



Inequities in Days Assigned to Out-of-School Suspension by Ethnicity/Race: A Texas, Statewide Analysis

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Abstract

In this Texas statewide investigation, the degree to which White, Hispanic, and Black boys in Grades 9, 10, and 11 in Texas high schools differed regarding the number of days they were assigned to an out-of-school suspension was examined. Inferential statistical procedures revealed the presence of statistically significant differences between Grades 9, 10, and 11 White, Hispanic, and Black boys in the number of days they were assigned to an out-of-school suspension. White boys in Grade 9, 10, and 11 were assigned to an out-of-school suspension a statistically significantly lower average number of days than were Hispanic and Black boys in Grades 9, 10, and 11. Of importance were the higher overall numbers of Grades 9, 10, and 11 Hispanic and Black boys who were assigned to an out-of-school suspension, even though these two student groups constitute a much lower percentage of high school student enrollment than White students. Clear and strong inequities in the assignment of this exclusionary discipline consequence were established. Implications of these findings and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Days, Out-of-school suspensions, Grades 9, 10, and 11, Hispanic, White, Black, Discipline, Disproportionality

Introduction

Inequities in the assignment of exclusionary discipline consequences is a problem at both the national and state level. According to the Office of Civil Rights (2014), approximately 50 million students were enrolled in public schools across the country for the 2013-2014 school year. Of that total, 50% of all students were White, 24% of all students were Hispanic, and 16% of all students were Black. When examining the assignment of students to in-school suspension and to out-of-school suspensions, clear and strong disparities arise. Black students received 32% of all in-school suspensions, Hispanic students received 23% of all in-school suspensions, while White students received 39% of all in-school suspensions. For students who received one or more days of out-of-school suspensions assigned, Black students represented 40% of this total. Hispanic students represented 21%, while White students represented 32%. Although White students represent the largest overall population of public school students, Black and Hispanic students receive a disproportionate number of in-school suspensions and out-of-school suspensions.

Reported by the United States Department of Education (2014, 2016) ^[14] was that approximately 3.5 million students nationally received an in-school suspension, slightly less than 3.5 million nationally received and out of school suspension, and 130,000 students were expelled. Of the out-of-school suspensions, 95% were for nonviolent behaviors. Exclusionary discipline assignments such as out-of-school suspensions are becoming more apparent with students as young as 3 and 4 years old. According to the United States Department of Education (2014, 2016) ^[15], students of color are disproportionately assigned exclusionary discipline consequences. Black students were three times more likely than their White peers to receive an out of school suspension.

At the state level, Mcloughlin and Noltemeyer (2010) ^[7], concerned with the increased use of exclusionary discipline and its disproportionate use on Black students, set out to identify factors that explained these two phenomena. A relative risk ratio was created by dividing the suspensions per 100 Black students by the number of suspensions per 100 White students. The variables that best predicted use of suspensions included office disciplinary referrals, the percentage of low socioeconomic students, the percentage of Black students, and the percentage of Black teachers. The disproportionality relationship between Black students and the number of suspensions was positive, whereas the use of suspensions by Black teachers was negative. The variable that best explained disproportionality of discipline was percentage of students in poverty. Mcloughlin and Noltemeyer (2010) ^[7] noted that as the poverty level of a school increased, the disproportionality in discipline decreased.

With respect to the state of interest for this article, Texas, Eckford (2017) ^[3] addressed the extent to which inequities were present in assignments to a Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program placement based on economic status, ethnicity/race, and reading and mathematics achievement for Grade 6, 7 and 8 boys in Texas middle schools for the 2012-2013, 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2015-2016 academic school years. By analyzing statewide archival data from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System, Eckford (2017) ^[3] documented that Grade 6, 7, and 8 Black boys were two to three times more likely to be assigned to a Juvenile Justice Alternative Educational Program placement than were White and Hispanic boys in the same grade levels. Hispanic boys were two times more likely to be assigned to a Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program placement than were White boys in all three grade levels. One substantive result was that Grade 8 Black boys were assigned up

to four times more often to a Juvenile Justice Alternative Educational Program than Grade 8 White boys. Eckford (2017) ^[3] recommended that further research be conducted with middle school girls, students at the high school level, other states, and with other forms of discipline consequences.

In another Texas statewide investigation, Lopez (2017) ^[6] examined the extent to which ethnic/racial inequities were present on the assignment to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement for Grade 6, 7, and 8 boys and girls. Similar to Eckford (2017) ^[3], Lopez (2017) ^[6] analyzed statewide archival data from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System for the 2012-2013, 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2015-2016 academic school years. For each academic year and grade level in his study, Black boys were assigned to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement statistically significantly more often than were Asian and White boys., Hispanic boys were assigned to a Disciplinary Alternative Educational Program placement statistically significantly more often than Asian boys and White boys. Recommendations from Lopez (2017) ^[6] included analyzing data from other states, conducting similar research at the elementary and high school levels, and focusing on the role of economic status on the assignment of a Disciplinary Alternative Educational Program placement.

Almost all of the researchers who have addressed inequities in exclusionary discipline consequence assignments have focused on disparities in assignments based on student ethnicity/race, economic status, gender, and grade level. Of note is that only three studies were located in which the researchers focused on the number of days students were assigned to an exclusionary discipline consequence. White and Slate (2017) ^[10] analyzed Texas statewide data on Grade 6, 7, and 8 Texas middle school students for the 2015-2016 academic school year to determine the extent to which economic status was related to how many days students were assigned to an in-school suspension and to an out-of-school suspension. Not only were Grade 6, 7, and 8, students who were economically disadvantaged assigned more often to an in-school suspension and to an out-of-school suspension, White and Slate (2017) ^[10] established that they were also assigned to statistically significantly more days, an average of one day more, to these exclusionary disciplinary consequences than their peers who were not economically disadvantaged.

Following the White and Slate (2017) ^[10] study, White and Slate (2018) ^[10] examined the degree to which the number of days assigned to an out-of-school suspension was related to the ethnicity/race of Grade 9 and 10 Texas high school students. Through statistical analyses of Texas statewide data for the 2013-2014 school year, they documented that Grade 9 and 10 White boys and girls were underrepresented in assignment to an out-of-school suspension. Grade 9 Hispanic boys and girls were appropriately represented, whereas Grade 10 Hispanic boys and girls were underrepresented. Of note in their investigation was that Grade 9 and 10 Black boys and girls were highly overrepresented in the assignment to an out-of-school suspension.

In the most recent investigation that was located, White (2019) analyzed statewide archival data from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System for Grade 6, 7, and 8 students as a function of their ethnicity/race, gender, and economic status for the 2012-2013 through the 2015-

2016 school years. Grade 6, 7, and 8, Black boys were assigned to statistically significantly more days to an in-school suspension, to an out-of-school suspension, and to a Disciplinary Alternative Educational Program placement than Hispanic boys and White boys. White (2019) established the presence of a stair step pattern wherein Black were assigned more days to exclusionary disciplinary consequences than either Hispanic boys or White boys. Hispanic boys were assigned more days to exclusionary discipline consequences than were White students. This pattern repeated at all three grade levels with Black boys being assigned to more days to exclusionary discipline consequences than Hispanic and White boys, and Hispanic boys being assigned more days than White boys.

Statement of the Problem

Disproportionality in discipline is a phenomenon that affects public schools nationwide (Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, & Moore-Thomas, 2012). Disproportionality in student discipline pertains to the inequitable distribution of discipline applied to a certain group of students compared with another group. Mcloughlin and Noltemeyer (2010) ^[7] defined disproportionality as “the overrepresentation of students of color as recipients of such exclusionary discipline” (p. 3). Disproportionality in discipline may result in increased student dropout rates, a growing achievement gap between ethnicity/race, and an improved chance for future trouble with law enforcement (Skiba *et al.*, 2011) ^[9].

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which the number of days that Texas Grade 9, 10, and 11 boys were assigned to an out-of-school suspension differed by their ethnicity/race (i.e. White, Hispanic, and Black). Specifically examined were the extent to which differences existed in the number of days boys were assigned to an out-of-school suspension in Grade 9, 10, and 11 by their ethnicity/race. As such, the disproportional trends present in of out-of-school suspensions by ethnicity/race can be determined.

Significance of the Study

Achievement gaps have been extensively documented between students of color and Asian and White students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline with students of a certain ethnic/racial group and economic status reduces the amount of time students are in the classroom, exacerbating the achievement gap. With diminishing results, students who suffer from a disproportionality of exclusionary discipline feel disenfranchised from future educational, economical, and societal opportunities resulting in the increased likelihood of dropping out of school, and improved chances of incarceration later in life (Skiba *et al.*, 2011) ^[9]. Most researchers who have examined the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline have focused on elementary and middle school level students. The emphasis of this study will be on the disproportionality of number of days assigned exclusionary discipline with high school students in Texas.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study: (a) For Grade 9 boys assigned to an out-of-school suspension, what is the difference in the number of days assigned by their

ethnicity/race?; (b) For Grade 10 boys assigned to an out-of-school suspension, what is the difference in the number of days assigned by their ethnicity/race?; and (c) For Grade 11 boys assigned to an out-of-school suspension, what is the difference in the number of days assigned by their ethnicity/race?

Method

Research Design

By analyzing archival data, a causal comparative research design was present (Johnson & Christensen, 2017) [5]. As with non-experimental research, extraneous variables could not be controlled. One categorical independent variable, ethnicity/race, was present. One quantitative dependent variable, days assigned to an out-of-school suspension, was also present. The samples of students whose data were analyzed were Grades 9, 10, and 11 boys.

Participation and Instrumentation

Participants in this study were Grades 9, 10, and 11 Texas White, Hispanic, and Black high school boys who received an out-of-school suspension during the 2015-2016 academic school year. An out-of-school suspension is a discipline consequence that removes a student from the school campus for a period of no longer than three consecutive days (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Discipline data for the 2015-2016 academic school year were obtained by use of a Public Information Request form submitted to the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System.

Results

Because of how the data were received from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System, a decision was made to use parametric independent samples *t*-tests to answer the three research questions. Independent samples *t*-tests are an appropriate inferential statistical procedure to calculate when the independent variable (i.e., White-Hispanic and White-Black) is dichotomous and the dependent variables (i.e., number of days assigned to out-of-school suspension) are at the interval/ratio level of measurement (Slate & Rojas-LeBouef, 2011) [10].

White and Hispanic Comparisons

For the first research question, the parametric independent samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between Grade 9 White and Hispanic boys in the number of days assigned they were assigned to an out-of-school suspension, $t(2850.75) = 6.16, p < .001$. This difference represented a small effect size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.14 (Cohen, 1988). Grade 9 Hispanic boys were assigned, on average, a tenth of a day more to an out-of-school suspension than were Grade 9 White boys. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are delineated in Table 1.

With respect to the second research question, the parametric independent samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between Grade 10 White and Hispanic boys in the number of days they were assigned to an out-of-school suspension, $t(1562.69) = 5.06, p < .001$. This difference represented a small effect size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.15 (Cohen, 1988).

Grade 10 Hispanic boys were assigned, on average, over a tenth of a day more to an out-of-school suspension than were Grade 10 White boys. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for this analysis.

For the third research question, the parametric independent samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between Grade 11 White and Hispanic boys in the number of days they were assigned to an out-of-school suspension, $t(884.39) = 4.70, p < .001$. This difference represented a small effect size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.19 (Cohen, 1988). Grade 11 Hispanic boys were assigned, on average, over a tenth of a day more to an out-of-school suspension than were Grade 11 White boys. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are defined in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Number of Days Assigned to an Out-Of -School Suspension to Grade 9, 10 and 11 White and Hispanic Boys

Grade Level and Ethnicity/Race	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Grade 9			
White	2,367	1.80	0.85
Hispanic	24,424	1.92	0.86
Grade 10			
White	1,205	1.67	0.85
Hispanic	8,587	1.80	0.85
Grade 11			
White	669	1.63	0.80
Hispanic	4,913	1.79	0.85

White and Black Comparisons

Continuing with the first research question, the parametric independent samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between Grade 9 White boys and Black boys in their number of days they were assigned to an out-of-school suspension, $t(3323.76) = 6.58, p < .001$. This difference represented a small effect size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.15 (Cohen, 1988). Grade 9 Black boys were assigned, on average, over a tenth of a day more to an out-of-school suspension than Grade 9 White boys. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are delineated in Table 2.

With regard to Grade 10 White and Black boys, the parametric independent samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between Grade 10 White and Black boys in the number of days they were assigned to an out-of-school suspension, $t(1725.19) = 8.74, p < .001$. This difference represented a small effect size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.27 (Cohen, 1988). Grade 10 Black boys were assigned, on average, over two tenths of a day more to an out-of-school suspension than Grade 10 White boys. Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics for this analysis.

For the second portion of the third research question, the parametric independent samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between Grade 11 White and Black boys in the number of days they were assigned out-of-school suspension, $t(995.35) = 6.08, p < .001$. This difference represented a small effect size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.25 (Cohen, 1988). Grade 11 Black boys were assigned, on average, over two tenths of a day more to an out-of-school suspension than Grade 11 White boys. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are defined in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Number of Days Assigned to an Out-Of-School Suspension to Grade 9, 10 and 11 White and Black Boys

Grade Level and Ethnicity/Race	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Grade 9			
White	2,367	1.80	0.85
Black	12,783	1.93	0.86
Grade 10			
White	1,205	1.67	0.85
Black	6,158	1.90	0.86
Grade 11			
White	669	1.63	0.80
Black	3,363	1.84	0.86

Discussion

Statistically significant differences were identified between Grade 9, 10, and 11 White and Hispanic boys, as well as between Grade 9, 10, and 11 White and Black boys in the average number of days they were assigned to an out-of-school suspension. White boys were assigned, on average, fewer days to an out-of-school suspension than either Hispanic and Black boys. In this Texas statewide analysis, Grade 9 Hispanic boys were 10 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 9 White boys. By Grades 10 and 11, Hispanic boys were seven times more likely to receive an out of school suspension than White boys. Hispanic boys at all three grade levels served over a tenth of a day more for an out-of-school suspension than White boys.

Of note is that in the 2015-2016 academic school year the ethnic/racial makeup of Texas high school students was comprised of approximately 30% White students, 13% Black students, and 50% Hispanic students (Texas Education Agency, 2019). In the 2015-2016 academic school year, Grade 9, 10, and 11 Black students made up only 13% of Texas high school enrollment (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Grade 9 Black boys were 5 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 9 White boys. By Grades 10 and 11, Black boys were also five times more likely to receive an out of school suspension than White boys. Black boys at all three grade levels served about two tenths of a day more for an out-of-school suspension than White boys. The number of out-of-school suspensions assigned to Grade 9, 10, and 11 White, Hispanic, and Black boys declined as they got older. The disproportionality however remained between White and Hispanic boys as well as between White and Black boys.

Implications for Policy and for Practice

The inequalities in both total days assigned to out of school suspensions and time spent in out-of-school suspension for Grade 9, 10, and 11 Hispanic and Black boys in relation to Grade 9, 10, and 11 White boys requires changes in both policy and practice. The Texas State legislature needs to examine the data provided by researchers in the area of discipline inequality. The legislature can determine if laws to reduce the number of days allowed in of out-of-school per academic school year, or even the possible elimination of out-of-school suspensions for less than egregious discipline infractions as a behavior modification tool, should be implemented. School district leadership throughout the state of Texas should examine the data as well and examine the possibilities of implementing alternatives to out-of-school suspensions and focus training with school staff members on

incorporating cultural relevancy training or to address social emotional learning gaps students bring to the classroom.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based upon the results of this empirical, statewide investigation, several suggestions for future research can be made. First, because the scope of this research project was limited to Texas Grades 9, 10 and 11 students, researchers are encouraged to extend this study to students in Texas middle schools and elementary schools. A second recommendation is for researchers to focus on transition years such as the year from elementary school to middle school and the year from middle school to high school. Such an analysis might permit the determination of whether increases might be present in discipline assignments during this transition between grade levels. This research project was also limited to Texas. To determine if this disproportionality in discipline is taking place across the nation, it is recommended that researchers replicate this investigation in other states. Further, researchers should focus into rural and urban areas in each state to analyze if location is a factor in disproportionate assignment of discipline. As White, Hispanic, and Black boys got older, the number of days assigned to an out of school suspension decreased across all three groups. Research should be conducted to determine, if possible, the causes for this decrease in numbers. Is the decrease due to drop out rates, improved relationships between students and school staff, or even just maturity of the student?

One other area recommended for further research should be to determine if this disproportionality in discipline is occurring in other areas of discipline. Does disproportionality occur with in-school suspensions, assignments to alternative education placements, and expulsion to juvenile justice alternative placement centers? This research should continue to see if it is happening at the elementary and middle school levels as well.

Conclusion

Researchers have addressed disproportionality in the assignment of exclusionary discipline consequences through the lenses of implicit bias, principal attitudes, vulnerable decision points, and discretionary use of subjective office discipline referrals. To date, however, these analyses have been correlational in nature, rather than cause-and effect analyses (Girvan *et al.*, 2017; Smolkowski *et al.*, 2016). As such, the underlying reasons for inequities in both exclusionary discipline consequences and days assigned to these consequences are not known. In this statewide investigation, Texas Grade 9, 10, and 11 White boys were assigned to an out-of-school suspension less often and with less duration than their Hispanic and Black counterparts. Until the underlying causes for these disparities can be determined, it is possible these disproportionalities will continue to exacerbate dropout rates, future incarceration, and widen the achievement gaps.

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