

NEWS RELEASE

Study Finds that Virginia Schools Suspend Black Male Students at Twice the Rate of White Male Students, But Schools Using Threat Assessment Have Lower Suspension Rates

December 18, 2014—The University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education and the Legal Aid Justice Center have partnered on a new Report documenting the scope of racial disparities in school suspension in Virginia.

The Report finds that, in Virginia schools, black male students are twice as likely to be suspended as white male students. Most black students are being suspended for relatively minor misbehavior, such as being loud or disruptive in class.

The Report also unveils the results of a new study demonstrating that use of the *Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines* (VSTAG) is associated with lower rates of school suspensions, including a smaller racial discipline gap. Schools using VSTAG have substantially lower rates of school suspensions, especially among black males. Specifically, the Report finds that:

- Schools implementing threat assessment had smaller racial disparities in their long-term suspension rates; and
- Threat assessment was associated with lower rates out-of-school suspension overall: **15%** fewer students receiving short-term suspensions & **25%** fewer students receiving long-term suspensions for schools using threat assessment.

Professor Dewey Cornell led the Curry team conducting the study. He summarized the research: “In previous longitudinal studies, we found that suspension rates were markedly reduced when schools adopted the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. Our new cross-sectional study suggests a statewide impact involving more than 600 secondary schools with fewer suspensions for thousands of students.”

“Studies have found no support for the hypothesis that black students misbehave more often,” said **Angela Ciolfi, the legal director of JustChildren**, a child advocacy program of the Legal Aid Justice Center that provides free legal representation to low-income children families in Central Virginia. “In fact, racial disparities in suspension rates have raised increasing concern nationally because the data shows just the opposite—that black students are more likely to be suspended for more subjective and less serious reasons.”

The Report also provides practical tips to educators and law enforcement professionals implementing threat assessment and makes several policy recommendations, including requiring that schools ensure suspended and expelled students continue to make academic progress during periods of disciplinary removal.

About VSTAG: This year, in response to the tragic shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary, Virginia became the first state in the country to mandate the formation of threat assessment teams in all its schools. Although the term “threat assessment” is unfamiliar to most educators, it is a violence prevention strategy that begins with an evaluation of persons who threaten to harm others and is followed by interventions designed to reduce the risk of violence. A key aspect of threat assessment is its emphasis on considering the context and meaning of the student’s behavior and taking action that is proportionate to the seriousness of the student’s actions. This approach regards a threat as a sign of frustration or conflict that might be amenable to intervention, rather than simply a violation of rules that must be punished. Currently, over 1,000 of Virginia’s schools are using the *Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines* (VSTAG).

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The JustChildren Program of the Legal Aid Justice Center offers civil legal services to low-income families throughout Central Virginia in the areas of education, juvenile justice, mental health, and foster care. Through legal representation, statewide advocacy, community education and organizing, JustChildren works both to eliminate the immediate symptoms and to address the underlying causes of poverty in Virginia.

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