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A Child Left Behind: How Harsh Disciplinary Tactics Contribute to the School-to-Prison-Pipeline

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Abstract

Exclusionary tactics such as expulsions, suspensions, and school transfers are utilized by public schooling staff for a number of reasons. Generally, they are enforced with the intent of removing 'problem students' out of their classrooms. This paper utilizes data provided by the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) from the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) in order to reproduce a more recent version of a 2013 study carried out by Na and Gottfredson which tested the association (a) increased levels of School Resources Officers (SROs) at public schools, and (b) the administration of harsh punishments on students, including expulsions, suspensions, and transfers. The replication will seek to demonstrate relationships between an increased use of harsh punishments in public schools between 2007-08 and 2015-16 and a number of common variables cited as contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (SSP). While the data does not clearly identify each cited SPP risk factor in the existing literature, a strong relationship is found between the administration of harsh punishments and both (1) the location of a school in areas of high crime and (2) schools with either high minority populations or a high rate of students who perform below the fifteenth percentile on standardized tests.

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List of Tables

Table of Contents

Introduction

The United States is winning the global race for mass incarceration among industrialized countries. Even when considering the 2016 drop in incarceration rates, the United States continues to incarcerate its population at a grossly higher rate than any other country. According to a Pew Research Study, at the end of 2016 roughly 2.2 million people were incarcerated in either federal and state prisons or locally run jails. This amounts to a national incarceration rate of 860 inmates for every 100,000 adults (Gramlich 2018). While policy makers point fingers at many potential culprits, zero-tolerance education policies seem to play a critical role in pushing students out of classrooms and into cells through criminalizing minor infractions, outsourcing school punishments from school administrators to police officers, and systematically removing disadvantaged students from traditional classrooms.

The school-to-prison pipeline (SSP) is a term used to refer to this national trend of using zero-tolerance policies and School Resource Officers (SROs) to remove and isolate both disadvantaged students and students of color from educational environments. Since most public schools in the United States are provided with inadequate resources, the schools are incentivized to push out low-performing students in order to increase standardized test scores "in response to pressures from test-based accountability regimes" (ACLU 2018). The increase in exclusionary tactics can be reflected in the rate at which schools suspend students which has increased from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million in 2000—a 10% overall increase in suspensions (ACLU 2018). This practice, combined with added incentives by the Department of Justice to station police personnel at public schools, poses a great threat to the promise that all American students will be provided with equal educational opportunities.

In this paper, the ties between stationing SROs, police officers, and security guards at public middle, high, and combined schools and the administration of harsh exclusionary punishments will be closely examined. This will be completed through replicating findings produced by Na and Gottfredson in their 2013 article, "Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors", in order to find either a positive or negative relationship between added security personnel and harsh punishments. Likely, the data will reflect that increasing security presence does not make any major contributions to school safety and lead to higher rates of the administration of harsh punishments and exclusionary tactics among socially disadvantaged students.

Background

While the United States Constitution does not define education as one of the fundamental rights owed to all citizens, the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause requires that no public schooling institutions may deny any child residing in the state equal access to education. Even still, through exclusionary tactics, disadvantaged and minority students are systematically removed from classrooms and, therefore, denied their rights to equal educational opportunities.

This denial of equal opportunities can be reflected through the White-Black and White-Hispanic achievement gaps recorded by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). In a 2016 report, they found that at the twelfth-grade level the White-Black achievement gap had increased from twenty-four points to thirty points while the White-Hispanic gap remained at twenty-two points. This demonstrates that White students have consistently been awarded resources which enable their continued achievement. When exclusionary discipline tactics are

2

considered, approximately 48.3% of African American male students have been suspended is more than twice that of any other group—a finding which can be replicated when considering suspension rates for African American female students (NCES 2016, 4). This then correlates to the gaps in enrollment at postsecondary institutions with White students enrolling approximately ten percent more than other minority students (NCES 2016, 5). The apparent disparities in educational achievement reflect the need to investigate how exclusionary tactics and school security officials may impact public school students.

Methods

Key Concepts

School-to-Prison-Pipeline

The school-to-prison-pipeline (SSP) is frequently cited in political science, criminal justice, and sociology as a major factor causing school age children to be pushed from classrooms and into the criminal justice system. Students are pushed out of classrooms through the liberal administration of harsh disciplines which can then lead to the repetition of grades, dropping out, committing crimes, and eventual incarceration. The exclusion of these students—who often come from either poor or minority backgrounds—represents an institutional failing of the public schooling system resulting from underfunded public institutions, overcrowded classrooms, ineffective staff members, and a lack of resources (Welch 2016). A few of the most cited risk factors regarding disciplinary actions in schools—and thus an increased risk of being incarcerated—include low socioeconomic status, status as a member of a minority population,

cultural mismatch between students and faculty at the school, and learning disabilities. These will each be more completely explained in the paragraphs following.

Low socioeconomic status has been widely cited as a key risk factor for school disciplinary actions. There is a common perception that the families of poor marginalized students are disconnected from the education process and, therefore, do not value education the same as the families of middle- and upper-class students. This is backed by Noltemeyer and Mcloughlin's study which displayed the most disciplinary disproportionality in major urban districts with high poverty rates and the least disproportionality in rural districts with few students and low poverty rates. Additionally, Skiba recorded that through being enrolled in a school with high rates of impoverished or low-income students or simply belonging to a low-income family puts a student at an increased risk for being subjected to punitive forms of discipline within schools.

While some analysis' attribute disproportionate rates of disciplinary actions simply to an increased rate of misbehavior, it has been widely supported that there are no behavioral differences between minority groups and white students. Instead, according to Skiba's research, there exists a racial bias which causes minority students to be referred to the office more frequently for less serious and more subjective reasons. Skiba's studies show that African American students, in particular, are more likely to receive suspensions, be excluded for longer time periods, and receive discipline for minor and subjective offensives such as disrespect. His research also demonstrated that Native American and Hispanic students were more likely than Caucasian students to be excluded from classrooms or to receive disciplinary actions due to an inherent racial bias. Therefore, exclusionary punishment tactics within schools have a sharp

4

oppressive edge which intends to remove racial minorities from school, denying them equal educational opportunities.

Since the majority of teachers are white, female, and from middle-class backgrounds, teacher in urban or racially diverse schools often misunderstand their students. This results in higher disciplinary rates when teachers are paired with students of different cultural backgrounds. These misunderstandings most commonly occur between teachers and males belonging to minority groups since the teachers are unfamiliar with interactional patterns which may cause them to interpret attempts to display emotions as combative or argumentative advances. Studies have shown that "once Black students and White students are both placed with same race teachers, and are similar on the other covariates, Black students' classroom behavior is rated more favorably than is White students' behavior" (Downey and Pribesh, 2004) demonstrating how cultural mismatch may contribute to increased disciplinary actions against students belonging to minority groups. Therefore, teachers may exclude students from classrooms due to misunderstandings resulting from a lack of exposure to the students' culture.

According to a case study by Sullivan, Klingbeil, and Norman, suspension among those with disabilities reached 19% during the 2009-2010 and of the suspended students with disabilities—learning disabilities included—33% of them were African American. The logic behind the hypothesis refers to underfunding of institutions and how the lack of proper funds allocated to special education programs can leave the students lacking the proper resources to succeed in school. Another method of excluding students is through labeling them as Otherwise Health Impaired (OHI) which allows for 'problem' students to be removed from classrooms without assigning them an Individualized Education Program (IEP) which would require the allocation of more funds to the student in question. However, this research has not been widely

5

reported or backed, so it is unclear whether it is an isolated occurrence or if other confounding variables—such as race—have caused the phenomenon.

School Resource Officers

School Resource Officers (SROs) act as an extension of the police within the school system. The U.S. Department of Justice defines SROs are sworn law enforcement officers responsible for both safety and crime prevention in schools (U.S. Department of Justice 2018). The Secure our Schools Grant Program (SOS) is largely responsible for the rise of SROs and other forms of police security within schools. This "grant provide[s] funding to state, local, or tribal governments to assist with the development of school safety resources" (Grants Office, 2018). Through funding, it encourages law enforcement agencies to partner with school districts which often leads to increased security measures in schools.

A limitation of the public use data from the SSOCS is that that the total SROs stationed at a school are combined with the total security guards and sworn law enforcement officials to create the variable SEC_FT. Without access to the restricted use data, it is not possible to separate the variable out to specify how many SROs, in particular, are stationed at the school. However, the variable is still able to communicate the impact more SROs have on harsh disciplinary actions through its inclusion of multiple types of school security officials.

Harsh Discipline

As cited by Welch in her explanation of the SSP, harsh discipline and exclusionary tactics are a major contributor behind pushing poor and minority students into the criminal justice system. The data selected to support the hypothesis, relies heavily on how SROs and other security forces placed in public high schools may lead to the increased administration of

harsh disciplinary measures. In this context, harsh discipline refers to a combination of three common exclusionary tactics: removals from school, transfers from school, and suspensions which last more than five days. Relying on quantitative data provided within the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) the total removals, transfers, and suspensions are combined in order to inform the 'harsh discipline' variable.

Data Sources

The School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) has been circulated to public high schools across the United States six times between 1999 and 2016 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The data collected from the surveys seek to study the relationships between school characteristics and violent crimes within schools to examine school programs, practices, and policies (Cox 2018, 1). Through the data provided, policymakers are able to make informed decisions regarding school policy as well as how to demonstrate to the public a proactive solution to school violence. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education utilizes the information in order to design grant programs which address school safety, violence prevention, and school climates. For the analysis, the survey variables and data from 2007-08 and 2015-16 will be closely examined in order to determine the relationship between the increased presence of school security officials at public middle and high schools and the implementation of exclusionary tactics/harsh disciplinary measures. Within this nine-year period, the changes in school security officials and how this effects the other variables between 2007-08 and 2015-16.

The research model utilized is based on Na and Gottfredson's fifth table included in their article, "Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending

Behaviors." The table "reports results from OLS regressions of the percentage of offenses for which the offending student was removed, transferred, or suspended" (Na and Gottfredson 2013, 640). Within the piece, they hoped to explain how police officers in schools shaped school discipline in ways which were detrimental to students. Using SSOCS Data from 2003-04, 2005-06, and 2007-08, they created longitudinal samples containing record for roughly 580 schools (Na and Gottfredson 2013, 627). From the table, they concluded "that increase in the use of police in schools is not significantly related to changes in the use of harsh discipline, which is contrary to the prediction that the increased use of police in schools facilitates the "push-out" process of problematic students" (Na and Gottfredson 2013, 641). The paper seeks to replicate their data using more recent data to test if the findings continue to hold true.

Within table five, Na and Gottfredson consider the following variables: total enrollment, percentage of crimes reported, percentage of male students, percentage of students enrolled in special education programs, percentage of students falling under a low socioeconomic status, presence of crime where the school is located, percentage daily attendance, the student to teacher ratio, location of the school, and type of school. Since the replicated table will rely on public use data for the two periods in question, some of the variables used in the original table are unavailable; therefore, they were either dropped or replaced with new variables in the most recent analysis.

Two variables which were dropped were both percentage male as well as the student to teacher ratio. The omission of the percentage of male students causes the data to be unable to render any conclusions regarding the association between the concentration of male students and the administration of harsher punishments at public schools. Literature on the SSP commonly cites this association, so the SSOCS public use data will be unable to reproduce this association.

8

The lack of data for the student to teacher ratio will make it difficult to test whether closer teacher to student relationships reduce the administration of harsh disciplinary practices. This ratio may have otherwise been used to explain cultural mismatch since a smaller classroom will in theory give educators more time to better understand and connect with their students. Unfortunately, the datasets provided have no variables which are similar enough to stand in for them.

Na and Gottfredson rely on a combination of the percentage of students who receive reduced school lunches and the percentage of minority students at the school to inform their low socioeconomic standing variable. Since the percentage of students who receive school lunches is included in the restricted access data, this paper will instead rely on three separate conceptions of the variable. These include; parental involvement since it is likely that families with lower socioeconomic standings will have to work increased hours which will conflict with school activities; the percentage of students who score below the fifteenth percentile on standardized tests since students who do not have the means to purchase expensive testing workbooks will likely underperform (Duncan 2011, 524); and the percentage who view academic achievement as important. Each variable listed above is labeled as SES1, SES2, and SES3 respectively within the table.

Replication of Na and Gottfredson's Table Five

Table 1: Na and Gottfredson's Original Table Five using SSOCS Data from 2003-04, 2005-06, and 2007-08 (2013).

	Harsh Discipline	
	B	SE
Add Police	1.770	4.812
(ln) Total Enrollment (t1)	5.612	2.954
Prior % Crime Reported (t1)	0.195**	0.050
# Years Between t1 and t2	–4.267**	1.626
% Male (t1)	–0.215	0.207
% Special Education (t1)	0.154	0.214
% Low SES (t1)	0.080	0.074
Crime Where School Located (t1)	–3.153	3.122
% Attendance (t1)	0.213	0.200
Student-teacher Ratio (t1)	–0.207	0.358
Urban Fringe (t1)	2.512	4.013
Town (t1)	1.697	5.798
Rural (t1)	6.160	4.959
Middle School (t1)	17.154*	8.739
High School (t1)	22.492*	9.134
Combined School (t1)	24.144	13.835
Constant	–24.910	31.525

Table 2: The Replicated 'Table Five' using SSOCS Data from 2007-08 and 2015-16.

| | changeharsh | | | | |
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
changeinpolice	0.350*		0.340*	0.365**	0.342*
	(0.185)		(0.185)	(0.184)	(0.184)
change ordinal (-1,0,1)		6.930***			
		(1.879)			
school size	−1.166	0.099	−1.083	−1.126	−1.346
	(1.807)	(1.836)	(1.808)	(1.801)	(1.812)
crimesreported	−4.958	−2.860	−5.027	−4.870	−4.792
	(4.819)	(4.836)	(4.816)	(4.812)	(4.816)
% special ed. (t1)	0.255	0.236	0.248	0.236	0.257
	(0.185)	(0.184)	(0.185)	(0.185)	(0.185)
crime where school located	4.832*	4.463	4.292	5.727**	4.274
	(2.864)	(2.852)	(2.874)	(2.792)	(2.768)
% daily attendance	−0.034	−0.051	−0.034	−0.023	−0.032
	(0.154)	(0.153)	(0.154)	(0.154)	(0.154)
% minority (non-white)	−0.037	0.334			
	(1.680)	(1.675)			
% low SES1 (t1)			−1.402		
			(2.521)		
% low SES2 (t1)				0.265	
				(0.227)	
% low SES3 (t1)					−0.123
					(0.139)
suburban	−1.074	−2.580	−1.381	−0.463	−1.026
	(4.184)	(4.187)	(4.157)	(4.146)	(4.116)
town	−0.947	−3.779	−1.247	−0.512	−0.216
	(4.996)	(5.043)	(4.917)	(4.893)	(4.946)
rural	−2.222	−4.660	−2.671	−1.535	−1.695
	(4.708)	(4.729)	(4.553)	(4.502)	(4.503)
middle school	−20.732***	−18.528***	−20.480***	−20.759***	−20.635***
	(4.300)	(4.334)	(4.323)	(4.297)	(4.300)
high school	−28.552***	−25.805***	−28.281***	−28.928***	−28.372***
	(4.808)	(4.862)	(4.813)	(4.799)	(4.793)
combined	−21.537***	−19.669**	−21.551***	−22.049***	−21.490***
	(8.238)	(8.218)	(8.188)	(8.196)	(8.186)
Constant	29.315	25.151	31.505*	23.508	26.579
	(19.105)	(19.054)	(17.679)	(17.811)	(17.390)
N	1020	1020	1020	1020	1020
R-squared	0.069	0.078	0.070	0.071	0.070
Adj. R-squared	0.057	0.067	0.058	0.059	0.058
Residual Std. Error (df = 1006)	46.588	46.359	46.581	46.557	46.570
F Statistic (df = 13; 1006)	5.768***	6.592***	5.793***	5.880***	5.833***

***$p < .01$; **$p < .05$; *$p < .1$

Conclusions and Future Research

Overall, Table 1 shows that the increase in SROs at schools are not significantly related to the way in which harsh disciplinary measures are carried out. Additionally, it shows that schools who reported harsh discipline in the previous year are more likely to continue reporting harsh discipline in the year following. This shows that, according to the SSOCS Data, there is no significant relationship between the increase of SROs at a school and the administration of harsh disciplinary tactics. From the analysis, Na and Gottfredson did not find any explicit connection between the administration of harsh punishments at public schools with increased police and any of the groups which are cited as 'at risk' to be funneled into the SSP which they concluded may be a result of relying on a school-level analysis instead of an individual level (2013, 641).

Within the replicated table, it was also found that most of the variables—similarly to Na and Gottfredson's results—which were considered were not significantly correlated to harsh punishments. However, unlike Na and Gottfredson's table, the replication does find a few significant relationships between harsh punishments and the variables considered. The first significant correlation found was the positive relationship between the change in police and the administration of harsh punishments which argues that an increase of security presence at a school may in turn lead to the increase in the administration of harsh punishments. This result is consistent across models 1, 3, 4, and 5. Model 2 uses a modified measure (ordinal) of police presence, and the relationship remains.

The two most meaningful findings, however—at least in terms of their substantive effect on the outcome of interest—, pertain to the level of crime where the school is located and when low socioeconomic status is either set as the percentage minority at the school (non-white) or for the students who score at or below the fifteenth-percentile on standardized tests. Specifically,

12

model 1 reports results that indicate that schools located in areas of high crime activities are more likely to administer harsh punishments. However, this variable ("crime where school located") is only statistically significant model 1, and then loses significance in models 2-3 and 5. Notably, models 3-5 control for the effect of socioeconomic status (SES), but do so in different ways. So, when the statistical significance of "crime where school located" re-appears in model 4, this suggests that something about the way SES is measured in model 4 influence, conditions, or moderates the effect of crime in the area where a school is located. Again, in model 4, SES is measured as the percentage of students who score below the fifteenth percentile on standardized tests. These results are telling in that most literature on the SSP cites a motivation by schools to push low scoring students out of schools so that the schools overall testing average will improve, therefore, allowing them to receive more funding (ACLU 2018). President Bush's "No Child Left Behind Act"—passed in 2001—required all states to report ratings on schools within their jurisdiction based upon testing results in order to receive federal aid; therefore, defining standardized test scores as the benchmark for effective student performance, classrooms, and teachers. In addition to funding considerations, standardized tests have also become a means of evaluating the performance of teachers (Kastenbaum 2012). Therefore, since the livelihoods of the teachers are at stake, those teaching in low performance areas are also likely to engage in exclusionary tactics as a means to improve their average standardized test result scores.

According to a case study on Chicago area schools—which record both high levels of violent crime on school grounds and in the surrounding areas as well as under-performance on standardized tests—"school and neighborhood fixed-effects models show that violent crime rates have a negative effect on test scores, but not on grades" (Burdick-Will 2013). The study

concluded that low preparation for standardized tests due to both low funding and high insecurity caused by high crime rates, lead to lower standardized testing scores. The replication of the case study findings within the table replication illustrates the negative feedback loop which schools with low performing students fall into. Since low performance on standardized tests is caused by the lack of proper materials with which to prepare for tests and education funding is most commonly allocated based on a school's performance on standardized tests, schools with low performing students become trapped in a vicious cycle of low funding. Since the Chicago case study identifies schools in areas of high crime as low standardized test performers, it logically follows that school administrators in high crime areas will be highly likely to employ harsh punishment tactics as a means to remove low performance students from their classrooms.

Since the replicated table relies on public use data, an analysis using the restricted use data may produce both stronger relationships between the existing data and harsh punishments as well as other relationships. Using the restricted access data, it would be interesting to break the percent minority data down into separate minority groups such as African Americans, Latinxs, and Indigenous populations. Additionally, it would be interesting to consider different constructions of socioeconomic status, such as either the combination of percentage minority and low standardized test achievement or through running the two variables which both already have a relationship to both harsh punishments and schools located in areas of elevated crime against each other.

Looking Ahead

American society does not benefit from the tax increases, political exclusion, and the societal toll mass incarceration causes the population. Similarly, schools do not stand to benefit from the exclusion of students using harsh punishments such as expulsion, suspension, and school transfer. Excluding students on the basis on their race, socioeconomic status, or other means, disadvantages not only the students who are excluded but also the rest of society through preventing a segment of society from furthering their intellectual understandings in a classroom environment and engaging with students of different social, ethnic, and religious groups during a critical point in juvenile development.

Moving forward, the United States needs to strive to improve when it comes to providing American children with fair and equal educational opportunities. Thus far, harsh zero-tolerance school policies have only succeeded in excluding students from classrooms. Therefore, different discipline techniques are critical in order to reduce the number of students who are denied educational opportunities through their removal from classrooms.

A Restorative Justice approach is perhaps the best response to the wave of harsh disciplinary measures which has captured the attention of public-school administrators across the country. Restorative Justice refers to the transition from punitive punishment systems to ones which utilize practices such as "student conferences, peer mediation, restitution, and community service" (Payne and Welch 2015, 539). As Payne and Welch cite, schools which concentrate on relationship building and view student misbehavior as a violation of a relationship rather than a law record lower recidivism rates than schools which focus on the administration of punishments. So, through the adoption of Restorative Justice systems in schools, it is likely that the associations between the administration of harsh punishments in schools on minority

15

populations in regions of high crime and the association between the administration of harsh punishments in schools on fifteenth percentile or less test scorers in regions of high crime will be reduced meaning that less students are being funneled into the SSP.

While Government grants, such as the COPS, program encourage the inclusion of increased security officials in schools, the emphasis should be on retaining the current student base rather than forcing them out. Therefore, American schools should strive to move away from their ineffective Crime Control Model and closer to a Due Process Model which seeks to halt recidivism and exclusion through encouraging the reintegration of students into the classroom. The focus should be on student success and wellbeing rather than the strict adherence to rules and strict policies.

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