Research on School Suspension

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Schools across the nation report increases in the use of punitive disciplinary methods (e.g., suspension). The need for these disciplinary practices to address serious student misconduct is undisputed. What research has questioned is why some students seem to be suspended more often than others, what effects suspension has on students, and whether or when alternatives to suspension might be more effective practices than suspension itself.

This research brief summarizes the most recent research findings on suspension and alternatives to suspension. It covers the basic scientific evidence on student and school characteristics related to the use of suspension, the effects of suspension on students, and the effectiveness of alternatives to suspension [1].

While reviewing the literature on suspension it is important to keep in mind some of the literature's strengths and some of its limitations. The greatest strength of the research evidence is that it has accumulated over 30 years. In recent years national, and nationally representative, datasets on school and student characteristics have been developed and analyzed, allowing for more accurate inferences from the data. It is important to note, however, that scientists have only recently begun examining these national datasets. Consequently, much of the empirical research reported below is based on findings from individual schools, school districts, or states, which limits how well findings might extend to other locales. Furthermore, the vast majority of research on suspension has examined data from single points in time. It is therefore impossible to state that one characteristic *causes* an outcome (e.g., that school characteristics cause higher suspension rates). When reviewing these studies we can only make summary statements about which characteristics are *associated* with which outcomes, and cannot make statements about what characteristics *cause* which outcomes.

General Findings on the Effects of Suspension:

- Suspension is effective in [2]:

- Removing a problematic student from school.

- Providing temporary relief to frustrated school personnel.

- Raising parental attention to their child's misconduct.

- Zero-tolerance policies:

  - Are not straightforward. Administrators from a school district in Michigan reported that they do not understand these policies very well and that they relied primarily on student characteristics to make decisions about how to best implement them. They reported that their decisions were most strongly influenced by the age and grade of the student, whether he/she had prior conduct problems, whether he/she posed a real threat to school safety, and whether his/her parent was home to provide support and monitoring [3].

  - Are often implemented arbitrarily and are frequently used as discipline for minor misconduct [4, 5].

  - Do not improve overall school safety and are associated with lower academic performance, higher rates of dropout, failures to graduate on time, increased academic disengagement, and subsequent disciplinary exclusion s [4, 6-12].

Student Characteristics:

- Research has consistently found that males are much more likely to be suspended than are females [13-16].

- Students who are frequently suspended are also less likely to have parental supervision at home [2, 16], and yet research indicates that these students are more in need of adult supervision than are students who are not suspended [17].

- Students with emotional, behavioral, or learning disabilities are more likely to be suspended than students without disabilities [18].

  - Students with an Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Emotional Behavioral Disorder are more likely to be suspended than are students with a Learning Disorder (LD) [4].

- Having an emotional or behavioral disability is related to higher suspension rates across ethnicity; however, African-American students with emotional or behavioral disabilities are the most likely to be suspended [18].

- Other predictors of suspension among students with disabilities include[4]:

    - Multiple school changes and attending an urban school, which are related to higher rates of suspension among students with an Emotional Behavioral Disorder.

    - Lower parental satisfaction with the school, which is associated with higher rates of suspension among students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders and Learning Disorders.

    - Older age, which is related to higher rates of suspension among students with ADHD.

- African-American students are more frequently suspended because of subjective disciplinary actions and are more likely to be disciplined more severely for minor misconduct [5, 7, 8, 10, 13, 19].

    - There is no conclusive evidence that these findings are because African-American students engage in more school misconduct or violent behaviors [5, 10, 13, 20].

    - This relation between being African-American and being suspended more frequently is not entirely explained by poverty (e.g., socio-economic status—receiving free and reduced lunches, low parental education) [13-15].

- The evidence on the frequency and potential disproportionate treatment of Hispanic, American Indian, and other minority students (except Asian American) appears to be consistent with findings among African-American students; however, the evidence for this relation in these groups is much more mixed than it is for African-American students [14, 18, 19, 21].

- Higher rates of suspension are related to higher rates of future antisocial behaviors and involvement in the juvenile justice system [7, 8, 10, 20, 22].

- o This finding is not entirely explained by prior engagement in antisocial behavior, having antisocial friends, having poor academic achievement, or poverty level [20, 22].

- For female students, suspendable violence :

  - o Is related to how much school violence female students observe at school, their involvement in gangs, their attitudes toward violence, their prior suspension record, their current grade level, and their drug use [23].

  - o Is unrelated to their family structures and their levels of self-esteem [23].

- Rates of suspension vary based on school and school district characteristics as well as student behaviors and attitudes [10].

School Characteristics:

- There is mixed evidence on whether the percentage of African-American students within a school is related to more frequent uses of punitive disciplinary methods, such as suspension [24, 25].

- Schools with high suspension rates have higher rates of board of education and law violations, have more students from lower socio-economic backgrounds[14, 26], and spend more money per student [7, 8, 27].

  - o Schools with low suspension rates have higher rates of attendance [7, 8].

  - o Schools with high suspension rates do not differ from schools with low suspension rates on:

    - ▪ Number of students enrolled, gender enrollment (i.e., percent of boys enrolled), teachers' average years of teaching experience, and student/teacher ratio [7].

- Schools with low suspension rates have more favorable ratings of overall school appearance (e.g., cleanliness, condition, order, ambiance) [5, 7].

- Schools with high suspension rates have more negative and hostile student-student relationships (e.g., frequent observed fights) than schools with low suspension rates [7].

- Schools' prior rates of suspension predict future rates of suspension [26].

- Strict school conduct codes predicted higher rates of suspension [28].

Personnel Characteristics:

The table below summarizes school personnel characteristics that are associated (or not associated) with rates of suspension.

Personnel characteristics that relate to HIGHER suspension rates	Personnel characteristics that relate to LOWER suspension rates	Personnel characteristics that are unrelated to suspension rates
Administrators who express needs: to reduce suspension rates, to increase family involvement, and to increase resources [7]	Administrators who express: no needs to reduce suspension, satisfactory or good family involvement, and few resource needs [7]	Caring and trusting relationship between parent(s) and teacher(s) [16]
Principals who have more favorable views of suspension [8]	Principals who prefer prevention and alternatives to suspension [8]	
Negative and hostile student-staff relationships (e.g., yelling at students) [7]	More caring and positive student-staff relationships [7, 15, 16, 29]	
	Teachers who use more varied instructional methods and have high student engagement [5, 7]	
	Teachers with consistent, positive, clear, and high behavioral and academic expectations of students [5, 7, 15, 16, 29]	
	Teachers who report having supportive administration [5, 7, 24]	
	Teachers and principals in urban schools who perceive that their administration is effective [24]	

Student Perceptions:

- Suspended high school students believe that suspensions are applied too liberally, without adequate evidence, and are unduly harsh [30].

- Suspended middle and high school students report that suspensions are not helpful and that being suspended increases their likelihood of receiving future suspensions [8].

- Suspended and non-suspended students perceive suspension as "an officially sanctioned school holiday" [2].

Evidence on Alternatives to Suspension:

- Comprehensive assessments of school and student needs should be conducted prior to implementing specific programs so that any implemented programs are tailored to individual needs [26].

- Comprehensive school-wide changes that address student and school-level characteristics through proactive prevention and the reinforcement of positive behaviors are related to lower suspension rates [5, 7, 10, 26, 31].

- When implemented school-wide, the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program reduces discipline referrals and the use of suspension [32].

- School-wide conflict resolution that focuses on alternatives to violence to solve conflict reduces students' acts of violence in the school [9].

    - Conflict resolution training that is implement outside of the school setting (i.e., Alternative to Suspension for Violent Behavior) does not reduce the use of suspension or the number of referrals for suspension [33].

- Training in cultural (including race and poverty) responsiveness and sensitivity is a promising intervention that may reduce teacher-student conflict, resulting in fewer suspensions [8, 26].

- Expanded school mental health programs do not affect suspension rates in elementary schools [27].

- Profiling students is unreliable, does not reduce the use of suspension, and does not reduce the frequency of violence [10].

- Corporal punishment: is ineffective in reducing misconduct; is often administered inconsistently and without adherence to guidelines; and can cause serious physical, psychological, and emotional injury [28].

- Punitive behavior management methods (e.g., lecturing, verbal reprimands, ridiculing, shaming) are ineffective at reducing misconduct and may cause harm to students [28].

As this summary of research on school suspension highlights, there is a range of individual student characteristics as well as school and school district level characteristics that are associated with rates of suspension. In general, African-American male students are suspended at higher rates than are other racial/ethnic groups. While the reasons for the connection between race and school discipline is not clear, this relation likely occurs because of an interplay among many factors that cut across student-, teacher-, administrative-, policy-, institutional-, and community-level factors. Research suggests that school systems that incorporate comprehensive school-wide practices that are positive, consistent, collaboratively regulated, and culturally-sensitive are much more likely to have lower rates of suspension than schools without such practices. School systems that incorporate such comprehensive proactive policies are also much more likely to enhance their students' current and future academic achievements as well as their broader life successes.

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