Study: School may be factor in suspensions

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A black student in East Baton Rouge Parish schools is far more likely to be suspended if he attends a school that until recently was predominantly white, according to a study by a Southern University professor.

Black students here are suspended in disproportionate numbers even though patterns of student suspensions in East Baton Rouge Parish are similar to those in other U.S. school systems, according to Clarence H. Thornton, an SU professor of sociology who conducted the study.

"Regardless of the method used to compare our two race groups, black students are still suspended at higher rates than whites and out of proportion to their enrollment in each of the schools," the study said. "Moreover, these phenomena vary by school and appear to have been aggravated by the most recent court order that was designed to complete the desegregation efforts that began more than a quarter century ago."

In the 1981-82 school year, white students comprised 58 percent of the parish's secondary school population and received 33 percent of the system's suspensions, the study says. At the same time, black students comprised about 42 percent of the secondary school population, but received 66 percent of the suspensions.

The following year, whites represented 55 percent of the secondary school population and received 27 percent of the system's suspensions, while blacks comprised 45 percent of the school population and received 73 percent of the suspensions, the study says.

The high schools that had the highest percentage of black suspensions were the traditionally white schools such as Woodlawn, Broadmoor and Tara, according to Thornton.

While his study did not attempt to discover whether discrimination was causing the higher suspension rates, his findings do suggest that local schools "must share the responsibility for the high number of black suspensions," Thornton said.

"This pattern suggests that as blacks move into traditionally white schools, their experiences are not always positive," Thornton wrote in the study. "Not only may their suspension rates increase, but if they are fortunate, or unfortunate, enough to enter higher status schools, the manner in which school administrators discipline them via the use of suspension is..."
Thornton also disputed the results of a report that recently was written by the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations.

The CHR report said the high suspension rates may be a result of American culture, which recently has experienced a rise in the number of single-parent families, according to council member Vicki Lott. She said some children from single-parent families may have problems adjusting to the structured environment of the classroom.

Thornton said he has never seen any research to support the idea that students from single-parent families have more discipline problems than those from two-parent families.

“You’d have to compare single-parent families with both-parent families,” he said. “You can’t study one group and then compare the two.”

Thornton also said that if the sample of people interviewed wasn’t drawn up properly, the results of the study would be “at best, tenuous, at worst, incorrect.”

Thornton said he will make copies of his study available to members of the School Board’s Pupil Services Committee when it takes up the issue Thursday afternoon. At that time, the committee is scheduled to review the Human Relations Council report.