



# Student attitudes and behaviors as explanations for the Black-White suspension gap<sup>☆</sup>



Francis L. Huang<sup>a,\*</sup>, Dewey G. Cornell<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Missouri, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Virginia, United States

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Although studies have documented that Black students receive out-of-school suspensions (OSS) at much higher rates than White students, few studies have investigated possible explanations for this disparity. The differential involvement hypothesis suggests that disproportionate sanctioning may be a function of racial differences in student misbehavior or characteristics that predispose them to misbehavior.

**Method:** Suspension data, risk behaviors, and aggressive attitudes from self-report surveys were collected from a statewide sample of 38,398 students attending 236 racially-diverse high schools. A series of school fixed-effect logistic and linear regression models were used to test behavioral and attitudinal forms of the differential involvement hypothesis.

**Results:** Racial differences in self-reported suspension could not be explained by different behavioral reasons for suspension (such as fighting, threatening others, and substance possession), by involvement in high risk behaviors of fighting, bullying, carrying a weapon, consuming alcohol, or using marijuana, or by aggressive attitudes that lead to hostile behavior.

**Conclusions:** Overall, these findings do not support the differential involvement hypothesis and although they do not establish the presence of bias, they strengthen concern that racial disparities are likely the result of differential decisions by school authorities.

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## 1. Introduction

Out-of-school suspension (OSS) refers to a commonly-used exclusionary sanction that prohibits a student from attending school for one or more days as a result of a disciplinary infraction. The detrimental effects of receiving an OSS are well-documented (Morgan, Salomen, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014; Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015). As a result of an OSS, students lose instructional time and tend to fall behind their classmates and they become disengaged and less motivated to achieve academic success (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2010). After an OSS, students often do not show the expected

improvement in their behavior and are at increased risk for further infractions and suspensions (Losen, 2015a; Morgan et al., 2014). There are long-term consequences that may follow from repeated suspensions and increasing academic and behavioral difficulties, including greater risk of being held back a grade, dropping out of school, and becoming involved with the criminal justice system (Arcia, 2006; Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2012; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Fabelo et al., 2011; Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009). School suspensions have been identified as a critical factor in funneling students into a school-to-prison pipeline that leads to school failure, criminal activity, and eventual incarceration (Morgan et al., 2014).

More than two decades of research have documented that Black students are more likely to receive an OSS compared to White students (Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen et al., 2015; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Van Norman, 2013). Across multiple state and national samples, the suspension rates for Black students are two or three times higher than their White counterparts (Anyon et al., 2014; Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Skiba et al., 2014, 1997). For example, in U.S. secondary schools in school year 2011–12, the percentage of Black students receiving an OSS (23.2%) was 3.5 times higher than the percentage of White students (6.7%) receiving an OSS (Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2016).

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\* Corresponding author at: Department of Educational, School, and Counseling Psychology, University of Missouri, 16 Hill Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, United States.

E-mail address: [huangf@missouri.edu](mailto:huangf@missouri.edu) (F.L. Huang).

There is concern that racial disparities in OSS reflect racial bias by school authorities. In their joint Dear Colleague letter, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice and the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education (USDOJ and USDOE, 2014) carefully articulated this position:

The Departments recognize that disparities in student discipline rates in a school or district may be caused by a range of factors. However, research suggests that the substantial racial disparities of the kind reflected in the CRDC [Civil Rights Data Collection] data are not explained by more frequent or more serious misbehavior by students of color. Although statistical and quantitative data would not end an inquiry under Title IV or Title VI, significant and unexplained racial disparities in student discipline give rise to concerns that schools may be engaging in racial discrimination that violates the Federal civil rights laws (p. 3).

When the Departments investigate racial disparities to determine whether school actions were discriminatory, a key question is “Can the school articulate a legitimate, nondiscriminatory reason for the different treatment? If not, the Departments could find that the school has intentionally discriminated on the basis of race” (p. 6). From this perspective it is incumbent on schools to assess whether their differential rates of OSS can be explained by differences in student attitudes or behavior that lead to disciplinary infractions.

Critics (Chavez, 2014) of the federal government have questioned whether racial disparities in suspension reflect discrimination, commenting that if Black students engaged in behaviors punishable by suspensions at higher rates than White students, the higher punishment rates would be appropriate. Losen (2015b) noted that efforts to reduce racial disparities in school suspension must ask, “If some historically disadvantaged groups misbehave more, *shouldn't* they be removed from school more often?” (p. 5). This question hinges on whether there is empirical evidence of differential misbehavior. Although many studies document the racial disparity in school suspension, surprisingly few studies have explored in more detail the reasons for the disproportionality (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). There are large disciplinary datasets that compile school disciplinary records and document OSS rates, such as datasets provided by the Center for Civil Rights Remedies (2016) or the Civil Rights Data Collection project of the U.S. Department of Education (2016), but these records do little to help explain why the disparities occur. One reason for this gap in knowledge is that discipline records contain little or no information on the reasons why students engaged in behavior that resulted in an OSS. Information on student attitudes or behaviors associated with school misbehavior might shed light on the racial disparities and help narrow down the search for explanations.

The *differential involvement* hypothesis suggests that racial disproportionality is not a result of discrimination but a consequence of differences in attitudes and behaviors that lead to higher rates of misbehavior among Black students (Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994; Huang, 2016b). This possibility must be carefully considered because in such a case, disproportional suspension rates would not represent racial bias, but an appropriate response to disproportionate behavior (Skiba et al., 2002). One avenue of research has been to distinguish suspensions for relatively more objective violations, such as smoking, drinking, or carrying a weapon at school from more subjective violations that require more judgment by school authorities, such as defiance, disrespectful behavior, and excessive noise. Several studies have found that Black students were suspended more often for subjective infractions, such as defiance or disruptive behaviors, compared to White students who were suspended more often for objective reasons such as alcohol, tobacco, and drug-related offenses (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Heilbrun, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002). The current

study investigated student endorsement of aggressive attitudes and rule-breaking behavior (e.g., fighting, weapon-carrying) that might explain Black/White differences in OSS rates.

### 1.1. Student predictors of suspension

Several studies have investigated student characteristics that might account for the racial disparity in school suspension. Hinojosa (2008) found that student involvement in fighting and negative beliefs about teachers were predictive of suspension but did not fully explain the higher rates for Black students. Administrator surveys have indicated that the offenses most likely to result in suspension are related to aggression and fighting (Costenbader & Markson, 1994; Skiba et al., 1997). Aggressive behaviors such as fighting and possession of drugs or weapons are the infractions most likely to lead to an OSS, so it is important to examine whether Black students engage in those behaviors more frequently than White students (Skiba et al., 2014). Although studies may suggest that disobedience or insubordination account for a large number of suspensions (Mendez & Knoff, 2003), these offenses can be viewed as largely subjective and may result from some form of racial bias (Skiba et al., 2002).

A second source of racial disparities in school suspension may be the attitudes that students hold toward aggressive behavior. Attitudes that encourage or support aggression are critical factors leading to aggressive behaviors (Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986; Slaby & Guerra, 1988). Although behaviors and attitudes are not synonymous, attitudes (together with intent) often precede behavior and are highly correlated (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Several middle school studies have found that student attitudes toward aggression were predictive of aggressive behavior, bullying, fighting, and school suspensions (Cotten et al., 1994; McConville & Cornell, 2003). In a study of 7th and 8th grade students in 423 schools, aggressive attitudes were found to be predictive of a student's involvement in bullying others while controlling for school and student demographics (Huang, Cornell, & Konold, 2015). In the same study, school-level analyses showed that aggressive attitudes were associated with increased suspensions, gang activity, student victimization, prevalence of teasing and bullying, and aggressive infractions. One way to extend this research is to investigate whether aggressive attitudes differ meaningfully across racial groups and can explain racial differences in suspension.

In addition to attitudes supporting aggressive behavior, actual engagement in deviant behavior are basic determinants of student suspension (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). Wright, Morgan, Coyne, Beaver, and Barnes (2014) found that teacher-rated problem behaviors in kindergarten and first grade were predictive of suspension in the eighth grade while controlling for other school and student variables. In addition, Wright et al. found that parent reports of delinquent behavior (such as stealing, cheating, and fighting) in eighth grade were associated with eighth grade suspension rates. When both teacher and parent reports of problem behavior were included in the analyses, differences between Black and White student suspension rates were no longer statistically significant. Wright et al. concluded that the use of suspensions may not be as racially driven as others have suggested. However, the use of teacher reports may be problematic in assessing racial disparities since teachers, even as early as preschool, may exhibit bias against Black students and expect them to misbehave more (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). In addition, the measures used by Wright et al. were a mix of skills (e.g., eagerness to learn, task persistence, attentiveness) which were quite different from problem behaviors (e.g., using drugs, getting into fights).

Finn and Servoss (2015) concluded that teacher and student reports of misbehavior could partially explain the higher rates of suspension for Black students, but disparities in the total number of suspensions were also still present. However, when OSS was the outcome variable (vs.

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