

Suspended Education Urban Middle Schools in Crisis

By Daniel J. Losen and Russell J. Skiba

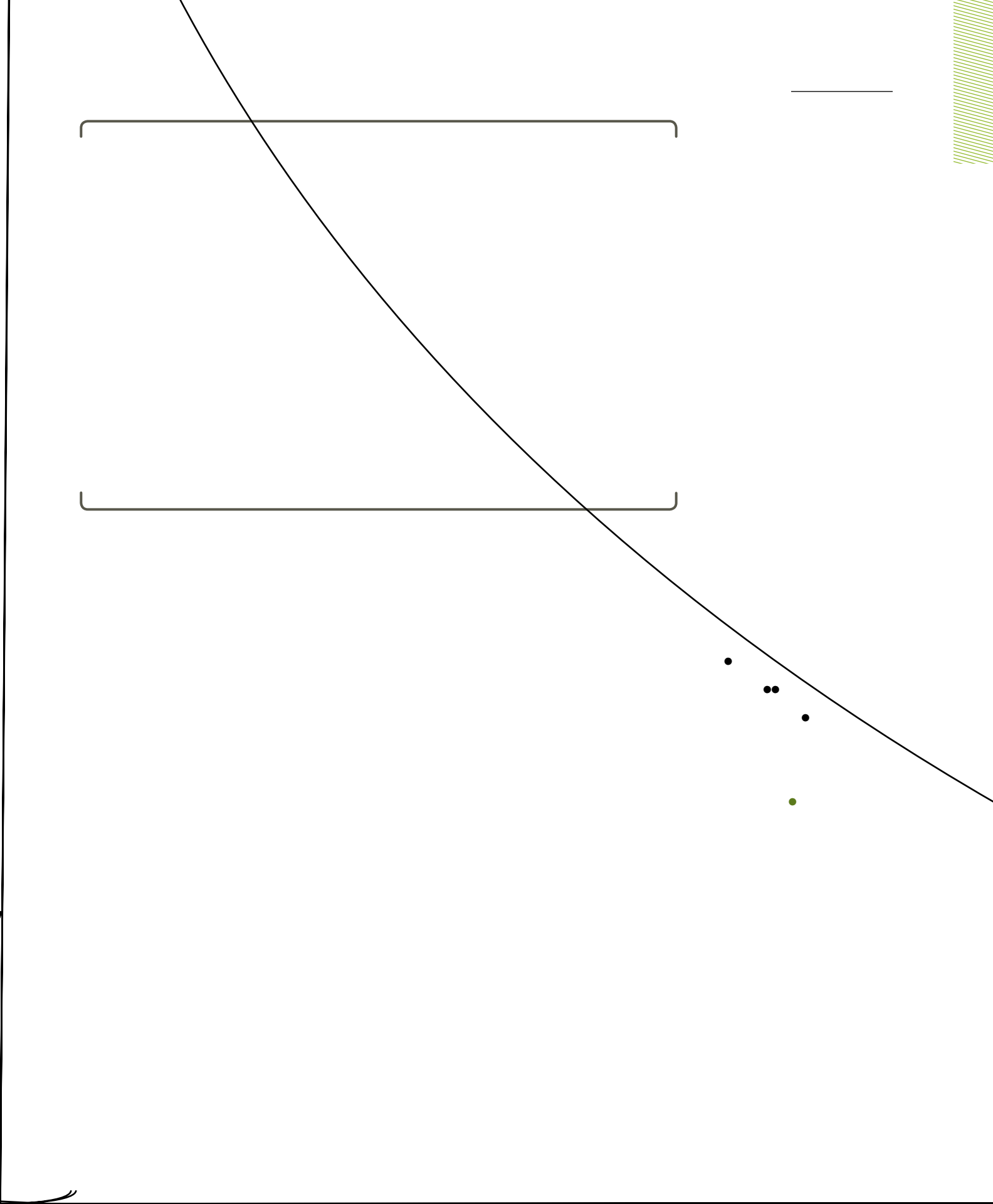
Suspended Education

Urban Middle Schools in Crisis

Daniel J. Losen, J.D.
Senior Education Law and Policy Associate
The Civil Rights Project at UCLA

Russell Skiba, Ph.D.
Director
The Equity Project, Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University

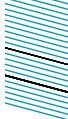
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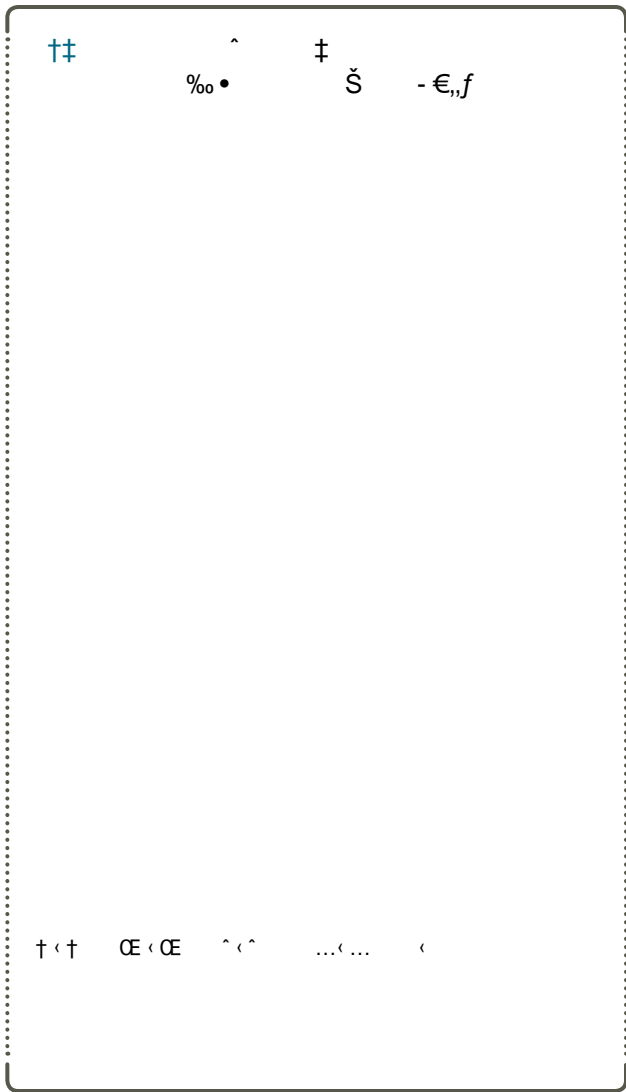


at the middle school level. Unfortunately, although some middle school data are collected or reported by school, there are no aggregate public reports on discipline (covering all states) that break down the data by elementary, middle and high school levels. Nor is the federally collected discipline data publicly reported by grade level. Instead, when the U.S. Department of Education reports school disciplinary data, the only report it publishes on its website combines elementary school suspensions together with those of middle and high schools. Our analysis suggests this reporting practice has unintentionally masked consistently higher rates of suspension at both the middle and high school level. Earlier analysis of sets of individually reported high school and middle school data in Florida suggested that middle school suspension rates tended to be higher than high school rates (Florida State Department of Education, 1995; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Therefore, our decision to report on middle schools grew out of our realization that many educators and policymakers were unaware of the high rates of out-of-school suspension at the secondary level - especially for students of color attending middle schools.³



This report analyzes school- and district-level suspension data from the Elementary and Secondary Education Civil Rights Compliance Survey from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The survey is more commonly referred to as the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). The CRDC is conducted biennially in every state, and includes school-level data on out-of-school





To provide closer analysis of middle school suspension rates at the district and school level, this report focused on 18 of the nation’s largest school districts. Table 1 disaggregates the risk index for these 18 districts by race and gender, showing the subgroups experiencing the highest and lowest suspension rates.⁴

When disaggregated by race and gender, the data clearly show that certain subgroups are consistently at higher risk for out-of-school suspension. For example, based on the survey data for 2006-2007, the district-wide middle school suspension rate across the 18 districts was 22.2%. In 11 of the 18 districts, the data reveal that over one in three Black males was suspended. In Palm Beach County and Milwaukee, the district-wide middle school suspension rate for Black males exceeded 50%. The suspension rate for Black females exceeded 50% in Milwaukee and was over 33% in Palm Beach County, Indianapolis, and Des Moines. Among the 18 districts reviewed, Hispanic males exceeded the 33% mark only in Milwaukee. The range of suspension rates was also quite wide, from 53% for Black males in Palm Beach County to 0% for Latino females in Baltimore County.

ever be suspended, but whether frequent suspension is an effective disciplinary tool that can aid schools in achieving the goal of a safe and productive educational environment. High rates of suspension, and even apparent race and gender disparities, would not be as problematic if research were to demonstrate that the frequent use of suspension compared to the costs, offered greater benefits in safety or improved instructional climate. As described in the next section, however, the research findings of the American Psychological Association (APA 2008 at p. 4) and others have consistently found otherwise. To provide additional context for the statistics discussed above, the remainder of this report reviews research on



, and „ •••). African-American students, however, were referred more often for , , and • - behaviors that would seem to require more subjective judgment on the part of the referring agent. In short, there is no evidence that racial disparities in school discipline can be explained through higher rates of disruption among African-American students.


To the extent that safety is the motivation behind the use of suspension, it is short sighted at best to fail to understand that removing many students from school simply leaves them unsupervised on the street. The frequent use of suspension by schools may thus lead to a net reduction in community safety. One organization, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a non-profit organization of 5,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors and other law enforcement leaders recently stated, “While school safety must be v

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disparate numbers of students by race or gender losing instructional time, but had no positive impact on truancy, that policy could be found by OCR to violate the disparate impact regulations promulgated pursuant to federal antidiscrimination law. The purpose of issuing such a finding would be to prompt the school or district to replace the ineffective discipline policy with one that works for all students.



These statistics and policy recommendations are intended to stimulate robust debate among educators and policymakers. We believe that, once aware of the high frequency and large disparities in the use of school discipline, educators and

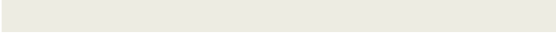
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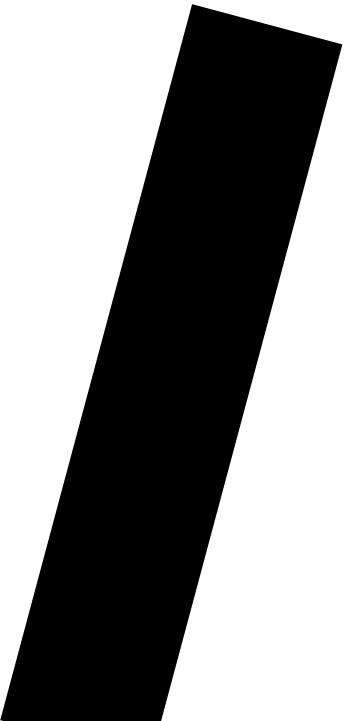
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The school-level data are presented without identifying specific schools. The two tables that follow show that, in almost every district, there is at least one middle school where 50% or more of a given subgroup was suspended at least one time based on the OCR 2006 data collection. These rates are alarmingly high. The district data tends to mask the existence of middle schools with extremely high suspension rates, including those where White students are frequently suspended. In fact, all but one of the 18 school districts had a middle school with an extremely



exclusion of students with disabilities from the numerator but not the denominator in our suspension-risk calculation.

This report acknowledges that the OCR survey may include data that are seriously underreported in some cases and mistakenly over-reported in others. We excluded all schools whose data was clearly erroneous. In some cases, the OCR data indicated that more students were suspended than were listed as enrolled. A review of these data anomalies revealed that they were far more common when the numbers of the enrolled group fell below 10 students. However, we also recognize that, in some cases, the data may have been reported incorrectly. One theory is that, despite explicit instructions to the contrary, some data recorders may have counted the number of suspensions rather than the numbers of students suspended. In preparing this report, we excluded all of the data from a school if the data in even one subcategory appeared to include an error. This, arguably, biased the suspension rates to be lower, as schools with high numbers of suspensions were removed from the study while few if any schools with low numbers of suspensions were excluded.

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