

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal data show that many girls are struggling across almost all measures of well-being—including substance use, experiences of violence, mental health, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Girls' well-being can be affected by their experiences in public schools, and the detrimental effects of removing students from the classroom for discipline (exclusionary discipline).

GAO was asked to review the effect of disciplinary policies and practices on girls in U.S. public schools. This report (1) examines what national data show about discipline disparities among girls in K-12 schools across various student characteristics, including race and disability, and school characteristics; (2) identifies factors that contribute to differences in discipline among girls in school; and (3) describes girls' perceptions of safety and belonging in school.

To understand discipline patterns for girls, GAO conducted descriptive and regression analyses using 2017–18 Education civil rights data (2020–21 data was anomalous because in-school attendance was affected by COVID-19) and a dataset that captures student infractions and associated disciplinary actions. To identify factors contributing to differences in discipline among girls, GAO reviewed empirical research and interviewed stakeholders specializing in the discipline and experiences of girls in schools.

To examine girls' perceptions of safety and belonging in school, GAO analyzed nationally representative survey data from the 2017, 2019 and 2022 National Crime Victimization Surveys, School Crime Supplement.

View [GAO-24-106787](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (202) 512-7215 or nowickij@gao.gov.

K-12 EDUCATION

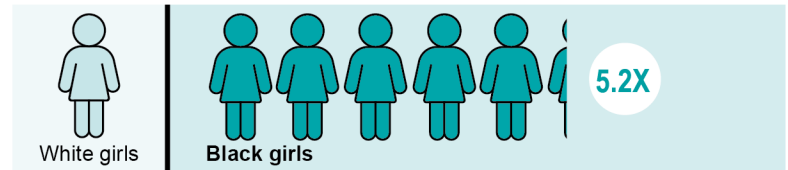
Nationally, Black Girls Receive More Frequent and More Severe Discipline in School than Other Girls

What GAO Found

Among girls, Black girls faced more and harsher forms of discipline than other girls and had the highest rates of exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions. According to GAO's analysis of the most recent Department of Education data before the pandemic, in school year 2017–18, Black girls comprised 15 percent of all girls in public schools but received almost half of suspensions and expulsions. Further, GAO's analysis of school year 2017–18 infraction or behavior data showed that Black girls received harsher punishments than White girls even when the infractions that prompted disciplinary action were similar. For example, Black girls had higher rates of exclusionary discipline compared to White girls for similar behaviors such as defiance, disrespect, and disruption. The data also show that in every state in the U.S., Black girls are disciplined at higher rates. When they also had a disability, exclusionary discipline rates of Black girls grew larger.

National Rate of Out-of-School Suspension for White Girls Compared to Black Girls

Out-of-school suspension



Source: GAO Analysis of Department of Education school year 2017-2018 Civil Rights Data. | [GAO-24-106787](#)

GAO's review of empirical studies identified multiple forms of bias as factors that contribute to the higher discipline of Black girls. For example, one study found that adultification—a form of racial and gender bias in which adults view Black girls as older and more promiscuous than their same-age peers—leads to harsher punishments for Black girls. Another study found that colorism—a form of racial bias against those with darker skin—is a factor in disproportionate discipline of girls. Stakeholders GAO interviewed also noted that girls in school are often subject to gender stereotypes that punish girls for failing to conform to traditional expectations of femininity. For example, officials from an organization representing school counselors and psychologists noted that many teachers encourage girls to uphold a quiet, docile form of femininity and “to act like ladies.”

GAO's analysis of nationally representative survey data found that over half a million girls (an estimated 5 percent) reported feeling unsafe in school. In addition, Black girls reported feeling less safe in schools than other girls. For example, Black girls more frequently reported that they were afraid of being attacked on school property than White girls. National data also show differences among groups of girls when looking at connectedness, which includes a sense of being supported and belonging at school. For example, more Black girls disagreed that teachers at their schools treat students with respect than White girls or Asian girls and more frequently felt that school rules were unfair.