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# How have we improved? Exploring racial inequalities in Special Education

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# How have we improved?

## Exploring racial inequalities in Special Education

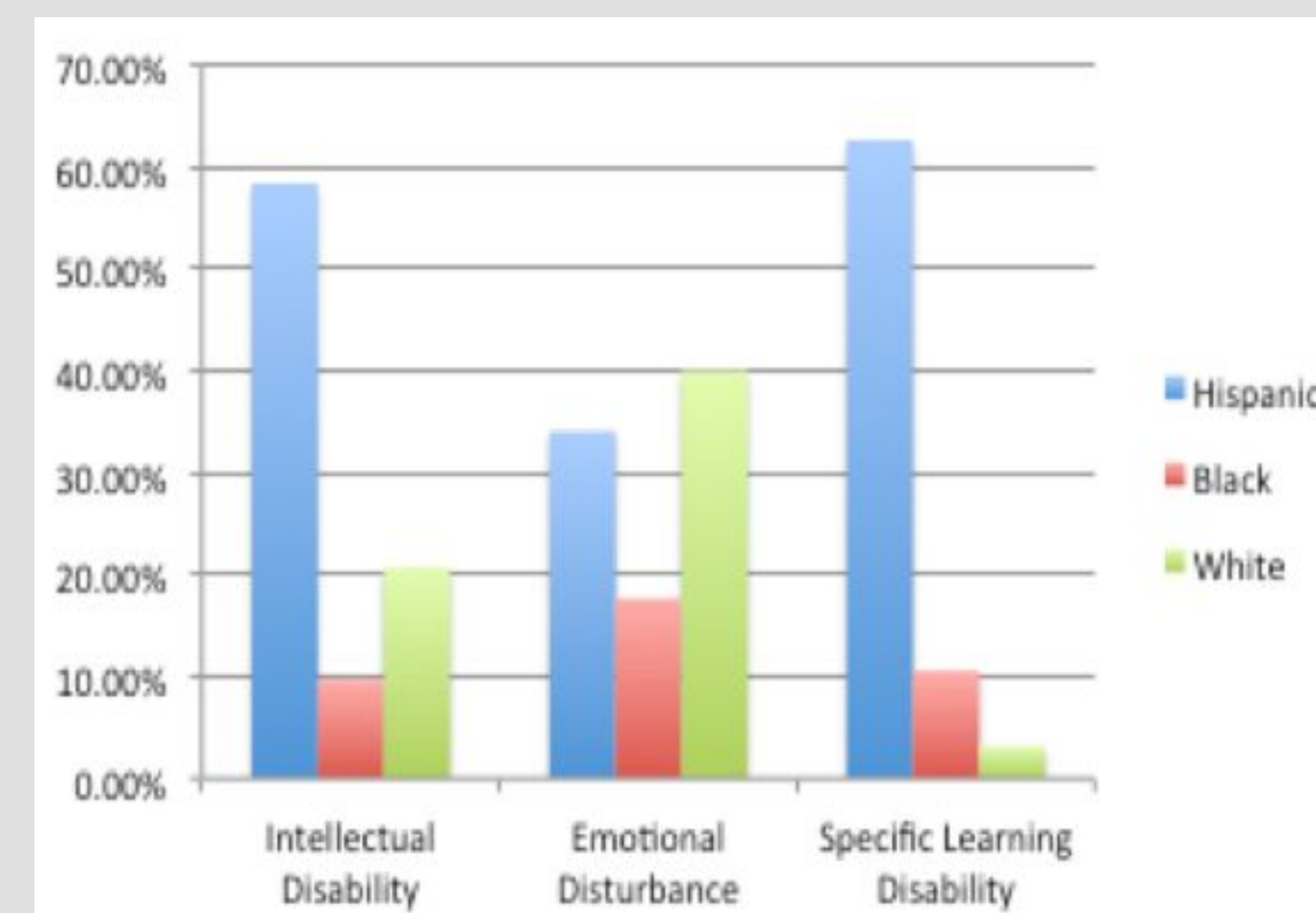
By: Erin Greer, Dr. Nobel

### ABSTRACT

This Independent Study explored the racial inequalities noted within the field of special education, particularly related to identification for certain disability categories and eligibility for special education services. An example of this would be more African American males being identified as having an Emotional Behavior Disorder, Learning Disability, or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. More severe disciplinary practices can also be noted among male, African American students with and without disabilities. Racial inequalities have been well documented in special education, even prior to the first special education law in 1975. Since then, awareness of racial inequalities when identifying students with disabilities has improved and identification practices are more appropriate, such as using non-biased and multi-factored evaluation tools with a Response-to-Intervention team-based approach. But, after reviewing data and exploring the literature, there is more work to be done. Ensuring students are correctly identified with disabilities and are placed in the least restrictive environments with the right supports is important. Discipline practices could be improved. Teachers could use more training and supports. Teachers are expected to work collaboratively with all families including diverse families and those from low socio economic status. It is so important for pre-service and in-service teachers to know and understand the inequalities that take place in the education system and determine what we can do as teachers to help fix and better these issues within and outside of our classrooms. Teachers are responsible for collecting data and assisting in the referral and identification of disabilities. It is vital that teachers are aware that racial inequalities are still present in identification and service for students with disabilities, particularly for African American males. After reviewing the data and the literature for this Independent Study, there are a few recommendations that can be made. Teachers need to be aware and understand this issue. When working to identify students for disabilities, teachers need to make sure they are being objective and are aware of their implicit biases. Teachers need more training on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports to create classrooms where students can thrive and positive discipline strategies can be used. With these suggestions, teachers can improve the outcomes for students with disabilities no matter what their race or ethnicity.

### What has been done in the past

- Overrepresentation of minority children by disability category.
  - Isolation. The children with disabilities who were in a minority experienced much less access to the general education classroom.
    - Separate schools for individuals in Special Education
- Low quality evaluations, supports and services. Many minority children were identified as having a disability but were at risk of receiving inappropriate and inadequate services.
- Racial discrimination in the classrooms.
- Inconsistent schoolwide, classroom, and individual behavior management practices.
- Poor funding across states and districts. Poorer school districts tend to get funded with less money by congress. The burden of making up for those unfunded expenses falls on schools, and particularly hard on the poorer school districts that disproportionately serve black and brown students.
  - IDEA Act - The funding goal then was committed to cover 40 percent of the cost of educating special education students in this country.



"Low-income students were identified in **very high numbers**. This may indicate that the failure to meet the needs of some of these children resides in general education. Assigning disability labels to children who are not disabled runs the risk of lowering expectations and, through segregated placements, restricting access to the general education classroom."

—Thomas Hehir, Ed.D.,  
Harvard Graduate School of Education professor and former OSEP director

### What is being done now

- Less overrepresentation in schools.
- Appropriate evaluations to students for Special Education Services.
  - Screening, Interventions and Evaluations to see if the child fits the need for Special Education services, Medical Diagnosis, etc.
- Educators have more access to training programs. Better resources to appropriately accommodate students with disabilities and behavioral issues.
- Less isolation in school. Children with learning disabilities are spending more and more time in general education classrooms.
- Still poor funding...
  - IDEA Act - The funding goal in current IDEA legislation is for the federal government to provide 40 percent of the average per student in the U.S., multiplied by the number of special education students in each state.
    - Forty percent of the cost of educating a typical student is a lower amount than 40 percent of the cost of educating a student with disabilities

### What can be done moving forward

- Using better identification practices in special education.
  - Encourage states to develop programs such as a multi-tier system of supports. MTSS helps educators quickly respond to students' needs and provide targeted instruction and support to prevent failure.
  - Identifying students earlier and using the correct and most appropriate services to help that child succeed.
- Focus on building a better safety net and reducing child poverty.
  - Making poverty programs better coordinated and more accessible to low income families, and improving job opportunities and wages across the board.
- Give parents the right information and resources they need to better help their child succeed.
- Improve on better more equalized funding for all students

### MULTIPLE JEOPARDY

[MUHL-TUH-PUH L JEP-ER-DEE]

**noun**

- The way in which oppressive barriers that individuals face contribute to the level of oppression faced due to these factors culminating together to cause further and greater oppression.

### REFERENCES

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4. Losen, D. J., & Orfield, G. (2008). *Racial inequity in special education*. Cambridge, MA: Civil Rights Project at Harvard Univ., Harvard Education Press.

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION by Income Status, for State A, State B, and State C (2013-14)

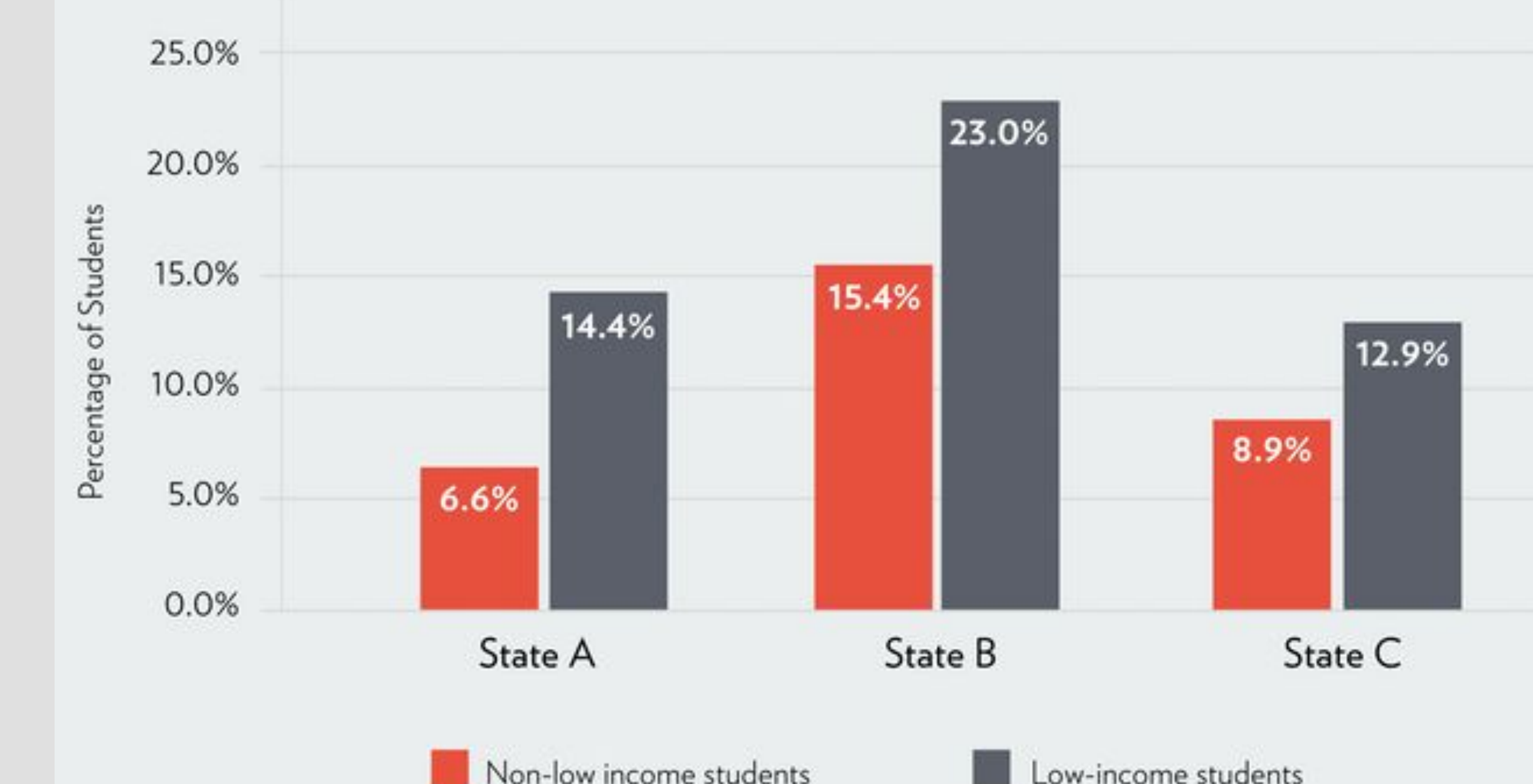


Figure 6: Percentage of children ages 6 through 11 in low-income and poor families by race/ethnicity, 2015

