

Chapter 5

Relative Rate Index, Racial Disparity, and School Suspensions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will analyze school disciplinary actions across large metropolitan school districts. In recent decades, K-12 school disciplinary practices have garnered national attention from researchers, policymakers, and educators. Racial disparity among school discipline raises serious questions about continued violations of the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision. The purpose of the chapter is to provide a series of evidence-supported recommendations for the dismantling of the school-to-prison pipeline. The current chapter will examine the discipline records for the 2016-2017 academic school year in 19 independent school districts to identify the equitable assignment of suspensions and expulsions. Disparity ratio analysis will help us understand the relationship between race, ethnicity, and school suspension. The findings will be utilized to guide policy recommendations. The results will provide an evidence-based understanding of racial disparity in school suspensions.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3359-1.ch005

INTRODUCTION

The school-to-prison pipeline debate has garnered great debate nationally. In fact, racial disparity among school discipline practices raises serious questions about continued violations of the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision. Stemming from the conversation about the school-to-prison pipeline is national and state-level data showing that minorities who receive school disciplinary actions are impacted at a disproportionate rate (Losen & Whitaker, 2018; Fabelo et al., 2011). The need to address patterns of racial inequities in public schools has surfaced as a key focus for education system reform efforts. However, much of the research up to now has been descriptive in nature and at the national and state level. The following chapter represents a localized movement toward education reform. Harris County has a population of 4.6 million residents and contains 19 independent school districts (ISDs). Based on the 2016-2017 academic school year, the ISD's racial and ethnic composition was approximately 6% Asian, 19% Black or African American, 55% Hispanic/Latino, 18% White, less than 2% two or more races, and American Indian or Alaska Native and Native/Hawaiian each account for less than 1%. The purpose of this chapter is to examine school disciplinary actions by race and ethnicity in the county's public school districts.

African American students are suspended and expelled at a higher frequency than their peers who represent other racial groups. This is a consequence of zero tolerance policies which were introduced into the school administrative system as a means to expand school safety among all students (Skiba et al., 2006). Yet, in recent years, these policies have become excessively rigid, and they have directly contributed to racial inequities in school discipline. Additionally, these policies have directly impacted students of color in a negative manner. Zero-tolerance policies are frequently authorized through unyielding practices and predestined penalties that significantly hamper any type of discretion in specific cases. The application of zero-tolerance policies has augmented the commonness of suspension and expulsion to deal with behaviors that run the gamut from improper dress code violations and talking back to teachers to the worst-case situations involving weapons possession and selling narcotics. These policies damage and disproportionately hurt students of color, students with disabilities, and low-income students (Curran, 2019; Hackett, 2018). Simply stated, zero-tolerance policies resulting in school removals do not work because Students suspended or expelled are associated with the stigma of being labeled as a "problem child." Consequently, as research shows, these students who are removed from school for disciplinary actions are more apt to end up at-risk, ultimately placed into an alternative disciplinary school, or worse. This is signified as the school-to-prison pipeline, and while it's a worst-case scenario, for many students, it becomes their reality (Wheeler, 2017).

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