

Excluded from Education: The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Suspension Rates

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Abstract

Zero-tolerance policies have increased throughout schools in the United States and as a result, more students are being exposed to exclusionary discipline. This disproportionately affects students of lower socioeconomic status as well as students who belong to racially or ethnically marginalized communities. Children of lower socioeconomic statuses are more likely to be suspended due to their home environments, the biases and negative expectations from teachers, as well as their history of suspensions or expulsions. Teacher support and preventative programs for misbehavior in students prove to decrease the rates of suspension on an individual and school-wide level.

Introduction

Exclusionary discipline is a rising method of punishing students for increasingly minor misdemeanors due to the growing popularity of zero-tolerance policies in schools, which disproportionately affect marginalized students. A trend indicates that roughly 34% of ninth grade students eligible for free or reduced lunch were suspended at least once versus 16% of non-eligible students throughout varying states and large cities in the United States (Balfanz et. al., 2018). Students of lower socioeconomic status face a higher risk of suspension and other disciplinary measures, such as expulsions or office referrals. Higher suspension rates in schools increase the risks of substance abuse, failure to meet graduation requirements, and feelings of alienation within the students and detachment from school (Skiba et. al., 2014). A more severe consequence of the rising rates at which exclusionary discipline is used is the increased chance

of increased contact with the juvenile justice system via the school-to-prison pipeline (Barrett et. al., 2017).

This paper identifies the factors that contribute to disproportionate suspension rates in schools and provides recommendations for what needs to be addressed and how these issues can be solved. Some factors include how growing up in poverty affects children and the likelihood they experience or witness violence, coming into high school with a record of suspensions, office referrals, or expulsions, and the relationships formed between students and their teachers.

Research Question

What impact does socioeconomic status have on suspension rates for high school students?

Thesis Statement

High school students belonging to families or communities of lower socioeconomic statuses than their peers have a higher rate of being suspended due to the environment in which they grew up, teacher biases and expectations, and their history of being suspended.

Terminology

In this paper, the following terms are necessary to understand: *pre-academic skills* are the skills that form the foundation of a child's learning before they enter school. *Socioeconomic status* (SES) is defined as the social standing of an individual, based on their education, income, and employment. In several studies referenced, the determiner of whether a student was of low socioeconomic status was their eligibility for *free or reduced-priced lunches* (FRPL). Students who qualify for free lunches are in households with incomes at 130% of the federal poverty line or below that. Students who qualify for reduced-priced lunches are in households with incomes

between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty line (Snyder & Musu-Gillette, 2015).

Exclusionary discipline includes methods of punishing students that remove them from the academic environment, impairing their access to education. These methods include suspensions and expulsions. *Zero tolerance policies* are methods of discipline in schools that are often subjective and broad. They focus on eliminating the problem through removing students from the classroom and giving more suspensions for less severe misdemeanors. The *school-to-prison pipeline* describes “national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems” (ACLU).

Literature Review

While most of the sources used in this paper focused on identifying the factors contributing towards disparities in suspension rates between students of different identities, the papers *Disparities in Student Discipline by Race and Family Income* and *The Relationship of School Poverty and Suspension Rates: Finding ways to reduce Suspension through Prevention Programming and School Bonding* specifically identified the factors that cause students of lower socioeconomic statuses to be suspended more often. They showed the correlation between the students’ perception of their neighborhoods, the teachers’ perceptions of the students, and the likelihood of a student of lower SES being suspended when compared to their peers of higher SES. The paper *Breaking the School to Prison Pipeline: Identifying School Risk and Protective Factors for Youth Delinquency* demonstrated the importance of the upbringing of these students and how that impacts the behavior of the students towards their teachers and peers. Several sources, such as *The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment* and *Sent Home and Put Off-Track: The Antecedents, Disproportionalities, and Consequences of Being Suspended in the Ninth Grade* indicated that when SES is controlled

for, race and gender remain prominent predictors for determining the probability of a student being suspended.

Methods

This is a research paper utilizing secondary sources from Google Scholar and the Duke Library databases. The information is primarily qualitative, relying on reports and previous research done on the subject. The journals referenced in this paper include sources from *The Journal of Applied Research on Children* and the *American Educational Research Journal*. I synthesized the information in these journals and reports to support the conclusion that while socioeconomic status has a large impact on the likelihood of a student receiving exclusionary discipline, there are other significant factors such as race, the student's history of violence, and previous suspensions. Information was also gathered from state-wide reports which focused on the disparities in suspension rates between groups of students with varying identities. These included a report for the *North Carolina Family Impact Seminar* as well as a technical report for the *Educational Research Alliance* for New Orleans. Along with the consequences of exclusionary discipline, information from these reports highlight the positive correlation between both socioeconomic status and suspension rates as well as race and suspension rates.

Findings

Childhood Environment

The environment in which children grow up in is important in regards to their likelihood of being subjected to the zero-tolerance policies of their schools. Students belonging to a lower socioeconomic status enter school with fewer pre-academic skills than their peers of a higher socioeconomic status (Christle et. al., 2005). When students come to school already behind their

peers, they are set up for low academic performance, which in turn lowers the expectations of them set by teachers. A negative perception of the students from teachers increases the chances of a student being suspended, showing the relationship between suspension rates and pre-academic skills.

The ability of zero-tolerance policies to be subjective allows teachers to consider factors other than the direct cause for suspension when deciding to use exclusionary discipline. It has been shown that students belonging to families of lower socioeconomic statuses are more likely to be victimized or witness violence in their neighborhoods (Christle et. al., 2005). Along with that, students who perceive their neighborhoods to be unsafe are disproportionately more likely to be suspended or sent out of the classroom (Shirley, 2012). The negative environment surrounding them can result in students developing various coping mechanisms such as becoming desensitized or projecting the attitudes of the adults in their personal lives to those in their school environments. “[The students’] ‘tough’ front may be misperceived by authority figures as a threat to student’s safety and to authority, which may lead administrators to give these students harsher sentences for minor offenses” (Shirley, 2012). Students of lower socioeconomic statuses are more likely to be suspended due to their childhood experiences as well as how their teachers interpret their reactions to their personal lives.

History of Violence or Suspensions

One of the strongest factors of predicting whether or not a student will face future suspensions is if they have a recorded history of violence, rule-breaking, or have received exclusionary discipline in the past. On an individual level, “predictors [of the probability of student suspension] were poverty, previous suspensions and severity of the last suspension incident” (Hines-Datiri et. al., 2014). Teachers are already more likely to suspend high school

students of lower socioeconomic statuses, but combined with the knowledge of previous suspensions or expulsions, the chances of teachers suspending those students again increased. While violence and a history of suspensions are important determiners regarding the likelihood of a student being suspended, a zero-tolerance policy can lead to unnecessary suspensions that are based in biases and poor expectations. These methods of exclusionary discipline are not used sparingly. Instead, they are “most commonly used for more interactive day-to-day disruptions, especially defiance and noncompliance” (Skiba et. al., 2014). For example, teachers have reported that their decisions of whether or not to suspend a student have been partially based on the student’s history with conduct problems and whether they believed the student was a threat to the safety of the other individuals at school. In the same study, it was found that administrators often rely on their judgement of student characteristics because the zero-tolerance policies can be difficult to interpret (Iselin, 2010).

Students of lower socioeconomic statuses are more likely to be suspended for both violent and nonviolent infractions than their peers of higher socioeconomic statuses. In fact, roughly 11% of students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches were suspended for a violent infraction, but 16% were suspended for nonviolent behavior. Of those students who are not eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches, 5% were suspended for violent behaviors, and 10% were suspended for nonviolent behaviors (Barrett et. al., 2017). Though students of lower SES were more likely to be suspended in general, violent infractions made up a larger portion of the total suspensions for students of higher SES. This shows that there is no predisposition towards violent behavior in students of lower socioeconomic statuses. Teachers are more likely to judge a student’s actions as disruptive, a misdemeanor, or other forms of nonviolent infractions to be more worthy of exclusionary discipline if they belong to a lower socioeconomic status.

The Role of Race and Gender

Although poverty has a significant impact on the likelihood of a student being suspended, there are other important factors to consider, such as race and gender. “Racial and gender disparities persist after controlling for socioeconomic status,” meaning that once socioeconomic status was removed as a variable in studies, race and gender still played significant roles in the likelihood of a student being suspended (Skiba et. al., 2002) Differences in suspension rates due to socioeconomic statuses can be addressed simply with teacher engagement and available support from the school, however the other remaining factors show that there are greater issues such as systemic racism.

Aside from socioeconomic status, gender is an important factor in the suspension rates of students. Overall, it is more common for males to be suspended than females. Rather than teacher bias playing as significant a role as it does with non-white students or students of lower SES, males were more likely to misbehave than their female peers. They were suspended for actions “ranging in seriousness from minor offenses to sexual acts, [but] for only one infraction (truancy) were girls more likely to be referred to the office than boys” (Skiba et. al., 2002). This shows in general that misogyny isn’t a primary factor in exclusionary discipline due to teachers suspending male students much more frequently.

Race was found to be the predominant factor in the chances of a student being suspended, and it was heavily linked to teacher bias. Both on an individual and school-wide scale, it was found that belonging to a racial or ethnically marginalized community increased rates of suspension. The degree to which this affects the suspension rates is so important that just after possession of weapons and physical violence, attending a school with higher percentages of African American students was a key factor in accurately predicting the suspension rates in

schools, with schools of larger populations of African American students being more likely to have higher rates of exclusionary discipline (Skiba et. al., 2014). When analyzing the different reasons for referrals or suspensions, it was found that “higher rates of suspension, particularly for African American students in the US, are not due to differences in student behavior” (Hemphill et. al., 2014). This demonstrates the severity of the role race plays in the probability of a student being suspended. It doesn’t remove the importance of socioeconomic status, but it shows that more work needs to be done after addressing the impact SES has on rates of exclusionary discipline. Compared to the disparities in suspension rates among gender, which can largely be attributed to behavior, the disparities here are clearly linked to teacher bias due to no obvious differences in behavior.

The intersectionality of the students’ identities is the most important factor because these issues don’t exist separately from each other. For example, when only considering race and gender, Black males were the most likely to be suspended (Skiba et. al., 2002). Black females were also significantly more likely to be suspended than girls of other races. Compared to their white and female peers, they were 5.5 times more likely to be suspended (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017). When a student belongs to a lower socioeconomic status, these issues are only amplified. Overall, the group of students most at risk for receiving exclusionary discipline are Black students of lower socioeconomic status, and the group with the lowest risk are white females of higher socioeconomic status. This highlights the importance of addressing it as an issue of intersectionality rather than simply approaching it as an issue solely of SES, race, or gender. Addressing all of these factors will be crucial in fixing the problem of disparities in suspension rates.

Solutions

When teachers take behavioral management classes for children and increase their instructional skills, they are far more likely to form positive and constructive relationships with their students when compared to those who do not. When teachers form hostile or otherwise negative relationships with their students, their expectations of those students decrease, and they are more likely to give them suspensions. Further, schools that train their teachers in cultural responsiveness and sensitivity “may reduce teacher-student conflict, resulting in fewer suspensions” (Iselini, 2010). Schools with lower suspension rates have students who simply perceive that they are more understood and welcome there. Not only does compassion from teachers improve suspension rates, but so does teacher involvement and support (Hemphill, 2014). It becomes increasingly clear that positive relationships between students and teachers as well as the teachers’ empathy and understanding of the situations of the students decreases suspension rates.

Various programs that support students have also been shown to decrease the likelihood of them acting out and being suspended. These programs include those that support physical and mental health as well as preventative programs for violence, substance abuse, and other forms of misbehavior (Shirley, 2012). Suspension rates are also decreased when students simply perceive that they are supported by their schools. The programs are so beneficial to the students in high poverty schools that they decreased the suspension rates drastically to the point at which they were lower than those of the low poverty schools (Shirley, 2012). The implementation of supportive programs does not only benefit students of low socioeconomic status; they also positively affect students belonging to other marginalized communities, especially Black females (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017). Luckily, these supportive programs and teacher engagement

are not difficult to achieve, so the aspect of socioeconomic status in the differences in suspension rates can be easily addressed if schools put in the effort, time, and the willingness to change.

Conclusion

Extreme disciplinary action in response to minor demonstrations of misbehavior can have detrimental consequences on the futures of students. Chronic absenteeism due to suspensions is damaging to any student's level of academic achievement and to the teacher-student relationship, and even one suspension or expulsion on a student's school record increases their risk of disengagement from school and being subjected to the school-to-prison pipeline. Factors that contribute to disproportionate rates of suspension within schools include a student's record of suspensions or expulsions, their childhood environment, and teacher bias towards certain characteristics of students, such as socioeconomic status, race, and gender. Race was shown to be the predominant factor in predicting whether or not a student would be suspended, and socioeconomic status only amplifies the chances. When these issues are addressed within schools through the development of programs that support children in various ways as well as within the classroom through teachers practicing empathy and compassion, suspension rates between high and low poverty schools become similar. The role that socioeconomic status plays in suspension rates can be decreased, but there still needs to be more research done on the intersectionalities of students' identities and how that impacts their chances of being suspended.

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