

Inequities in School Discipline in Melrose Public Schools - Background and Methods

- This document is a companion to the brief report found here: <https://www.reparationsformelrose.org/documents/Inequities%20in%20School%20Discipline%20in%20Melrose%20Public%20Schools%202022-2023%20Update.pdf>
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Background

Exclusionary school discipline is ineffective and harmful. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) advises that suspending students for non-violent offenses, “has limited effectiveness in improving their behavior and performance, and causes the students to fall behind academically” (MA DESE, 2016). Research shows that suspension and expulsion put students at greater risk of dropping out altogether (ACLU Washington). Disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion also have negative long-term effects, including lower earning power, fewer job opportunities, and greater chance of involvement in the carceral system, via “the school-to-prison pipeline” (ACLU Washington; Bacher-Hicks, Billings & Deming, 2021). Because Black students and students of color are disciplined more frequently and more harshly than white students (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2022), they are more likely to experience negative outcomes stemming from school discipline.

Recent studies show that racial bias is a primary cause of inequities in school discipline. For example, an experimental study in which teachers were asked to review the record of a fictional Black or white student found that teachers were more likely to label the Black student “a troublemaker” and more likely to recommend disciplinary action for the Black student than they were for a white student with an identical record (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Another study shows that, nationwide, Black students are more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled, and that inequities are greater in communities with more racial bias (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Restorative practices may reduce reliance on exclusionary school discipline. A local expert in restorative practices notes that many schools are now moving away from disciplinary models that “mirror the criminal justice system of rules and punishment,” to focus on programs that emphasize communication and relationships (Hampson, 2019; WCAI, Feb. 2, 2022). The Massachusetts Department of Education encourages schools to adopt alternatives to exclusionary school discipline, including restorative practices and conflict resolution, explaining that such programs “not only reduce suspensions but also promote greater school safety, discipline, and academic success” (MA DESE, 2016)

Methods

Data Source

Data used in this report are from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) School District Profiles, which are publicly available online at <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>.

Measures

- 1) The total number of Black students in one city in a given year
- 2) The total number of white students in one city in a given year
- 3) The number of Black students disciplined in one city in a given year
- 4) The number of white students disciplined in one city in a given year

Analyses

Rate of Discipline by Race for a Single Year (Figure 1)

Racial inequities in discipline for a single year are calculated as follows.

- Rate of discipline for Black students = (# of Black students disciplined in a single year/# of Black students in total in a single year).
- Rate of discipline for white Students = (# of white students disciplined in a single year/# of white students in total in a single year)
- Rate of Black versus white students disciplined = (Rate of Black students disciplined/Rate of white students disciplined)

For example, in Melrose, in 2019-2020 of the 231 Black students, 12 were disciplined; that is, $12/231=0.0519$ or 5.2% of Black students. Of the 3,137 white Melrose students, 27 were disciplined; that is, $27/3137=0.0086$ or 0.9% of white students. To calculate the rate of Black versus white discipline we divide the rate of discipline among Black students (0.0519) by the rate of discipline among white students (0.0086) with the result of 6.0348. Black students were disciplined at 6 times the rate of white students.

Rate of Discipline by Race for Multiple Years (Figure 2)

Racial inequities in discipline over multiple years are calculated as follows.

- Rate of discipline for Black students = (# of Black students disciplined over all the study years/# of Black students in total over all the study years).
- Rate of discipline for white Students = (# of white students disciplined over all the study years/# of white students in total over all the study years)
- Rate of Black versus white students disciplined = (Rate of Black students disciplined/Rate of white students disciplined)

For example, in Melrose, from 2012-2023, there were 2,739 Black students, of which 84 were disciplined, so the discipline rate was $84/2,739=0.0306$ or 3.1%. During the same period there were 36,696 white students, of which 256 were disciplined, so the discipline rate was $256/36,696=0.0069$ or 0.7%. To calculate the rate of Black versus white discipline we divide the rate of discipline among Black students (0.0306) by the rate of discipline among white students (0.0069) with the result of 4.4347. Black students were disciplined at 4 times the rate of white students.

Limitations

In Melrose, and in some of the other communities included in this report, the total number of students disciplined can sometimes be quite small. For example, the total number of disciplinary actions in Melrose from 2012-2023 ranged from 8 (during the pandemic, in 2020) to 60 (in 2018). In general, analyses based on a small number of estimates are less precise than those based on a larger number of estimates. That means the “true” rate of inequity in discipline might be a little greater or a little less than our estimate. Small samples are a limitation of school discipline data when analyzed at the level of a single year.

We address this limitation in two ways. First, we show data for many years at once (trends over time, as in Figure 1). This enables us to look at patterns. If there were no differences in the rate of Black and white student discipline, we would not expect to see Black rates of discipline consistently higher in every year studied, as we see here. Second, we combine many years of data to increase sample sizes and thus increase the precision of our estimates (as in Figure 2). As you will note, the number of Black students disciplined in our two examples above rose from 12 (in 2019) to 84 (2012-2023).

Data Quality and Completeness

Data used in this report were downloaded and entered into an Excel spreadsheet by one individual and checked for accuracy by a second individual. The team has documented one instance in which state data appear to have been revised over time. Data for Everett for the 2019-2020 school year were updated to increase the total number of disciplinary actions from 19 to 445. (Everett has also reported 19 actions for 2020-2021, although actions are regularly in the range of 400+). It is possible there have been other data revisions the team has not noticed.

Citations

1. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Advisory on Student Discipline under Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012. An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School. (2016)
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2. ACLU Washington. How do suspension & expulsion impact students, schools, and community?
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3. Bacher-Hicks, Billings & Deming. Proving the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Stricter middle schools raise the risk of adult arrests. Education Next. (2021)
4. U.S. Dept. of Education, Office for Civil Rights. Discriminatory Discipline. (2022)
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7. Hampson. How Restorative Practices Address Exclusionary Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline. (2019) [How Restorative Practices Address Exclusionary Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline — Pathways to Restorative Communities \(pathways2rc.com\)](#)
8. WCAI. Changes in school discipline and culture. (2022) [Changes in school discipline and culture | CAI \(capeandislands.org\)](#)
9. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. School District Profiles. Melrose. (2019/2020)
<https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/ssdr/default.aspx?orgcode=01780000&fycode=2020>
10. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. School District Profiles. Melrose. (2018/2019) <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/ssdr/?orgcode=01780000&fycode=2019>
11. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. School District Profiles. Melrose. (2020/2021)
<https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/ssdr/default.aspx?orgcode=01780000&fycode=2021>

*The MA DESE *About the Data* page for school discipline reports that disciplinary data for years prior to the 2012-2013 school year are reported in the Student Indicators Profile.