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LGBTQ+ YOUTH SCHOOL DISCIPLINE EXPERIENCES AND THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE



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The school-to-prison pipeline is a well-documented phenomenon wherein youth, disproportionately from underrepresented groups, are pushed out of schools into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. School discipline—such as suspension and expulsion—can exacerbate this pipeline: [research by the National Institute of Justice \(NIJ\)](#) finds that an initial school suspension increases the likelihood of subsequent arrest by 128%. At a macro level, school approaches to discipline, such as adopting harsher policies that increase likelihood of suspension and expulsion, can further funnel youth onto this pipeline. A working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) found that students who attended schools with suspension rates higher than the national average are 15 to 20 percent more likely to be arrested and incarcerated as adults.

One such school-level factor that can contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline is the existence of [zero-tolerance policies](#) that automatically mandate suspension or expulsion for even minor rule infractions, without consideration of extenuating circumstances. Certain low-level infractions, like talking back to teachers or disobeying instructions, warrant suspension and/or expulsion under many schools' zero-tolerance policies, thus contributing to students' likelihood of later arrest and incarceration. Beyond the school-to-prison pipeline, research has also shown that zero-tolerance policies and heightened levels of school discipline are associated with [negative outcomes in school climate](#), student achievement, and school dropout, as well as [poorer academic performance](#). Moreover, the presence of police/School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools often leads to [students being criminalized for behavior that would otherwise be handled in school](#), thus exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline, [especially for students of color](#). [Research from the Chicago Lawyers' Committee on Civil Rights](#) shows that the presence of SROs often results in disparate treatment among minority groups, including students of color, female students, and LGBTQ+ students.

While all students suffer from harsh school discipline policies, research suggests that marginalized youth, such as [Black and Hispanic/Latine youth](#), youth [living in poverty](#), and those [living with disabilities](#), are all more likely to be impacted. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth—and [LGBTQ+ youth of color](#) in particular—also report [disproportionately high rates](#) of school suspension and juvenile justice system involvement as well as expulsion, juvenile arrest and conviction, and adult conviction, [a pattern not explained by](#) greater engagement in illegal behavior. LGBTQ+ youth also face unique vulnerabilities for



school discipline, including being punished for public displays of affection despite cisgender/heterosexual peers not being disciplined for the same conduct, being punished for defending themselves from bullying, and being penalized for dress code violations simply for dressing in accordance with their gender identity or expression.

At the same time, LGBTQ+ youth do not always find themselves safe and welcomed in schools. Especially because of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, LGBTQ+ students report poorer mental health, and increased incidents of harassment, violence, and bullying (Ojeda, Elipe, and Del Rey 2023; Johns et al. 2019), thus making them a vulnerable population in schools. The experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in schools are complicated by compounding factors, including race, socioeconomic status, and geopolitics (Jackman et al. 2020).

Given that LGBTQ+ youth are at risk for both worse school climates and school discipline, and school discipline itself can impact school climate and well-being, it begs the question how all three are interrelated, including how they contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Work is also needed to see how associations differ across race and ethnicity, in order to uncover how multiply marginalized identities compound to impact disparities.

Following, this report explores experiences of school discipline among LGBTQ+ youth, and its impact on health, well-being, academic performance, and other aspects of school experience, using data from a large, national sample of nearly 13,000 LGBTQ+ youth.

ABOUT THE STUDY

In 2022, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation partnered with the University of Connecticut to survey LGBTQ+ youth from across the United States. A total of 12,615 LGBTQ+ identified youth (age 13-18), from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, completed the online survey between January 31 and October 23, 2022. More information about the survey process, materials and respondent profiles can be found in the HRC Foundation's 2023 LGBTQ+ Youth Report.

WHO IS GETTING SUSPENDED AND EXPELLED?

LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience school discipline (suspension and expulsion) than the overall youth population.

In the academic year 2017-2018, the last year that the National Center for Education Statistics reported these figures, 5.0% of youth experienced an out-of-school suspension, and 0.2% experienced expulsion. While prior-year suspension/expulsion rates for LGBTQ+ youth are not available, when looking at lifetime rates in the 2022 LGBTQ+ Youth Study:

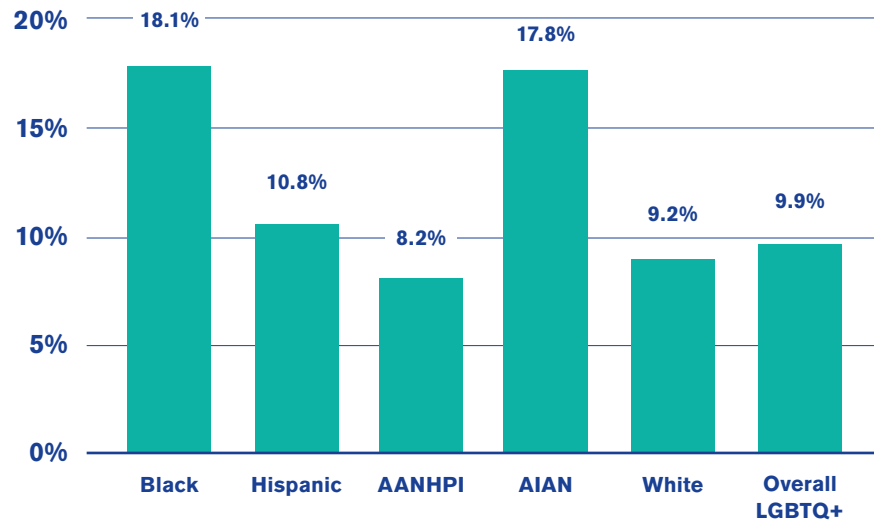
- + **One in ten (9.7%)** LGBTQ+ youth, including one in ten (10%) transgender and gender-expansive youth, have ever been suspended in their life (Table 1a).
- + **1.7%** of LGBTQ+ youth, including **1.7%** of transgender and gender-expansive youth, have **ever been expelled**.



BIPOC LGBTQ+ youth are even more at risk for experiencing school discipline, with Black and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) LGBTQ+ youth more likely than LGBTQ+ youth from all other racial/ethnic groups to have ever been suspended or expelled.

- + **Almost 2 in 5 each** of Black LGBTQ+ youth (**18.1%**), and AIAN LGBTQ+ youth (**17.8%**) had ever been suspended or expelled—**twice that** of white and Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AANHPI) LGBTQ+ youth (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Lifetime experience of suspension and/or expulsion among LGBTQ+ youth, by race/ethnicity



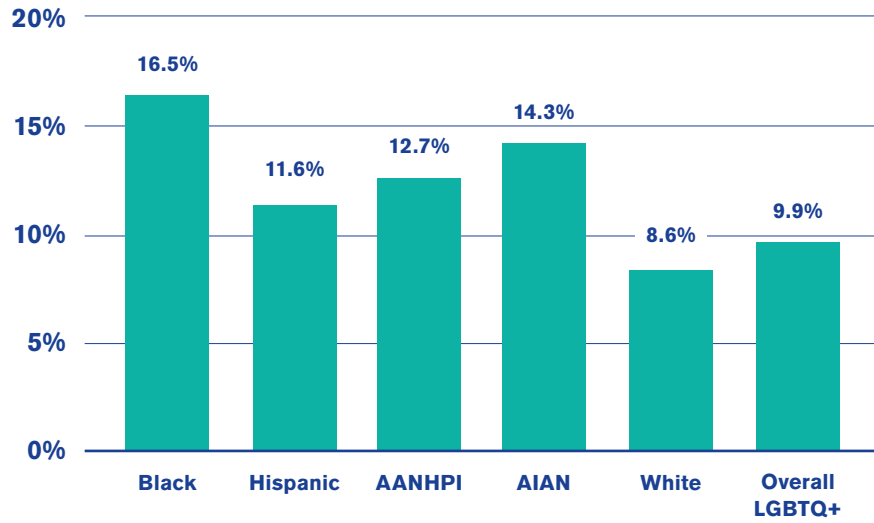
BIASES IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Over 1 in 10 LGBTQ+ youth attributed their school discipline experience to anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination. Rates were even higher for Black and AIAN LGBTQ+ youth.

- + **13%** of all LGBTQ+ youth ever suspended or expelled, and **13.5%** of transgender and gender-expansive youth say they were **suspended or expelled due to their LGBTQ+ identity**.
 - Black LGBTQ+ youth were more **than twice as likely** as white LGBTQ+ youth to say they were suspended or expelled because of their LGBTQ+ identity (3.1% vs. 1.1%, Table 2b).
- + **9.9%** of LGBTQ+ youth say they are disciplined “somewhat more” or “a lot more” than other students, with BIPOC students substantially more likely to feel this way (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Percentage of LGBTQ+ youth who believe they are disciplined at school more frequently than their peers, by race/ethnicity

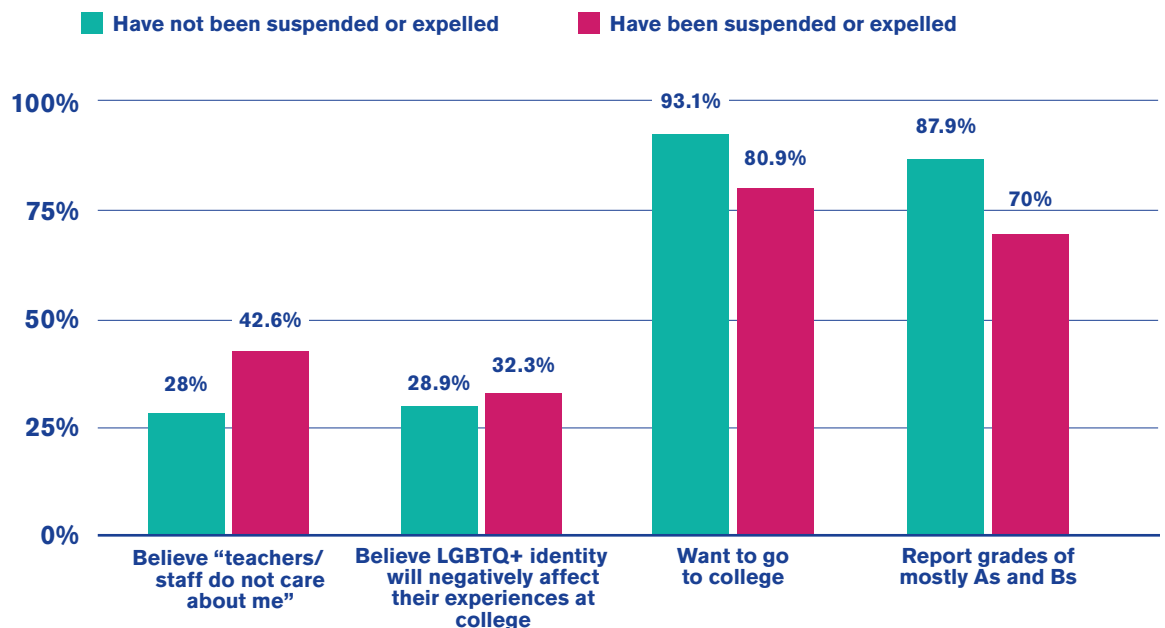


ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND...

...ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

LGBTQ+ youth who have experienced school discipline reported poorer academic performance and held more pessimistic feelings about their future than their LGBTQ+ peers who have not (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Relationship between school discipline and school experiences, future plans, and academic performance





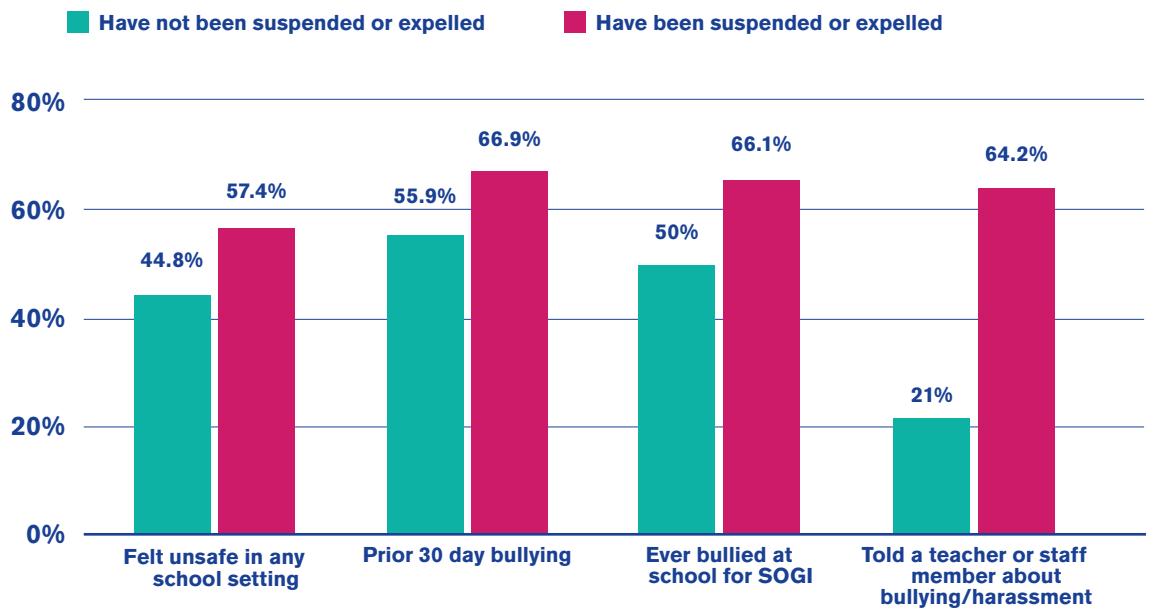
Compared with LGBTQ+ youth who had never been suspended or expelled, after adjusting for race/ethnicity (Table 3a), those who been suspended and/or expelled were

- + **90% more likely** to believe that teachers/staff **did not care about them** (OR: 1.9; 95% CI: 1.7-2.2).¹
- + **3 times as likely** to consider not **going to college** (OR: 2.9; 95% CI: 2.4-3.4).
- + **A third as likely** to report grades of **mostly As and Bs** (OR: 0.3; 95% CI: 0.3-0.4).

...SCHOOL SAFETY

LGBTQ+ youth who were suspended or expelled also reported higher rates of harassment and violence at school (Figure 4)

Figure 4. Relationship between school discipline and school safety and violence/harassment



After adjusting for race/ethnicity (Table 3a), LGBTQ+ youth who had been suspended and/or expelled were

- + **70% more likely to feel unsafe** in 1+ school setting (OR: 1.7; 95% CI: 1.5-1.9).
- + **60% more likely** to have experienced **violence or harassment** in school in the prior month (OR: 1.6; 95% CI: 1.4-1.8).

¹ Odds ratios are adjusted for race ethnicity. Figures and charts in this report are unadjusted. More information is available in the Methods section.

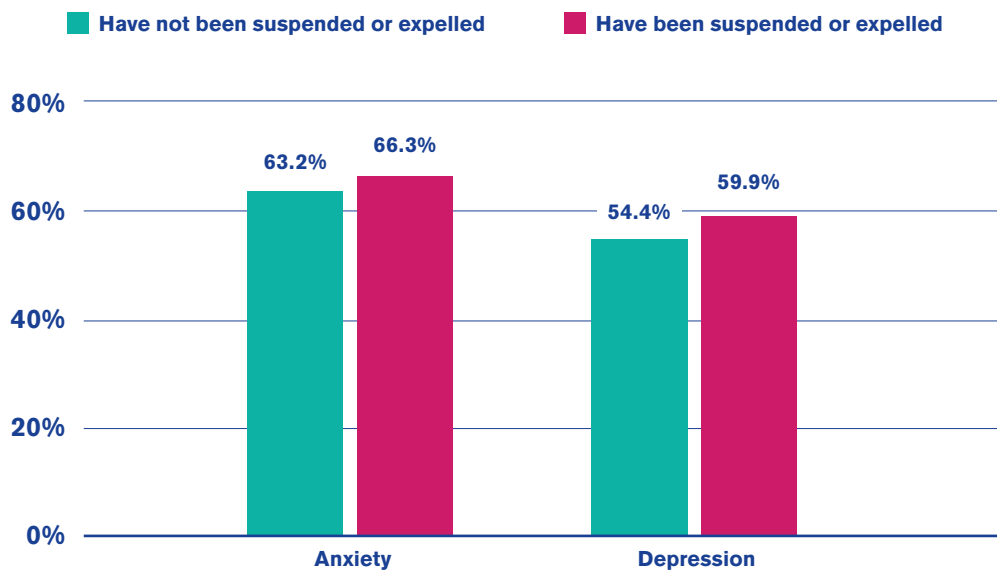


- + **Twice as likely** to have experienced **violence or harassment because of their LGBTQ+ identity** in the prior year (OR: 2.0; 95% CI: 1.7-2.2)
- + **More than twice as likely** to have **told a teacher or staff member** about experiencing violence or harassment at school (OR: 2.1; 95% CI: 1.9-2.4).

...MENTAL HEALTH

LGBTQ+ youth who had ever been suspended or expelled were more likely to screen positive for both anxiety and depression (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Relationship between school discipline and mental health



After adjusting for race/ethnicity (Table 3a), LGBTQ+ youth who had ever been suspended or expelled were 20% more likely to screen positive for anxiety, and 20% more likely to screen positive for depression, than those who had not experienced school discipline.

IMPACT OF BIAS IN SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION

LGBTQ+ youth who had been suspended or expelled for their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression reported worse outcomes than those who had merely been suspended or expelled, and than the entire sample (Table 3b).

Compared with those who did not attribute school discipline to anti-LGBTQ+ bias, those who had been suspended or expelled for being LGBTQ+ were

- + **Over 8 times as likely** to have experienced **violence or harassment because of their LGBTQ+ identity** in the prior year (OR: 8.4; 95% CI: 5.1 - 13.9).



- + **Three times as likely** to feel unsafe in at least one school setting (OR: 3.0; 95% CI: 2.1 - 4.2).
- + **80% more likely** to screen positive for anxiety (OR: 1.8; 95% CI: 1.2 - 2.8).

Across all variables, associations were stronger between each outcome and experiencing biased school discipline, than between each outcome and having ever been suspended or expelled. For example

- + LGBTQ+ youth who had ever been suspended or expelled **were 1.2 times as likely** than those who had not been to think their **LGBTQ+ identity will negatively impact their future experiences in college** (OR: 1.2; 95% CI: 1.0 - 1.3).
 - LGBTQ+ youth who had ever been suspended or expelled due to being LGBTQ+ were **2.4 times as likely** to believe this, compared with those who had suspended or expelled for another reason (OR: 2.4; 95% CI: 1.7 - 3.3).

ARRESTS AND SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS (SROS)

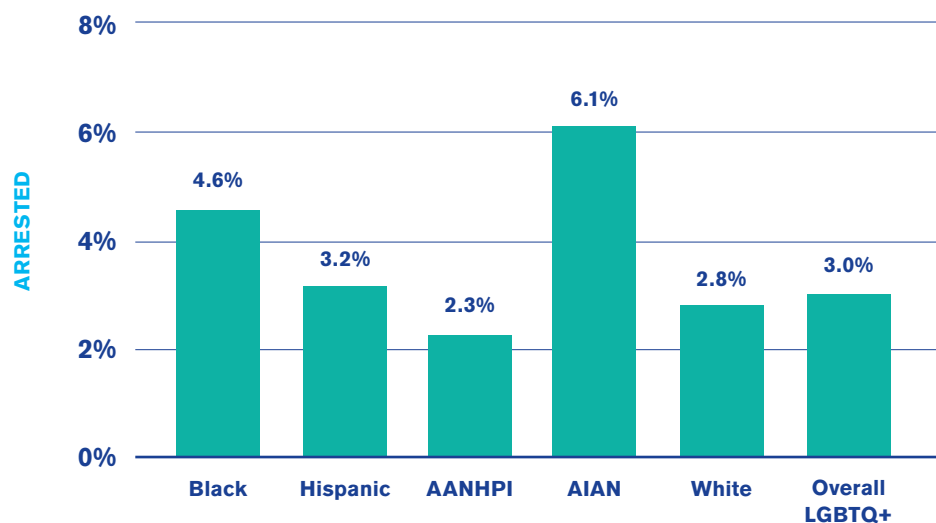
LIFETIME ARREST

3% of LGBTQ+ youth, and 3.1% of transgender and gender-expansive youth have ever been arrested.

- + Black and AIAN LGBTQ+ youth were substantially more likely to have ever been arrested than other racial/ethnic groups. (Figure 6)

Figure 6. Lifetime arrests by race/ethnicity

ARREST BY RACE

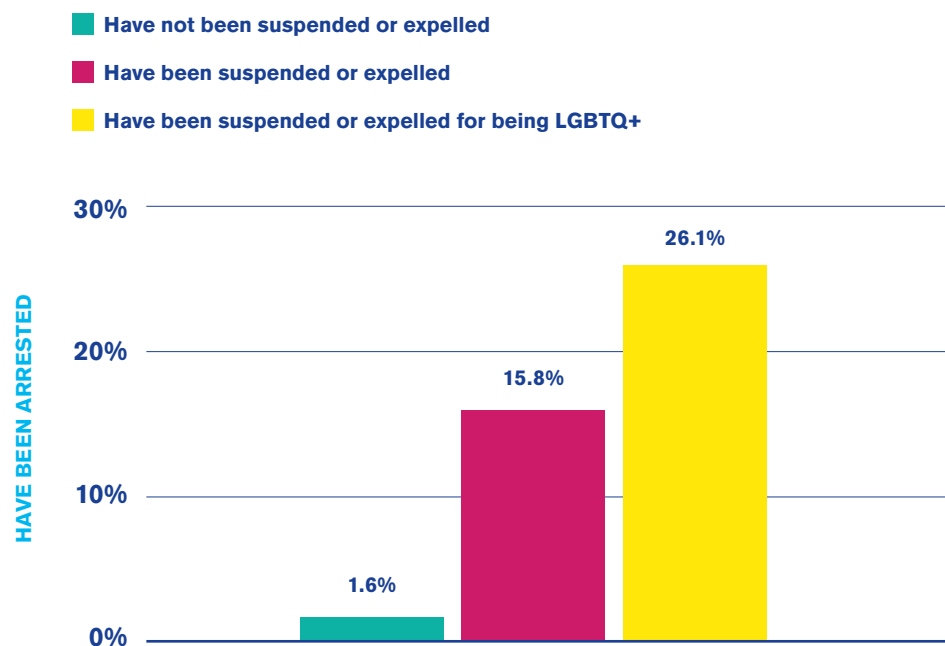




Those who had been suspended or expelled were significantly more likely to have ever been arrested (Figure 7).

- + Controlling for race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+ youth who had experienced suspension or expulsion were **eleven times** as likely to be arrested. (OR: 11.1; 95% CI: 8.9-13.7; Table 3a)

Figure 7. Arrest and discipline



SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER (SRO) EXPERIENCES

Most LGBTQ+ students are attending schools with a school resource officer (SRO), though the vast majority of LGBTQ+ youth do not trust their SRO.

- + **More than 8 in 10 (83.5%)** respondents indicated that their schools have School Resource Officer(s) (SROs).
- + **Over 4 in 10 (41.5%)** LGBTQ+ youth attending schools with an SRO do not trust them to help them when someone harasses, teases, or bullies them for being LGBTQ+.
 - **Almost half (46.7%)** of transgender and gender-expansive youth do not trust their SRO in these situations.

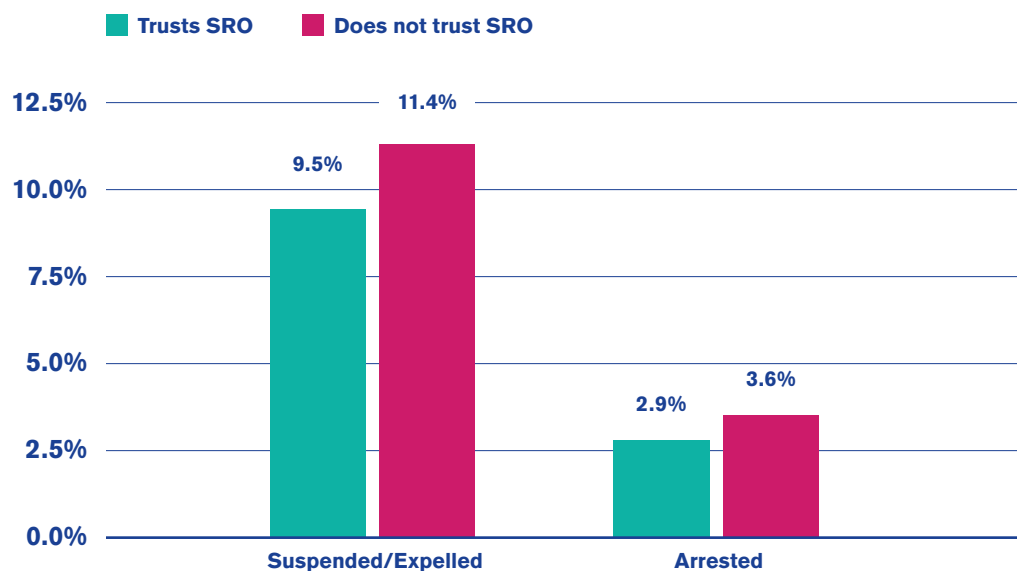


Students who did not trust their SRO were more likely to have been suspended, expelled, and/or arrested (Figure 8).

No correlation was found between a student's school having an SRO and their likelihood of suspension/expulsion, however, after controlling for race/ethnicity, **students who did not trust their SROs** were

- + **30% more likely** to be suspended or expelled (OR: 1.3; 95% CI: 1.1 - 1.5; Table 3a)
- + **30% more likely** to be arrested (OR: 1.3, 95% CI: 1.0 - 1.6; Table 4).

Figure 8. Lifetime school discipline and arrest history, by level of trust for SRO



CONCLUSION

The results reveal that LGBTQ+ youth are experiencing school discipline at higher rates than their non-LGBTQ+ peers, even as those who are disciplined are also those who are more likely to be experiencing violence and school harassment: LGBTQ+ youth who had experienced school discipline were 70% more likely to feel unsafe in one or more school setting, and twice as likely to have experienced violence and harassment at school for their sexual orientation/gender identity, compared with their peers who hadn't experienced such discipline. This replicates patterns seen elsewhere in the literature wherein victims of bullying are often suspended/expelled and inadvertently harmed by zero tolerance policies.

Lifetime school discipline was also associated with worse mental health and academic performance, and violence and harassment in school. Controlling for race/ethnicity, for instance, those who were suspended or expelled were three times less likely to plan to attend college. While causality cannot be measured here, these correlations are important to note because they demonstrate how negative experiences in and out of school are often concurrent.



Results further show that [long-documented racial disparities in school discipline](#) and [arrests](#) are perpetuated among LGBTQ+ youth as well. The high percentages in suspension, expulsion, levels of discriminatory discipline, and arrest among BIPOC LGBTQ+ youth, especially Black and American Indian/Alaska Native youth, demonstrate that compounding marginalized identities can create additional burdens for LGBTQ+ youth.

Finally, the positive association between lack of trust for SROs, suspension and expulsion, and lifetime arrest, offer evidence for how the school-to-prison pipeline is playing out among LGBTQ+ youth. Not trusting an SRO is significantly, and independently, associated with significantly higher likelihood of suspension/expulsion, and lifetime arrest. But when both school discipline and arrest history are included in the same model, the association remains significant only for suspension/expulsion, suggesting that this association is specifically mediated through suspension/expulsion. Put more plainly: the increased presence of cops and officials in schools that students do not trust leads to higher rates of suspension/expulsion, with school discipline, in turn, resulting in increased risk of arrest.

This research has demonstrated that the school-to-prison pipeline intensely affects LGBTQ+ youth and other marginalized groups and that school discipline can create further difficulties for these students' acclimation to their school environment. Because LGBTQ+ youth are already a vulnerable population, it is imperative that schools provide support to them to prevent these harmful pipelines and patterns.

CALL TO ACTION

Understanding that LGBTQ+ youth, particularly BIPOC LGBTQ+ youth, are disproportionately impacted by school discipline, here are some key actions you can take to address this issue in your school:

- Eliminate any zero-tolerance discipline policies, especially related to fighting as they often punish both the victim and the perpetrator.
- Implement discipline policies that focus on restorative justice and account for the violence and harassment often faced by LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and other marginalized youth.
- Create or strengthen your school's non-discrimination policy by explicitly including protections for sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- Ensure your school dress code is not biased against transgender and gender-expansive youth as well as BIPOC youth and youth from underrepresented religious and faith communities. For example, create dress codes focused on the article of clothing and not the gender of the person wearing them (e.g., skirts and dresses must be below the knee).
- Recognize that having law enforcement in schools can increase the severity of punishment for minor infractions, including arrest; consider removing law enforcement and shifting to utilizing civilian staff to address discipline concerns.



- ❑ Train your School Resource Officers and/or other administrative staff responsible for discipline in LGBTQ+ inclusion as well as how to equitably address biased-based bullying, violence, and harassment.
- ❑ Provide education and resources to students, families, and all school staff on inclusion of LGBTQ+ students and families as well as how to address bias-based bullying, violence, and harassment.
- ❑ Provide positive, affirming, and inclusive after-school activities including identity-based student organizations such as Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSA) and Black Student Unions.
- ❑ Research local affirming resources to address the mental health needs of all students, particularly LGBTQ+ students and BIPOC students.
- ❑ When violence and harassment occur, provide appropriate counseling for all involved, as well as restorative justice practices to address the harm that has been done.
- ❑ For youth who have been suspended or expelled, provide appropriate support for reentry back to school and opportunities to make amends to the school community if harm was caused.
- ❑ For youth who have been suspended or expelled, ensure you continue to provide guidance on post-secondary opportunities including higher education, technical or vocational education, and other career opportunities to assist with future success.



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HRC FOUNDATION

The HRC Foundation — a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization — envisions a world where all LGBTQ+ people can participate fully in the systems that shape our daily lives. Through public education, research, and policy and practice change, the Foundation's impact can be felt in schools, on factory floors and corporate suites, and in places of worship. It touches LGBTQ+ lives from childhood through end-of-life, people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, abilities and religious beliefs, in big cities and small towns, in the United States and across the globe.

YOUTH WELL-BEING

The HRC Foundation's Youth Well-Being Program is dedicated to improving the lived experience of LGBTQ+ youth in everyday institutions of daily life—families, schools, after-school enrichment programs, community centers, health and wellness programs, child welfare, and other systems of care. The Youth Well-Being Program includes the Time to THRIVE conferences, Project THRIVE, the Youth Ambassador program, the Parents for Transgender Equality Council and a portfolio of training and educational resources to help youth-serving professionals promote the overall well-being of LGBTQ+ youth.

THE PUBLIC EDUCATION & RESEARCH PROGRAM

The HRC Foundation's Public Education & Research Program spearheads a wide variety of LGBTQ+ advocacy and outreach campaigns, working to ensure that the HRC Foundation's resources and programs are timely, impactful and inclusive. In addition to publishing resource guides, informational materials and reports, the team conducts original quantitative and qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people. The program also collaborates with experts and provides guidance to other HRC initiatives in support of efforts to advance LGBTQ+ equality and well-being.

WELCOMING SCHOOLS

HRC Foundation's Welcoming Schools (<https://welcomingschools.org>) is the most comprehensive bias-based bullying prevention program in the nation to provide LGBTQ+ and gender inclusive professional development training, lesson plans, booklists and resources specifically designed for educators and youth-serving professionals. Our program uses an intersectional, anti-racist lens dedicated to actionable policies and practices. We uplift school communities with critical tools to embrace family diversity, create LGBTQ+ and gender inclusive schools, prevent bias-based bullying, and support transgender and non-binary students.

UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT RESEARCH TEAM:

Dr. Ryan Watson, Associate Professor, University of Connecticut

Dr. Ryan Watson is an Associate Professor at the University of Connecticut and was the lead researcher who ran both the 2017 and 2022 LGBTQ+ Youth Study, as well as co-led the 2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report which utilized data from the 2017 survey, as well as co-led the 2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report which utilized data from the 2017 survey. His program of research is focused on reducing health disparities among sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth and young adults. Motivated



by the urgent need to reduce the inequities in health for vulnerable populations, he has focused his scholarship on SGM youth and young adults, their relationships within family and school contexts, and their health experiences. Collaborating with a prolific team of scholars, he has been awarded over a million dollars in federal funding and published more than 125 peer-reviewed papers in the spirit of better understanding the mechanisms that drive well-documented injustices in health, school, and community experiences for SGM individuals.

REPORT AUTHORS:

Casey Beidel was an undergraduate intern for the Youth Well-Being Program at the HRC Foundation during the summer of 2023. He is a senior at Princeton University studying Sociology and Gender & Sexuality Studies where his independent research explores the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and freedom of speech in classrooms related to gender identity and sexual orientation.

Shoshana K. Goldberg, PhD MPH, Director of Public Education & Research, HRC Foundation

Shoshana K. Goldberg is the Director of Public Education & Research at the HRC Foundation. In her role, she oversees research projects that use quantitative and qualitative data to better understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in all aspects and dimensions of daily life, as well as public education products that aim to educate and inform advocates, policy makers and the general public. Prior to joining to HRC, Goldberg held both research and academic positions in the fields of LGBTQ+ health and policy, working with organizations such as The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, UNC-Chapel Hill, and Strength in Numbers Consulting Group. Through her prior work, she has co-authored numerous academic articles, book chapters and research briefs, gaining expertise in the use of population-based data to understand the demographics of the LGBTQ+ population, as well as how existing social, structural and political factors contribute to vulnerabilities, marginalization and health disparities faced by the LGBTQ+ community.

Goldberg holds a Master's of Public Health in Maternal and Child Health, and a Ph.D. in Maternal and Child Health and Epidemiology, both earned from the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. She is currently based in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Ted Lewis, MEd, Director of Youth and Family Programs

Ted Lewis, MEd, serves as the director of Youth & Family Programs in HRC's Foundation. In this role, they work with the All Children-All Families program, HRC Foundation's LGBTQ+ advocacy program within child welfare and social services systems, and the Youth Well-Being program, which is dedicated to improving the lived experience of LGBTQ+ youth in everyday institutions of daily life.

Ted brought nearly two decades of experience to their role at HRC. Prior to this role, Ted served as the executive director of Side by Side, a Richmond-based LGBTQ+ youth organization and was the founding LGBTQ+ staff position at UNC Charlotte and the University of Richmond. Ted has also consulted with Fortune 500 companies, K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and nonprofit organizations on LGBTQ+ inclusion. They hold a Master's of Education from the University of South Carolina.