

Examining Minority Enrollment and Out of School Suspension Rates of Massachusetts
Public School Districts

By

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Abstract

Traditionally, studies have consistently shown that minority students are treated differently when it comes to school discipline practices. This is one example of second-generation segregation. Low socio-economic status (SES) is highly correlated with minority populations, and therefore hypothesized to play a strong role in the relationship to out of school suspension. Data from all 389 public school districts in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts were analyzed for percentage minority enrollment, percentage low-income (SES) enrollment and out of school suspension rate. Minority and low-income enrollments were hypothesized to affect suspension rates. At the multivariate level, low-income enrollment status was found to play a more influential role than minority enrollment when it comes to out of school suspension rates. As SES is correlated to race, the implications of this analysis call for actions to reduce second-generation segregation in terms of disciplinary actions.

One of the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act is to help create safer schools. Under Title IV of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), states are required to report data on school safety and drug use among students. In anticipation of safety issues in schools, states must have plans that include appropriate and effective discipline policies and student codes of conduct to prevent problems (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). At what cost do these initiatives have on student enrollment in terms of equity and fairness?

In the United States, public education has long been a symbol of American ideals and freedoms. Through public education, it is hoped every American is given opportunity to further their own destiny with equal chance and expectations. Just over the last one hundred years, the United States has struggled to meet this ideal of equal opportunity through education by correcting mistakes of the past.

As far back as 1895, the United States struggled with equality of education issues as it decided the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case establishing “separate but equal” schools. This was eventually overturned by *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. Next came the 1964 Civil Rights Act. According to Strouse (1997), “Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was most important because it provided a means for the federal government to force school desegregation” (pp.226-227). To prove actual segregation existed in schools in order to take action, *Oliver v. Michigan State Board of Education* (1974), outlined the conditions for which would constitute segregation. Individual motives or prejudices need not be investigated but an over all pattern of school actions had to be shown to increase racial segregation (Strouse).

However tracking, racial boundaries, control of student activities and student disciplinary action, highlight patterns in which integrated schools have demonstrated a type of segregation known as second-generation segregation (Strouse, 1997). Suspension, the disciplinary action that prevents students from attending school, has been one area of particular concern. According to Rist (1979), African American students during the desegregation of schools would receive more severe punishment than White, non-Hispanics for the same offense, thus highlighting the occurrence of second-generation desegregation.

Research in the area of discipline has been studied for a number of years. What has been quite apparent is the increase of out of school suspension as a means of punishment, and not just for severe infractions. Simultaneously, there has been an increase and disproportionate application of such punishment towards minority students (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Krezmien, Leone & Achilles, 2006).

In general, it has been shown that African American and Latino students, especially males, are more likely to be suspended than their White, non-Hispanic counterparts (Keleher, 2000). In a study of a south Florida district conducted by McFadden (1992), it was shown that with African American pupils accounting for only 39.7 % of discipline referrals, they were suspended out of school at a higher rate of 43.9%. McFadden also reported African American pupils accounting for 22.0% of the population received 36.7% of the disciplinary referrals. Similarly, in the 1999-2000 school year, Connecticut reported a suspension rate of 87.2 % for African American and Latino kindergarteners while Tennessee showed to have a rate of suspension for African American students twice that of White, non-Hispanic students (Zero Tolerance, 2003).

By examining disproportionate rate of out of school suspensions among minority students as a type of second-generation segregation, schools and districts can take on better approaches to school safety, discipline and equal access to education for all students.

Since socio-economic status (SES) is correlated to race (minority students are more likely to come from families with low SES), it is also important to determine the role SES plays in minority enrollment and out of school suspension rate. According to Skibia, Peterson and Williams (1997), low SES students are more likely to have disciplinary action compared to high SES students. With such a strong relationship between SES and race, it is also important to control for SES when determining the significance of race in discipline.

Coming up on fifteen years of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1993), the state has taken considerable approaches in approving the quality of education for students and demanding higher expectations from educators and students. However, with all of these approaches has the state been able to mitigate the potential manifestation and impact of second-generation segregation? If the data across many studies have been consistent, then Massachusetts should not differ in regards to minorities receiving more out of school suspensions.

Hypotheses

H₁: The higher the percentage of minority enrollment in a school district, the higher the out of school suspension rate.

H₂: The higher the percentage of low-income enrollment (SES) in a school district, the higher the out of school suspension rate.

Methods

Participants

All 389 Massachusetts public school districts were involved in this study. Participants, defined by the Massachusetts Department of Education, include the following types of public school districts: Institutional School - State institutional schools that are administered by the DOE. County Agricultural - Agricultural school district that is administered by a board of trustees. Independent Public - This category includes Commonwealth Charter Schools, Horace Mann Charter Schools and the Massachusetts Academy of Mathematics and Science. Independent Vocational - Vocational school district that is administered by a board of trustees. Local School - District that is administered by a city or town school committee. Regional Academic - District that is administered by a regional school committee. Regional Vocational Tech - District that is administered by a regional vocational school committee.

Independent Variables

Minority enrollment. Each year districts provide to the Massachusetts Department of Education a total of percentage of race/ethnicity enrollment by October 1. Total percentage of minority enrollment for each district was calculated by summation of percentage enrollment for African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander and Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic students. Data was collected for the 2005-2006 school year (<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/enrollmentbyracegender.aspx?mode=&orderBy=&year=2006&filterBy=>).

Low-income enrollment (SES). Annually by October 1, each district provides low-income enrollment to the Massachusetts Department of Education. This data indicates the percentage of enrolled students who **meet any one of the following definitions of low income:**

the student is eligible for free or reduced price lunch; or the student receives Transitional Aid to Families benefits; or the student is eligible for food stamps. The data collected was for the 2005-2006 school year

(<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/selectedpopulations.aspx?mode=&year=2006&orderBy=&filterBy=>).

Dependent Variable

Out of school suspension rate. Annually, each district provides out of school suspension rates to the Massachusetts Department of Education at the conclusion of each school year. This data indicates the percentage of enrolled students by school district who received one or more out-of-school suspensions. The data collected was for the 2005-2006 school year (<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/indicators.aspx>). This data is part of a report known the Indicators Report, which also includes such information as drop out, attendance, and retention rates.

Results

Examining the frequencies of percentage of minority enrollment, low-income enrollment and out of school suspension rate showed positive skewness for all three variables, 2.0, 1.51 and 3.45 respectively. In order to transform this data to reflect a more normal distribution, the natural log of each variable data set was calculated.

The results of the correlational analysis presented in Table 1 show the Pearson Product Moment Correlations between the three variables. The effect size was moderate for H₁ and large for H₂ per Cohen (1988).

Table 1

Tests of Significance: Simple bivariate models

Correlations

		LN suspension rate	LN low income enrollment	LN Minority Enrollment
LN suspension rate	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.536	.384
LN low income enrollment		.536	1.000	.621
LN Minority Enrollment		.384	.621	1.000

Table 2 presents a multiple regression analysis to estimate if minority enrollment affected out of school suspension rates controlling for low-income enrollment (SES). Overall, the regression equation predicting to the suspension rate was significant ($R^2 = .287$, $F(2,386) = 155.7$, $p < .01$). Table 2 shows that the low income enrollment variable was statistically significant ($t=8.8$, $p<.001$), and minority enrollment, while positively predicting to suspension rate was statistically insignificant ($t=1.55$, $p=.06$, ns). Based on these results, SES appears to be a better predictor of out of schools suspensions. However it must be noted from the previous correlation between SES and minority enrollment, that $r = .621$, indicating a strong relationship.

Table 2

Multiple regression analysis analyzing suspension rate by minority enrollment and SES

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.181	.133		-1.358	.175
	LN Minority Enrollment	.088	.057	.084	1.546	.123
	LN low income enrollment	.485	.055	.483	8.838	.000

^a Dependent Variable: LN suspension rate

Discussion

Since we had the population of school districts in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, inferential statistics was a secondary component of the statistical analysis. The results of the study showed that within public school districts in Massachusetts, as the percentage of minority enrollment and SES enrollment increases so does the rate of out of school suspensions. However, SES is a better predictor for out of school suspensions.

Need for disaggregated data

As this information does indicate a correlation, the picture is somewhat incomplete. Through out the literature, it has been cited that African American males tend to be disciplined at much higher rates than their White, non-Hispanic counter parts. The data from public school districts in Massachusetts ought to be reported so that it reflects specificities of the suspension data, in other words the number of suspensions by specific race/ethnicity should be accounted for. By doing so, data may be analyzed at a more disaggregated level to determine if there are any significant concerns regarding the treatment of specific minority groups and school discipline. SES data needs to be taken into account, since it SES, not minority enrollment that drives suspension rates.

Taking a more investigative approach to this concern in Massachusetts may help better understand the issue of second-generation segregation. By having access to more disaggregated data, districts may then develop programs, policies, professional development and outreach that will help create a fair and equitable school environment that supports good health and safety.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, schools are mandated to create safe environments in which children are to learn and achieve. These schools must include appropriate and effective discipline policies, security procedures, prevention activities, codes of conduct and crisis management (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Coupling this with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, school districts might explore of policies that have adverse effects on the student body. Through careful evaluation and reflection, perhaps Massachusetts can mitigate practices that create second-generation segregation.

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