



## Significant Disproportionality in Special Education: The Role of Income

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*Years of research point to inequities in education for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities. These inequities are particularly apparent when it comes to rates of discipline and special education enrollment. The term “significant disproportionality” is used to describe the widespread trend of students of certain racial and ethnic groups being identified for special education, placed in more restrictive educational settings, and disciplined at markedly higher rates than their peers. Due to bias within the education system (including within assessments and academic and other policies), students of color can be misidentified as needing special education, and are then placed in more restrictive settings and experience harsher discipline because of the intersectionality of race and special education. Being misidentified as needing special education, placed in a restrictive setting, or disciplined more harshly can negatively affect student outcomes. It is imperative that education professionals and policymakers understand the magnitude of significant disproportionality for students of different races, ethnicities, and incomes and take actions to correct it.*

*This brief summarizes the trends in significant disproportionality for students from low-income backgrounds. For a full discussion of the research on disproportionality in special education and a set of policies and practices that can reduce significant disproportionality in schools, visit [nclld.org/sigdispro](https://nclld.org/sigdispro).*

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# Introduction

As a way to explain the overrepresentation of students from low-income backgrounds in special education, some researchers have pointed to the “correlatives of poverty,”<sup>1</sup> suggesting that students of certain racial and ethnic groups are disproportionately affected by poverty and therefore more likely to be exposed to circumstances that could lead to higher rates of disability.<sup>2</sup> It is true certain minority groups do experience higher rates of poverty,<sup>3</sup> but the role of poverty in special education is complex.

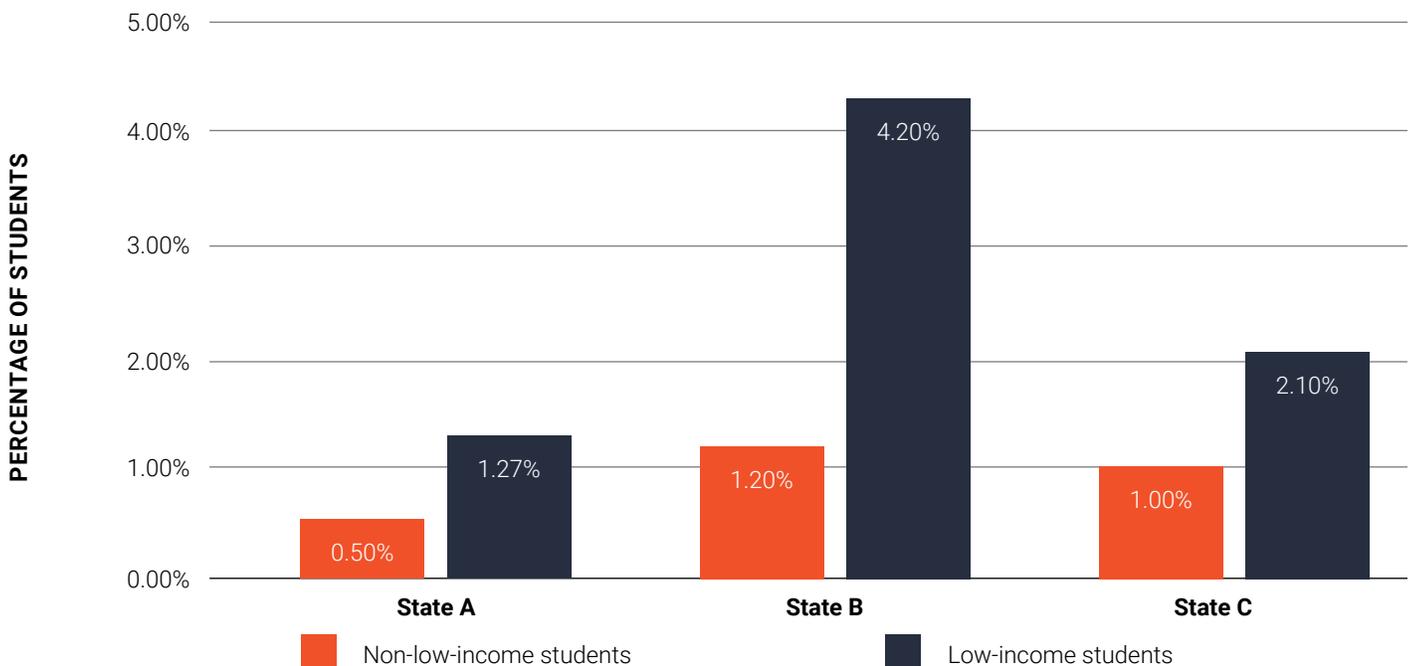
This brief explores the research on the relationship between poverty and special education. While it is not a determining factor, income status is an important piece in the conversation on disproportionality, due to the real consequences income status has on students as well as the complex relationship among income status, race, and ethnicity in special education identification.

## Trends in Special Education Enrollment and Discipline for Students From Low-Income Backgrounds

### Special education identification and placement

Students from low-income backgrounds are overrepresented in special education, specifically in more subjective disability categories.<sup>4</sup> In a study looking at three separate states, it was found that students from low-income backgrounds in all states studied were disproportionately placed in special education, and once in special education, more than twice as likely to be put in substantially separate classrooms, compared to their non-low-income peers.<sup>5</sup> Research has clearly shown the benefits of inclusion<sup>6</sup>—the practice of educating special education students in general education classrooms alongside their peers who are not receiving special education services. When inclusion begins early and embeds supports into the curriculum, students have better outcomes, including higher test scores and graduation rates. However, once placed in special education and placed in separate settings, students are then exposed to a less challenging curriculum, with fewer chances for success.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 1.** Placement in substantially separate classrooms, by income status, for three states studied.<sup>8</sup>



## Discipline disparities

In regards to discipline disparities, socioeconomic status has been found to be a predictor for more frequent and severe discipline, but when socioeconomic status is controlled, racial disparity trends still persist.<sup>9</sup> Studies have shown that for discipline differences among Black and Hispanic students, socioeconomic differences do not explain the observed disparities.<sup>10</sup> While poverty is likely a contributor to discipline disparities, it does not solely explain them.

## The Connection Between Poverty and Special Education

Some researchers argue that disparities in identification rates exist because students of color actually do experience disability at a higher rate than their White peers, and that these students are actually *underrepresented* in special education based on their significant level of need.<sup>11</sup> This theory rests in part on the fact that race and income in the United States are highly correlated.

To be clear, poverty and disability are connected in some ways. According to the National Survey of Children's Health, children living at or below the federal poverty level are more than twice as likely to be identified with SLD as children in households with income four times the poverty level.<sup>12</sup> Poverty has been tied to risks such as low birth weight and exposure to lead<sup>13</sup> and a higher likelihood of having adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).<sup>14</sup> Students who experience four or more ACEs have been found to be 32 times more likely to be diagnosed with learning or behavioral challenges.<sup>15</sup> ADHD and other issues of learning, attention, and behavior have been linked to toxin exposure and other environmental factors.<sup>16</sup>

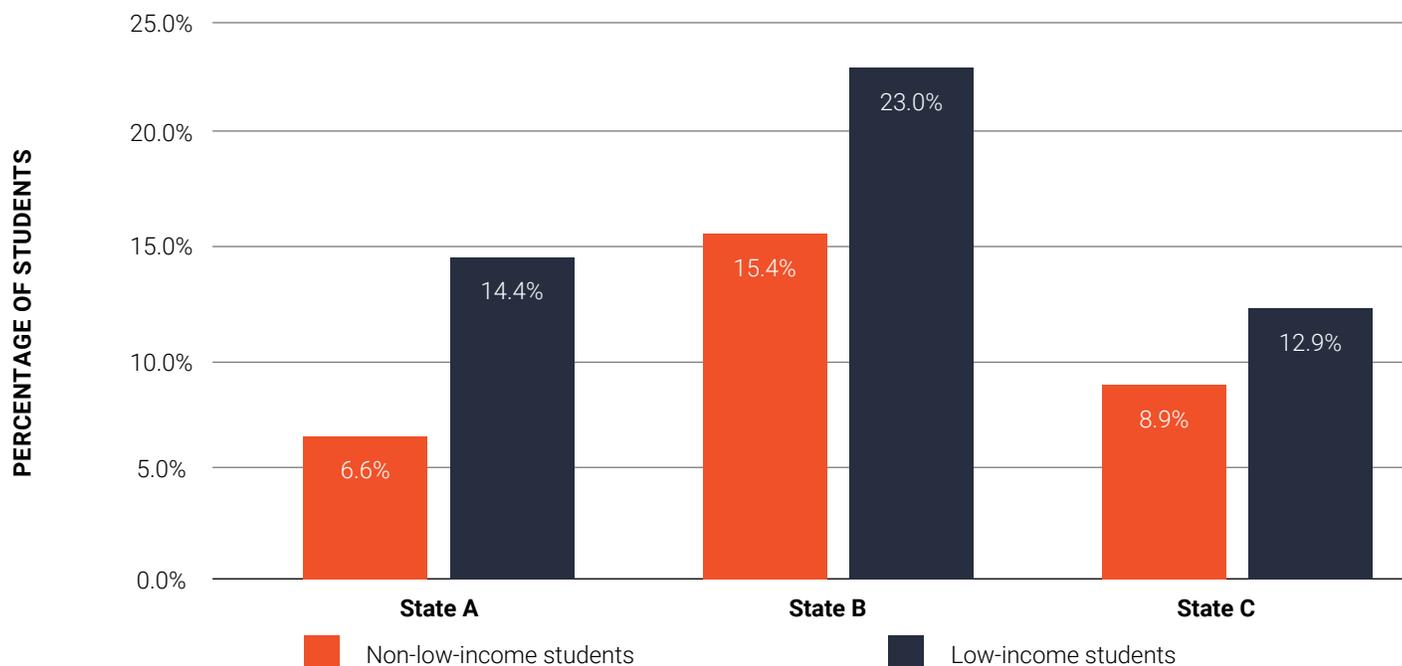
### Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) include:<sup>17</sup>

- Economic hardship
- Divorce or separation of a parent
- Death of a parent
- Parent served time in jail
- Witnessing adult domestic violence
- Victim or witness to neighborhood violence
- Living with someone who was mentally ill or suicidal
- Living with someone with an alcohol or drug problem
- Being treated or judged unfairly due to race/ethnicity

However, schools are not required to report student income levels in their special education data.<sup>18</sup> Until such data is made available, it is difficult to know the exact role that income plays or understand the interaction between these variables.

In fact, some research indicates that income disparities do not account for all disproportionality effects, and that race plays a larger role, leading to increased special education placement—even for students who do not need these services.<sup>19</sup> Research by Grindal et al., 2019, looked at the role of both race and income in disproportionality. Their research found that, when comparing students within the same income bracket, Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be identified for special education, compared to White students.<sup>20</sup> For example, in their study, non-low-income Black students had about twice the likelihood of being identified with an intellectual disability (ID) or emotional disturbance (ED), compared to non-low-income White students in the states studied.<sup>21</sup> Another study even found that Black males are more likely to be identified with an ID as their income level rises.<sup>22</sup> Thus, income alone does not explain the differences in identification rates, and race plays an important role.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of students eligible for special education by income status, in three observed states.<sup>23</sup>



## Policy and Practice Considerations

When addressing significant disproportionality, it is vital to guard against overidentification of students for special education services. However, if state education agencies engage in this effort without also meeting their legal responsibility to ensure students' right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE), children with disabilities could be at risk of not receiving the critical services and supports that they need. The following important policy and practice changes can be made in the areas of evaluation, assessment, discipline, teacher preparation and training, and data:

- **States and districts can refine their special education eligibility process with a focus on:**
  - seeking outside expertise to implement training on disability identification that includes considerations for linguistic and cultural differences;
  - investing in and prioritizing hiring educational professionals with expertise in cultural and linguistic consideration in identification;
  - completing an audit of their discipline and special education policies and processes to uncover and address bias within the system itself and the actors within the system; and
  - investing in developing relationships with families and creating an open dialogue with parents and families to better understand a student's familial, social, and cultural background and to incorporate parents' observations into the special education evaluation.
- **Districts can:**
  - modify their discipline policies to restrict the usage of suspensions and expulsions, focusing instead on creating positive learning environments with sufficient social workers and school counselors; and
  - implement (and provide training to educators in) Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), culturally responsive teaching (CRT), and restorative practices.
- The federal government, states, and local school districts should take action to diversify the principal, teaching, and school staff workforce and incentivize the use of culturally responsive approaches.

- The federal government and states should continue with regular data collections such as the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). It must continue to track and report on the number of English learners (ELs) in EL programs by disability status. Additionally, it should disaggregate the data by student status under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and by the race and ethnicity categories used in the American Community Survey and require that this data is able to be cross-tabulated (with a minimum n-size to protect identity).
- The U.S. Department of Education must continue to enforce the Equity in IDEA regulations and provide intensive technical assistance to states and districts with the highest levels of significant disproportionality.

For a full discussion of the research on disproportionality in special education and a set of policies and practices that can reduce significant disproportionality in schools, visit [nclد.org/sigdispro](https://nclد.org/sigdispro).

<sup>1</sup> Abdi, F. M., Seok, D., & Murphey, D. (n.d.). Children with special health care needs face challenges accessing information, support, and services. Retrieved July 16, 2020, from [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gaELIM\\_0Ew4l4NYV8pO4\\_eHODIUEuXYb/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gaELIM_0Ew4l4NYV8pO4_eHODIUEuXYb/view)

<sup>2</sup> Studies by Drs. Paul Morgan and George Farkas are often cited in support of the notion that students of color are underrepresented in special education, but other researchers have identified flaws in their work. For example, their research assumed that teacher reports on student behavior and scores on assessments were not biased measures, even though other studies have shown the opposite. Morgan and Farkas' work also relied on parent and teacher reports on disability status, rather than potentially more accurate administrative records; Schifter, L., Grindal, T., Schwartz, G., & Hehir, T. (2019, January 17). Students from low-income families and special education. Retrieved July 16, 2020, from <https://tcf.org/content/report/students-low-income-families-special-education/>; Grindal, T., Schifter, L., Schwartz, G., & Hehir, T. (2019). Racial differences in special education identification and placement: Evidence across three states. *Harvard Education Review*, 89(4), 525–553.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2018, July 31). Poverty rates for selected detailed race and Hispanic groups: 2007–2011. Retrieved July 22, 2020, from <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2013/acs/acsbr11-17.html>

<sup>4</sup> Schifter, L., Grindal, T., Schwartz, G., & Hehir, T. (2019, January 17). Students from low-income families and special education. Retrieved July 16, 2020, from <https://tcf.org/content/report/students-low-income-families-special-education/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center (n.d.). Benefits of inclusive education for all students. Retrieved 2020 from <https://iod.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/InclusiveEd/researchsupport-final.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Schifter, L., Grindal, T., Schwartz, G., & Hehir, T. (2019, January 17). Students from low-income families and special education. Retrieved July 16, 2020, from <https://tcf.org/content/report/students-low-income-families-special-education/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Welsh, R. O., & Little, S. (2018). The school discipline dilemma: A comprehensive review of disparities and alternative approaches. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(5), 752–794.

<sup>10</sup> Harper, K. (2017). The school-to-prison pipeline: The intersections of students of color with disabilities. Retrieved 2020.

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>12</sup> Committee to Evaluate the Supplemental Security Income Disability Program for Children With Mental Disorders (2015). *Mental disorders and disabilities among low-income children*. Boat, T. F., & Wu, J. T. (Eds.). Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

<sup>13</sup> Samuels, C. (2015, June 24). Minorities less likely to be identified for special education, study finds. Education Week. Available at: [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/speced/2015/06/minorities\\_identification\\_special\\_education.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/speced/2015/06/minorities_identification_special_education.html)

<sup>14</sup> Child Trends (2013, July). Adverse experiences: Indicators on children and youth. Available at: <http://www.childtrends.org/indicators/adverse-experiences/>

<sup>15</sup> Burke, N. J., Hellman, J. K., Scott, B. G., Weems, C. F., & Carrion, V. G. (2011). The impact of adverse childhood experiences on an urban pediatric population. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 35(6), 408–413.

<sup>16</sup> National Center for Learning Disabilities. (2017). The state of learning disabilities: Understanding the 1 in 5.

<sup>17</sup> Child Trends (2013, July). Adverse experiences: Indicators on children and youth. Available at: <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/adverse-experiences>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Grindal, T., Schifter, L., Schwartz, G., & Hehir, T. (2019). Racial differences in special education identification and placement: Evidence across three states. *Harvard Education Review*, 89(4), 525–553.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> National Education Association. (2007). Truth in labeling: Disproportionality in special education. Retrieved 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Schifter, L., Grindal, T., Schwartz, G., & Hehir, T. (2019, January 17). Students from low-income families and special education. Retrieved July 16, 2020, from <https://tcf.org/content/report/students-low-income-families-special-education/>



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1220 L Street, NW Ste. 100 Box #168 Washington, DC 20005  
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