



Original article

The Influence of School Demographic Factors and Perceived Student Discrimination on Delinquency Trajectory in Adolescence

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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of school demographic factors and youth's perception of discrimination on delinquency in adolescence and into young adulthood for African American, Asian, Hispanic, and white racial/ethnic groups.

Methods: Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), models testing the effect of school-related variables on delinquency trajectories were evaluated for the four racial/ethnic groups using Mplus 5.21 statistical software.

Results: Results revealed that greater student ethnic diversity and perceived discrimination, but not teacher ethnic diversity, resulted in higher initial delinquency estimates at 13 years of age for all groups. However, except for African Americans, having a greater proportion of female teachers in the school decreased initial delinquency estimates. For African Americans and whites, a larger school size also increased the initial estimates. Additionally, lower social-economic status increased the initial estimates for whites, and being born in the United States increased the initial estimates for Asians and Hispanics. Finally, regardless of the initial delinquency estimate at age 13 and the effect of the school variables, all groups eventually converged to extremely low delinquency in young adulthood, at the age of 21 years.

Conclusion: Educators and public policy makers seeking to prevent and reduce delinquency can modify individual risks by modifying characteristics of the school environment. Policies that promote respect for diversity and intolerance toward discrimination, as well as training to help teachers recognize the precursors and signs of aggression and/or violence, may also facilitate a positive school environment, resulting in lower delinquency.

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The life-course perspective suggests that development is a continuous process that occurs because of the interplay and intersection between personal biography (e.g., ethnicity) with social, cultural, and historical factors [1]. Studies revealed that individuals tend to desist in delinquent activities once they are engaged in new life roles such as in work and forming partnerships [2,3]. The age-crime curve is a reflection of this life-course perspective. Primarily shown among white and African Ameri-

can youth populations, delinquency seems to increase during preadolescence, peaks between mid to late adolescence, and then decreases thereafter [4,5]. The shape of the delinquent trajectory is also arguably similar across individuals [6].

Many studies, however, have also revealed the importance of context, and how different contexts (e.g., family, school) might moderate delinquency trajectory [7,8], consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory [9]. Using a large, nationally representative dataset, we examine the effect of certain demographic and contextual school factors on the initial estimates and the corresponding developmental trajectories of delinquency in early adolescence into young adulthood among the four major race/ethnic groups in the United States. Consequently, both the

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life-course perspective and Bronfenbrenner's theory inform this study.

The racial/ethnic composition of the student population is one feature of school demographics. Juvonen et al [10] recently calculated an index of diversity by considering the relative representation of the different ethnic groups in each of the 11 public middle schools in Los Angeles, and found that African American and Latino youth reported fewer experiences of victimization and a greater feeling of safety in classrooms/schools with greater student ethnic diversity. They attributed this finding to the presence of greater power balance in more diverse schools. Similarly, Brand et al [11] found that minority students who perceived greater support for cultural pluralism (consideration and respect of different groups) in their schools, even after controlling for students' socioeconomic status, experienced significantly better adjustment outcomes. Kim and McCarthy [12] found that Asian youth were less likely to engage in substance use in schools that had a high Latino majority and schools with a high Asian immigrant population in the surrounding neighborhoods. Finally, Benner and Graham [13] developed a growth model of the transitional experiences of going from middle to high school on roughly 2,000 adolescents, and found that African American and Latino students were particularly challenged in the transition when the ethnic composition of their respective groups declined in high school. In summary, these studies suggest that ethnic minority youth benefit psychosocially and behaviorally from a more diverse or immigrant-concentrated school context.

However, other published data suggest a potentially adverse effect for greater student ethnic diversity, particularly as it relates to aggression and delinquency. For example, Ross [14] found that students reported higher delinquency in more equally mixed school environments than in racially homogeneous school environments. Putnam [15] argued that greater ethnic diversity actually leads to greater self-protection and self-preservation tendencies and greater social isolation and anomie among individuals in the short-term. According to social identity theory, one of the fundamental needs of individuals is to distinguish themselves from other groups and to engage in in-group bias [16,17]. In the context of ethnic diversity where several groups are present, this can be accomplished by creating distinction between one's in-group and out-group, preferring one's own ethnic group over others, and highlighting differences. Previous studies observed a positive association between the level of school ethnic heterogeneity and higher incidences of violence and victimization [18,19] partly because heterogeneous schools are likely to be located in poor, urban neighborhoods, are more disorganized, and have fewer resources; thus they are at a greater disadvantage [20]. Hanish and Guerra [21] noted in a large sample of ethnically diverse elementary schools that white children were at greater risk for experiencing victimization in predominately non-white schools; risks, however, did not increase for Latino

youth and were even slightly less for African American youth. Similar to school ethnic diversity, the few studies that examined the relation between school size and delinquency found a positive association [22,23].

Present study

Consistent with the life-course perspective, we hypothesized that delinquency trajectories will vary by race/ethnicity, with African American and Hispanic youth showing higher initial rates than Asian and white youth, yet they will all evince the same pattern of increase during early adolescence, peaking between mid to late adolescence, followed by a dramatic decline into emerging adulthood [4,5]. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, we also hypothesized that a larger school size, higher perceptions of discrimination, and greater student ethnic diversity will elevate initial delinquency levels across the four racial/ethnic groups, but that the groups will display similar developmental pattern (slopes), consistent with the findings of Rowe et al [24].

We also included two control variables, namely family socioeconomic status (SES) and nativity in terms of U.S.-born versus born in another country (i.e., in general first generation vs. second or third generation) to account for potential confounds of higher ethnic diversity in more distressed neighborhoods [25,26], and low SES being related to higher delinquency and lower family cohesion [27,28]. Similarly, U.S. nativity is included because cross-sectional studies indicate greater risks of delinquency for second and third generation (U.S.-born) youth [29–31].

Methods

Sample

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is a nationally representative sample of adolescents initially in grades 7 through 12 collected at three waves. The study used a multistage, stratified, cluster sampling design that included all public and private secondary schools, and representation of urban, regional, and racial strata. All participants in grades 7 through 11 in wave I (1994/95) were re-interviewed in 1996 (wave II) and in 2001/2002 (wave III), with response rates ranging from 77% to 88%. The analyses herein did not include the oversample of educated African Americans, or youth who reported more than one race/ethnicity. Analyses were also restricted to youth who had a delinquency score in at least one of the three waves. The resulting sample consisted of 18,753 participants (Table 1).

Table 1
Means of school-related variables by racial/ethnic group

Racial/ethnic group	n	Percent female teachers	School size	Students in school prejudiced	Student diversity index	Teacher diversity index
White	10,322	59.6 ^b	3.43 ^d	2.68 ^c	.32 ^c	.12 ^d
African American	3,562	62.1 ^a	3.60 ^c	3.03 ^a	.44 ^b	.35 ^c
Hispanic	3,326	54.4 ^c	3.81 ^a	2.86 ^b	.54 ^a	.39 ^b
Asian	1,543	48.6 ^d	3.74 ^b	2.93 ^b	.54 ^a	.46 ^a

Means within a column not significantly different and $p < .05$, Ryan/Eiot/Gabriel/Welsch procedure.

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