

The Equity Project at Indiana University

SUPPLEMENTARY PAPER I:

ARE BLACK KIDS WORSE? MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN BEHAVIOR

A SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE

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The Children’s Defense Fund’s report, *Suspensions: Are They Helping Children?*¹ first brought the issue of racial disparities in discipline to national attention. African American over-representation in out-of-school suspensions has increased steadily from the 1973 Office for Civil Rights data collection² and estimates from the most recent release of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights show that African Americans are approximately 3.5 times as likely to be suspended as White students.

It is not uncommon for racial disparities in school discipline or special education to be viewed as an issue, not of differential treatment of students of different races, but of poverty and different rates of misbehavior. Wrote Linda Chavez in a column in the *Dallas Morning News*, “Children who grow up in fatherless homes are exponentially more likely to face school suspension or engage in early criminal behavior.”³ Such an argument holds that students of color, being exposed to greater family and community disadvantage, are less likely to learn

socially appropriate strategies for self-control and interpersonal interaction. When students exposed to such disadvantage arrive at school, the reasoning holds, they will be more likely to engage in disruptive behavior or violate discipline codes, unfortunately placing them at greater risk for a range of disciplinary consequences, including out-of-school suspension and expulsion.⁴

There has been a substantial amount of research exploring connections between race, poverty, student behavior, and suspension/expulsion. The purpose of this paper is to summarize that research. Does poverty explain the Black-White discipline gap? To what extent are racial differences in suspension and expulsion due to differential rates of misbehavior or disruption among students of different races? What has research shown to be associated with disparities in discipline? We begin with a consideration of the relationship between discipline, poverty, and racial disparities.

Relationship between Poverty and Racial Disparities

Poor students *are* disciplined more frequently. Studies have found that low-income students are consistently over-represented in the use of out-of-school suspension.⁵ A variety of variables typically associated with poverty, including presence of mother or father in the home, number of siblings, and quality of home resources, are significantly associated with the likelihood of suspension.⁶ It is not entirely clear however, that this relationship is due to students from poverty backgrounds engaging in more disruption: Reviews of the literature have shown that, while poverty does correlate with increases in disruption or behavioral disorders, those relationships tend to be small.⁷

Even if poverty did have an impact on rates of suspension and expulsion, that does not necessarily mean it would have an impact on *racial and ethnic disparities* in discipline. Whether racial disparities in school discipline are due entirely to poverty status can be tested statistically through multivariate statistical analyses.⁸ These analyses have consistently found that race remains a significant predictor of Black over-representation in suspension even after holding poverty constant;⁹ that is, while African American students in poverty are more likely to be suspended than poor White students, middle and upper class Black students are also more likely to be suspended than their peers at the same demographic level. Finding that urban schools consistently suspended a higher proportion of Black students out-of-school even after controlling

for poverty, Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin concluded that “there is something above and beyond poverty that explains disciplinary differences between school types.”¹⁰

Are There Racial/Ethnic Differences in Behavior That Can Explain the Gap?

Racial disparities for Black students, Black males in particular, are ubiquitous. Nearly 40 years of research has almost universally found Black students, Black males in particular, to be overrepresented in the use of exclusionary discipline, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion.¹¹ Yet simply showing a difference in the rates of suspension between two groups is not proof of discrimination. An alternate hypothesis might suggest that differential rates of discipline for African American students are due to differences in student behavior. As Chavez notes, “If Black and Hispanic students engage in behavior that is punishable by suspension at higher rates than Whites or Asians, we shouldn’t be surprised that their punishment rates are higher.”¹²

The crux of the matter then, is whether Black students engage in more seriously disruptive behavior that could justify different rates and severity of consequences. A number of different methods have been used to test the idea that differential punishment is due to different rates of misbehavior. Regardless of the method, such studies have provided little to no evidence that African American students in the same school or district are engaging in more seriously disruptive behavior that could warrant higher rates of exclusion or punishment. Those results are summarized below, broken down by type of analysis.

Differences in severity of behavior. If higher rates of suspension and expulsion for Black students are somehow justified by differences in behavior, one would expect them to be referred to the office at a higher rate than White students for more serious, safety-threatening infractions. A number of studies have examined whether higher rates of suspension for some groups are due to those groups engaging in more serious misbehavior.

Across a number of studies examining whether Black students are referred to the office for behaviors that might be considered more severe, racial and ethnic differences in severity of behavioral referrals tend to be minimal,¹³ or occur in more interactive or subjective (rather than more serious) categories of infraction.¹⁴ Despite higher rates of school suspensions for Black, Latino, and Native American students, there appear to be few racial differences in the offenses most likely to lead to zero tolerance policy violations (e.g., drugs, alcohol, weapons).¹⁵ In an analysis of middle school disciplinary referrals, White students were referred to the office

significantly more frequently for more observable, objective offenses (e.g., *smoking, vandalism*), while Black students were referred more for behaviors requiring subjective judgment (e.g., *disrespect, excessive noise*).¹⁶ Others have found that racial differences in reasons for suspension are most common in non-safety threatening behaviors such as defiance.¹⁷

Statistical controls for the type of infraction. If African American students *are* engaging in more serious misbehavior, that should be a more powerful predictor than race. One way of testing whether differential behavior is a prime cause of disciplinary disproportionality is to test for racial differences in discipline while holding the types of infraction students engage in constant. If racial disparities in discipline are due primarily to behavioral differences, the contribution of race to disciplinary outcomes will become non-significant when type or severity of behavior enters the statistical equation.

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Actual tests, however, have not supported the hypothesis of differential behavior. Regardless of whether the outcome variables are office disciplinary referrals at the school level,¹⁸ major offenses (e.g., weapons or substance use and possession) at the state level,¹⁹ or self-report data from national studies,²⁰ controls for the extent or type of disruptive behavior have led to small and often nonsignificant changes in measured disproportionality. The fact that race remains a significant predictor of discipline after controlling for a range of disciplinary infractions strongly suggests that factors related to student behavior are not sufficient to account for racial/ethnic disparities in discipline.

Controlling for teacher or student ratings of behavior. Referrals to the office depend upon *both* the severity of student behavior and the teacher's perception of or tolerance for that behavior. In order to pull these variables apart, some studies have measured disproportionality in office referrals while controlling for student or teacher ratings of the severity of students' behavior. If Black students are being referred more because their behavior is more serious, race should become a non-significant predictor of discipline after controlling for teacher ratings. Yet even after controlling for a classroom teacher's own ratings of externalizing or disruptive

behavior or fighting, African American students are still referred to the office more by those same teachers, or suspended more than their White peers.²¹ Thus, racial disparities in referrals to the office or suspensions occur even after the severity of the behavior as perceived by teachers is controlled for.

Summary. In summary, regardless of the source, there is virtually no support in the research literature for the idea that disparities in school discipline are caused by racial/ethnic differences in behavior. Studies comparing the severity of behavior by race have found no evidence that students of color in the same schools or districts engage in more severe behavior that would warrant higher rates of suspension or expulsion. Race/ethnicity remains a strong predictor of school punishment even after controlling statistically for student misbehavior. Finally, even controlling for teachers' own ratings of disruptive behavior, race remains an independent predictor of office referral and suspension. In short, the data are consistent: there is simply no good evidence that racial differences in discipline are due to differences in rates or types of misbehavior by students of different races.

What does Predict Disciplinary Disparities?

Although neither poverty nor differential rates of misbehavior explain racial and ethnic disparities in discipline, recent research has identified a number of factors that seem to have a relationship to rates of racial disparity in school discipline.

Relationship to achievement. The relationship between student behavior problems and poor academic achievement has been well documented.²² Interventions that improve the quality of academic instruction and learning outcomes can have important outcomes in terms of improved student behavior and school climate.²³ At the same time, consistent findings of a negative relationship between school achievement and rates of exclusionary discipline²⁴ mean that effort put into improving the discipline gap will also have a positive effect on achievement, especially for students of color.

Representativeness of faculty and students. Schools with a more diverse and representative teaching force have been found to exhibit lower rates of racial disparity in school discipline.²⁵ The makeup of the student body also plays a role: Regardless of levels of misbehavior and delinquency, schools with higher Black enrollment have been found to be more

likely to use higher rates of exclusionary discipline, court action, and zero tolerance policies, and to use fewer mild disciplinary practices.²⁶

Contribution of classroom and office processes. Racial disparities in school discipline begin with classroom referral and classroom management. Black students are twice as likely to receive office disciplinary referrals at the elementary level and up to four times as likely in middle school.²⁷ Higher rates of Black referral to the office appear to be situational, occurring only in some classrooms.²⁸ Even though racial/ethnic disparities in school punishment appear to begin at the classroom level, those initial disparities in referral appear to be magnified by differential processing at the administrative level: A number of studies have found that Black and Latino students have been found to receive more serious consequences for the same offense.²⁹

School climate. Positive school climate has been found to be associated with lower rates of student misconduct and discipline.³⁰ It is not surprising then, that there is evidence of a link between rates of disproportionality and student ratings of racial climate,³¹ as well as with more general measures of school climate.³²

Conclusions

Research has failed to support the common perception that racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline stem from issues of poverty and increased misbehavior among students of color. Racial disparities in discipline are likely to occur at all socio-demographic levels, and a variety of statistical approaches have failed to find evidence that students of color act out at higher rates that could justify differential punishment. Although more research on the actual causes of racial disparities in general is needed, findings thus far indicate that school-level variables such as the achievement gap; representativeness of faculty and students; classroom and office processes; and school climate represent a more fruitful set of variables to examine in addressing the discipline gap.

Footnotes

¹ Children's Defense Fund. (1975). *School suspensions: Are they helping children?* Cambridge, MA: Washington Research Project.

² Losen, D., & Skiba, R. (2010). *Suspended education: Urban middle schools in crisis*. Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center.

³ Chavez, L. (2014, January 15). Obama going about school discipline changes the wrong way. *Dallas Morning News*. Retrieved from http://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/latest-columns/20140113-obama-going-about-school-discipline-changes-the-wrong-way.ece?nclick_check=1

⁴ Note that this argument is framed in terms of the influence of the environment, typically early childhood exposure to disadvantaged, presumably more unstable homes and communities. There is also a longstanding tradition of blaming racial behavioral disparities on an inherent or even genetic pre-disposition (see e.g., Gordon, R. A. [1987]. SES versus IQ in the race-IQ-delinquency model. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 7, 30-96.; Herrnstein, R. J., & Murray, C. [1994]. *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Free Press). This tradition appears to have more in common with earlier pseudoscientific attempts, such as eugenics, to "prove" the inferiority of certain races than it does with current scientific understanding, and so will not be considered in this paper. For further discussion of the longstanding tradition of such research, see Skiba, R. J. (2012). As nature has formed them: The history and current status of racial difference research. *Teachers College Record*, 114(5), 1-49.

⁵ Brantlinger, E. (1991). Social class distinctions in adolescents' reports of problems and punishment in school. *Behavioral Disorders*, 17, 36-46; Noltemeyer, A., & Mcloughlin, C. S. (2010). Patterns of exclusionary discipline by school typology, ethnicity, and their interactions. *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 7, 27-40; Skiba, R. J., Peterson, R. L., & Williams, T. (1997). Office referrals and suspension: Disciplinary intervention in middle schools. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 20, 295-316; Wu, S. C., Pink, W. T., Crain, R. L., & Moles, O. (1982). Student suspension: A critical reappraisal. *The Urban Review*, 14, 245-303.

⁶ Hinojosa, M. S. (2008). Black-white differences in school suspensions: Effect on student beliefs about teachers. *Sociological Spectrum*, 28, 175-193.

⁷ Letourneau, N. L., Duffett-Leger, L., Levac, L., Watson, B., & Young-Morris, C. (2013). Socioeconomic status and child development: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 21, 211-224.

⁸ Statistical approaches such as linear regression, ordinary least squares regression, or hierarchical linear modeling allow one to hold poverty constant while testing for racial differences.

⁹ Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *Urban Review*, 34, 317-342; Wallace, J. M., Jr., Goodkind, S., Wallace, C., & Bachman, J. G. (2008). Racial, ethnic, and gender differences in school discipline among U.S. high school students: 1991-2005. *Negro Educational Review*, 59, 47-62; Wu et al. (1982).

¹⁰ Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin (2010).

¹¹ Skiba, R. J., Shure, L., & Williams, N. (2012). Racial and ethnic disproportionality in suspension and expulsion. In A. L. Noltemeyer & C. S. Mcloughlin (Eds.), *Disproportionality in education and special education* (pp. 89-118). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, Ltd.

¹² Chavez, L. (2014).

¹³ McCarthy, J. D., & Hoge, D. R. (1987). The social construction of school punishment: Racial disadvantage out of universalistic process. *Social Forces*, 65, 1101-1120; Wallace et al. (2008).

¹⁴ Gregory, A., & Weinstein, R. S. (2008). The discipline gap and African Americans: Defiance or cooperation in the high school classroom. *Journal of School Psychology*, 46(4), 455-475; Skiba et al. (2002).

¹⁵ Wallace et al. (2008).

¹⁶ Wallace et al. (2008).

¹⁷ Gregory, A., & Weinstein, R. S. (2008). The discipline gap and African Americans: Defiance or cooperation in the high school classroom. *Journal of School Psychology*, 46(4), 455-475.

¹⁸ Skiba, R. J., Horner, R. H., Chung, C.-G., Rausch, M. K., May, S. L., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review*, 40(1), 85-107.

¹⁹ Eitle, T. M. N., & Eitle, D. J. (2004). Inequality, segregation, and the overrepresentation of African Americans in school suspensions. *Sociological Perspectives*, 47, 269-287.

²⁰ Peguero, A. A., & Shekarkhar, Z. (2011). Latino/a student misbehavior and school punishment. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 33(1), 54-70.

²¹ Bradshaw, C. P., Mitchell, M. M., O'Brennan, L. M., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Multilevel exploration of factors contributing to the overrepresentation of black students in office disciplinary referrals. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(2), 508-520;

Hinojosa. (2008); Rocque, M. (2010). Office discipline and student behaviors: Does race matter? *American Journal of Education*, 116(4), 557-581.

²² Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (2000). The natural history and developmental functions of aggression. In A. J. Sameroff, M. Lewis & S. M. Miller (Eds.) *Handbook of developmental psychopathology* (2nd ed.) (pp. 403-429). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers; Lopes, J. (2005). Intervention with students with learning, emotional and behavior disorders: Why do we take so long to do it? *Education and Treatment of Children*, 28(4), 345-360.

²³ Scott, T. M., Nelson, C. M., & Liaupsin, C. J. (2001). Effective instruction: The forgotten component in preventing school violence. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 24, 309-322.

²⁴ See e.g., Davis, J. E., & Jordan, W. J. (1994). The effects of school context, structure, and experiences on African American males in middle and high schools. *Journal of Negro Education*, 63, 570-587. doi: 10.2307/2967296

²⁵ Mcloughlin, C. S., & Noltemeyer, A. (2010). Research into factors contributing to discipline use and disproportionality in major urban schools. *Current Issues in Education*, 13(2), 1-21; Rocha, R., & Hawes, D. (2009). Racial diversity, representative bureaucracy, and equity in multicultural districts. *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(2), 326-344.

²⁶ Payne, A. A., & Welch, K. (2010). Modeling the effects of racial threat on punitive and restorative school discipline practices. *Criminology*, 48(4), 1019-1062; Welch, K., & Payne, A. A. (2010). Racial threat and punitive school discipline. *Social Problems*, 57(1), 25-48.

²⁷ Skiba et al. (2011).

²⁸ Gregory, A., & Weinstein, R. S. (2008). The discipline gap and African Americans: Defiance or cooperation in the high school classroom. *Journal of School Psychology*, 46(4), 455-475.

²⁹ Nicholson-Crotty, S., Birchmeier, Z., & Valentine, D. (2009). Exploring the impact of school discipline on racial disproportion in the juvenile justice system. *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(4), 1003-1018; Skiba et al. (2011).

³⁰ Bickel, F., & Qualls, R. (1980). The impact of school climate on suspension rates in the Jefferson County Public Schools. *The Urban Review*, 12(2), 79-86; Welsh, W. N. (2003). Individual and institutional predictors of school disorder. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 1(4), 346-368.

³¹ Mattison, E., & Aber, M. S. (2007). Closing the achievement gap: The association of racial climate with achievement and behavioral outcomes. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 40(1), 1-12.

³² Gregory, A., Cornell, D., & Fan, X. (2011). The relationship of school structure and support to suspension rates for black and white high school students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 1-31; Kuperminc, G. P., Leadbeater, B. J., Emmons, C., & Blatt, S. J. (1997). Perceived school climate and difficulties in the social adjustment of middle school students. *Applied Developmental Science*, 1(2), 76-88; Shirley, E. L. M., & Cornell, D. G. (2011). The contribution of student perceptions of school climate to understanding the disproportionate punishment of African American students in a middle school. *School Psychology International*. Advance online publication.

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