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## The Racial/Ethnic Composition of Students with Disabilities \_\_\_\_\_

This paper presents data on the number of minority students with disabilities who receive special education services and the disabilities of these students. It was published by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the *Twentieth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. The reference citation is shown on the last page.

**In the recent reauthorization of IDEA** (P.L. 105-17), Congress expressed concern about the disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minorities in special education and poor educational results for minority students. Congress encouraged the Federal Government to be responsive to the growing needs of an increasingly diverse society, to ensure a more equitable allocation of resources, and to provide an equal educational opportunity for all individuals. In reauthorizing IDEA, Congress found that, between 1980 and 1990, the rate of increase in the number of White Americans was 6 percent, while the rates of increase for racial and ethnic minorities were much higher: 53 percent for Hispanics, 13.2 percent for African Americans, and 107.8 percent for Asians. By the year 2000, nearly one of every three Americans will be African American, Hispanic, Asian American, or American Indian. As a group, minority children are comprising an increasing percentage of public school students (Section 601[c][7][B], [C], and [D]).

Congress wrote in the IDEA Amendments of 1997 that "greater efforts are needed to prevent the intensification of problems connected with mislabeling. . . among minority children with disabilities" (Section 601[c][8][A]). More African American children are served in special education than would be expected given the percentage of African American students in the general school population. IDEA also notes, "although African Americans represent 16 percent of elementary and secondary enrollments, they constitute 21 percent of total enrollments in special education" (Section 601[c][8][D]). "Poor African American children are 2.3 times more likely to be identified by their teacher as having mental retardation than their White counterparts" (Section 601[c][8][C]). In addition to being identified with specific disabilities at different rates than White, non-Hispanic students, minority students are also more likely than White students to be served in less inclusive settings (Singh, Ellis, Oswald, Wechsler, & Curtis, 1997).

Congress also noted in IDEA that minority youth with disabilities are more likely to drop out of high school: "The dropout rate is 68 percent higher for minorities than for Whites. More than 50 percent of minority special education students in large cities drop out of school" (20 U.S.C. 1401[c][8][f]). Dropout rates for Hispanic youth with disabilities are particularly high: 36.9 percent compared to 31.2 percent for Whites -- and 30.4 percent for African Americans (Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990).

In response to these concerns, Congress required States to submit special education child count, educational environment, exiting, and discipline data by race and ethnicity starting in the 1998-99 school year. The race/ethnicity data required under the IDEA Amendments of 1997 will better enable Congress and OSEP to monitor the disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minorities in special education and dropout rates for minority youth.

Under IDEA, local educational agencies are required to use racially and culturally nondiscriminatory tests and other evaluation materials for identifying students as eligible for special education. Tests must be administered in the child's native language or other mode of communication, unless it is not feasible to do so. Each State is also required to collect and examine data to determine if race is the basis of significant disproportionality in the identification of students with disabilities or the placement of children with disabilities in particular educational settings. If the State determines that significant disproportionality exists, it must provide for the review and, if appropriate, revision of policies, procedures, and practices used to identify or place students to ensure that they meet the requirements of IDEA.

## **RACE/ETHNICITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

The disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minorities in special education is a highly complex issue because it is difficult to isolate the effects of poverty, limited English proficiency, residence in inner cities, and race/ethnicity on special education eligibility.

For many years, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has collected data from a sample of school districts and schools within these districts on the race/ethnicity of students with selected disabilities -- mild, moderate, and severe mental retardation; specific learning disabilities; and emotional disturbance. This module presents data for students with those disabilities from the 1994 OCR Elementary and Secondary School Compliance Reports on race/ethnicity.

Discrepancies in disability prevalence and service provision across racial/ethnic categories are most apparent in the mental retardation category. A total of 2.6 percent of Black, non-Hispanic students were identified as having mental retardation. In contrast, 1.2 percent of White, non-Hispanic students were identified as having mental retardation. Hispanic students were less likely than White, non-Hispanic students to receive special education to address mental retardation.

White, non-Hispanic students; Black, non-Hispanic students; and Hispanic students were equally likely to receive services to address specific learning disabilities. American Indian students were considerably more likely to receive such services, and Asian/Pacific Islanders were less likely to do so. (See Table 1.)

Overall, 0.8 percent of the student population received services for emotional disturbance. The rate was slightly higher for Black, non-Hispanic students than for White, non-Hispanic students, and was considerably lower for Hispanic students and Asian/Pacific Islander students.

It is often difficult to distinguish between the effects of poverty and the effects of race on special education eligibility because, in the United States, poverty and race are correlated. Poor children are more likely than wealthier children to receive special education (Wagner, 1995). African American children are more likely than White or Asian children to receive special education under some disability categories. While both poverty and racial/ethnic background may contribute to minority representation in special education, data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study suggest that race/ethnicity was not the primary contributor to the over-representation of African Americans in special education. Rather, the over-representation of African Americans was driven by the over-representation of very poor students in special education, at least for most disability

categories (Wagner, 1995). This suggests that, while some of the disproportion may be addressed through improvements in unbiased and more discriminate assessment, attention must also focus on the broader issue of child poverty.

## SUMMARY

The disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minorities in special education has been an issue for educators for more than 25 years, yet African American students continue to be over-represented in programs for students with mental retardation. Furthermore, relative to White, non-Hispanic students, Asian students are under-represented in all four of the disability categories for which the OCR collects data. It has been postulated that poverty, rather than race/ethnicity, may account for some of the over-representation of minorities in special education programs. Therefore, without attention to poverty and its effects on children, the use of unbiased assessment alone will not eradicate the disproportionate representation described.

**Table 1. Number and Percentage of Students in Special Education  
By Race/Ethnicity and Disability, 1994**

	<u>Learning Disabilities</u>	<u>Mental Retardation</u>	<u>Emotional Disturbance</u>	<u>Total Student Population By Race/Ethnicity</u>
White non-Hispanic	5.7% 1,587,198	1.2% 350,699	0.8% 214,442	28,039,068
Black non-Hispanic	5.7% 407,848	2.6% 190,885	1.1% 80,253	7,193,038
Hispanic	5.7% 308,136	0.9% 50,091	0.5% 25,514	5,425,976
American Indian	7.3% 32,413	1.6% 7,152	0.9% 4,227	445,105
Asian/ Pacific Islander	2.0% 31,968	0.5% 8,197	0.2% 2,786	1,588,124
Totals	5.5% 2,368,283	1.4% 607,024	0.8% 327,222	42,691,311

## References

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