

## School Discipline & Corrections

How does school discipline impact learning & incarceration?

**Some disciplinary actions in school systems are associated with students entering the criminal justice system.**

On-campus law enforcement officials (e.g., school resource officers) and ‘zero tolerance’ policies for minor infractions of codes of conduct are the primary mechanisms connecting students to corrections systems (Mallett, 2016). This pathway is often called the ‘school-to-prison-pipeline’ (Mallett, 2016).

**School resource officers (SROs)** are “sworn law enforcement officers responsible for safety in schools” that can make arrests, respond to calls, and document campus incidents (USDOJ).

- Few studies have shown SROs to be associated with increases in actual and/or perceived school safety (Javdani, 2019).
  - U.S. data from 2014-18 suggest that SROs did not prevent school shootings (Sorenson, 2021).
- Schools with SROs tend to report more crimes to law enforcement (Na, 2011).
  - In NC, SRO presence increased suspensions and expulsions by about 70% and the number of referrals to law enforcement by 132% (Sorenson, 2021).



### Research Highlights

Some disciplinary policies meant to improve safety in schools are linked to poorer academic performance and early student involvement in the criminal justice system.

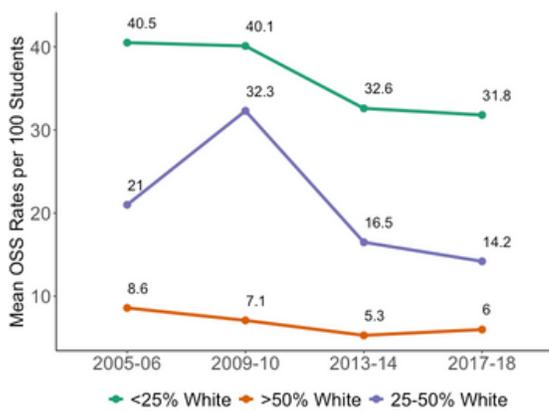
Rates of suspension, expulsion and school-related law enforcement encounters are disproportionately higher for boys, students with disabilities, and Black students.

State policies related to school discipline can be targeted to decrease student incarceration rates and improve learning outcomes.

**‘Zero tolerance’ (ZT)** refers to a strict disciplinary approach that removes students from school to curb violence and drug use on campus. It can also be applied to minor offenses such as truancy and class disruption (Monahan, 2014).

- ZT policies prevent administrators from considering the motive and context of situations in disciplinary decisions and can lead to the suspension or expulsion of first-time offenders (Mallett, 2016).
- In grades 6-8, violation of rules, refusal to follow instructions, disorderly conduct, and repeated classroom disruption accounted for 45% of suspensions; fighting, verbal abuse, profanity, and assault accounted for 25% of suspensions (Wilkerson, 2022).

Security measures such as security cameras, metal detectors, and regular or random searches along with bias based on ability, sex, gender identity, and race also affect the number of students sent into the corrections system (Mallett, 2016; Sorenson, 2021).



**Figure 1.** In Missouri, average out-of-school suspension (OSS) rates are higher for predominantly minority schools (adapted from PRiME, 2020).

## School discipline disproportionately impacts minorities, boys, and disabled students, and has negative effects on learning.

Suspensions and arrests are used disproportionately for Black students (USDOE, 2014). Hispanic, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, multiracial students, and students with disabilities also have higher suspension rates than White students (USDOE, 2014; de Brey, 2019).

- SROs are more common in schools with large minority populations and poorer students (NCWA, 2016).
- Schools with SROs have higher student arrest rates, especially for Black students and boys (Homer, 2019).
- In MO, predominantly minority schools have suspension rates 5x more than majority White schools (PRiME, 2020; Figure 1).

Students who have been suspended are more likely to dropout, fail classes and standardized tests (Chu, 2018). While suspended, students are twice as likely to be arrested (Monahan, 2014). High numbers of suspensions/expulsions are associated with increased risk of recidivism to juvenile detention (Novak, 2022).

- 2/3 of students who never received a suspension graduate in four years compared to only 1/3 of students who have received a suspension (Chu, 2018).
- Suspended students pass 60% of their classes while non-suspended students passed 80% of their classes (Chu, 2018).
- Entering the criminal justice system as a student is associated with many negative life outcomes, such as continued involvement with the criminal justice system and lower employment rates (Bernburg, 2006).

## States advance alternative policies to decrease incarceration rates of students and improve learning outcomes.

Policies promoting positive social and professional support, and trust between students and staff may improve learning outcomes (Mallett 2016). Many states have recently advanced policies to reduce the use of corrections in schools, but evaluation of program efficacy is still lacking for many.

- ND, UT and TN have **decriminalized minor status offenses**, instead referring children to noncriminal justice services.
  - ZT reform of minor offenses in PA did not reduce long-term suspension rates.
- CA **prohibits suspension** of elementary students. VA requires schools to **provide suspended students with access to resources** so they don't fall behind.
- KS requires **SRO training** to minimize the risk of students facing corrections.
- Several states (NJ, MA, KY, WV, VA) have laws that require **implicit bias and equity training** for school staff (NCSL 2020).
- Some states **employ more counselors and/or behavior intervention specialists** rather than law enforcement to deal with disciplinary issues in schools (NCSL 2020).