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How effective are severe disciplinary policies? School policies and offending from adolescence into young adulthood[☆]

Jennifer L. Matjasko^{*}

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USA

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ABSTRACT

Based on the stage environment and the person environment fit perspectives, the current study examined the relation between school disciplinary policies and offending from adolescence into young adulthood. Using Waves I and III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (a.k.a., Add Health), hierarchical multinomial logistic regression models were utilized to test whether school disciplinary policies were related to offending patterns during adolescence and young adulthood. Descriptive results suggest that, overall, severe school policies were not associated with the course of offending. However, relations between individual characteristics (i.e., inattention and impulsivity) and offending patterns did appear to differ depending on the severity of disciplinary policies. Within schools with more severe policies, adolescents scoring higher on inattention were more likely to be in the adolescent-limited offender group over the persistent offender group. On the other hand, adolescents with high levels of impulsivity were more likely to be in the persistent group over the non-offender group within schools with more severe policies. The results suggest that severe policies may not be effective for all students and the policies, alone, may not be promising avenues for the prevention of offending during adolescence and young adulthood.

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^{*} Corresponding author at: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 4770 Buford Highway NE, MS-F64, Atlanta, GA 30341. Tel.: +1 770 488 4267; fax: +1 770 488 1360.

E-mail address: jmatjasko@cdc.gov.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is generally a healthy period of the lifecycle, when morbidity and mortality rates are relatively low. With many adolescents positively engaged in school and extracurricular activities as well as work and volunteer experiences, the stage for a successful transition to adulthood is set (Larson, 2001). However, for some individuals, adolescence is a time of marked increases in problems with social and behavioral adjustment. Research considering the relation between age and delinquent activity has shown that offending or misconduct rises sharply in the early teen years, continues to rise throughout adolescence, and declines late in adolescence (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983).

In order to control adolescent misconduct, most schools have instituted disciplinary policies for infractions such as cheating, alcohol and drug use, fighting, and assaulting teachers. More than 75% of all schools report having zero-tolerance policies, which mandate predetermined and severe consequences for specific offenses, such as drug use and violence (DeVoe et al., 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). There are few studies that have examined the effectiveness of severe disciplinary policies in reducing offending. The current study investigates whether and how between-school differences in the severity of their disciplinary policies are related to success in curbing offending behavior in adolescence and into young adulthood.

1.1. School disciplinary policies

Schools vary in their approaches to student disciplinary policies. Although most require expulsion only in cases of repeated instances of violence or drug use, some require suspension or expulsion for cheating. Since the advent of the Gun-Free School Act of 1994 and several high-profile school shootings in the 1990s, many schools are implementing severe disciplinary policies (U.S. Departments of Education, 1998). Severe policies are those in which both major and minor infractions are reprimanded severely, even at the first offense and usually regardless of individual circumstance. Research has found that suspension is one of the most widely used disciplinary techniques (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). Suspension can be either in the form of internal suspension, in which the student must go to school but is essentially quarantined from classmates and must remain in a designated “suspension room,” or external suspension, in which the student is to remain at home.

Some psychologists question the logic behind the use of suspension (e.g., Hyman & Perone, 1998). It is not uncommon for a student to be told that their behavior is intolerable and, therefore, warrants suspension. However, explanations as to why the behavior is intolerable are usually not given to students (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). Skiba and Peterson (2003) found a relation between suspension, repeat offending, and involvement with the legal system during adolescence. Suspension is highly correlated with drug use, poor academic achievement, and future dropout (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). Furthermore, suspension is used at a more frequent rate with African Americans and students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The Applied Research Center (ARC, 2001) reported that although African American students accounted for only 17% of the student population in the United States in 1998, they accounted for almost 33% of students that were suspended in the United States that year.

Many students who have been known to exhibit non-compliant behavioral patterns early in their educational career find reprimands and punishment to be a form of confrontation (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Suspended students may not only begin to view the disciplinary policy as arbitrary and unfair, but they may also feel rejected by the school and its administration. In turn, the students may reject the school as a prosocial institution and exhibit maladaptive behaviors—possible residual effects of repeated suspensions, such as withdrawal from school staff and counter-aggression. On the other hand, if severe disciplinary policies do discourage adolescent or young adult offending, they can be a part of a strategy aimed at decreasing offending behavior among adolescents and young adults.

There is very little qualitative and quantitative research assessing the effectiveness of severe school disciplinary policies. In an investigation of zero-tolerance school policy implementation, The National Center of Education Statistics (NCES, 1998) found that schools implementing zero-tolerance policies in 1996–1997 tended to have more crime than those schools without such policies. However, this link was correlational and did not control for important student and school characteristics. Research examining the link between severe school policies and the long-term behavior of adolescents and young adults,

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