



# Zero Tolerance Policies in Education: How Can Palo Alto High School Student Voices Contribute to the Solution?

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## INTRODUCTION

After attending the Impact of Social Movements program at Loyola Marymount University in the summer of 2018, I wondered about the impact of Zero Tolerance policies in my school community. Zero Tolerance policies in education are the policies that allow for suspension and expulsion. These policies are called Zero Tolerance because the schools will not tolerate bad behavior and will not be lenient with rules. Due to racially discriminatory enforcement of Zero Tolerance policies in schools, this has negatively impacted students of color at a higher rate. Furthermore, Zero Tolerance policies in high schools send students of color down a path with limited opportunities. Graduation and employment rates decline while incarceration rises. This is an ongoing problem that needs to be fixed, because it is putting student of color's lives in jeopardy. The Zero Tolerance policies were created and implemented in school handbooks during the 1990s. These policies were created in order to stop students from committing serious crimes like bringing weapons to school. Many schools have different rules and codes on the subject of suspension and expulsion. The most common reasons for students getting suspended and expelled are bringing weapons to school, fighting, and threatening people. In many cases, students were not given another chance before getting suspended or expelled, which has had a negative effect on these students in many instances.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

For this project, a recruitment poster was hung in the library with a QR code. On the poster is a picture of a Palo Alto High School building, with the words "Historically underrepresented students in this district are more than three times as likely to be suspended than their peers." Under this statement is the question "Does this frustrate you? Tell me, why?" Once a student reads this, they scan the QR code on their phone, which brings up a link to a survey. The survey asks students to recall the two questions that are stated on the poster: "Does this frustrate you? Tell me, why?" and additional demographic question about ethnicity/race. The first categorical question and the demographic question were analyzed with descriptive statistics, and the second open-ended question was coded.



## DATA AND FINDINGS

Question 1: Historically underrepresented students in the district are more than three times as likely to be suspended than their peers. Does this frustrate you?



Figure 1: yes/no answers

Question 2: What are your ethnicities/racial groups?

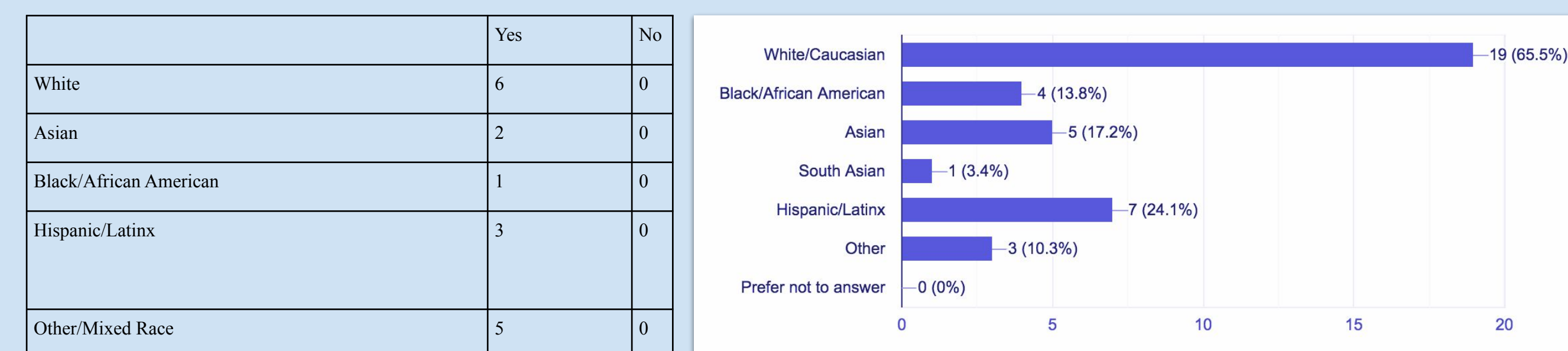


Figure 2: demographics

Question 3: Tell me why?

Suspending based on ethnicity is wrong. This does seem unfairly biased against minorities. It frustrates me because there are definitely steps that can be taken to lower these numbers, and they haven't been done. All too often, the suspensions are done by administrators who may not be familiar with the culture of the student, or are just plain racist. Because we're just trying to learn but they're trying to find minuscule reasons to suspend us so they can kick us out. It's just unfair for those people, and it's good to treat people equal and that's not what's happening. Because it masks much of the structural racism our students experience. It says there is a problem whether from the admin or from the students that needs addressing. Looking to help all students navigate the system and succeed. It's institutionalized racism. There should be equality, especially since since they are outnumbered. All peers should be treated the same. Administrator 1 threatened to suspend me without looking at my IEP. There's a lot of good culture people want to understand but don't out of fear. Yes, because student 1 and student 2 get suspended every week; student 1 just got suspended again for body boxing with student 3. I feel like its a racial thing, like most of the staff is white, so if the student is black or hispanic, then they're most likely to get in trouble. I think for two reasons: the first reason why is that the behavior may be eliciting the consequence and why are the kids behaving in a manner to warrant those consequences? The second is that there may be bias toward the students, because their parents may or may not be big donors to the school. It's annoying because i feel targeted. Why \*\*\*\* would underrepresented children be three more times? Everyone should be created equal. Because it is not fair and it is not their fault of the background because that's not right and it shows how racist this school is

red = unfair treatment

pink = racism or discrimination

green = idea of equality

blue = targeting

## CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYSIS

The findings from the surveys and articles indicate that there is a problem with the Zero Tolerance policies and something has to be done about them. 96.6% of my respondents said they were frustrated that underrepresented students in this district are over three times more likely to be suspended than their peers. The majority (65.5%) of the respondents are White/Caucasian, 13.8% of the respondents are Black/African American, 17.2% are Asian, 3.4% are South Asian, 24.1% are Hispanic/Latinx, and 10.3% are another race/ethnicity. The survey results indicate that a vast majority of people think that the Zero Tolerance policies are a problem. Many students expressed concerns that these policies seem like unfair treatment. From the coding of my responses, the themes that emerged from the results are: unfair treatment, racism/discrimination, idea of equality, and targeting.

## IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

An important implication of these findings is that there is a consensus about how these policies are unfair because they target students of color. There are some solutions that can be implemented in schools to help the safety of other students. One solution could be educating administrators about other students' culture. In addition, administrators could develop clarity between what leads to strong consequences and what leads to lesser consequences.

One difficulty in this study was the ability to choose a sufficiently large and representative sample. In the future, a larger sample size would provide better results, as would adjusting the research methodologies to capture a broader audience. In addition, a continuation of this work should examine at the policies at other schools and compare them to Paly's in order to better understand how Paly differs from other schools.

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