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The emotional disturbance identification and special education placement of African American students

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Currently in school districts across the United States, minority students are over-represented in Special Education programs. Additionally, a disproportionate number of these students have been placed in restrictive environments and the disproportionate level of restrictiveness is most marked for African American students. African American students are most often over-identified in the disability categories of Mental Retardation (MR) and Emotional Disturbance (ED), those most closely associated with high levels of restrictiveness. Within the state of Missouri, this issue of African American over-representation in Special Education exists and significantly within the Columbia Public School District. The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent African American students within the Columbia Public School District are over-identified specifically as Emotionally Disturbed and to what extent African American students identified as ED are placed in restrictive environments in comparison to other ED students. By way of retrieving and manipulating data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, it was found that within the Columbia Public School District, in accordance with State and National trends, African American students are disproportionately identified as ED and subsequently placed in more restrictive environments than other ED students. Although the study confirmed that there is a problem, why the problem exists has yet to be explained. Regardless of why the disproportionalities exist, in order to comply with the IDEA requirements that each student be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate, it is the responsibility of all educators to insure that African American students are not being unlawfully treated.