

# Students of color are at greater risk for reading difficulties – even in kindergarten

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The achievement gap for young readers is stark, even in kindergarten.

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Black, Hispanic and Native American students are more likely than white or Asian students to struggle with reading – and that gap emerges early, according to our new research. During kindergarten, they are more likely to score in the lowest 10% on assessments measuring skills such as letter recognition, vocabulary and recognizing common sight words. Large racial and ethnic differences in the risks for reading difficulties continue as students move through elementary school – a pattern largely explained by family income and early academic skills.

Our study, published online in November 2025 in the *Journal of School Psychology*, finds that about 15% of Black, Hispanic and Native American kindergartners score in the lowest 10% of reading scores, compared to 6% and 8% of white and Asian students, respectively. By fifth grade, 18%, 16% and 10% of Black, Hispanic and Native American students are struggling. The contrasting rate for white and Asian students is about 5%.

We analyzed data collected by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics from 2010-2016. This data includes direct academic assessments as well as surveys of the students and their parents, teachers and school administrators.

We used standard statistical methods to explore how a wide range of factors across homes and schools – measured during kindergarten – helped explain whether students later experienced reading difficulties. A key factor, according to our analysis, is the family's socioeconomic status: a measure including household income and parental education levels and occupations.

Kindergartners who struggled with initial reading, math and science skills, as well as more general learning abilities such as working memory, were also at higher risk for reading difficulties throughout elementary school.

## **Why it matters**

U.S. elementary students' reading achievement has been declining in recent years. The gap between the highest- and lowest-scoring readers is increasing too.

Supporting these children is important. Students who wrestle with reading are more likely to later experience anxiety and depression. Adults with reading difficulties are also more likely to be incarcerated and unemployed. In one study, for example, about half of Texas prisoners were poor readers.

Because our findings suggest Black, Hispanic and Native American students are at higher risk for reading difficulties by kindergarten, students from these groups may have greater needs for early reading interventions that provide extra help with phonics, vocabulary and reading fluency. Some of these students may also have unrecognized learning disabilities.

Yet students of color are less likely to be identified with disabilities, including dyslexia – even when the students are experiencing early and significant reading difficulties.

## **What still isn't known**

How economic and educational policies and practices can best help lower the risks of reading difficulties is poorly understood. There is some evidence that cash transfers to financially struggling families may increase children's later reading achievement. Poverty is also associated with lower exposure to age-appropriate books and other early literacy materials and fewer opportunities to acquire a larger vocabulary.

Our longitudinal research adds to the very limited understanding of the early economic, environmental, cognitive, academic and behavioral factors that help shape elementary students' reading abilities. Most other studies have focused on a single grade and examined a limited set of specific skills – such as how children process sounds – instead of multiple grades and a more general set of risk factors.

More research is needed to identify the full range of reasons why elementary students begin to struggle in reading and what can be done to best help them.

The Research Brief is a short take on interesting academic work.

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