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CONTACT

Lucinda Fickel
lfickel@uchicago.edu
(773)-834-2823

New UChicago Consortium report: Racial disparities in suspension rates driven by schools with concentrated disadvantage

Students' risk of suspension is more strongly determined by which school they attend than by their backgrounds—including their race, gender or income. A subset of Chicago schools—about a quarter of high schools and 10 percent of schools with middle grades— have very high suspension rates, and almost all of these schools predominantly serve African-American students. These schools' students come from the poorest neighborhoods with the lowest incoming achievement; many have been victims of abuse or neglect. At high-suspending high schools, about half of students received a suspension in the 2013-14 school year.

Following [an earlier report](#) that found Chicago has been experiencing an overall decline in suspension rates since 2009, *Suspending Chicago's Students: Differences in Discipline across Schools* examines reasons for racial and gender disparities in suspension rates and finds that suspensions are concentrated among schools serving the most vulnerable student populations. *Suspending Chicago's Students* also explores the degree to which differences in schools' suspension rates are related to school climate and student achievement.

“The group of high schools that are suspending at very high rates are facing extreme concentrations of disadvantage, said UChicago Consortium researcher Lauren Sartain, lead author on the report. “The combination of deep poverty, low achievement, and exposure to trauma presents enormous challenges. Without supports, that’s a recipe for frustrated students, stressed teachers, and an environment where tensions escalate.”

Key findings from *Suspending Chicago's Students* include:

- **At Chicago high schools serving students who live in extreme poverty and have low levels of academic achievement, all students are at a high risk for being suspended.** Racial disparities in suspension rates are largely attributable to the degree to which Chicago high schools are segregated by race, poverty, and achievement. The schools serving students from the highest-poverty neighborhoods with the lowest incoming achievement are either predominantly African American schools or schools that serve a mix of African American and Latino students. Thus, suspension practices at these schools drive the racial disparities at the district level. However, there are also many schools that predominantly serve African American students that do not have

high suspension rates; the students in these schools tend to have high prior achievement or come from neighborhoods without substantial poverty.

- **Students with a history of abuse or neglect are at particularly high risk for being suspended.** For the first time, researchers were able to combine discipline data with child welfare data and found that almost a third of the students with a history of abuse or neglect were suspended in the 2013-14 school year. Students with a history of abuse or neglect are concentrated in schools with high suspension rates; in almost all high-suspending high schools, at least 10 percent of students had a documented history of abuse or neglect.
- **Schools with higher suspension rates have worse climates for learning, even when compared to schools serving similar student populations.** Frequent use of suspensions is related to greater disorder in schools and with less positive peer relationships among students. District policies discouraging suspensions, shortening their length, and encouraging alternative discipline approaches such as restorative justice have mixed effects. Shortening the length of suspensions, which mostly affected schools with the highest suspension rates, was associated with improved attendance but worse school climate. Restorative practices that accompany suspensions have a more positive association with climate in schools with lower suspension rates, suggesting that policy solutions are particularly difficult to implement effectively in schools with the most disciplinary problems.
- **Disparities also exist because African American boys are suspended at higher rates than other students in their school.** At schools that have racial/ethnic diversity, suspension rates for African American boys are about 13 percentage points higher than the suspension rates for other students who attend the same school.

“Students with the most disadvantages are most in need of a supportive school climate, and all too often they’re not getting it. Further, they’re more likely to be suspended, miss even more instructional time, and fall further behind,” said Elaine Allensworth, Lewis-Sebring Director at UChicago Consortium and co-author of the report.

“The vast majority of Chicago schools are safe and orderly and have low suspension rates,” said Consortium researcher and report coauthor Shanette Porter. “That’s especially true in the middle grades, where there is less concentrated disadvantage than at the high school level. Everyone’s likelihood of suspension goes up in the transition to high school, but it’s particularly problematic for African American boys.”