

Children Who Get Suspended

Race, Gender, and Disability are Significant Factors

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Looking at the Data

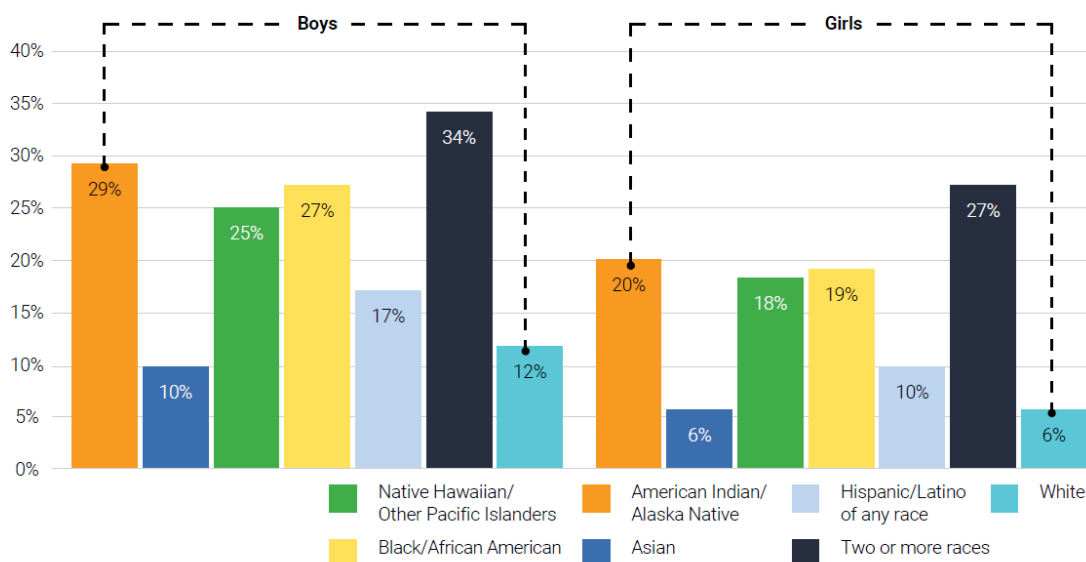
Social scientists sometimes use statistics to document and explain the world around us. Look at the graph below and think about what it shows. Here are some questions that may guide your thinking:

1. What do the bars represent? What is being measured?
2. Which group has the highest suspension rate and which has the lowest?
3. Which are the tallest and shortest bars in each section and what do they represent?
4. What's the difference between the left side and right side of the graph?

When I look at the graph, I notice that boys get suspended way more than girls in every racial group. I see that Black boys have the highest rate at 34%, American Indian boys are next at 29%, and white boys have the lowest rate at 12%. I also see that girls follow a similar pattern but with lower numbers overall. Black girls still have the highest rate at 27%, while white girls have the lowest at 6%.

When I read these numbers, I wonder why this is happening. Why are Black boys and girls more often suspended than white boys and girls? Why are boys overall suspended more often than girls?

Students with disabilities receiving out-of-school suspensions by race/ethnicity and gender



Source: National Center for Learning Disabilities. (2020). Significant disproportionality in special education: Current trends and actions for impact. <https://nclcd.org>

But then, when I pay even closer attention to how these numbers connect, I see that Black girls with disabilities (27%) get suspended more often than white boys with disabilities (12%). Think about that: even though boys usually get in trouble more than girls, race seems to matter more than gender here. Why is that?

Historical Context

In my work, I read a lot about history. So, when I try to understand why Black girls get suspended more than white boys, I think about a long and ugly history in the United States when Black people were without any good reason thought of as less capable and more disobedient. For over 100 years, some people used fake science called “eugenics” to claim that certain races were naturally more violent or less intelligent. They also said people with disabilities were “defective.” These ideas were used to justify terrible treatment of people of color and people with disabilities. Because of eugenic thinking, many people have lost their basic rights.

Even though we know eugenics was wrong, those old ideas might still influence how people think today. When teachers and principals see certain students as “more likely to cause trouble,” they might be unconsciously following those old, harmful stereotypes. Sometimes, even researchers who create research by dividing people into demographic groups could be using this old eugenic thinking.

Current Factors

Although it is important to look back at history and seek explanations, I am also careful to note that discrepancies like these exist in our world today. Health scientists say that these suspension patterns might also reflect what they call “social determinants of health.”

Social determinants of health are the conditions where people live, work, and go to school that affect their wellbeing. Students

What Is Eugenics?

Eugenics is the belief that you can breed for certain qualities. If you do this, you can “improve” future generations. It is a discredited theory that is rooted in racist and ableist ideas about who is “fit.”



In the U.S., eugenics led authorities to forcibly sterilize people with disabilities, people in prison, people of color, and poor white people. Carrie Buck (above left) was sterilized in 1924 because authorities said she was “feebleminded.”



In Germany in the 1930s and 40s, Nazis promoted the idea that Jews were an inferior race. They measured body parts to identify traits of a “superior” race of humans. This kind of racist thinking, was the “science” behind the Holocaust. It was based, in part, on the practices promoted by racist scientists in the U.S.

Sources: <https://www.genome.gov/genetics-glossary/Eugenics>; <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/>; <https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/entries/buck-carrie-1906-1983/>; <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-racism>

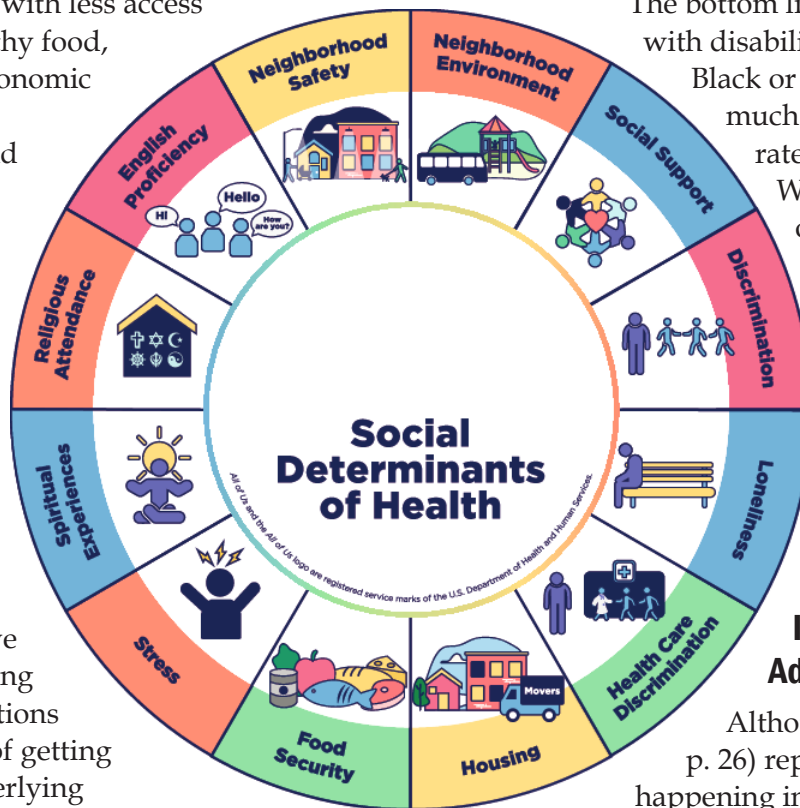
from communities with less access to healthcare, healthy food, safe housing, or economic opportunities may face more stress and trauma. This stress can affect behavior and learning in ways that might lead to more school discipline.

For example, a student dealing with housing instability, food insecurity, or community violence might have trouble concentrating or controlling emotions at school. Instead of getting help for these underlying problems, they might just get suspended. This creates a cycle where the students who need the most support get pushed out of school the most.

Using Data to Inform Decisions?

Finally, statistics like these should help us reflect on our policies and perhaps change them. For example, schools could make new rules that aim to lessen the racial discrepancy in their punishments.

However, we should be careful about what statistics can and can't tell us. Numbers can hide important details, like what actually happened before each suspension, or whether schools tried to help these students in other ways first. Statistics can also reflect the biases of the people collecting the data or making the decisions that create the numbers. Just because we can measure something doesn't always mean we understand why it happens, but it does often confirm or show that something is happening.



The bottom line is that students with disabilities who are also Black or American Indian face much higher suspension rates than white students. Whether this is because of unfair treatment rooted in historical prejudices or other factors, it means these kids are missing more school time, which could hurt their education and their futures.

Implications for Adult Education

Although the graph (on p. 26) represents what is happening in K-12 schools, we can see how this connects to adult education.

Many adults who come to adult education programs are there because they were pushed out of regular school as kids, often through the same unfair discipline patterns we see in this graph. Black and American Indian adults with disabilities might be more likely to need adult education not because they chose it, but because they got suspended so much as kids that they never finished school properly.

For some students, walking into an adult education classroom can bring back painful memories. A Black man with a learning disability might remember being labeled as a “troublemaker” in middle school and getting suspended for behaviors that were really just signs he needed help. A woman might recall feeling like teachers never believed in her abilities and always expected her to fail. These students often carry shame about not finishing school, even though the system failed them, not the other way around. They might feel nervous about speaking



An adult education classroom at workplace-based program in Boston. In your opinion, what makes a classroom welcoming to adults returning to school?

up in class, worry that they're "not smart enough," or expect to be treated unfairly again.

Many of these students might have bad memories of school and might not trust teachers or feel confident about learning. The same old biases that led to unfair suspensions can still show up in adult classrooms too. Teachers might expect less from certain students or make assumptions about what adults with disabilities can do.

Many people in adult education programs are there because they were pushed out of school as children through these same unfair discipline practices. We need to recognize that when students struggle, it's often because the system has failed them, not because they have failed. Only by addressing these deep-rooted issues can we give every student a real chance to succeed.

Source: Image on the previous page is from: <https://aahd.us/2022/05/all-about-the-social-determinants-of-health/>

AFTER YOU READ:

- 1.** According to the author, why is data about race, disability, and childhood suspension rates relevant to adult education?
- 2.** Study and discuss the Social Determinants of Health chart. How do you think these social issues affect health?
- 3.** If you were an adult student who got suspended a lot as a kid, how would you feel walking into your first adult education class?
- 4.** How can teachers help adult students who have bad memories from school feel supported?

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