

ZERO TOLERANCE: AN UPDATE, 2010



Three zero tolerance offense categories are defined in state statute: drug possession/use, firearm possession, and battery of staff. Local boards of education may classify additional offenses (e.g., possession of a knife) as zero tolerance offenses. Codified zero tolerance offenses (those defined in state statute) are the same from district to district, while LEA-determined offenses vary. This update focuses on codified offenses to provide a more accurate comparison across districts.

Analysis of zero tolerance data spanning back to school year 1999-2000

indicates that:

- Overall, zero tolerance offenses increased from school year 1999-2000, when standardized data collection began, to 2005-06, but have since trended downward.
- Drug offenses have increased 45 percent since 1999, outpacing student population growth. More recent data, however, shows a slight decline in the number of drug offenses.
- Firearm offenses showed a relatively steady pattern of decline in the years between 1999 and 2005, though the pattern of offenses has been erratic more recently.
- Battery of staff offenses have increased since 1999, though the reliability of such data is complicated by the category's subjectivity (i.e., interpretation by school officials and victims).

Analysis of more recent (from school years 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08) zero tolerance data indicates that:

- In 2007-2008, 40 percent of all codified zero tolerance offenses came from Tennessee's five largest school districts.
- Urban districts varied in their utilization of disciplinary actions, and outcomes for zero tolerance offenders were largely dependent on district practices.
- A majority of zero tolerance offenders were in grade 9, and two-thirds of all offenders were male.

The state does not audit school districts' zero tolerance data, although the data is reviewed by TDOE officials. OEA discovered a data reporting error during the course of this project that was not identified by TDOE. A district reported no offenses for a category, although its report from the year prior indicated hundreds of offenses. It is unknown whether this data reporting error is an anomaly or represents a larger, broader problem with the accuracy of zero tolerance data.

Policy Options

TDOE may wish to periodically audit a random sample of school districts to verify the accuracy of zero tolerance data.

TDOE may wish to survey district superintendents to determine the criteria LEAs use for zero tolerance charges and modifications.

Note: As a companion to this report, OEA is releasing a web-only feature: an interactive zero tolerance map. The statewide map can be accessed at http://www.comptroller1.state.tn.us/Repository/RE/ZeroToleranceMap_1.htm.

View the full report at <http://www.tn.gov/comptroller/orea>

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