

School Discipline Disparities in Missouri's Public Schools

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Using school-level data from Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education from 2005 through 2019, we explored between-school disparities in out-of-school suspensions based on school characteristics – racial composition, locality, and socioeconomic status – to track trends and see if schools have made improvements. We find that over the last fourteen years, out-of-school suspension rates have declined, but large disparities persist between schools serving different populations of students. Out-of-school suspension rates are over five times higher for schools with predominantly (>75%) racial minorities than in schools with a majority of White students, four times higher for poorer communities than wealthier ones, and more than three times higher in urban schools than in rural ones.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, researchers have documented the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline policies and practices against Black students. Exclusionary discipline includes expulsion and suspensions of any sort. While Black students represent only 15% of K-12 students, they represent 35% of students suspended once, 44% of students suspended repeatedly, and 36% of expelled students.^I Not only are Black students subject to higher rates of exclusionary discipline, but so are students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those receiving special education services.^{II}

This policy brief focuses on disparities in out-of-school suspensions (OSS) as previous studies have linked a host of negative student outcomes to OSS. Most notably, students who are suspended out-of-school are more likely to fall behind academically, become disengaged from school, drop out or become involved with the juvenile justice system.^{III, IV, V} We intend to include an in-depth analysis of in-school-suspensions (ISS) in our education report on school discipline disparities in Missouri which will be available on the PRiME website.

While OSS rates are declining both nationally and in Missouri, the state continues to exhibit higher OSS disparities by race than the national average. According to the Office of Civil Rights, Black students in 2013-14 were 4.1 times more likely than White students to receive at least one out-of-school suspension. By 2017-18, this ratio had fallen to 3.6. In Missouri, the Black/White ratio was 4.6 in 2013-14 and fell to 4.1 in 2017-18. Thus, while both the nation and the state have made progress in reducing these rates, the disparities in Missouri persist behind the national average.^{VI}

At PRiME, we would like to dig deeper into these results and learn more about disciplinary practices across the state of Missouri. Ideally, in future analyses, we will use student-level data to examine disparities. Even now, however, with school-level data, we can learn a great deal about disciplinary practices over time across the state. In this analysis, we use school-level data from the past fourteen years (2005-06 to 2018-19) from Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to examine between-school disparities in OSS rates depending on school characteristics - racial composition, socioeconomic (SES)

Inside this issue:

Introduction	1
Trends in School Suspensions	2
Disparities in Out-of-School Suspensions	2
Conclusion	5

Special points of interest:

- Since 2005, overall out-of-school suspensions in Missouri declined by more than 30%.
- Overall, out-of-school suspensions declined for all schools across the state.
- Schools serving predominantly racial minority, low-income, and urban students experienced the greatest decrease.
- Out-of-school suspension rates are currently five times higher in predominantly racial minority schools compared to majority White schools, four times higher in low-income schools than in more affluent schools, and more than three times higher in urban schools compared to rural schools.

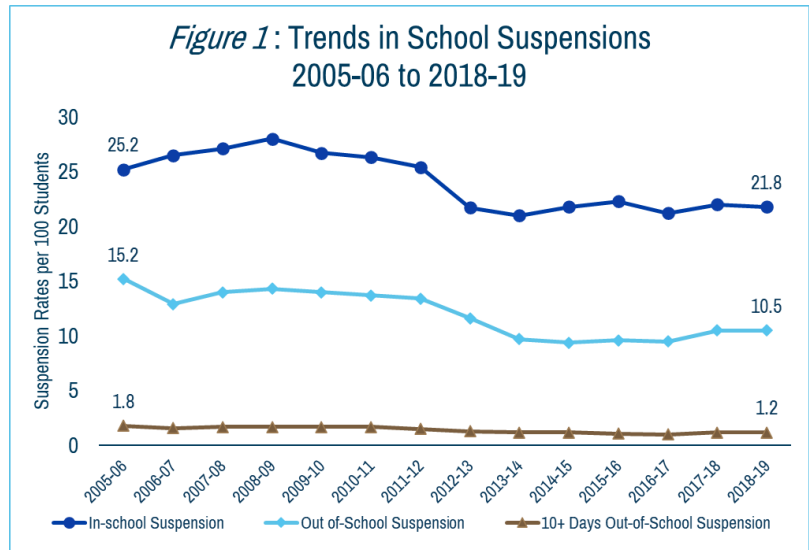
and school locality (urban, suburban and rural). Socioeconomic status is measured by the percent of students receiving free/reduced lunch (FRL) enrolled in the school. We use data from 2,184 schools, representing about 90% of all K-12 public schools in Missouri.¹ More than half of the schools were elementary (54%), and 19% and 27% were middle and high schools, respectively. Rates of OSS in this analysis are defined as the number of OSS incidents for every 100 students enrolled.

Trends in School Suspensions

Overall, the use of out-of-school (OSS) suspensions is decreasing in Missouri. Figure 1 presents trends in school suspensions in the state for the past fourteen years. Between the 2005-06 and 2018-19 school years, OSS rates fell by more than 30% from 15.2 suspensions per 100 students in 2005-06 to 10.5 per 100 students in 2018-19. In-school suspension (ISS) rates decreased by over 20% from 25.2 to 21.8 per 100 students. Similarly, extended out-of-school suspensions (10 or more days) declined by 35% from 2005-06 to 2018-19. Figure 1 presents these trends.

Disparities in Out-of-School Suspensions

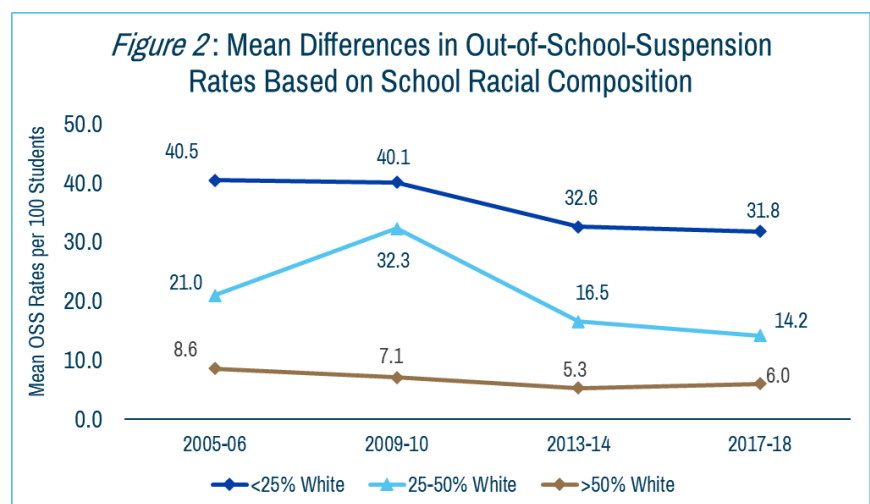
As stated, this work is motivated by the concern that school suspensions have had disparate impacts on students, depending on students' background characteristics; most notably, race and socioeconomic status. Therefore, in this section, we focus on between-school disparities in out-of-school (OSS) rates depending on school characteristics – specifically, racial composition, socioeconomic status, and school locality (urban, suburban and rural).



Racial Disparities

Racial disparities in suspension have been one of the most noted concerns in school discipline research. To assess between-school disparities in OSS rates, we divided schools into three groups based on the racial composition of their student population:

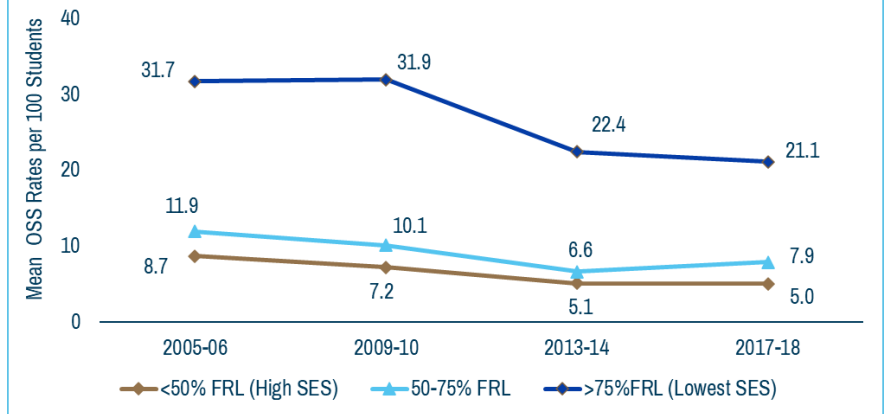
1. Schools that serve predominantly (>75%) racial minorities. These represent about 12% of Missouri's public schools and serve about 11.3% of Missouri's students.
2. Schools that are more racially integrated with a White population of between 25% and 50%. These schools are about 6% of the state's public schools and serve about 6.5% of Missouri's students.
3. Schools that serve majority (>50%) White population. These represent 82.5% of the state's public schools and serve about 82.2% of Missouri's students.



1. The schools removed from the analysis include Early Childhood Centers, Division of Youth Services, Schools for the Severely Disabled, Technical Schools and Juvenile Detention Centers. Most did not have data available except for enrollment.
2. The PRiME Center has requested for student-level data from DESE to conduct a more in-depth analysis on the extent of discipline disparities.
3. School categorization based on race and FRL were calculated from 2017-18 data. For locality, 2018-19 school year data were used.

Results in Figure 2 reveal that out-of-school suspension rates are significantly higher in the group of schools serving predominantly racial minorities across all the years assessed. While suspension rates have fallen over time for all schools, the gaps between schools by racial composition have increased slightly. In the 2005-06 school year, suspension rates were 4.7 times higher (mean = 40.5) in schools in which over 75% of the students were racial minorities compared to schools in which the student population was over 50% white (mean = 8.6). In 2017-18, OSS rates were 5.3 times higher (mean = 31.8) in predominantly (>75%) racial minority schools compared to those with majority (>50%) White students (mean = 6.0).

Figure 3: Mean Differences in Out-of-School-Suspension Rates Based on Percent Students Receiving FRL



Socioeconomic Status Disparities

As mentioned, schools’ socioeconomic status (SES) is measured by the percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunch. To assess OSS disparities based on SES, we divided schools into three groups based on the percentage of students receiving FRL:

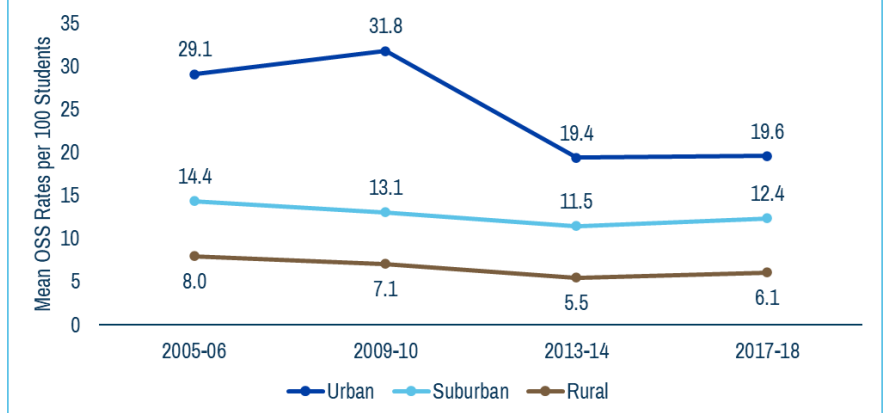
1. High SES Schools, in which less than 50% of their students are FRL eligible. About 43.6% of Missouri’s K-12 schools fall into this category. These schools serve 52.5% of Missouri’s students.
2. Economically Integrated Schools, in which between 50% and 75% of their students are FRL eligible. About 35.1% of Missouri’s schools fall into this category and about 30.4% of MO students attend these schools.
3. Lowest SES Schools, in which more than 75% of their students are FRL eligible. These schools represent 21.3% of Missouri schools and serve 17.1% of Missouri’s K-12 students.

Suspension rates are significantly higher in schools serving high-poverty neighborhoods compared to those in more affluent neighborhoods in all the years examined. Despite overall suspension rates declining for all types of schools, schools serving the lowest SES students continue to suspend students at a higher rate than their counterparts. In 2005-06, mean OSS rates were 3.6 times higher in the lowest SES schools compared to those in the highest SES schools. By the 2017-18 school year, suspension rates were over four times as high in the poorest schools compared to the more affluent schools. Figure 3 presents the comparison of suspension disparities based on the percentage of students receiving FRL over the years.

Urban/Suburban/Rural Disparities

While overall suspension rates in the state have declined over the years for all localities, disparities in out-of-school suspensions persist. Figure 4 presents the OSS trends by locality. Overall, 14% of K-12 public schools and 14.4% of Missouri’s students are in urban areas, and about 24% are in suburbs and serve about 34% of students. Finally, 62% of schools are in rural areas and serve 51.5% of students. Suspensions rates were three to four times higher in urban schools compared to rural schools and almost twice as high in

Figure 4: Mean Rates of Out-of-School-Suspensions by School Locality



urban schools (mean = 31.9) compared to rural schools (mean = 7.1). Eight years later, in 2017-18, while overall suspension rates and gaps have declined, a large gap between rural and urban schools remained. Out-of-school suspension rates in urban schools were over three times higher (mean = 19.7) compared to those in rural areas (mean = 6.1) by the end of the 2017-18 school year.

Conclusion

While the overall use of out-of-school suspensions is falling, disparities in OSS based on race, socioeconomic status, and school location are still large. Suspensions are significantly higher in schools serving primarily minority students, those serving economically depressed neighborhoods, and those in urban areas. These schools rely more on punitive discipline such as OSS compared to those schools serving whiter, more affluent, and more rural students. The lowest SES schools had the highest drop in OSS rates across the years examined. However, disparities in suspension rates between schools in rich and poor communities are still a concern.

The PRiME Center plans to continue analyzing discipline trends. For example, it is difficult to understand the extent of suspension disparities not only between schools but also within schools without student level data. The PRiME Center has requested these data from DESE and plans to examine suspension disparities in Missouri rigorously. In addition, scholars and practitioners have identified alternative behavioral interventions including Positive, Behavioral, Intervention and Support (PBIS) and Restorative Justice (RJ) practices. The PRiME Center is analyzing the research on these practices and will share our findings in future briefs.

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