Discipline Disparities:
A Research-to-Practice Collaborative

Discipline Disparities Series
Executive Summary

New and Developing Research on Disparities in Discipline

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March 2014

Introduction

Our understanding of disciplinary disparities continues to grow and become more sophisticated; yet significant gaps in the research base remain. Through its *Collaborative Funded Research Grant Program* and support of a national conference on disciplinary disparities, *Closing the Discipline Gap*, the Discipline Disparities Collaborative has generated new research to increase what is known about disparities and disparity-reducing interventions. *New & Developing Research on Disparities in Discipline* describes findings from those efforts and new research.[1]

What Have We Learned About Disparities?

School discipline continues to be used inequitably, and disparities cannot be explained by different rates of misbehavior or poverty. Students of color and students with disabilities continue to be at higher risk for suspension and expulsion compared to their peers. African American males and African Americans with a disability continue to have the highest risk of student removal. While not as extensively documented compared to African American students, Native American/Alaskan Native students also have very high rates of removal. New research also finds significant disparities for girls of color, with African American and to some extent Hispanic/Latino girls at high risk of suspension and expulsion compared to their peers, and finds that LGBT students experience exclusionary discipline, hostile school climates, and contact with the juvenile justice system more often than their peers. Research continues to find that disparate rates for students of color cannot be fully explained by higher rates of disruptive or dangerous behavior, or the overlap of race and poverty. If anything, new research continues to find that students of color are removed from school for similar or lesser offenses compared to their peers.

Hispanic/Latino disproportionality varies by level, helping to explain previously inconsistent results for that population. Two recent studies find no disproportionality or even under-representation for Hispanic/Latino students at the elementary level, yet by middle and high school, Hispanic/Latino students experience significant overrepresentation.

Suspension is often the first step in a chain of events leading to short- and long-term negative academic and social consequences. Even while controlling for a number of socio-demographic factors, suspension is strongly related to a number of negative outcomes including academic disengagement, failing high school courses, dropping out of school, truancy, and contact with the justice system. Notably, suspension itself may be a risk factor for future contact with the justice system: one study finds that students report engaging in delinquency or crime occurred only *after* the first time they were suspended from school. Disciplinary removal predicts grade retention, costing states significantly more money for each year of additional instruction as well as delayed workforce entry. Moreover, suspended students are less likely to vote and volunteer in civic activities after high school.

Commonly relied-upon interventions, such as security measures or alternative placements, are often less effective than assumed, and can exacerbate racial/ethnic disparities. Often viewed as a disciplinary solution, alternative school placement in elementary school strongly predicts subsequent juvenile detention within four years, and high usage of security measures is associated with greater disparities for African American students even after controlling for differences in student behavior.

Schools have the power to change their rates of exclusion. New research finds that while socioeconomic status or type of behavior does not fully explain racial/ethnic disparities, school factors and practices, such as a principal's perspectives on discipline and school achievement level, contribute significantly to discipline gaps and school safety.

School-level inequity in discipline and juvenile justice may be related, with devastating consequences. Racial disproportionality in out-of-school suspension is a strong predictor of similar levels of racial disparity in juvenile court referrals, even when controlling for levels of delinquent behavior, poverty, and other demographic variables. LGBT youth, girls in particular, experience about twice as many arrests and convictions as girls engaged in similar behavior. Youth in juvenile facilities are at heightened risk of sexual victimization and future criminal behavior, and a high percentage (70%) of youth who committed suicide while confined, were imprisoned for nonviolent offenses.

What Have We Learned About Reducing or Eliminating Disparities?

Interventions that focus on strengthening teacher-student relationships can lead to reductions in use of exclusionary discipline, particularly for African American students. A teacher professional development program (*My Teaching Partner*) that focused on teachers' interactions with students resulted in less use of exclusionary discipline with all students, and reduced exclusionary discipline the most for African American students. Effective implementation of *restorative practices*—systems designed to build relationships and repair harm after wrongdoing—finds that exclusionary discipline can be reduced and racial disciplinary gaps can be narrowed.

Some structural and comprehensive interventions can reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and discipline gaps, but in some cases specific attention to issues of race, culture, and difference may be necessary to reduce disparities. Use of a systematic protocol that responds to students' threats of violence without immediately resorting to use of exclusionary discipline (*Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines*) has been found to reduce suspensions and reduce discipline gaps between Black and White males. While implementation of PBIS continues to demonstrate strong reductions in discipline, reductions in racial/ethnic disparities continue to be mixed, prompting some researchers to call for expanded PBIS models that include cultural considerations. The Cleveland Metropolitan School District's efforts to improve safety, order, and the conditions for learning resulted in large declines (58.8%) in district-wide use of out-of-school suspensions and increases in other positive student outcomes, but disciplinary disparities remained.

What Do We Still Need to Know About Disparities?

A number of gaps in our knowledge remain on the extent of, and reasons for, disparities for under-researched groups, such as LGBT students, English Language Learners, gender nonconforming students, Native American students, and girls. The field can also benefit from knowing more about additional factors that account for inconsistent findings for Hispanic/Latino students, and the impact of increased law enforcement and security technology on disparities, given their growing popularity in some states and locales.

Perhaps the most important gap is in the development and documentation of disciplinary gap-closing interventions. *What malleable school factors and interventions show the most promise for reducing disparities? What are the classroom dynamics and structures that lead to disciplinary disparity reduction? Is disciplinary equity best achieved through interventions that focus on disciplinary systems or through whole-school change efforts? How do school-based practitioners respond to state, district, and school disciplinary policy changes? What resources are needed to change disparities?* Finding answers to these and other key questions is essential in learning how to create equitable disciplinary systems.

Conclusion

While our understanding of disparities in school discipline has significantly advanced over the last few years, significant gaps remain, especially in identifying research-validated strategies and interventions that close disciplinary gaps. As the consequences of ineffective exclusionary practices and the impact of those practices on marginalized groups become increasingly evident, research-based guidance on approaches that eliminate disparities is an urgent priority.

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1 More complete descriptions and full citations for each study can be found in the full briefing paper available online at rtpcollaborative.indiana.edu