

# Key Issues Paper No. 4



## Understanding Disproportionality and School Exclusions<sup>1</sup>

International research shows that school exclusions tend to disproportionately affect vulnerable and marginalised groups of students, that is, particular groups of students are over-represented in the number of fixed-term and permanent exclusions they receive relative to their size in the general student population. A recent review of US research concluded that marginalised groups, including students from particular racial backgrounds, students with disabilities, boys, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, were disproportionately at risk of being suspended and excluded from school (Skiba et al., 2016). Similar findings have been observed outside of the US. In England, research has shown disproportionately higher rates of exclusionary practices are applied to Black Caribbean students, Gypsy/Roma and Traveller pupils, Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils, boys (Demie, 2019), as well as those with disabilities and/or behavioural, emotional or social difficulties (Strand & Fletcher, 2014). In the Netherlands, Coskun et al. (2015) found that immigrant youths were more likely to be referred to out-of-school facilities than their national peers.

Comparative research in Australia is limited. In Victoria, Hemphill (2010) found “a clear association between student reports of school suspension and area level SES, with lower levels of SES increasing the likelihood of students being suspended.” (p. 16) An investigation into school expulsions in Victoria during 2016 (Victorian Ombudsman, 2017) found that, of the 278 formal expulsions, 80% were male, 86% were secondary school students, 51% were Year 8 and 9 students, 34% were identified as having a disability or mental illness and 6% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (despite representing less than 2.5% of the Victorian government school population). Of particular concern, given these disproportionate rates of exclusion, is the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schools. A small exploratory study of government schools in Western Australia found that Aboriginal students were suspended from school at twice the rate of the total population, and for over twice the number of days (Gardiner, Evans, & Howell, 1995). In addition, Aboriginal students were four times as likely to be permanently excluded from Western Australian schools than non-Indigenous students.

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Of further concern is the way in which exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups of students have the potential to contribute to 'deep exclusion' (Levitas et al., 2007). Deep exclusion refers to 'exclusion across more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, well-being and future life chances' (p. 29). Research shows that there is a clear 'relationship between external school suspension and a range of behaviours detrimental to the health and wellbeing of young people' (Hemphill et al. 2017, p. 9) including alienation from school, involvement with antisocial peers, increased alcohol and tobacco consumption (Hemphill et al., 2013) and a lower quality of school life which increases the likelihood of school dropout, and involvement in illegal behaviour (Skiba, et al., 2016). Students who are considered vulnerable or disadvantaged in more than one way are at higher risk of being suspended from school (Losen, 2014) and are therefore more likely to be adversely affected. Thus, school exclusions are likely to both result from and contribute towards further deep exclusion.

## Current disproportionality of school exclusionary practices

Recent data from 2019 shows that school exclusionary practices continue to be disproportionately applied towards particular groups of students in Australia.

### Indigenous students

- In Queensland, Indigenous students received a quarter of all fixed-term and permanent exclusions (25.3% and 25.4% respectively), despite making up just over 10% of all Queensland's full-time state school enrolments.
- In NSW, of all short and long suspensions approximately 25% were for Aboriginal students, despite this group representing just 8% of all student enrolments
- In Victoria, 6.5% of all expulsions were for Indigenous students, however, this group represents only 2.3% of the student population.

### Students with a disability

- In Victoria, students with disability funding received 14% of all permanent exclusions yet constituted only 4.5% of all government school enrolments.

### Male students

- In South Australia, over three quarters of all suspensions were given to male students (77%), a ratio of over 3:1 compared to females.
- In Victoria, males received over 80% of the permanent exclusions, a ratio of 4:1 compared to females.
- In NSW, around three quarters of all short and long suspensions in 2019 were for males (75.3% and 73.9% respectively).

## School Exclusions Study Overview

The School Exclusions Study aims to investigate the extent to which exclusionary practices such as suspensions and exclusions are used by schools across Australia to discipline students and manage diverse student populations; the reasons why students are suspended and excluded; the profile of students who are suspended and excluded; and the impact on the health, welfare and academic achievement of children who are suspended and excluded from Australian schools. The research will provide the evidence base for policy and school-based interventions that enhance the success of vulnerable children in our schools.

An initial pilot study is focussing on Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia to examine the policies and practices that shape and influence the use of school exclusions to address problematic student behaviour. Data includes legislative constructions guiding school disciplinary practices, and publicly available school exclusions data.

For further information please see [www.schoolexclusionsstudy.com.au](http://www.schoolexclusionsstudy.com.au)

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- [Australian Secondary Principals Association](#)
- [Australian Primary Principals Association](#)
- [South Australian Secondary Principals Association](#)
- [South Australian Primary Principals Association](#)
- [Queensland Secondary Principals' Association](#)
- [Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association](#)

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