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Rough Discipline, in Black and White

In a time when questions of racial inequality once again roil the nation, a UC Santa Barbara researcher has found striking evidence that “some aspects of the ‘bad old days’ are not fully behind us.” Dick Startz, a professor of economics at UCSB, reports in a [blog post](#) for the Brookings Institution that black children are twice as likely as white children to receive corporal punishment at school.

Using data from the 2011-12 school year — the most recent available — Startz also found that corporal punishment is most racially disproportionate in the Deep South, with North Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas at the top of the list.

Corporal punishment is banned in 31 states, but only two states, Delaware and Hawaii, report zero cases of corporal punishment. “The numbers are the numbers reported by the school districts or the states to the federal government,” Startz explained. “This isn’t from surveys, this isn’t the feds investigating; this is what schools say they’re doing. One could imagine that they’re underreporting some, but it’s really hard to imagine that they’re deliberately saying they’re doing corporal punishment when they’re not.”

Even more troubling, Startz said, black students receive a disproportionate number of school suspensions. Roughly 15 percent of black students receive out-of-school suspensions in a given year — four times that of white students. For in-school suspensions, black students receive twice as many as white students.

“Suspensions are an actual consequence, and being suspended from school does bad things to you, because you’re not in school,” Startz said. “In terms of social policy corporal punishment is not that frequent. However, out-of-school suspensions, which are very bad, are very common. The patterns look pretty much the same as corporal punishment. They don’t have the same regional distribution, but in terms of racial disproportionality, same thing. And that really is a serious issue.”

Startz expected pushback, and as usual, the Internet provided plenty. The most common comments were that students who were beaten “deserved” it, or it was black teachers doling out the punishment. Neither assertion holds up, he said.

“If you’re at the stage where you’re beating a kid in school, something’s gone wrong,” Startz asserted. “The truth is, I don’t have a scientific opinion as to the causes of why we see these racial disproportionalities, but it’s there and it’s big. I think that indicates something wrong. The science says it’s there; I guess people can disagree as to whether this indicates there’s something wrong or not.”

As it happens, one of Startz’s Ph.D. students is doing research that may shed light on the issue. The student, Adam Wright, has a large set of data that tracked students for several years from kindergarten on. The data come from surveys in which the race of teachers and students is known. Each year the teachers rate the students on personality traits, positive and negative.

“What Wright finds is black students, when they have black teachers, are much less likely to be written off as problems,” Startz said. “It’s basically just boys, and it doesn’t show up for Hispanics, doesn’t show up for whites.

“All these things are really about perception, but it’s very strong evidence, at least, that black teachers perceive discipline differently,” Startz added. “I think that fits with a lot of our intuition that there are certain different cultural things. Nobody’s necessarily suggesting that the white teachers are intending to do anything bad, but that it’s a useful lesson to remember that people seem to perceive things differently.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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