Level: grades 9–12

Time: 45–60 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Speaking and Listening, Language

Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand what is meant by the term, “School-to-Prison Pipeline.”
- Students will reflect on the history of school discipline policies and the evolution of the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

- Students will identify strategies in order to teach others and take action about the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

Compelling Question: How did the School-to-Prison Pipeline come to be and what can we do about it?

Material:

- [Cartoon](#) (one for each student or projected for entire class viewing)
- [Police Officer Grabs High School Student](#) video (10 sec., *The New York Times* TimesVideo, www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004001301/police-officer-grabs-high-school-student.html)
- [School-to-Prison Pipeline Infographic](#) (one for each student)
- [The school-to-prison pipeline, explained](#) (one for each student)

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's "[Glossary of Education Terms](#).")

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|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| • discretionary | • incarcerated | • School Resource Officer* |
| • disorderly | • insubordination | • suspended |
| • disproportionate | • misdemeanor | • unconscious bias |
| • documentable | • policy | • “willful defiance” |
| • expelled | • punitive | • zero tolerance |

**This term varies depending on the city, state and/or region of the country.*

INFORMATION SHARING

1. Either project a copy of the [Cartoon](#) on the board/smart board or distribute a copy to each student. Ask students: *What is happening in the cartoon? What do you think it means?* If you had to give it a title, what would the title be?
2. Ask students: *What is the School-to-Prison Pipeline? Have you ever heard the phrase? What do you think it means?* Record their responses on the board/smart board, encouraging them to use the different words in the phrase to try to come up with its meaning.
3. Depending on what they say, define the School-to-Prison Pipeline as follows, projecting this on the board/smart board:

The School-to-Prison Pipeline is a set of policies and procedures that drive our nation’s schoolchildren into a pathway that begins in school and ends in the criminal justice system. Zero tolerance and other harsh discipline policies that often impose suspensions, expulsions, and arrests increase the likelihood that students will drop out of school. Students who drop out of school, in turn, are much more likely to go to jail or prison later in life. Studies show that students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students are more likely to be suspended, expelled or arrested in school than their peers, even though evidence shows that there is no difference in students’ behavior to explain the different treatment.

Ask students: *How does the cartoon illustrate the School-to-Prison Pipeline?*

4. Explain to students that they will learn more about the School-to-Prison Pipeline during the lesson. Summarize and share the following background information:
- Behavior that once led to a trip to the principal's office and a detention, such as school uniform violations, profanity and "talking back," now often leads to suspension, expulsion and/or arrest. Largely as a result of "zero tolerance" policies that mandate harsh punishments for even minor misbehavior in schools, 3.3 million children are suspended or expelled from school each year, approximately double the rate of the 1970s. In addition, schools have increasingly become dependent on school-based police officers, commonly known as School Resource Officers (SROs), to act as disciplinarians. In 2009, approximately 68% of students reported the presence of security guards and/or police officers in school, whereas in 1975 only 1% of principals reported police presence in their schools. Studies suggest that "increased use of police officers facilitates the formal processing of minor offenses and harsh response to minor disciplinary situations."
 - Harsh school discipline policies disproportionately impact students of color, students with disabilities, and students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/questioning (LGBTQ). Data from the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights shows that black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than their white peers and black girls are six times as likely to be suspended as white girls, even though studies have shown no differences in behavior to justify the disparate treatment. Similarly, students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive out-of-school suspensions as students with no disabilities and LGBTQ youth are much more likely than their heterosexual peers to be suspended or expelled. Studies have found little difference in students' behavior across racial lines to account for the disproportionality; African-American students tend to receive harsher punishment for less serious behavior, and are more often punished for subjective offenses, such as "loitering" or "disrespect."
 - Black and Latino students are more than twice as likely to drop out of school as their white peers. Although there are many factors that contribute to this troubling inequity, school suspensions and expulsions are among the best indicators for which students will drop out of school. A student who has been suspended from school is more than three times as likely to drop out in the first two years of high school than a student who has never been suspended. Students who drop out of school have more difficulty finding gainful employment, have much lower earning power when they are employed, and ultimately are more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system.
 - In January 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education jointly issued landmark guidance for schools "to assist public elementary and secondary schools in meeting their obligations under Federal law to administer student discipline without discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin." The guidance urges schools to implement training programs for all school personnel that includes alternatives to "zero tolerance" and harsh discipline policies. The guidance also urges schools to conduct trainings that enhance staff awareness of "their implicit or unconscious biases and the harms associated with using or failing to counter racial and ethnic stereotypes." Furthermore, it outlines specific ideas for how schools should approach the relationship with school resource officers.

DATA REVIEW AND DISCUSSION: INFOGRAPHIC

1. Distribute a copy of the [School-to-Prison Pipeline Infographic](#) to each student and/or if you are able, project it on the board/smart board. As you give an overview of the infographic, have students follow along by looking at the picture graphs/data. Explain that the first picture illustrates how many black, white and other students attend pre-school compared with how many black, white and other pre-

school children have had more than one out-of-school suspension. Ask if there are any clarifying questions.

2. Ask students: *How would you describe the statistics you see in the picture?* Then move to the next graph/picture in the infographic explaining the data, answering any clarifying questions and asking students to explain the numbers.
3. After students read and digest all of the data, engage them in a discussion by asking:
 - How do you feel about the statistics on this infographic?
 - How do you account for the disparities between different races of students?
 - Why do you think this is happening?
 - Does this information resonate with what you see in our school?

VIDEO ACTIVITY

1. Show the video [Police Officer Grabs High School Student](#). Ask if students have seen it before (some may have).
2. After watching the video, have students turn and talk with a person sitting next to them, sharing their initial reactions to the video (one minute each).
3. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What happened?
 - How did you feel while watching the video?
 - Have you ever seen anything like this actually happen?
 - What do you think should happen next?
 - What does this have to do with the School-to-Prison Pipeline?

If students don't know, you can explain that this incident recently took place at Spring Valley High School in South Carolina. A School Resource Officer was called in after a sixteen year-old student was reportedly caught using her cell phone during class and refused to put it away when asked by the teacher and refused to leave class after a school administrator asked her to leave. The police officer in the video, Ben Fields, has since been fired and the United States Justice Department and the FBI have opened a civil rights investigation into the case.

HERE I STAND: SCHOOL DISCIPLINE PRACTICES (OPTIONAL)

1. Explain to students that they will listen to some statements about this issue and decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. Instruct students to indicate their opinion about each statement by positioning themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement.
2. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line with the farthest right point representing a STRONGLY AGREE response and the farthest left point a STRONGLY DISAGREE response. In between, place AGREE, IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE, AND DISAGREE along the continuum. Create signs with these words and hang them up on the wall.

3. Read each statement below, requesting students to take a few minutes to decide where they stand in the continuum and have them walk silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand. Following each statement, after everyone has chosen their spot, have students spend 2–3 minutes talking amongst themselves about why they are standing where they are.
 - Teenagers talk back to teachers more than they should.
 - Sometimes students are disciplined too harshly and they don't deserve the punishment they get.
 - Having police officers in school makes me feel safe.
 - Students get disciplined, suspended or expelled in different ways depending on their race.
 - Students who act out in class should be talked to by a teacher or school staff, not a police officer.
4. After the activity, lead a whole group discussion using the following questions:
 - Were some statements easier to decide where to stand and some more difficult? How so?
 - How did it feel when most people had the same response as you? How about when most people were standing somewhere else?
 - Did you ever decide to change your position when you saw you did not agree with a majority of the group, or after hearing others' points of view?
 - What did you learn by doing this that made you either change your point of view or made you feel more strongly about your position?

READING ACTIVITY

1. Distribute a copy of article "[The school-to-prison pipeline, explained](#)" to each student. Give students 10–15 minutes to silently read the article. You may also choose to assign the article as homework reading the night before the lesson.

ALTERNATIVE: If you are short on time, you can divide the article into six sections (based on the six sections of the article) and have a small group of students read each of the six sections. After reading their section, one student from each group can share with the class the basic information.

2. After students have read the article, engage them in a discussion by asking:
 - What did you learn you didn't know before?
 - What surprised you the most? What didn't surprise you at all?
 - How did the School-to-Prison Pipeline come about?
 - Why do you think it's called a "pipeline?"
 - What's an example of something that happens in your school (or others you've heard about) that reflects the School-to-Prison Pipeline?
 - How would you describe (in your own words) the School-to-Prison Pipeline?

ACTION PLAN: DO SOMETHING

1. Ask students: *What can you do to teach/educate others about this topic and/or take action?* With the students, brainstorm and record their ideas on the board/smart board, including the ones below if they are not already suggested:
 - Read the school’s student handbook to learn more about the discipline policy and critically analyze how it does or does not contribute to the School-to-Prison Pipeline.
 - Write a letter to the school or community newspaper about your position on the School-to-Prison Pipeline.
 - Make an infographic on some of the facts you learned about the School-to-Prison Pipeline and share with others.
 - Interview your friends and classmates and make a video of their responses to questions you pose about the School-to-Prison Pipeline.
 - Create a survey about the School-to-Prison Pipeline for students, parents and school staff. Compile and distribute the results.
 - Organize a forum on the School-to-Prison Pipeline to take place in school or the community.
 - Research your state’s school disciplinary rates and analyze them for disproportionality for students of color, disabled students and LGBTQ students.
 - Research your state’s laws on school discipline. Write an essay or create a chart that responds to the following questions: Are there any laws that criminalize behavior in school? Are there laws about when schools must, can or cannot suspend or expel students? Are there any state laws that dictate what kind of school discipline policies each school must create? If so, what are they?
 - Use social media channels to share information with others, share your point of view and encourage activism.
2. Either have students select one of these ideas to work on as a class (dividing up the tasks accordingly) or select 4–5 of the ideas and have students work in small groups on each of the ideas. To bring the projects to fruition, it may take several class periods or weeks to complete.

CLOSING: 3-2-1

On a piece of paper, have students write three things they found out, two interesting things and one question they still have related to the lesson. As time permits, have students share with the class.

ADDITIONAL READING

- [Civil Rights Data Collection: School Discipline](#) (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, March 2014)
- [“Good guys’ with guns: how police officers became fixtures in US schools”](#) (Guardian, October 28, 2015)
- [Reclaiming the Promise of Racial Equity: In Education, Economics and Our Criminal Justice System](#) (AFT, October 9, 2015)
- [“Rough Student Arrest Puts Spotlight on School Police”](#) (*The New York Times*, October 28, 2015)
- [School-to-Prison Pipeline](#) (ACLU)

- [“Stop the School-to-Prison Pipeline”](#) (*Rethinking Schools*, Winter, 2011-12)
- [The Changing Role Of Police In American Classrooms](#) (NPR, October 31, 2015)
- [“Where Are Black Children Safe?”](#) (*The New York Times*, October 29, 2015)
- [“Will School Discipline Reform Actually Change Anything?”](#) (*The Atlantic*, September 14, 2015)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on other’s ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally.
Language
Standard 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaning word parts and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
Standard 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CARTOON



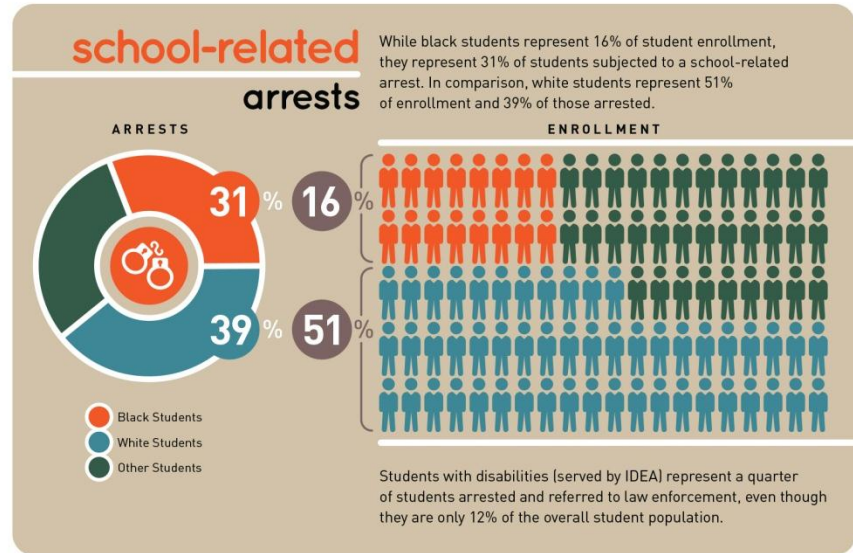
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BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION 60 YEARS LATER
1954-2014



SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPE LINE

three times the suspensions and expulsions **3x** Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than their white peers.



more than 25% out-of-school suspension

More than 25% of boys of color with disabilities receive an out-of-school suspension.

THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE, EXPLAINED

Police officers in classrooms are just the tip of the iceberg

By [Libby Nelson](#) and [Dara Lind](#) on October 27, 2015

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A police officer handcuffs a small child during a demonstration. Lyn Alweis/Denver Post via Getty
When a student at Spring Valley High School, South Carolina captured a cellphone video of a police officer flipping over a student and her desk, then throwing the student across the room, the video quickly got national attention: people were alarmed that a police officer in a school would do that to a teenager who didn't pose a threat.

But to others, it was less surprising that a police officer would behave so aggressively in a school: because school discipline and the criminal justice system have already been intertwined, in a phenomenon civil-rights advocates call the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Especially for older students, trouble at school can lead to their first contact with the criminal justice system. And in many cases, schools themselves are the ones pushing students into the juvenile justice system—often by having students arrested at school by School Resource Officers like the one in Spring Valley.

[Related [What happened at Spring Valley High School, explained](#)]

Juvenile crime rates are plummeting, and the [juvenile incarceration rate](#) dropped 41 percent between 1995 and 2010. But school discipline policies are moving in the opposite direction: out-of-school suspensions have increased about 10 percent since 2000. They have more than doubled since the 1970s. And it's hardly racially balanced: Black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students, [according to the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights](#), and research in Texas found students who have been suspended are more likely to be held back a grade and drop out of school entirely.

Here's how the current state of school discipline developed and why some districts and federal officials are working to change the status quo.

1) Concerns about crime led schools to adopt 'zero tolerance' policies

In the 1970s, keeping students out of school as a punishment was relatively rare: fewer than 4 percent of students were suspended in 1973, according to an [analysis of Education Department data by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#). But growing concern about crime and violence in schools led states and districts to adopt policies that required students to be suspended.

The Gun-Free Schools Act, passed in 1994, mandated a yearlong out-of-school suspension for any student caught bringing a weapon to school. And as states began adopting these zero-tolerance policies, the number of suspensions and expulsions increased. The suspension rate for all students has nearly doubled since the 1970s, and has increased even more for black and Hispanic students.

Zero-tolerance policies have been widely criticized when schools have interpreted “weapon” very broadly, expelling students for [making guns with their fingers](#) or chewing a Pop-Tart into a gun shape or [bringing a camping fork for Cub Scouts to class](#).

But they're not the only reason schools suspended students more frequently. At the same time as zero-tolerance policies for violence were growing, school districts adopted their own version of the broken windows theory of policing. The broken windows theory emphasizes the importance of cracking down on small offenses in order to make residents feel safer and discourage more serious crimes; in schools, it translated into more suspensions for offenses that previously hadn't warranted them—talking back to teachers, skipping class, or being otherwise disobedient or disruptive.

At the same time, administrators started relying more heavily on actual police—in the form of School Resource Officers (SROs) stationed in schools. From 1997 to 2007, the number of SROs [increased by nearly a third](#). Ostensibly, they were there to prevent mass school shootings like the one at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1998—in other words, to protect students, not to police them.

But as often happens with law enforcement, resources that are supposed to be used for a rare occurrence often get used for more common occurrences simply because they're there. About [92,000 students](#) were arrested in school during the 2011-2012 school year, according to US Department of Education statistics. And most of those are low-level violations: 74 percent of arrests in New York City public schools in 2012, according to [a report published by the state courts](#), were for misdemeanors or civil violations.

2) Schools have outsourced discipline to juvenile courts and officers in schools

Officer Joe Plazio, of the Fairfax County Police Department, stays armed with his service pistol as he patrols the hallways where he is stationed at West Springfield High School on Friday, January 18, 2012, in Springfield, VA.

When a school allows a School Resource Officer to arrest a student—or, less drastically and more commonly, refers a student to law enforcement or juvenile court as a form of discipline — they're turning that student over to the juvenile justice system. That makes it that much easier for a student to get a juvenile record (so even if punishment for a first offense is light, punishment for a second offense is likely to be much harsher).

This happens way more at schools with officers. A report by the Justice Policy Institute found that, even controlling for a school district's poverty level, schools with officers had five times as many arrests for "disorderly conduct" as schools without them.

This isn't something that the juvenile court system is calling for—quite the opposite. The chief judge of the juvenile court in Clayton County, Georgia has become an outspoken opponent of police in schools and the school-to-prison pipeline after placing cops on school grounds resulted in eleven times as many students getting sent to juvenile court. He told Congress at a [2012 hearing](#) that “the prosecutor’s attention was taken from the more difficult evidentiary and ‘scary’ cases—burglary, robberies, car thefts, aggravated assaults with weapons—to prosecuting kids that are not ‘scary,’ but made an adult mad.”

The Department of Education only started collecting detailed data on arrests and referrals for the last two iterations of its Office for Civil Rights report. So it's hard to be confident about trends. But there's some evidence that arrests and referrals are on the decline; referrals to law enforcement of students without disabilities, for example, went down about 9 percent between [2009-10](#) and [2011-12](#).

3) Black students are more likely to be disciplined

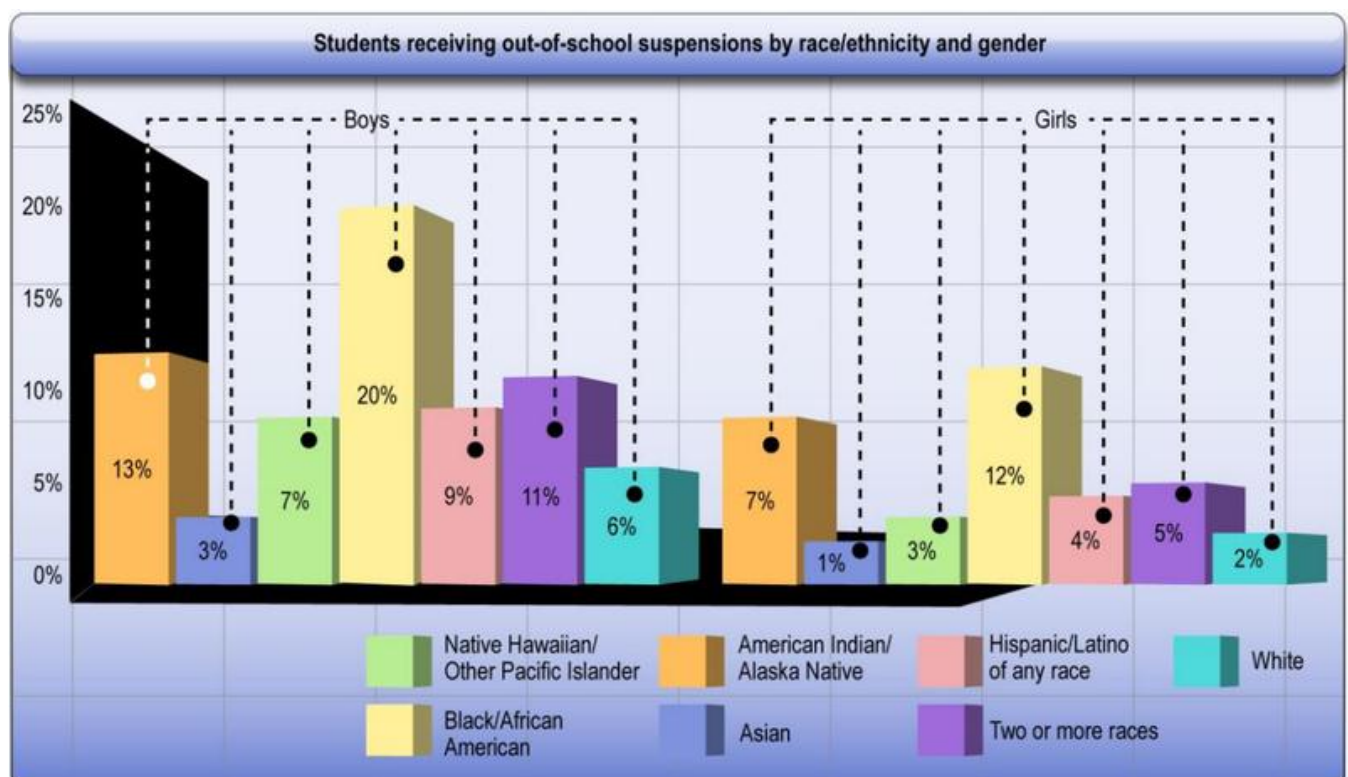
Black students are suspended or expelled three times more frequently than white students. And while black children made up 16 percent of all enrolled children in 2011-12, according to federal data, they accounted for 31 percent of all in-school arrests.

The disparity begins in preschool: [48 percent of preschool children](#) suspended more than once are black. And students with disabilities are also suspended more frequently than students without disabilities. This, too, can have a racial component. One [2014 study by a Columbia University researcher](#) found that five-year-old boys whose fathers had been incarcerated were substantially less behaviorally “ready” for school than five-year-olds whose fathers hadn’t been incarcerated—making them more likely to be placed in special-education classes for their behavioral disabilities.

Several studies have looked at the relationship between race, behavior, and suspension, and none have them have proven that black students misbehave at higher rates. A [study in 2002](#) found that white students were more likely to be disciplined for provable, documentable offenses—smoking, vandalism, and obscene language—while black students were more likely to be disciplined for more subjective reasons, such as disrespect.

Schools with more black students tend to have higher rates of suspension, researchers have found. There’s a [2010 study by researchers at Villanova University](#) that showed the punitiveness of a school’s discipline policy was positively correlated with the percentage of its students that were black. It wasn’t correlated with students’ rates of juvenile delinquency or drug use.

A landmark study of Texas discipline policies found that 97 percent of school suspensions were the choice of school administrators. Only 3 percent of students had broken rules that made suspension a required punishment, such as carrying a weapon to school. And those discretionary suspensions fell particularly hard on black students: they were [31 percent more likely to receive a discretionary suspension](#), even after controlling for 83 other variables.



(Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011-12)

Many discretionary suspensions and arrests are for tough-to-define offenses, like “insubordination” or “willful defiance,” which can just mean a student has challenged the authority of a teacher or school administrator. In California, for example, 40 percent of all suspensions during the 2010-11 school year were for “willful defiance”—which a US [Department of Education official defined in 2012](#) as “any behavior that disrupts a classroom.” “Insubordination” was the [most common cause of suspension](#) in New York City public schools in 2013-14.

Unsurprisingly, there’s a racial disparity in suspensions for nebulous offenses like these: in 2006-2007 (the last year data appears to be readily available) in New York City, [51 percent of students suspended for “profanity” were black](#), and 57 percent of students suspended for “insubordination.” Even arrests by SROs are often for vague reasons: in New York in 2012, one of every six arrests in schools was for “resisting arrest” or “obstructing governmental administration” after the student had been in a conflict with an officer.

4) Even when schools aren't deliberately sending children into the juvenile justice system, disciplining them makes it more likely they'll end up there

Students who are suspended are more likely to repeat a grade or drop out than students who were not. The Texas study, considered the most thorough analysis of school discipline policies and their effects, looked at data from every seventh-grader in the state in 2000, 2001, and 2002, then tracked their academic and disciplinary records for six years. They found that 31 percent of students who were suspended or expelled repeated a grade, compared with only 5 percent of students who weren’t.

It’s hard to prove causation; it’s possible that students who misbehave would have ended up in academic trouble no matter how they were punished. But the Texas study found that students who had been suspended or expelled were twice as likely to drop out compared to students with similar characteristics at similar schools who had not been suspended.

Students who are disciplined by schools are also more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system. The [Texas study](#) found that, of students disciplined in middle or high school, 23 percent of them ended up in contact with a juvenile probation officer. That figure stands at 2 percent among those not disciplined. And students who have been suspended or expelled are three times more likely to come into contact with the juvenile probation system the following year than one who wasn’t.

It’s hard to prove that suspensions cause delinquency in the same way they cause poor educational outcomes. But researchers argue that just as out-of-school suspensions or expulsions don’t do anything to improve a student’s academic standing, they don’t do anything to monitor his behavior or improve his safety, either.

5) The Education Department is pushing schools to change their discipline policies

The Obama administration has opened [investigations into the civil rights implications of schools' discipline policies](#), and [urged schools to restructure their discipline systems](#) so that expulsion and suspension are a last resort.

But this effort, by the Education Department and the Department of Justice, has been controversial because the guidance is based on “disparate impact.” Even if a policy doesn’t mention race and is applied equally to students of all races, the federal government says schools shouldn’t use it if the consequences fall disproportionately on students of a particular race. For example, if a school had a policy that all students who were caught using cell phones in class got an out-of-school suspension, and that school ended up suspending a disproportionate number of Latino students as a result of the policy, the federal government

would urge the school to figure out if there was another way to achieve the same goal (a cell phone-free classroom) without removing students from the classroom.

Some conservatives argue that schools will become disorderly if teachers and administrators feel that they aren't able to remove disruptive students from the classroom.

6) Some school districts are taking the matter into their own hands

Even before the Obama administration issued that guidance, though, some school districts were acting on their own. Some of the nation's largest districts are working to punish students in ways that don't involve suspension, trying to reform discipline so that students aren't referred to police, or both.

In Clayton County, Georgia, for example, where referrals from schools were overwhelming juvenile prosecutors, the juvenile courts made an agreement with the police force and the school district, restricting the cases in which police were allowed to arrest students in school or refer them to court. The agreement had a huge impact in schools: the high-school graduation rate increased by 24 percent from 2004 to 2010, beating the national average.

Meanwhile, some large school districts are moving away from zero tolerance policies. Broward County, Florida, one of the largest school districts in the country, decided in 2013 that schools, not police, would deal with students' nonviolent misdemeanors. The Chicago Public Schools are trying to reduce the number of suspensions, [softening a policy](#) under which students could be suspended for using a cell phone in school and ending suspensions for children younger than second grade, among other changes. In Los Angeles, children under 13 won't be referred to police for minor offenses, after police issued [552 tickets to preteens](#) during the 2013-14 school year.

New York City schools are taking a more targeted approach. The city [recently unveiled proposals](#) to overhaul its school discipline code. If the changes go into effect, school principals will have to get the city Department of Education's permission to suspend any student for "insubordination," or for any suspension of a student in third grade or younger. And it would no longer be possible to give "superintendent's suspensions" (a more serious level of suspension) to students involved in "minor physical altercations."

Other schools are exploring restorative justice programs, which focus on forming relationships between teachers, students, and administrators and giving students an opportunity to resolve problems by talking about them. The Oakland School District [has been testing this approach for 10 years](#) and recently decided to expand it districtwide after schools using restorative justice reported that their suspension rates were cut in half.