



The School to Prison Pipeline: Long-Run Impacts of School Suspensions on Adult Crime

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POLICY ISSUE

When faced with behavioral infractions, schools often turn to suspensions or other forms of exclusionary discipline as a means of managing student behavior and restoring a productive classroom learning environment. On the one hand, removing disruptive students from the classroom may promote a safe and productive learning environment for the students who remain in the classroom. On the other hand, the students who are suspended lose important classroom instructional time and may face a range of downstream consequences that extend well beyond the punishment itself. Correlational evidence, for example, consistently shows that students who are suspended are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system later in life, a pattern often referred to as the “school to prison pipeline.”

In response to these concerns, along with longstanding racial disparities in school discipline, the Obama administration issued guidance in 2014 encouraging schools to reconsider the role of exclusionary discipline in favor of alternative discipline strategies. In 2018, the Trump administration rescinded this guidance, and in early 2021 the Biden administration announced plans to reexamine racial disparities in school discipline, signaling a likely return of the Obama-era guidance.

Despite this national policy debate, important questions remain about the net effects of suspensions. To address this, the authors estimate the overall impact of suspensions across students who attend strict schools.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

Leveraging a large and sudden change in school assignments in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in North Carolina, the authors find that, on average, **students who were suddenly re-assigned to attend strict schools were less likely to graduate high school and more likely to be arrested and incarcerated as adults.** These effects are strongest for minority students and for boys.

Bacher-Hicks, Billings & Deming find that being assigned to a stricter middle school (i.e., one with a higher rate of suspensions) leads to a range of harmful consequences. For example, on average, students who are assigned to a school that is one standard deviation stricter than the average school¹ are:

- 17% more likely to be arrested as an adult,
- 20% more likely to be incarcerated as an adult,
- 15% more likely to drop out of high school, and
- 11% less likely to enroll in a 4-year college.

1 A one standard deviation increase in strictness is equivalent to the difference between an average school and a school at the 84th percentile (i.e., stricter than 84 out of 100 schools).

KEY FINDINGS

Effects of Attending a Stricter School

Students assigned to schools with higher rates of suspension are:

- ✓ Less likely to **graduate high school**
- ✓ Less likely to **attend a 4-year college**
- △ More likely **to be arrested**
- △ More likely **to be incarcerated**

These harmful effects are largest among minority males.

Importantly, the authors also find little evidence to support the claim that high suspension rates benefit students who are not suspended. While white male students appear to benefit slightly from a stricter school environment, these effects are short-lived and fail to translate into greater educational attainment or reduced engagement with the justice system. There is no evidence of improvements in school-wide test scores as a result of greater reliance on exclusionary discipline practices.

The analysis also points to some important insights around the role of school leadership in these effects. By exploiting movement of principals across various schools during this time period, the authors find evidence that school suspensions are affected by school leadership.

To obtain these findings the authors use data from CMS spanning the school years 1998-1999 through 2010-2011. These records are matched to criminal justice records from Mecklenburg County, including adult arrests and incarcerations. The authors also link the CMS data to college attendance records from the National Student Clearinghouse. The empirical strategy takes advantage of a sudden

change in school assignments in the summer of 2002, when CMS re-assigned more than 50% of its students over a single summer following a court order. The authors compare students who lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same school prior to the summer of 2002 but were suddenly assigned to schools with different suspension rates in prior years.

By relying on this sudden school assignment change, this analysis ensures that students' characteristics are not related to the strictness of the newly assigned school. While student characteristics are uncorrelated with school strictness, it is possible that other school characteristics are correlated with strictness. However, in a series of robustness checks, the authors examine several additional school-level factors, including the effect of peer groups and overall school quality. Comparing the relative impacts of school strictness alongside these other factors, the authors **find that strictness is the only predictor of students' later involvement in the criminal-justice system**, providing further evidence that their main results are driven by suspensions rather than other aspects of the school.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These results highlight the substantial costs of exclusionary discipline and suggest that policymakers should focus on strategies to limit their use. The study illustrates that school suspensions have harmful effects on students who receive them, without any clear spillover benefits to their classmates who are not suspended. Overall, attending a strict middle school increases the likelihood of interaction with the criminal justice system and decreases educational attainment.

These results lend support to initiatives to re-examine the role of exclusionary discipline in our schools and provide support for efforts to limit the use of suspensions. In light of the disparate impact on minority male students, school leaders should carefully consider their discipline practices to ensure that they are not perpetuating existing inequities.

FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit wheelockpolicycenter.org.

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