



## School Social Work Association of America

### Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality in School Discipline

SSWAA promotes the profession of school social work to enhance social-emotional growth and positive mental health, behavioral, and academic outcomes of all students. We support school social work as a valued, integral part of the education of all children, connecting schools, families and communities. This resolution statement focuses on the issue of *racial and ethnic disparities in disciplinary actions, the role of school social workers in addressing this concern, and how schools can be supported in their efforts to promote positive school climates that minimize these disparities.*

**Background:** Commonly referred to as the “school-to prison-pipeline,” suspension and expulsions can push children out of school, often leading directly and indirectly to involvement in the juvenile justice system (Mizel, Miles, Pedersen, Tucker, Ewing, & D’Amico, 2016). Moreover, these disciplinary actions tend to disproportionately and more severely impact students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities (Krezmien, Leone, & Wilson, 2014). Disciplinary actions such as suspensions and expulsions have dramatically increased for students of color from 1972 to 2010, with rates doubling for African American and Latino students (11.8% to 24.3% and 6.1% to 12.0% respectively), while the increase for Whites was slight, from 6.0% to 7.1% (Losen & Martinez, 2013). While there is limited research on Native American students, one study looking at the data in the state of Arizona found that the level of disproportionality was similar to African American students (Brown & DiTillio, 2013). Considering the disproportional increase in disciplinary actions, it is critical to recognize that *differences in school behavior do not justify disparities in disciplinary actions across racial groups* (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). In other words, for the same type of infraction, African American and Latino children are punished more harshly.

The increase in suspensions and expulsions has been largely due to the use zero tolerance policies in the public schools over the last two decades (Heilbrun, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2015). Zero tolerance policies refer to mandatory sanctions for a particular behavior without consideration for the severity of that infraction. The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, requiring expulsion for students bringing a firearm to schools, was the beginning of the proliferation of the use of Zero Tolerance policies, reinforced later that decade by several school shootings (Mongon & Walker, 2012). However, schools expanded the use of Zero Tolerance policies to include other infractions such as drug use, alcohol, classroom disruption, and insubordination (Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2010). While Zero Tolerance was intended to deter behavior, the research concludes that not only is there no evidence that this policy deters misbehavior, but there are negative and harmful consequences to these policies such as disproportionate impact on students of color as well as an increase in future suspensions, increased risk of drop out, and lower academic performance (Kelly, Raines, Stone & Frey, 2010).

African American students are one of the most impacted by differential responses to similar behavior. In a study that controlled for the type of infraction, African American students had higher rates of out-of-school suspension or expulsion than did all other racial groups (Porowski, O’Connor, & Passa, 2014). As recently as 2014, researchers found that school exclusion through suspension and expulsion continued to increase for African American students (Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker, Sheya, & Hughes,

2014). African American students have been overrepresented in a range of school disciplinary outcomes, including office disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Even when controlling for gender, special education status, and socio-economic class, African American students were the most likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline (Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Van Norman, 2013).

School suspensions and expulsions can lead to direct involvement in the courts and the juvenile justice, and can also lead to disengagement from school, lower academic performance, higher likelihood of repeating a grade, and dropping out (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). While most studies have focused on suspensions and expulsions, a smaller number of studies looking at the impact of office referrals have found that they not only disproportional across race, gender, and SES (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, & Leaf, 2010), but that they also reduce opportunities to learn and increase the risk of future suspensions, expulsions, and dropping out of school (Morrison & Skiba, 2001; Scott & Barrett, 2004). Thus, as school social workers concerned with both educational equity and justice as outlined in the SSWAA school social work model, we must address structural inequalities and school processes that affect school quality and educational outcomes (Frey et al. 2017). As Frey et al. (2017) state, “school social workers are expected to give voice to issues of diversity, and social and economic justice that lead to school failure and educational disparities” (p. 32-33). Thus, not only must the work involve direct work with students, but also to work to change policies and practices that result in such disproportionately in school discipline and outcomes. School social workers can play a key role in all system levels to foster and support schools in providing different approaches to school discipline and creating trauma informed environments with an emphasis on restorative practices.

***Recommendations:***

1. SSWAA supports stronger monitoring efforts consistent with congressional intent in framing the disproportionality provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
2. SSWAA recommends technical assistance and non-regulatory guidance to school districts regarding ways to address disproportionality in disciplinary actions. School social workers can play a significant role in these efforts, including the following:
  - a. Assisting with school climate measures (e.g., Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI; <http://www.schoolclimate.org>) to determine whether the perception of school climate differs substantially among students or families of color.
  - b. Promoting the use of schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports to ensure the communication of consistent expectations and behavioral reinforcement.
  - c. Helping teachers with classroom management skills focused on prevention of and appropriate interventions for problem behaviors.
  - d. Supporting school administrators to develop more nuanced approaches to school discipline that go beyond mere school exclusion, such as implementing restorative justice programs that help troubled students understand the effect of their behavior on others and make amends for their wrongdoing.
  - e. When disciplinary infractions do occur for students in special education, contributing to manifestation determinations and conducting functional behavioral assessments to design behavior intervention plans.

- f. Providing social skills training for students with emotional/behavioral disorders (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014).
  - g. Conducting training for other school staff on cultural sensitivity, addressing such issues as racial stereotypes, microaggressions, and implicit bias.
3. Finally, school districts should be aware that hiring specialized instructional support personnel, including school social workers, is a cost-effective use of early intervening funds. School social workers are trained in early identification and prevention of academic and behavioral problems that may escalate without proper attention and they provide supports to both general and special education students and their families.

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