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Harms of School Punishment

Educators, policymakers and children's rights advocates often talk about the "school-to-prison pipeline." While this term is frequently misunderstood, it typically refers to the problem of excessive school punishments that cause long-term harm to students, schools, families, and communities.

Isn't Discipline a Good Thing?

Research shows that authoritative school discipline is important for managing student behavior. Authoritative discipline is when students receive both structure (rules and consequences that are clear and applied fairly) and supports (emotional, academic and social support). But since the 1990s, schools across the U.S. have relied too heavily on punishments like suspension out of school, usually in response to minor misbehavior, while providing too few supports. Suspensions have skyrocketed during this time, most frequently for behaviors like being disrespectful or disobedient – not for violence, drugs or weapons. Youth of color, particularly Black students, are far more likely to be suspended than white students – particularly for minor misbehaviors – despite no credible evidence that Black students, on average, misbehave more than white students. Research that compares students who behave similarly finds that students of color are more likely to be punished, and punished more severely, than white students.

How Is It Harmful?

School suspension fails to improve students' behaviors. Evaluations show that students who are suspended are more likely to misbehave in the future, when compared to similar students, and that schools with high suspension rates are no safer or more orderly than other schools. In fact, excessive use of suspensions does a lot of harm. Individual students who are suspended are at increased risk of academic failure, failing to graduate, and future criminal behavior, arrest and incarceration. Their families suffer, particularly if parents need to miss work (and possibly risk losing a job) in order to pick up a child from school, supervise them, and meet with school staff to discuss the situation. Their schools are worse off as well. Research shows that schools with high suspension rates have lower average test scores among non-suspended students when compared to schools similar in aspects other than their suspension rates. And entire communities are harmed, since suspended students are less likely to be employed, or even to vote or volunteer years later. But perhaps most importantly, excessive school punishments increase racial inequality. The fact that students of color are at greatest risk of suspension means they suffer these harms more than others. Excessive use of suspensions means that schools unfairly limit opportunities for students of color.

What Should We Do Instead?

Student misbehavior can certainly cause challenges, particularly for under-resourced schools and over-burdened teachers. But instead of removing students from school, we need to better help students address the problems and limitations that provoke their misbehavior. Students tend to act up for reasons – often it's frustration with course material, for example. Efforts to work with students to empower them, teach them, and care for them are far more promising than efforts to remove them from school with no supports. If they are implemented well, programs like social-emotional learning strategies and restorative justice can help with these challenges. But most importantly, schools need to provide the emotional, academic and social supports that students need, rather than kicking them out of school for days at a time because of minor misbehavior.