



To educate or to incarcerate: Factors in disproportionality in school discipline☆



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ABSTRACT

The school-to-prison pipeline describes the process by which school suspension/expulsion may push adolescents into the justice system disproportionately based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. The current study moves the field forward by analyzing a survey of a diverse sample of 2539 students in 10th to 12th grade in Southern California to examine how demographic, individual, and family factors contribute to disparities in office referral and suspension/expulsion. African Americans, boys, and students whose parents had less education were more likely to be suspended/expelled. Higher levels of student academic preparation for class, hours spent on homework, and academic aspiration were associated with less school discipline. Findings suggest that helping students engage in school may be protective against disproportionate school discipline.

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1. Introduction

Commonly referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012) or the “cradle-to-prison pipeline” (Children's Defense Fund, 2012), suspension and expulsion can push children out of school and into the juvenile justice system, a process that tends to more severely penalize students of color as well as those who are male, of lower socioeconomic status (SES), and who have disabilities (Krezmien, Leone, & Wilson, 2014). Over 2,000,000 secondary school students – or approximately 1 out of 9 – were suspended from U.S. middle and high schools during the 2009–2010 school year (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Suspension has increased in frequency in recent years coinciding with an increase in the gap in racial disproportionality. Between the 1972–1973 and 2009–2010 school years, rates of suspension doubled for African American (11.8% to 24.3%) and Latino (6.1% to 12.0%) students, whereas rates increased only slightly for White students (6.0% to 7.1%) (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Krezmien et al. (2014) describe two pathways, one direct and the other indirect, through which suspension and expulsion can lead to students entering the justice system. In the direct pathway, schools refer

students facing suspension/expulsion directly to the police and courts (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Krezmien, Leone, Zablocki, & Wells, 2010). In the indirect pathway, suspensions lead to the youth's disconnection from school, reduced academic performance, increased delinquent activity, and incarceration (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle, & Seal, 2005; Krezmien et al., 2014; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Students who are suspended and/or expelled, especially those who are repeatedly disciplined, are more likely to be held back a grade or to drop out than students not receiving such discipline (Arcia, 2006; Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2014; Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). School suspension hinders academic growth and contributes to racial disparities in achievement, accounting for approximately one-fifth of black-white differences in performance (Morris & Perry, 2016). School suspension is also associated with contact with the juvenile justice system the following year (Fabelo et al., 2011), antisocial behavior (Hemphill, Toumbourou, Herrenkohl, McMorris, & Catalano, 2006), and arrest in that same month versus months when youth had not been suspended or expelled (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014).

Most prior research has only included suspension and expulsion as outcome variables, but a smaller number of studies have also found office referrals (i.e., a teacher or school official sent a student to the office for disciplinary purposes) for students to be disproportionate based on race, SES, and gender (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Rocque, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Office referrals are an important form of discipline that can reduce student opportunities to learn (Scott & Barrett, 2004) and increase the risk for future suspension and dropout (Morrison & Skiba, 2001). As a result, this study

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examines both suspension/expulsion and office referrals as outcomes. The term *school discipline* will refer to all of these outcomes. Doing so also allows a comparison of factors for the different forms of discipline as they can operate via different processes (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

Despite extensive research linking the demographic factors of race, SES, and gender to school discipline, fewer studies address the role of multiple, varied risk and protective factors with disciplinary actions. The current study addresses this gap by testing whether individual risk factors (e.g., delinquency, substance use), individual protective factors (e.g., academic engagement and mental health), and family factors (e.g., alcohol and drug use, cultural values about family, parental monitoring) along with demographic factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, parent education, and gender) are associated with school disciplinary action.

2. Literature review

2.1. Disproportionality by race/ethnicity

African American and Latino students are negatively affected by disproportionate suspension/expulsion rates in comparison to Whites, whereas Asian Americans tend to experience a lower rate of punishment than Whites. In 2007, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted a nationally representative survey of student discipline among public school students in grades 6 through 12. Based on parental reports, lifetime suspension rates were 43% for African Americans, 22% for Latinos, 16% for Whites, 14% for Native American/Alaskan Natives, and 11% for Asian Americans; lifetime expulsion rates were 13% for African Americans, 3% for Latinos, and 1% for Whites (Aud, Fox, & KewallRamani, 2010). Official school records show that school districts reported suspension rates of 17% for African American students, 8% for Native Americans, 7% for Latinos, 5% for Whites, and 2% for Asian Americans in the 2009–2010 academic year (Losen & Martinez, 2013). A large literature base corroborates these disparities in suspension and/or expulsion (e.g., Fabelo et al., 2011; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2011; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Moreover, African American students are more likely than students of other races/ethnicities to experience office referral (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Rocque, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). Importantly, differences in student behavior have not justified disparities in school discipline across race (Bradshaw et al., 2010; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Skiba et al., 2002; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982).

2.2. Disproportionality by socioeconomic status

Students of low SES are also more likely to be suspended or expelled (Petras, Masyn, Buckley, Jalongo, & Kellam, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Van Norman, 2013; Wu et al., 1982). In particular, level of parents' education as a measure of SES has been associated with suspension rates, with less education predicting greater punishment (Hemphill, Plenty, Herrenkohl, Toumbourou, & Catalano, 2014; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987). In one study, when family SES comprised parental education, family income, and parent/guardian occupational prestige, SES was not associated with student misbehavior, but increased SES reduced the likelihood of suspension/expulsion (Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011).

2.3. Disproportionality by gender

Schools tend to suspend boys at a much greater rate than girls (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 1997; Skiba et al., 2002; Wu et al., 1982). According to the 2007 NCES survey previously mentioned, almost twice as many boys than girls in grades 6 through 12 were suspended (28% vs. 15%) and expelled (4.5% vs. 2.3%) at least once in their lifetime (Aud et

al., 2010). In addition, several studies found a powerful interaction of race/ethnicity and gender whereby the highest rates of suspension were for African American boys (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Wallace et al., 2008).

2.4. Individual risk factors

Even though schools discipline disproportionately based on race/ethnicity, SES, and gender, student behavior influences punishment (Skiba et al., 2014). In addition, research has indicated that alcohol and drug (AOD) use is associated with lower expectations for academic success (Donovan, 1996; Sutherland & Shepherd, 2001), reduced educational achievement (Degenhardt et al., 2010; Engberg & Morral, 2006; Jeynes, 2002; Lynskey, Coffey, Degenhardt, Carlin, & Patton, 2003; Martins & Alexandre, 2009), and delinquency (D'Amico, Edelen, Miles, & Morral, 2008). To address this, we include both delinquency and AOD use in our analyses.

2.5. Individual protective factors

Students with a greater interest in school achievement are less likely to have a history of suspension (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Morrison, Anthony, Storino, & Dillon, 2001). Further, having high expectations for future educational achievement increases the likelihood of high school graduation (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992) and reduces dropout among children of immigrants (Rumbaut, 2005). In a study of school resiliency, a combination of teacher and student measures indicated that students who were suspended less (both in school and out of school) worked harder, engaged in more learning activities, attended more regularly, were more prepared for class, and expended more effort to complete assignments (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Some limited evidence suggests that mental health may affect the likelihood of school discipline. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health indicate that students who report persistent depressive symptoms are more likely to be suspended one year later (Rushton, Forcier, & Schectman, 2002). Furthermore, optimism about the future is associated with a lower dropout rate, even after controlling for grade point average, suspension, and SES (Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). As prior research has only begun to measure the association between mental health and school discipline, this study aims to address that gap.

2.6. Family factors

A variety of research suggests the importance of family on adolescents' school outcomes. More family conflict and family AOD use are associated with office referral (Morrison et al., 2001). Another study found that parental involvement and discussing homework are associated with reduced student misbehavior but not associated with school punishment (Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011). Familism is often protective for Mexican-American youth and bolsters academic achievement (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). Increased family cohesion, measured in part as familism, is associated with a greater level of engagement in school and schoolwork discipline (Rumbaut, 2005). Increased family respect is also associated with higher academic achievement (Fulgini, Tseng, & Lam, 1999). Given the influence that family can have on student academics, we include family factors in our model to increase understanding of how they may affect school discipline and its disproportionate application.

3. The present study

In sum, a large body of research supports the conclusion that schools discipline students disproportionately based on race/ethnicity, SES, and gender, and that doing so may have severe consequences, such as

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