

2-24-2021

## Racial Disproportionality In School Discipline

Melissa Becker  
beckerm2@csp.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/teacher-education\\_masters](https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/teacher-education_masters)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Becker, M. (2021). *Racial Disproportionality In School Discipline* (Thesis, Concordia University, St. Paul). Retrieved from [https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/teacher-education\\_masters/43](https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/teacher-education_masters/43)

This Non Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education & Humanities at DigitalCommons@CSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Teacher Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSP. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csp.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csp.edu).

Racial Disproportionality in School Discipline

Melissa Becker

Concordia University, St. Paul

Master of Arts in Education - Educational Leadership

ED 590: Research & Complete Capstone, Cohort #911

Professor Brian Boothe Ed.D

Second Reader: Theresa Starkman

February 15, 2021

DEDICATION

To my parents: With love and respect for all that you have sacrificed!

To my students: Each of you hold a special place in my heart, inspire me to always give my all and to do my best in everything I try. Never let another person lessen your story! You are worthy, capable and deserving of everything you wish to accomplish in life. The path may be difficult and you may have many detours, never give up!

I see you, hear you and believe in you!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To my colleagues, I cannot express enough thanks to Dr. Emily Palmer for the persistent encouragement to begin this path, push past my fears and to always see my worth. Thank you for your guidance and support throughout this entire journey. To Dr. Constance Robinson, thank you for your prayers and support along this adventure. Your advice and encouragement helped me to remain present and remember what I bring to the table. To Amy Nelson, thank you for support, willingness to be a sounding board and helping me to “stay in the arena.” To Ahmed Amin, thank you for your candor, advice and support in helping to build important connections, always moving forward. To Albert Pitt thank you for your supportive reminders to never give up, even when the road is less traveled or more difficult.

Thank you to my parents, Ernest and Jean Becker. Your continued support and unwavering love has helped me throughout this long journey. Dad, the strength that you carry each and every day for everyone around you has made me into the person that I am. Mom, your ability to always find the good in such difficult situations reminds me to never give up or give in, and to always keep pushing forward. Thank you both for always being in my corner! To my brothers and sister, John, Michael and Jennifer, thank you for your humor, guidance and love. Tracy, Jenny and Cheryl, my friends, for the many supportive conversations, reminders to keep going and always listening to me lecture about what I was learning; I thank each of you for your support and love!

Finally, the completion of this project, and this journey, could not have been accomplished without the support of my classmates and professors. This adventure had many twists and turns along the way, yet I feel completely blessed and fortunate to have walked this journey with each of you. Your kindness, support and understanding have been second to none!

Table of Contents

Abstract.....6

Chapter One: Racial Disproportionality in School Discipline .....7

Introduction.....7

Importance of the Topic.....8

Scope of Research.....10

Research Question.....10

Definition of Terms.....11

Summary.....11

Chapter Two: Literature Review.....12

Review of the Proposed Problem.....13

Review of the Importance of the Topic.....14

Factors Responsible for Disproportionality in Discipline.....14

    Zero Tolerance.....15

    Implicit Bias.....19

Short and Long-Term Impact of Exclusionary Practices.....22

Methods to Combat Disproportionality.....25

    Restorative Justice.....26

    Positive Behavior Intervention and Support.....27

    Culturally Responsive Teaching.....29

Summary of Findings.....30

Conclusion.....31

Chapter Three: Discussion and Application.....31

Insights Gained from Research.....31

Application.....33

Future Studies.....37

Conclusion.....38

References.....41

**Abstract**

Racial disproportionality in discipline has been present, documented and researched for several decades. A growing body of evidence indicates that students of color, most specifically African American males, receive the highest rate and most severe forms of exclusionary discipline (suspension and expulsion). Certain contributing factors found responsible for the increasing rates in disproportionality, such as implicit bias and the implementation of a zero-tolerance policy, have been linked to the Nation's deeply rooted history of racism. Therefore causing the academic achievement gap between African American and white students to also continue to widen. Evidence further indicates a correlation between exclusionary discipline and negative outcomes in academics and social emotional growth. Exclusionary discipline practices have also been found to increase the likelihood of students of color being introduced to the criminal justice system, therefore perpetuating the school-to-prison-pipeline. Methods such as culturally responsive teaching, restorative justice and positive behavior interventions and support have been found to slightly alleviate how contributing factors influence disproportionality in discipline. While these methods individually have not been able to provide a promising avenue towards ending disproportionality in school discipline; there is speculation, based on research, that a multi-layered approach of methods may bring about success in achieving equity in school discipline.

*Keywords:* Discipline, Exclusionary Discipline, Disproportionality, Racial Disproportionality, School-to-Prison-Pipeline.

## Racial Disproportionality in School Discipline

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

Due to the Nation's deeply rooted history of racism, conscious prejudice and unconscious bias, many organizations and systems were built on, and have operated within, that same mentality. Education, more specifically, schools, have been and continue to be one of those systems! "Racism is alive and well in our American school system" said Dianis, executive direction of the civil rights group, the Advancement Project (Balingit, 2018, para. 9). Dianis was referring to the racial disproportionality in school discipline. Better explained, racial disproportionality in discipline is the "overrepresentation of children of color that are subject to discipline, more specifically, suspension and/or expulsion as compared to the total population of children in the community or their white counterparts" (MAEC, Inc., 2020, para. 1).

Discipline policies and procedures were created within schools to positively and proactively address students' needs while preventing unwanted behavior. However, discipline policies and procedures were also put in place to address unwanted behavior through the use of corrective or punitive action. These punitive responses may vary from something as small as a conversation with a teacher or conference with a family, escalating up to a lunch detention, after-school detention or referral to administration. Many studies, across several decades, consistently speak to the fact that African-American students, especially males, have a significantly higher risk, between two to five times more likely, of receiving subjective behaviors referrals and punitive responses in the form of exclusionary (McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvan, 2017; Monroe, 2005; and Ritter & Anderson, 2018).

Overall, exclusionary discipline which is disproportionately assigned to students of color "represent a significant dilemma as it indicates problems of inequity, discrimination and



marginalization within education,” not to mention, it perpetuation of widening the achievement gap (Sullivan, A.L., A’Vant, E., Baker, J., Chandler, D., Graves, S., McKinney, E., & Sayres, T., 2009, p. 14). The following research attempts to determine what factors are responsible for racial disproportionality in discipline, the short-term and long-term impact that exclusionary discipline has on students of color and what methods can be used to combat the growing rate of disproportionality in discipline.

### **Importance of the Topic**

“Racial disproportionality in school discipline represents one of the most significant problems in education today” (Mcintosh et al., 2017, p. 146). However, it is not a new problem. Disproportionality in discipline has drastically increased since 1975 with out-of-school suspensions growing to nearly four times the rate it was then (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Gregory, 2018). More specifically, according to Okilwa and Robert (2017), via the 2012 Civil Rights Data Collection, African Americans accounted for only 16% of nationally enrolled students in public school, yet accounted for 36% of expulsions and over 38% of out-of-school suspensions (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). Meanwhile the disparity is evident when compared to white students that held only 37% of expulsions and 36% of out-of-school suspensions when accounting for 56% of the national student enrollment (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). Despite the clear contrast of the data, “...there is no published research showing higher base rates of problem behavior for student of color that would warrant more school discipline” (Mcintosh et al., 2017, p. 147). While plenty of research proves that racial disproportionality in school discipline exists and discusses what factors may contribute to the perpetuation of this disproportionality.

Studies by Bal (2016), Monroe (2005), Noguera (2003) and Pesta (2018), explain various ways that disproportionality in discipline impact students of color, both short-term and long-

term. These studies also show evidence that African American students are those most greatly affected. McIntosh et al. (2017), mentions that repeated exclusionary practices, such as the use of suspensions, can decrease academic achievement through lower grades and feeling less connected to school. Essentially, students begin to lose trust in their teachers and the school after just one suspension (Okonofua & Quereshi, 2017). While the deterioration of trust can be experienced by all students, studies show it is plausible that African American students, which receive a higher rate and level of disciplinary action, are also at higher risk to disengage from school resulting in higher dropout rates, struggles with employment or even fall into the criminal justice system (Noguera, 2003; Okonofua & Quereshi, 2017). Furthermore, Bal (2016) explains that students of color, mainly African American males, are often over-represented in referrals to special education due to the disproportionate rate in which they referred for discipline. Could the achievement gap exist largely due to disproportionality in discipline?

Sadly, disproportionality in discipline is not just a middle school or high school problem. “African American preschool children are 3.6 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as white preschool children” (Okonofua & Quereshi, 2017, p. 6). Rudd (2014), further explained when African American children, even as young as five years old, are suspended for talking back, their infraction stays on their record often labeled as a threat, while a white student with the same behavior is not suspended. This is likely due to the historical stereotyping of African Americans, more pointedly males, being portrayed as “aggressive and dangerous” and how these stereotypes perpetuate implicit bias (Okonofua & Quereshi, 2017, p. 4).

The continuation of racial disproportionality within the school system only continues to maintain this Nation’s struggles with racism, inequality and injustice. School should be meant to

be a safe space for children to come to. It is imperative that more attention is placed on researching what methods can help rectify disproportionate practices in education, explicitly discipline practices, in order to protect the civil rights and well-being of the youth most critically impacted. Could dismantling those practices that perpetuate disproportionality in discipline create a societal ripple effect to deconstruct larger systems of oppression?

### **Scope of Research**

This research study investigates qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies regarding racial disproportionality in discipline. This paper will discuss three themes. The first theme will examine a couple of factors that are responsible for exclusionary practices and racial disproportionality in discipline. This information will allow for a better awareness and understanding of why disproportionality continues to exist at such prevalent levels. The second theme will examine a few areas of impact, both short-term and long-term, that racial disproportionality creates within a student's life. With this information staff may be better equipped to understand the severity that disproportionality plays in one's life. Lastly, the third theme will examine a few methods that have been tried in the effort to combat the growing rate of disproportionality in discipline. This information can serve as a resource to help staff determine what approach(s) may be further pursued to reduce, reverse and eventually end disproportionality within discipline.

### **Research Question**

In light of knowing that there is racial disproportionality in school discipline, what factors contribute to its perpetuation, as well what short-term and long-term impacts do exclusionary discipline have on students of color in comparison to white students; and what methods can combat the growing racial disproportionality in school discipline?

## Definition of Terms

**Discipline** is the structure of rules, expectations, strategies and procedures applied in a school, through either preventative discipline (positive) or corrective/punitive discipline (negative), to manage student needs and behavior (American Institutes for Research, 2021).

**Exclusionary discipline** “encompasses any type of school disciplinary action that removes or excludes a student from his or her usual educational setting. This may include out of school suspensions, in-school suspensions, referrals to law enforcement, expulsions, corporal punishment and school-related arrests” (American Psychological Association Services, Inc., n.d., para. 1).

**Racial disproportionality** “can be defined as the overrepresentation of children of color that are subject to discipline, suspension and/or expulsion as compared to the total population of children in the community or institution” (MAEC, Inc., 2020, para. 1).

**School-to-prison-pipeline** exists due to “trouble at school leading to a student’s first contact with the criminal justice system,” wherein the school pushes for a student to be arrested or cited for an offense that doesn’t necessarily need to involve law enforcement presence (Nelson & Lind, 2015, para. 3).

## Summary

Racial disproportionality in discipline is a long standing and ever growing problem within the educational system. In order to serve all students equally and appropriately, disproportionality in discipline must be examined in a way to permanently dismantle it and to work toward healing the long-lasting affects which students of color, more specifically African American students, must endure. This research will attempt to understand the best way in which staff can facilitate ever-lasting change to the discipline system.

The literature review in chapter two will examine studies regarding racial disproportionality in discipline, the contributing factors, impacts, both short and long term, and effective methods in which to combat this growing problem. Chapter two will also provide a research summary of findings in relation to the research question. Chapter three will discuss the insights gained from the research, how the research can be applied and give suggestions for possible future studies.

### **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

As mentioned earlier racial disproportionality in discipline is a long standing and ever growing problem within the educational system. In order to serve all students equally and appropriately, disproportionality in discipline must be examined in a way to permanently dismantle it and to work towards healing the long-lasting affects which students of color often endure. Therefore, this literature review will investigate racial disproportionality in discipline through various quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods research to discuss the contributing factors, impacts and how to combat racial disproportionality.

The first section of the literature review examines a couple of factors that share a responsibility for exclusionary practices and racial disproportionality in discipline. The common theme that emerges from Gastic (2016), Monroe (2005), Verdugo (2002), and Ritter and Anderson (2018), is that the implementation of zero-tolerance policies hold a large responsibility in the significant increase of racial disproportionality within discipline from 1990 forward. However, zero-tolerance policies are not the only contributing factor which will be discussed. Research from Bal (2016), Girvan (2017), McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, and Girvan (2017), also point to another common factor affecting disproportionate rates of subjective behavior referrals and suspensions for African American students. All of these researchers agreed that implicit bias

was largely responsible. While it is important to understand the factors that contribute to disproportionality in discipline, it is also beneficial to know what lasting effects these practices have on a student and their future.

The second section of the literature review examines what impact, both short-term and long-term, racial disproportionality creates within a student's life. APA (2008), Noguera (2003), Pesta (2018) and Simons (2017), collectively speak to the increased risk African American students are exposed to due to being disproportionately referred and suspended for behavior. These researchers are all in agreement that there are various ways an African American student is impacted, from mental health concerns, to an increased risk of falling behind or dropping out; and yet even more serious, a higher exposure to the criminal justice system (Okilwa & Robert, 2017).

Lastly, the third section of the literature review will examine research from Bottiani, Mcdaniel, Henderson, Castillo, and Bradshaw (2020), Bradshaw, Mitchell, and Leaf (2009), and Wallace Jr., Goodkind, Wallace, and Bachman (2008), regarding what strategies or methods have been used to try and combat the growing rate of disproportionality in discipline. This information coupled with what factors contribute to the perpetuation and how students are impacted will help staff to be prepared, reflective and able to be effective in creating a plan that could help reduce and eventually end disproportionality in discipline.

### **Review of the Proposed Problem**

Racial disproportionality in discipline has continued to increase throughout several decades and it "represents one of the most significant problems in education today" (Mcintosh et al., 2017, p. 146). When compared to white students, students of color are at a higher risk for being referred for their behavior, often resulting in exclusionary discipline practices such as

suspension or expulsion. African American students experience the highest rates of disproportionality in discipline. In light of knowing that racial disproportionality in school discipline exists and what is known about how children learn; all school staff need to be educated about why disproportionality in discipline persists, how it affects students over time and what may work to dismantle the currently broken discipline system.

### **Review of the Importance of the Topic**

In order for students of color, more specifically African Americans students, to achieve at the same level as their peers, they must be given a fair chance to do so. Disproportionality in discipline, especially exclusionary practices, decreases the likelihood that an African American student will receive the same instructional time, educational supports and opportunities as the majority of white students. Therefore, it is imperative that more attention is placed on researching how to rectify the disproportionate practices in education, explicitly discipline practices, in order provide students of color with an equal opportunity to a better future.

### **Factors Responsible for Disproportionality in Discipline**

Why is there disproportionality in school discipline? Several researchers list a variety of factors that may contribute responsibility to the growing rate of disproportionality in school discipline. Factors that appear throughout various studies and discussions are poverty, zero-tolerance policy, unengaged parenting, poor teacher recruitment and hiring practices, lack of teacher preparation, struggles with classroom management, lack of relationships between staff and students, as well as the existence of implicit bias among staff (APA, 2008; McIntosh et al., 2017). However, the list of contributing factors does not end there. While research will continue to provide a variety of contributing factors perpetuating disproportionality in discipline; the cold reality is that “once an African American student is referred for a behavior, they are 2.4 times as

likely, as a white student, to receive exclusionary discipline for the infraction” (Ritter & Anderson, 2018, p. 163). Which brings up the question, why has disproportionality persisted and what is causing it?

This question may begin to be answered through the examination of two specific factors, zero-tolerance policies and implicit bias. Researchers such as, Verdugo (2002), APA (2008), Okilwa and Robert (2017), Monroe (2005), Pesta (2018), McIntosh et al. (2017), and Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002), share that these two factors are largely responsible in contributing to the disproportionality that exists in discipline. Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of why these factors exist and how they powerful they are in perpetuating the overrepresentation of African American students in discipline data.

**Zero Tolerance.** While zero-tolerance policies were strongly used throughout the 1980s to deter drug use and possession within the military branches it didn’t make it into the schools until the earlier part of the 1990s (Verdugo, 2002). Throughout the first several years of the 1990’s gun violence, via school shootings, became a worrisome problem (Okonofua & Quereshi, 2017). By 1994, the Guns-Free School Act was enacted (Dunn, 2002). This act mandated federally funded schools to take action, in the form of expulsion and a law enforcement referral, against any student in possession of a firearm on school grounds (Simons, 2017). The enactment of the Guns-Free School Act, in combination with an increase of violence, essentially birthed the movement of implementing zero-tolerance policies into school protocol and the invitation for school resource officers into the buildings. However, it was the school shooting at Columbine in 1999 that drove the use of zero-tolerance to rapidly increasing levels (Bottiani, et al., 2018).

Initially the zero-tolerance policy was put in place as a deterrent for students to commit violent crimes and offenses, such as bringing weapons and/or drugs, within the school. Its



purpose was to operate in a way that students received the same punishment across the board for any serious infraction (APA, 2008). This means that the zero-tolerance approach would punish any offending students equally for any school offense involving items considered weapons, regardless of the severity or without any background information. The purpose was to reduce the need for staff to decide based on judgement of a behavior, therefore creating a more consistent environment (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). However, while in theory this may have made sense, in practice it did not always work as planned. Several examples in research show how zero-tolerance policies removed students from their education, when the situation didn't call for such extreme measures. The first example, shared by Simons (2017), explained that a Texas student was expelled for having a bread knife in the bed of his pick-up truck. It was learned that the student had helped his grandmother move the day prior and did not realizing the knife had fallen out of a box. His administration determined that while there was no ill intent, they had to expel him due to zero-tolerance protocol. The APA (2008) shared two different situations where students were expelled due to a zero-tolerance policy in place. One example explained how a 10-year old student was expelled for immediately turning in a paring knife they found in their lunch box, packed by their parent, to cut an apple (APA, 2008). Another example showed a clear and common misuse of the zero-tolerance policy; sharing that a student was expelled for using their cell phone by answering a call from their deployed parent in Iraq they hadn't heard from in 30 days (APA, 2008).

While the intention may have been in the right place; did schools implement this initiative hoping to lessen criminal level behavior in schools, all the while using it in the wrong way? In a qualitative research review, Verdugo (2002), explained, "over 90 percent of public schools adopted a zero-tolerance policy," yet pointed out, "there's mounting evidence that those

policies where neither effective nor implemented in a manner that was child centered or equitable and appeared to create more challenges” (p. 51). In agreement, Monroe (2005), shared “black pupils are statistically two to five times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts for the same infractions,” while further referencing that “94 percent of public schools have implemented the use of zero-tolerance policies” (p. 46). Therefore, showing a correlation between the use of zero-tolerance practices with higher rates of suspensions for students of color.

Clearly, zero-tolerance policies use has become inconsistent (Pesta, 2018) therein affecting students of color, more specifically African-American students, at the highest rate through the use of exclusionary discipline practices (APA, 2008; McIntosh et al., 2017). Best explained by Okonofua and Quereshi (2017), “Over the last twenty years, discriminatory school disciplinary systems have contributed considerably to the disproportionate rates of punishment of Black students”(p. 4). Based on the data available through all these studies, one must ask themselves if the zero-tolerance policy is implemented with all students or only students of color?

This question begins to be answered through various research findings regarding African American students’ experience in the school’s disciplinary system. Heilbrun, Cornell, and Lovegrove (2015), shared results that “African American students are suspended more than twice the rate as white students” and attributed this to the use of zero-tolerance policies (p. 495). They reached these results in their quantitative study by using the Zero Tolerance Attitudes Scale to assess 306 high school principals’ attitude toward zero-tolerance policies. Heilbrun, et al. (2015), determined that “school suspensions were higher in schools where principals endorsed that zero-tolerance disciplinary policies helped maintain order in their school” (p. 490).

Furthermore, in Gastic's, (2007), mixed-methods data study, records regarding physical fights were analyzed for 300,000 ninth to twelfth grade students in Massachusetts's public schools. This research determined that African Americans were suspended 2.52 times more often than white students for fighting. These outcomes were reiterated in the quantitative research by Ritter and Anderson's, (2018), which was based on 7 years of discipline referral data from every public school in the state of Arkansas. The findings determined that black students are 2.4 times as likely, compared to whites students, to receive exclusionary discipline, again showing a connection to zero-tolerance practices (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). While, at the same time, there is no research supporting any theory that African American students are exhibiting behavior, subjective or objective, at a higher rate to warrant an increased level of discipline in comparison to white students (APA, 2008; McIntosh et al., 2017).

Qualitative research by Dunning-Lozano (2018), shared that zero-tolerance policies also disproportionately affect parents of color as well. Throughout a 27-month period Dunning-Lozano (2018), collected ethnographic data from students between the sixth and twelfth grade at a disciplinary alternative education public school. While the research primarily focused on the effects zero-tolerance policies had on parents, it also found that students of color, primarily African American and Hispanic students, were disproportionately sent to alternative programs because of expulsion or multiple suspensions that fell in line with zero-tolerance practices (Dunning-Lozano, 2018). Furthermore they shared that students of color receiving exclusionary discipline were also at higher risk for future interactions with law enforcement (Dunning-Lozano, 2018). Simons (2017) stated in their research that law enforcement involvement went hand in hand with zero-tolerance policies. While Monroe (2005) shared "zero-tolerance policies became a conduit in which large numbers of students, primarily African-American students,

were removed for various offenses, mostly subjective, yet also referred to law enforcement” (p. 49).

While zero-tolerance policies have clearly shown a pattern, through research, to contribute to the disproportionality in discipline among African American students, it is not the only factor largely responsible. Racism has a long-standing presence in our Nation’s history and many studies share how it appears as implicit bias, thereby a contributing factor to students of color, more specifically, African American students being disproportionality disciplined, when compared to the discipline white students receive.

**Implicit Bias.** As mentioned in the previous chapter many organizations and systems were built on and have operated with a mentality that has a deep history of racism and prejudice and bias. Therefore, is it at all surprising that “educational expectations, practices, and policies reflect the values of the individuals who created them?” (Monroe, 2005, p. 47).

Implicit bias speaks to the unconscious reactions or attitudes to towards others.. It “operates outside of a person’s awareness and can be in direct contradiction to a person’s beliefs and values, often affecting that person’s interactions with others and/or their behavior toward others without them being aware of it” (Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, n.d., para. 2). According to McIntosh et al. (2017), implicit bias affects individuals most when they are physically or mentally fatigued and have to make a quick decision. As mentioned by Okonofua and Quereshi (2017), African Americans, primarily males, due to in part, to the long history of dehumanization and stereotyping often show up as “dangerous” and/or “hyper-aggressive.” Best explained:

“..many teachers may not explicitly connect their disciplinary reactions to negative perceptions of black males, yet systematic trends in disproportionality suggest that

teachers may be implicitly guided by stereotypical perceptions that African American boys require greater control than their peers and are unlikely to respond to nonpunitive measures” (Monroe, 2005, pp. 46-47).

Furthermore, Skiba et al. (2002), explained, “racial bias in the practice of school discipline is also part of a broader discourse concerning the continuing presence of institutional racism or structural inequity in education” (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 322). This seems to be evident in the findings of a mixed-methods study by Bal, Afacan, and Cakir (2018), where 429,725 Wisconsin students from 2,116 public schools, “found African American students were seven times more likely to be removed from the learning environment due to disciplinary actions compared to White students,” (p. 1017). Yet national averages range between two to five times as likely (Monroe, 2005). Even if there is not enough research to show a connection, this should provoke some thought regarding if implicit bias may play a stronger part in discipline in various parts of the country?

In a quantitative study by Girvan et al. (2017), a sample of discipline referral records from 1,154,686 students enrolled in 1,824 United States schools verified that the disproportionality of discipline referrals for subjective behavior, (i.e., defiance, disrespect, disruption), were related to the effects of implicit bias. The same outcome was determined by McIntosh et al. (2018). Their quantitative research was based on a sample of 483,686 discipline referrals from 1,666 elementary schools. McIntosh et al. (2018), shared “school discipline was more equitable, between African-American and white students, for objective behavior (i.e. smoking), while the disproportionality between the same students for subjective behaviors was strong” (p. 48). These findings echo the results from a quantitative study in 1994-1995, wherein Skiba et al. (2002), examined discipline records for over 11,000 students, throughout 19 schools

from an urban midwestern public school district and found that African American students were twice more likely referred for subjective behavior and nonviolent offenses, while White students mostly received objective referrals. Skiba et al. (2002), went further to say that this disproportionality didn't come from an excess in behaviors, but due to a higher rate of referrals written. Could this disproportionate rate in discipline be due to the underlying notions one holds that they are unaware of, called implicit bias?

Many studies show, that not only do African American students receive more office referrals for that subjective behavior, but they also receive a greater amount of exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and sometimes expulsion, for that behavior (Bottiani et al., 2018; Verdugo, 2002). While studies by Bottiani et al. (2018), Skiba et al. (2002), and Verdugo (2002) further shared that white students typically only get suspensions for objective behavior (i.e. weapon or drug possession, smoking, etc.). Fenning and Rose (2007) examined qualitative research from various studies ranging from middle to high school to determine if lower-socioeconomic status plays a part in students receiving more referrals for severe behaviors. Their research review showed that African American students, despite socioeconomic status, received more referrals for subjective and nonviolent offenses (Fenning & Rose, 2007). These findings begin to hint at the idea that implicit bias plays a major part in how African American students are being perceived to be more threatening during low level and subjective behavior.

Overwhelming disproportionality in discipline referrals, especially for subjective behavior requires more judgement. Yet findings show subjective behaviors or interactions by African American students are often perceived as a threatening gesture (Okonofua & Quereshi, 2017). However, findings show that white students do not receive referrals for the same subjective infractions that African Americans do. As explained by Okonofua and Quereshi

(2017), this reaction “perpetuates the stereotypes about African American students being aggressive and dangerous” (p. 4). Thus continuing to perpetuate the cycle of racial disproportionality in discipline practices because implicit bias’s held.

While many studies can show disproportionality in the school discipline practices, implicit bias is a difficult area to measure due to the use of self-reporting for data collection. This poses a limitation to clear and concise numbers. If research could find a more definitive way to measure implicit bias, could the research be used in a more streamlined way of forcing change?

Knowledge is power, and learning which school factors contribute to the perpetuation of disproportionality in discipline is important to begin working on plans to combat the problem. However, to fully understand the impact that these disproportionate practices create in a student’s life may help in the creation of better discipline procedures as well as staff trainings. Therefore, throughout the next section, research will be shared regarding some of the short-term and long-term effects that occur, to African American students, due to disproportionate practices in discipline.

### **Short and Long-Term Impact of Exclusionary Practices**

Several studies, such as, APA (2008), Bal (2016), Monroe (2005), Noguera (2003) and Pesta (2018), reference different areas of impact, both short-term and long-term, that disproportionality of discipline plays in the lives of students of color, more specifically, African American lives. Noguera (2003), researched approximately 150 students from 10 different high schools throughout Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts. In their mix-method approach, they found that in several of the schools, maintaining order and discipline took priority over academics and that students expectations for students were not very high (Noguera, 2003). These findings in turn also correlated with a higher-risk of being denied a diploma and in some cases a

higher risk in school dropouts (Noguera, 2003). McIntosh et al. (2017) mentioned that repeated exclusionary practices, such as the use of suspensions, can decrease academic achievement through lower grades and feeling less connected to school. Lower self-esteem, rejection, mental health deterioration and disengagement as well as feelings of lower expectations were also shown in a qualitative study by Townsend (2000), wherein 25,000 eighth grade were involved in a longitudinal study that began in 1988 carrying through 1994. The research also mentioned that student disengagement often shows an increase in school safety concerns and delinquency as well (Townsend, 2000).

Noguera's (2005), research further speaks to the fact that some students with persistent behavior problems, even if subjective behaviors, are placed on indefinite suspension, also known as home-bound schooling. However, during this time the school retains funding for the student (Noguera, 2005). It is easy to infer that a removal from an organization or program would coincide with a feeling of lack of belonging. This is no different for students that are repeated removed from class for smaller subjective infractions. This "deviance" as it is often labeled, after multiple minor infractions, gain the attention from staff, especially staff with implicit bias, as a problem. Rather than address the function of the behavior, (i.e., avoidance from a class, academic struggle, or lack of connection with a teacher), the student is asked to leave the class, take a break or worse referred for their behavior or lack of engagement. These "continued absences from school for black students manifest in dismal academic and life outcomes; arising in an increase in the opportunity and academic gap, an increase in dropout rates, alienation and disengagement and delinquency or what has come be known as the school-to-prison pipeline" (Okilwa & Robert, 2017, p. 241, 243; Stalker, 2017). Now imagine, a student missing class often due to staff's response, or interactions, causing them to fall behind in their academics over time



due to lost instruction. Then, when the student is allowed to return to class, they do not feel welcomed, causing them to further disengage and again are sent on their way. It becomes a vicious cycle, which again continues to perpetuate the achievement gap and in many cases, for students of color, especially African American males, they are referred for a special education evaluation, which also occurs in disproportionate amounts.

While researchers agree there are many impacts that come from discipline disproportionality, there is one area that many studies discuss with deeper concern, that is the school-to-prison- pipeline. APA (2008), Bal (2016), Noguera (2005), Okilwa and Robert (2017) and McIntosh et al., (2017), are all in agreement and show verifiable association between exclusionary discipline, zero-tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline. While the purpose of exclusionary discipline may be thought to curve the student from future infractions, in reality it actually is putting students at a greater risk for more exclusionary discipline or worse.

Overrepresentation of people of color in discipline data within schools mirror data within the criminal justice system (Fenning & Rose, 2007) and those students involved with the juvenile justice system are often labeled with in the school as “troublemakers,” receiving less opportunities presented to them throughout their life (Stalker, 2017). Simons (2017), mixed-methods research shared that “during the 2011-2012 school year, 64,218 students were arrested in American schools, while 13-year-old students being cited at the highest rate” (pp. 954-955). Receiving a citation does not just end there. The student, who then must attend court, will continue to miss instruction time in class in order to avoid longer and heavier consequences within the juvenile justice system. Again, this continuing on or increasing a feeling of estrangement from the school. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge research that speaks to

the connection of disproportionality in school discipline for people of color, more specifically African Americans, with a higher risk of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system.

It is important to know that racial disproportionality in school discipline, further carries over into adulthood, correlating with the racial disproportionality within the prison system, as a recent study showed, “1 in every 15 African American men are incarcerated compared to only 1 in 106 white men” (Okilwa & Robert, 2017, p. 244). In fact, a quantitative longitudinal study involving a sample size of 4,321 individuals, Pesta (2018), found that African American and White individuals who received at least one suspension or expulsion in their childhood had the same impact risk ratio for dropping out of school. Whereas, when it came to offending in adulthood, African Americans had 28 percent increase of odds compared to Whites seven percent increase of odds (Pesta, 2018). While more current information has not been attained, in “2003, 56 percent of federal and 67 percent of state inmates had not completed high school,” which speaks to the importance reducing disproportionality in school discipline to reduce the risk of school drops outs as well as involvement with criminal activity into one’s adulthood (Wolf Harlow, 2003, p.1). This statistic, along with the research showing the disproportionality within the school disciplinary system matching that in the justice system should draw more attention to research idea of how to combat the growing disproportionality that directly affects people of color.

### **Methods to Combat Disproportionality**

There is agreeance among researchers that there are a few methods that may help combat disproportionality in discipline: Restorative practice/justice, PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (Bradshaw, et al., 2009; Wallace, et al., 2008; Bottiani, et al., 2020; and Okilwa & Robert, 2017). Okilwa and Robert’s (2017),

qualitative review of data from the US Department of Education Civil Rights Office as well as several different qualitative studies not only reiterated that there is a disproportionality in discipline but also that there are methods in which to combat disproportionality. Each method in itself contributed to better school climate, more trusting relationships between staff and students, stronger engagement from students and ultimately the hope of reducing exclusionary disciplinary action, let alone disproportionate practices within schools.

**Restorative Justice.** One of the methods recommended is the use of restorative practices as an alternative to exclusionary practices by approaching behavior in a different way (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Gregory, 2018). Restorative practices revolve around relationship-building, empathy, responsibility, accountability and respect for self, others and their community (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). The intention of restorative practices is to place the responsibility back on the student to have a voice and to be accountable for their actions by acknowledging the impact their actions had caused and attempting to repair the relationship that was damaged (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). This process of repair should happen directly after the incident occurred and in the same space so the individual can immediately reflect on their emotions leading up to their actions and often happens through a guided mediation or conversation or a talking circle (Lustick, 2015).

To ensure that restorative practices are successful the staff must be accepting and non-judgmental while engaging a student in conversation, as well as consistently providing a safe space while encouraging honesty and respect (Lustick, 2015). According to Okilwa and Robert (2017), when restorative practices are done consistently and effectively they can build trust, communication and respect within the school community and decrease the use of exclusionary practices. While another research stated, “Restorative interventions may have benefits, but do not demonstrate substantially better outcomes for black students” (Bottiani, et al., 2018, pp. 111).

Only to be reiterated by quantitative research, through a sample of discipline behavior from 74,000 10th grade students nationwide, Wallace, et al. (2008), found restorative practices did in fact helped to create a reduction in exclusionary discipline used, however, they went further to state that disproportionality in discipline yet persisted for students of color despite the reduction in exclusionary discipline.

While restorative justice is not an end all be all solution to disproportionality in discipline, it is important that schools pair this with other successful methods such as PBIS and culturally responsive teaching to continue to work towards ending disproportionality in discipline.

**Positive Behavior Intervention and Support, (PBIS).** Another method to combat disproportionality that is often mentioned in studies, is PBIS. Positive behavior intervention and support uses a proactive way in presenting expectations through visual aids and positive reminders as well as 3-tiered preventive system to support academic and social behavior in a proactive manner (Mcintosh, et al., 2017). Okilwa and Robert (2017), explained that this system is based on the principal of applied behavior analysis. Therefore, PBIS requires time and labor-intensive up-front work with setting goals and collecting data to make data-based decisions to then creating practices and communicating to all students and staff within the school, for the program to work well (Okilwa & Robert, 2017).

Positive behavior intervention and support, is not just beneficial for improving student behavior, but it ultimately improves a school climate through working and changing adult behavior. Moreover, “PBIS allows for distinctions of what behaviors should be handled in the classroom, due to clear definitions of unwanted behaviors, and what behavior should be handled with a referral to the office” (Mcintosh, et al., 2017, pp. 149). Per Mcintosh et al. (2017), PBIS

structure of clear expectations being posted and taught throughout the school reduces the uncertainty in decisions, which can reduce the influence of implicit bias in that decision-making process. Schools have been using this system for over two decades and research shows that when implemented with high fidelity, PBIS decreases referrals and exclusion from academics, as well as improves teacher attitudes and the school climate (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). PBIS implementation also can lead to the success of the improved school climate and academic outcomes while in-turn reducing discipline referrals and suspensions (Carter et al., 2016). This notion is also met within Bradshaw, et al. (2009), mixed-methods longitudinal study consisting of discipline referrals, from 37 elementary public schools from five school districts, to determine the effectiveness of School Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support. The study did determine that there was a reduction in the amount of suspensions when the school implemented PBIS. However, for schools that did not, their referral data did not improve over time, nor change (Bradshaw, et al., 2009). Nevertheless, Bal (2016) pointed out, that these positive results with PBIS still benefited whites students, while students of color continued to remain overrepresented within the disciplinary process, even with an overall reduction in discipline referrals or suspensions.

There are also a few areas of importance concerning PBIS that should be noted. The first, is that the behavior standards for the school are often created based on the norms within the middle class (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). This, connects back to the earlier message of systems being created by those whom they look like. Secondly, Okilwa and Robert (2017) state, PBIS may not be implemented with high fidelity due to a teacher's lack of cultural knowledge, which then in turn allows for the program to be compromised, which then continues to affect students of color. Therefore, it is important that schools that pursue PBIS initiatives also train their staff in

culturally responsive teaching. This leads the reader to the final suggested method to combat the disproportionality within school discipline, culturally responsive teaching.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching.** More specifically stated, teachers must accomplish five core components to be successful when being culturally responsive in the classroom; they are, having sensitivity to students situational and cultural experiences, using reflective thinking, build authentic relationships, creating a connection to curriculum and have effective communication (Bottiani, et al., 2018). Okilwa and Robert (2107) agreed that when a teacher is culturally responsive they are making connections with students, not only on a personal level, but also in connecting students with the curriculum in a way that is relevant for that student. Their study stated that culturally responsive teaching is:

“.. an approach that is considered to acknowledge diverse student backgrounds. It is geared towards understanding student prior experiences and learning styles, as well as uses cultural knowledge to ensure that learning is appropriate to culturally diverse learners” (Okilwa & Robert, 2107, p. 255).

Teachers that take an initiative to go to training to become culturally responsive, as well as those who receive guidance and feedback about their teaching style, become more attentive to the needs of their students of color and act more equitably, thus increasing the possibility of reducing disproportionality in discipline (Mcintosh et al., 2017). Monroe (2005), show positive results in reducing disproportionality in discipline through culturally responsive teaching. This being reiterated in a more recent qualitative study by Bottiani, et al. (2020), where 397 ninth graders from ten schools were sampled, said, “available research shows culturally responsive teaching shows positive teacher-student relationships, linking to better student engagement and less behavioral misconduct” (p.1021). However, the study also mentioned that while culturally

responsive teaching does have positive results in many areas involving students, there is no clear and consistent data that shows culturally responsive teaching “can mitigate the effects of adverse experiences such as racial discrimination,” (Bottiani, et al., 2020, p.1019). This leads the author to question the severity of damage that remains with a student after one experience of a disproportionate response to behavior or experience within school?

### **Summary of Findings**

Through decades of research, virtually every study regarding disproportionality in discipline speaks to the fact that it clearly exists within the school system, the rate in which it continues to exist, and who it most affects. In light of knowing that there is a racial disproportionality in school discipline, the majority of studies also speaks to a variety of contributing factors, such as zero-tolerance policies and implicit bias, which continue to perpetuate disproportionate levels of behavior for African American students and other students of color. As well, several scholars speak to how disproportionality plays a part in students’ lives, from short-term, engagement and self-esteem, to long-term concerns of mental health, employment success or higher risk of falling into the criminal justice system. The bottom line is that the scholars show us that disproportionality in discipline is detrimental to students of color, most specifically, African American males.

Many scholars suggest different avenues to try, such as restorative justice, PBIS or culturally responsive teaching, to reduce the disproportionality in discipline. They generally agree that single solution ideas have not been successful in the progression of closing the gap of disproportionality in discipline and therefore also the gap in academic achievement. Instead they suggest a multi-layered approach of interventions will need to be executed in order to effectively

work on closing the gap and therefore there is still a crucial need for more research to be done to find the right combination of what strategies will work to create lasting change.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research presented here has shown that disproportionality in discipline is a real, continued, and prevalent problem. The continued growth of this problem is perpetuated through policies, such as zero-tolerance, ultimately also perpetuating the school-to-prison-pipeline. Teacher's implicit bias, along with a lack of culturally responsive training further place students of color at a higher risk of being susceptible to disproportionate discipline. Teachers, administration and policy makers must continue to prioritize these findings, examine the constructs of the discipline systems, who they are affecting and how to remedy these matters, for children of color, especially African American students to get a fair shot to their education.

Throughout the proceeding chapter, the insights gained from the research and how those insights can be applied toward pushing forward change will be shared. The chapter will also discuss suggestions for future studies that can help to reduce and eliminate such practices as those that create disproportionality in discipline.

## **Chapter Three: Discussion and Application**

### **Insights Gained from the Research**

After reviewing each study mentioned in the literature review, several insights were gained. First, regardless of the contributing factors, students of color, more specifically African American students, are disproportionately disciplined when compared to white students. Throughout their educational career, African American students, are two to five times more likely than white students, to be suspended (Monroe, 2005). Research shows that African American students receive a higher rate of scrutiny regarding their behavior. Whether conscious



or unconscious, they are referred and suspended at higher rates than any other ethnic group of students. Furthermore, research speaks to how implicit bias plays a major part in the increased rate of subjective behavior referrals for African American students and links this mentality to stereotypes that exist within our society. Therefore, there must be clear, specific and on-going training to counter implicit bias, stereotyping and discrimination.

Another insight gained was the rate in which zero-tolerance policies caused an increase to the disproportionality gap in discipline. Through the research, zero-tolerance policies, were found to be a conduit for students being introduced at a higher rate to the criminal justice system through subjective discipline referrals and referrals to law enforcement (Mcintosh et al., 2017). Ultimately, the zero-tolerance policy has, in many cases been a student's introduction to the criminal justice system then continuing to perpetuate the school-to-prison-pipeline. Therefore, zero-tolerance policies need to be removed from the school systems.

Yes, the harsh reality of disproportionality in discipline is that the greatest contributing factor is the human, from policy making to policy implementation. However, according to research disproportionality can be combated with various methods, such as restorative justice, PBIS and culturally responsive teaching. This information led to the insight that no single idea method will achieve the results of breaking down the current discipline system, reducing the current racial gap within discipline, nor end it all together. Moreover, the research shows that with the right combination of methods such as restorative justice and culturally responsive trained teachers, it provides hope and some success in reducing disproportionality in discipline. This means that schools need to stop putting all their eggs in one basket and instead adopt a multi-layered approach to address disproportionality in discipline. This leads us to the question, how?

**Application**

The first step, while in theory would seem easy enough, would be for educators to examine their attitudes about the students in which they are referring and disciplining the most. In this case, African American students. However, for this to be done successful, it would be suggested that the educators must first honestly and openly reflect on their own culture, values, experiences and beliefs not only regarding schooling, but also society, family and traditions and how they differ from those from different cultures. These differences must be not only recognized, but embraced in order to begin understanding their transformation of becoming more conscious of their outward actions and attitude or better known as implicit bias. Though this consciousness, the goal would be to start counter-balancing negative stereotypical associations and therefore, reducing the effects of implicit bias on decision making. Being aware, means the individual is halfway to where they need to be. This also allows staff to begin forming relationships with students they previously may have not taken the time to do so.

The removal of zero-tolerance policies also needs to occur to better serve students. No two circumstances are identical and it is important to understand all the details of a situation to best approach how to decide on the outcome or response. Unlike, the criminal justice system, it should not be a process of pulling together evidence on how to prove a child's guilt in any given situation. Rather, it should be a process of listening, learning and seeking to understand what the child is lacking or needing that is causing the concerned behavior. However, this also means taking the time to recognize the difference between a serious safety issue and minor disruptive concerns. Currently, many schools districts have been removing school resources officers from their buildings. In the past, zero-tolerance policies and school resource officers have gone hand in hand, often referring students with minor behavior concerns to law enforcement. Ultimately,

introducing them to the criminal justice system. Could school districts re-allocate funding, currently in place for school resource officers, toward positions that help evaluate behavior concerns and alleviate the school-to-prison-pipeline?

As stated above, in theory both of these applications would seem easy enough to do. However, a multi-layered approach will need to be taken to achieve and sustain the desired results of forming better relationships with students of color, more specifically African Americans. This multi-layered approach would begin with culturally responsive teaching training and self-reflection training. Through culturally responsive training, teachers would accomplish five core components that would not only benefit their teaching ability, but also their student's success. The core components teachers would gain through culturally responsive teaching training would be to have sensitivity to students situational and cultural experiences, use reflective thinking, learn how build and maintain authentic relationships, how to build a connection to curriculum and effectively communicate (Bottiani, et al., 2018). Research shows positive results in reducing disproportionality in discipline through culturally responsive teaching (Monroe, 2005), because teachers become more attentive to the needs of their students of color and act more equitably (Mcintosh, et al., 2017). As well, when staff are culturally responsive there is a more likelihood that they will connect academics to their students in a meaningful way, therefore also increasing student engagement. However, culturally responsive teaching is just one layer of the multi-layered approach that needs to occur to successfully support students of color, especially African American students.

Reflected in research, PBIS, when used with high fidelity, decreased referrals and exclusion from academics, as well as improved teacher attitudes and the school climate (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). Its proactive approach, through presenting expectations in a positive way with

visual aids throughout the school as well a preventative 3-tiered system to support academics and social behaviors helps in better supporting students, rather than “catching” students (McIntosh, et al., 2017). In combination with being trained in cultural responsiveness, PBIS can help to change adult behavior maintain a positive outlook within the school. This occurs through teachers being attentive to a students’ needs, while having clear expectations posted, reduces the uncertainty in decisions, ultimately reducing the possible influence of implicit bias in that decision-making process as well. Therefore, lessening the use of office referrals, due to strengthened relationships with students and the ability to address student’s subjective behavioral needs within the classroom, rather than excluding them from class (McIntosh, et al., 2017). However, again, this is just another layer which is needed to begin true change.

Thirdly, combining restorative practices with the multi-layered approaches above would allow students to have a voice, be accountable, recognize the impact and repair the damage that occurred (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). Training staff in the use of restorative practices allows them several avenues to slow down and strengthen their communication and listening skills through guided mediations or talking circles. These tactics will help teachers to better understand what a student ultimately is needing or seeking through their behavior. In consistently providing students with a safe space to share openly and honestly while not being judged, staff are able to build trust and respect with students while also promoting their engagement not only in the process, but also within the school. A quote by Benjamin Franklin said, “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.” When schools begin to include and engage students in conversation regarding matters that involve or affect them, that is when they will begin to learn how they impact themselves and those around them.

It is clear to see how this trifecta of methods could strengthen a staff's connection with students. Staff that not only go through training, but take the initiative to receive guidance and feedback, become more attentive to the needs of their students of color and act more equitably, thus increasing the possibility of reducing disproportionality in discipline (McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvan, 2017). However, the limitations within each of these areas is consistency and willingness. If staff do not wholeheartedly implement these methods and ultimately begin to see the benefits of them they are not likely to be used consistently. Therefore, resulting in a lack of positive results. The other limitation is whether staff are able to engage in self-reflection at a level that is vulnerable and honest to better understand the areas in which they have implicit bias or why. Learning about oneself, or learning that what you believe to be right actually hurts someone else, is not an easy message for everyone to receive. However, as staff, we are quick to correct others, such as students, in order to "teach" them. Human interactions, perceptions, preconceived notions and experiences all shape us to who we are. Due to that, there is no perfect answer to lessen the limitations in which those create on a day to day basis. However, if schools begin to slow down the process within the learning environment and focus back on relationships and engagement beyond a surface level, the hope is that positive academics and behavior outcomes will also follow.

Furthermore, it is important to keep relationships at the forefront of each training and every school interaction. This includes increasing parental involvement through the entire process of the student's education; not just when a student fails to behave in accordance with school policy. As well, there also needs to be alternative approaches to discipline other than to exclude a student from their education. This may mean, introducing Saturday schooling, after-school study/teacher instruction or parent-teacher-student collaborations, as well as more

programming around social and emotional learning. All of these alternative approaches, as well as trainings, take substantial funding, one thing most public schools are severely needing. Could future studies regarding disproportionality in school discipline help alleviate the disparities while also helping administrators to better focus their resources on more successful trainings and programs?

### **Future Studies**

As previously stated, there is not a lack of research pointing to the clear fact that there is disproportionality within school discipline. Yet, this topic would benefit from further research regarding programs or methods that work to reduce the disproportionality and in what combinations are most successful. More detailed research to determine the level of implicit bias that exists within schools would be helpful as an eye opener for staff. As well, future studies could revolve around trainings that have been successful in decreasing the level implicit bias plays in decision making, especially that which involves disciplinary actions. The limitations with this kind of study is huge, however, due to most data being retrieved through self-reporting, which is not entirely reliable.

There are many studies showing how zero-tolerance policies and school resource officers have negatively affected students. These studies also show how they perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline. However, through recent tragic events, schools are beginning to remove these kinds of policies and positions from the schools. Therefore, new research needs to take place to determine if their removal changes the rate in which African American students are referred. Will it lessen the risk African Americans experience entering into the criminal justice system due to being referred for their behavior? Learning more about this through current research would

provide some insight into the connection of behavior and the removal of law enforcement in schools.

In turn, it would also be beneficial for further studies to take place on multi-layered approaches of combating disproportionality in discipline. Many studies speak to the positives, as well as the limitations, of single idea methods such as restorative justice, culturally responsive teaching and PBIS (Bradshaw, et al., 2009; Okilwa & Robert, 2017; Monroe, 2015; McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvan, 2017). Yet, the overall message received, is while each of these methods show positive outcomes, they cannot work alone. Therefore, it would be extremely important for researchers to study multi-layered approaches used. The limitation in this future study would be the difficulty in finding several schools running the same multi-layered approach with fidelity. However, if this were to come to fruition, it could substantially mean finding a combination that ends disproportionality within academics and discipline.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the underlying message throughout each study is that racial disproportionality in school discipline not only exists, but it is one of the most significant problems in education today (McIntosh et al., 2017). More concerning is how numbers speak to a student's childhood educational experience and how often they are forced to lose instruction. From the rate in which African American students are affected: "African American preschool children being 3.6 times more likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as white preschool children" (Okonofua & Quereshi, 2017, p. 6). Children as young as five, of African American descent, being suspended for talking back, while their school records the incident as a threat, only furthers a student's difficulty moving forward in their education (Rudd, 2014). An introduction to the criminal justice system, through school referrals to law enforcement, beginning earlier than a

student's teen years, yet showing its highest rate for citations among 13-year old students (Simons, 2017). While some states were found to remove African American students from the learning environment at a rate of seven times more than White students (Bal, et al., 2018). Yet the national average for an African American student to be removed is two to five times more likely than that of white students (Monroe, 2005). These numbers are undisputable in showing that disproportionality in discipline, at levels such as these, can affect one's mental and emotional well-being. From short-term struggles with low self-esteem, disengagement at school; to longer-term struggles of difficulty in relationships or trusting others, higher referrals into special education, higher school drop-out risks to difficulty with employment or even future incarceration.

There is no denying that the disproportionate rate in which African American students are referred out for behavior is rooted in this Nation's history of racism, conscious prejudice, stereotyping and perceptions and unconscious bias. There is also no denying that school systems, such as many organizations, were built on a system benefiting white individuals. Clearly racism in the educational system exists in areas such as discipline and we have to start addressing that in order to move forward and implement changes that equally benefit all students. There is an African proverb that says, "It takes a village to raise a child." That being said, the school must be the part of the village that helps create a safe and healthy environment for students to grow, not only academically but socially and emotionally.

Best quoted by James Baldwin, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced" (Bottiani, et al., 2018, pp. 114). Given the continued growth of racial and ethnic diversity within our Nation and our school systems and the current and continued unrest in the Nation, change needs to come! Therefore, schools must be ready, with a



willingness, to host hard conversations, while embracing the hard realities regarding their current disciplinary practices. This must be done, all while making a conscious and collaborative effort to create an open and understanding environment for feedback, not just from peers, but also from students and their family.

### References

- American Institutes for Research. (2021). Discipline. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/environment/discipline>
- American Psychological Association (APA). (2008). Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?: An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations. *American Psychologist*, 63(9), 852-862. doi:10.1037/0003-066x.63.9.852
- American Psychological Association Services, Inc.,(APA). (n.d.). The Pathway from Exclusionary Discipline to the School to Prison Pipeline. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from <https://www.apa.org/advocacy/health-disparities/discipline-facts.pdf>
- Bal, A. (2016). From Intervention to Innovation: A Cultural-Historical Approach to the Racialization of School Discipline. *Interchange*, 47(4), 409-427. doi:10.1007/s10780-016-9280-z
- Bal, A., Afacan, K., & Cakir, H. I. (2018). Culturally Responsive School Discipline: Implementing Learning Lab at a High School for Systemic Transformation. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(5), 1007-1050. doi:10.3102/0002831218768796
- Balingit, M. (2018, April 24). Racial disparities in school discipline are growing, federal data show. Retrieved April 2, 2019, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/racial-disparities-in-school-discipline-are-growing-federal-data-shows/2018/04/24/67b5d2b8-47e4-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.aab81c2128ea](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/racial-disparities-in-school-discipline-are-growing-federal-data-shows/2018/04/24/67b5d2b8-47e4-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee_story.html?utm_term=.aab81c2128ea)
- Bottiani, J. H., Bradshaw, C. P., & Gregory, A. (2018). Nudging the Gap: Introduction to the Special Issue “Closing in on Discipline Disproportionality”. *School Psychology Review*, 47(2), 109-117. doi:10.17105/spr-2018-0023.v47-2

Bottiani, J. H., Mcdaniel, H. L., Henderson, L., Castillo, J. E., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2020).

Buffering Effects of Racial Discrimination on School Engagement: The Role of Culturally Responsive Teachers and Caring School Police. *Journal of School Health, 90*(12), 1019-1029. doi:10.1111/josh.12967

Bradshaw, C. P., Mitchell, M. M., & Leaf, P. J. (2009). Examining the Effects of Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports on Student Outcomes. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 12*(3), 133-148. doi:10.1177/1098300709334798

Carter, P. L., Skiba, R., Arredondo, M. I., & Pollock, M. (2016). You Can't Fix What You Don't Look At. *Urban Education, 52*(2), 207-235. doi:10.1177/0042085916660350.

Dunn, M. J. (2002, June 01). Security Solutions: Knowing Legislation. Retrieved January 20, 2021, from <https://www.asumag.com/safety-security/fire-life-safety/article/20851028/security-solutions-knowing-legislation>

Dunning-Lozano, J. L. (2018). Secondary discipline: The unintended consequences of zero tolerance school discipline for low-income black and latina Mothers. *Urban Education, 1*-28. doi:10.1177/0042085918817343

Fenning, P., & Rose, J. (2007). Overrepresentation of African American Students in Exclusionary Discipline The Role of School Policy. *Urban Education, 42*(6), 536-559. doi:10.1177/0042085907305039

Gastic, B. (2016). Disproportionality in School Discipline in Massachusetts. *Education and Urban Society, 49*(2), 163-179. doi:10.1177/0013124516630594

Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development. (n.d.). Two Types of Bias. Retrieved January 13, 2021, from <https://nccc.georgetown.edu/bias/module-3/1.php#:~:text=Implicit%20or%20unconscious%20bias%20operates,full%20awareness>

%20of%20that%20person.

- Girvan, E. J., Gion, C., McIntosh, K., & Smolkowski, K. (2017). The relative contribution of subjective office referrals to racial disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Quarterly, 32*(3), 392-404. doi:10.1037/spq0000178.
- Heilbrun, A., Cornell, D., & Lovegrove, P. (2015). Principal Attitudes Regarding Zero Tolerance and Racial Disparities in School Suspensions. *Psychology in the Schools, 52*(5), 489–499. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21838>
- Lustick, H. (2015). Administering discipline differently: A Foucauldian lens on restorative school discipline. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 1*-15. doi:10.1080/13603124.2015.1100755
- MAEC, Inc. (2020, May 27). Disproportionality, Discipline, and Race. Retrieved January 12, 2021, from <https://maec.org/resource/disproportionality-discipline-and-race/>
- McIntosh, K., Ellwood, K., McCall, L., & Girvan, E. J. (2018). Using Discipline Data to Enhance Equity in School Discipline. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 53*(3), 146-152. doi:10.1177/1053451217702130
- Monroe, C. R. (2005). Why Are "Bad Boys" always Black?: Causes of Disproportionality in School Discipline and Recommendations for Change. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 79*(1), 45-50. doi:10.3200/tchs.79.1.45-50
- Nelson, L. & Lind, D. (2015, February 24). The School to Prison Pipeline, Explained. Retrieved January 20, 2021 from <http://www.justicepolicy.org/news/8775>
- Noguera, P. A. (2003). Schools, Prisons, and Social Implications of Punishment: Rethinking Disciplinary Practices. *Theory Into Practice, 42*(4), 341-350. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip4204\_12

- Okilwa, N. S., & Robert, C. (2017). School Discipline Disparity: Converging Efforts for Better Student Outcomes. *The Urban Review*, *49*(2), 239-262. doi:10.1007/s11256-017-0399-8
- Okonofua, J., & Quereshi, A. (2017). Locked Out of the Classroom: How Implicit Bias Contributes to Disparities in School Discipline. Retrieved January 13, 2021, from [https://www.naacpldf.org/files/about-us/Bias\\_Reportv2017\\_30\\_11\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.naacpldf.org/files/about-us/Bias_Reportv2017_30_11_FINAL.pdf)
- Pesta, R. (2018). Labeling and the Differential Impact of School Discipline on Negative Life Outcomes: Assessing Ethno-Racial Variation in the School-to-Prison Pipeline. *Crime & Delinquency*, *64*(11), 1489-1512. doi:10.1177/0011128717749223
- Ritter, G. W., & Anderson, K. P. (2018). Examining Disparities in Student Discipline: Mapping Inequities from Infractions to Consequences. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *93*(2), 161-173. doi:10.1080/0161956x.2018.1435038
- Rudd, T. (2014, February 5). Racial Disproportionality in School Discipline: Implicit Bias is Heavily Implicated. Retrieved January 13, 2021, from <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/racial-disproportionality-in-school-discipline-implicit-bias-is-heavily-implicated/>
- Simons, M. (2017). Giving vulnerable students their due: Implementing due process protections for students referred from schools to the justice system. *Duke Law Journal*, *66*(4), 943-977.
- Stalker, K. C. (2017). Teen Court–School Partnerships: Reducing Disproportionality in School Discipline. *Children & Schools*, *40*(1), 17-24. doi:10.1093/cs/cdx024
- Sullivan, A.L., A’Vant, E., Baker, J., Chandler, D., Graves, S., McKinney, E., & Sayres, T. (2009). Inequity in special education, part I: Understanding the problem of disproportionality. *Communique*, *38*(1), 14-15.

Townsend, B. L. (2000). The Disproportionate Discipline of African American Learners:

Reducing School Suspensions and Expulsions. *Exceptional Children*, 66(3), 381-391.

doi:10.1177/001440290006600308

Wolf Harlow, C. (2003). Education and correctional populations. *U.S. Department of Justice*, 1-

12. Retrieved from <http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf>

Verdugo, R. R. (2002). Race-Ethnicity, Social Class, and Zero-Tolerance Policies. *Education*

*and Urban Society*, 35(1), 50-75. doi:10.1177/001312402237214

Wallace Jr., J., Goodkind, S., Wallace, C., & Bachman, J. (2008). Racial, Ethnic, and Gender

Differences in School Discipline among U.S. High School Students: 1991-2005. *Negro*

*Educational Review*, 59(1-2), 47-62.