



# *EDUCATION* **SUSPENDED**

*The Use of  
High School  
Disciplinary  
Records  
in College  
Admissions*



CENTER FOR COMMUNITY ALTERNATIVES  
INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR JUSTICE

*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*



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## *The Use of High School Disciplinary Records in College Admissions*



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# *ABOUT THE CENTER FOR COMMUNITY ALTERNATIVES (CCA)*



**CENTER FOR COMMUNITY ALTERNATIVES**  
**INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR JUSTICE**

The Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) is a community-based nonprofit organization that promotes reintegrative justice and a reduced reliance on incarceration. Founded in 1981, CCA engages in research, policy advocacy, and direct services in pursuit of our goals to end mass criminalization and incarceration, eliminate racial disparities, and eradicate barriers to employment, housing, higher education, and civic participation experienced by people with criminal records. CCA defines our work within a civil and human rights framework, based on our understanding that the criminal justice system in the United States has become a mechanism to erode fundamental rights in this broad array of social domains. Our research and policy advocacy is grounded in our service work with people directly impacted by the criminal and juvenile justice systems which now include the school-to-prison pipeline.

This report was written by CCA staff: Marsha Weissman, Ph.D., Executive Director and Emily NaPier, M.A., Senior Associate of Research and Public Affairs.

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## **Disclaimer**

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# *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

The use of harsh discipline in elementary and high schools – suspensions and expulsions – has skyrocketed since the mid-1990s. More than 3 million children per year are suspended from school and an additional 100,000 are expelled. Over the last several years, however, there has been growing awareness that excluding young people from school has devastating effects that include increased student dropout/pushout rates, decreased graduation rates, and increased youth involvement in the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

Largely neglected in the conversation on the deleterious effects of suspension and expulsion has been the issue of its impact on college admissions. Yet beginning in the 2006-2007 academic year, the Common Application, used by more than 500 colleges and universities across the country, added a question about school disciplinary histories to its application. The Common Application also includes questions about school disciplinary records on the forms that are sent to high school guidance counselors or other similar school officials for completion. Many colleges that do not use the Common Application have also adopted the practice of collecting information about high school disciplinary violations despite a lack of research on the relationship between disciplinary history screening and safety on college campuses. Further, the studies that have been conducted on criminal history screening in college admissions have found no evidence that such screening practices make campuses safer.

This research was prompted by the Center for Community Alternatives' (CCA) work with young people who have been subjected to harsh school discipline and involved in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. As an organization that provides services to help justice system-involved individuals successfully reintegrate into the community, staff at CCA are often asked to help individuals overcome the myriad lifetime consequences that hamper access to jobs and housing. The experience

of a client referred to CCA for assistance with applying to college raised our concern and focused our attention on the use of criminal history records in the college admissions process. To examine this issue, CCA first looked at the national trends in college admission screening of criminal history records. In the course of this work, we were astonished to learn that colleges were not only asking about and taking into account past criminal records, but many were also considering an applicant's high school disciplinary record. CCA works with young people in urban schools where almost all students are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch and there are high rates of suspension. One of the main concerns of the students is how suspension will affect their future including their prospects of attending college. Already facing barriers related to poverty and being potential first-generation college students, marginalized young people who encounter questions about their high school disciplinary records may be further discouraged from pursuing a college education.

This report investigates how colleges are using high school disciplinary information in the admissions process and how high schools are responding to requests for such information about their students. We frame our findings in the context of the increased criminalization of normative adolescent behavior and the disparate impact of suspensions and expulsions on students of color and students with disabilities. Efforts to improve access to education for young people from low income communities of color and first-generation college students are undermined by policies that include high school disciplinary information in admissions decision making. Instead of promoting campus safety, excluding students with past disciplinary records is likely to decrease public safety in society at large by denying opportunities for higher education to otherwise qualified applicants.



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# Key Findings

1.

**The collection of applicants' high school disciplinary information by colleges and universities is widespread, and that information is used to inform admissions decisions despite the absence of formal, written policies and training around such practices.**

- A.** About three-quarters (73 percent) of colleges and universities collect high school disciplinary information, and 89 percent of those use the information in admissions decision making.
- B.** Only one-quarter (25 percent) of colleges that collect disciplinary information have formal, written policies to guide their use of it, and only 30 percent of schools have trained their admissions staff to interpret disciplinary violation findings.



2.

**High schools commonly disclose disciplinary information about their students to colleges and universities, although most do not have formal, written policies about disclosure and leave those decisions in the hands of individual guidance counselors.**

- A.** Fifty percent of high schools disclose disciplinary information about their students to colleges in at least some cases.
- B.** Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of high schools do not maintain formal, written policies regarding disclosure of student disciplinary records to colleges.
- C.** At 41 percent of the high schools that disclose disciplinary information, the guidance counselor is the only person to review the information prior to sending it to colleges.



3.

**Those students who have a history of disciplinary violations and are admitted to college frequently face requirements and restrictions not imposed on other students.**

- A.** About one-third (33 percent) of colleges sometimes require special supervision of students with prior disciplinary violations, often through the office of the Dean of Students or the office of Student Affairs, or a probationary period may be imposed.
- B.** Almost half (45 percent) of colleges place housing restrictions on students with prior disciplinary violations, with more than one-third (34 percent) prohibiting the student from residing in campus housing, depending on the nature of the disciplinary violations.

# *Recommendations*

## To School Districts:

*Adopt policies that prohibit the disclosure of high school disciplinary records to colleges and universities.*

## To Colleges and Universities:

*Refrain from including questions about high school disciplinary violations on college applications and prohibit the use of such information in admissions decision making.*