

The Washington Post

Five eye-opening figures from the U.S. Education Department's latest civil rights data dump

By Emma Brown

June 7, 2016

The U.S. Education Department on Tuesday released a trove of data drawn from surveys of nearly every single one of the nation's 95,000 public schools. This latest installment of the Civil Rights Data Collection, from the 2013-2014 school year, offers a sobering look at the wide disparities in experience and opportunity that divide the nation's 50 million students.

By the fall, anyone will be able to look up data on a specific school or school district online. GreatSchools, the website that provides information about school test scores and demographics, also is planning to incorporate the civil rights data into its school profiles.

Meantime, here are five eye-opening figures from the overview that the Education Department released Tuesday:

1. In the 2013-2014 school year, 6.5 million children were chronically absent from school, missing 15 or more days of school.

A growing body of research has shown that children who are chronically absent from school are more likely to struggle academically and eventually drop out. It makes sense: Missed classes mean missed instruction and holes in understanding that make it more and more difficult to keep up with peers. Absenteeism rates are highest among teenagers, but it's by no means an adolescent problem alone. More than 3.5 million of chronically absent students were in elementary school.

2. 850,000 high school students didn't have access to a school counselor.

High school counselors often have tough jobs. They keep track of their students' progress toward graduation. They help students apply to college and navigate the financial aid process. They also help kids navigate their lives outside of school, which can be made complex by poverty, violence and family trouble. And because counselors often are one of the first positions to be cut when budgets get tight, there are almost never enough to go around. The national average is close to 500 students per school counselor; many student have no counselor at all.

3. 1.6 million students went to a school that employed a sworn law-enforcement officer, but no counselor.

The 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection for the first time counted how many schools have a sworn law-enforcement officer: 24 percent of elementary schools and 42 percent of high schools. Among high schools with predominantly black and Hispanic populations (i.e., more than 75 percent of students were black and Latino), more than half — 51 percent — had an officer.

4. Nearly 800,000 students were enrolled in schools where more than 20 percent of teachers hadn't met state licensure requirements.

Black, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native students were more likely than white students to attend schools like this. The same students of color are more likely than white students to attend schools where more than 20 percent of teachers are in their first year of teaching.

5. Racial disparities in suspensions reach all the way down into preschool: Black children represent 19 percent of all preschoolers, and 47 percent of all those who were suspended.

Activists and journalists have helped draw attention to disparities in school discipline in recent years. The Obama administration has also called attention to the gaps and pressed schools to address them. Even with all that attention, the difference in suspension rates among the youngest children are still surprising.

Stay tuned: In the next civil rights data dump, two years from now, the Education Department expects to include new data that promises to be just as interesting — including on corporal punishment in preschool, allegations of bullying based on sexual orientation and religion, teacher turnover and discipline-related transfers to alternative schools.