Left Behind?
The Effect of the No Child Left Behind Legislation on Academic Achievement Gaps

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One of the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; 20 U.S.C. § 6301) was to close racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. Ten years have passed since NCLB went into effect. In this paper we investigate whether the Act has been successful at narrowing racial achievement gaps. We do so by testing whether there is an association between the number of years that a cohort has been exposed to NCLB by a particular grade and the size of that cohort’s achievement gap in that grade, net of state-specific cohort and grade trends.

Overall, our analyses provide no support for the hypothesis that No Child Left Behind has led, on average, to a narrowing of racial achievement gaps, though we do find evidence indicating that the effect of NCLB varies across states. Moreover, we find that the effect of NCLB on achievement gaps depends in part on whether a majority of black or Hispanic students are in schools where there are enough black or Hispanic students to meet the state-determined NCLB minimum subgroup size reporting threshold. In states where relatively few minority students are in schools held accountable for their minority students’ performance, NCLB actually appears to have led to a widening of the achievement gap. Nonetheless, the impact of NCLB on achievement gaps—whether positive or negative—is generally very modest in size, on the order of changing gaps by 1/100th of a standard deviation per year on average.