

Chapter 6

Separate and Still Unequal: An Analysis of School Discipline

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will examine the disproportionate rate of minority school suspensions relative to race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, grade level, and school population size. Although Black students account for 20% of the school population for this chapter's study, the rate of in-school discipline for Black students far exceeded the rates for White and Hispanic students. Notably, the authors find that race, gender, socioeconomic status, and grade level are correlated with the disproportionate disciplinary practices imposed upon minority students regardless of grade level. In this chapter, the authors review the previous research on race, gender, poverty, grade level, and school discipline before laying out their methodological approach for understanding suspension disparities. After analysis, they conclude with recommendations for improvement.

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ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES AND SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

Prior research highlights the ineffectiveness of zero-tolerance school disciplinary policies (Cramer et al., 2014; Noguera, 2010). These policies - established to create safer learning environments for all students - have negatively and disproportionately impacted students of color, the economically disadvantaged, and those classified for special education. This is evidenced by the over-representation of Black, poor, and developmentally challenged students disciplined within schools. School-based zero-tolerance policies were originally derived from federal drug policies designed to deter drug trafficking through immediate, harsh, and legally mandated punishments and initially focused on weapons and substance use. However, many schools nationwide later expanded these policies to include infractions which have relatively negligible impact on school safety (Smith & Harper, 2015; Wallace Jr et al., 2008). The continued implementation of zero-tolerance policies for all infractions, including discretionary ones, has marginalized students of color, the economically disadvantaged, and those classified for special education, and led to these groups overrepresentation in the school discipline system. The high rate at which racial minority students receive multiple suspensions is the clearest evidence against these zero-tolerance policies. An analysis of Texas student suspension data demonstrated African American students were four-times more likely to receive suspensions than White or Hispanic students for similar behavioral infractions (Fabelo et al., 2011). While the suspension rates are disproportionately high for Black, poor, and developmentally challenged or special education students, it is important to note that some students may fall into more than one of these categories (Texans Care for Children, 2019).

The current research examines reasons for school discipline and the influence of student's racial classification. To do so, a convenience sampling of 262 students from a small, rural Texas school district were analyzed. Convenience sampling was used due to time constraints and was retrieved from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). In the school district we examined, Black students accounted for almost 20% of the students in Grades 3 - 12 during the 2016 – 2017 academic year; however, the rates at which they were suspended were disproportionately higher than White and Hispanic students. Though, of the three racial groups, Hispanic students had the lowest suspension rates.

Our study also shows that high school students - in grades nine through twelve - represent the highest percentage of all students suspended, at 47 percent. Additionally, middle school students - in grades six through eight - represent the lowest percentage of the student suspension population at 21 percent. Moreover, 33 percent of students in grades 3 - 12 were suspended, and 17 percent of all students were disciplined, 47 percent of which were Black. We argue that this school district's zero-tolerance

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