

Brief: An Empirical Examination of the Effects of Suspension and Suspension Severity on Behavioral and Academic Outcomes

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Background

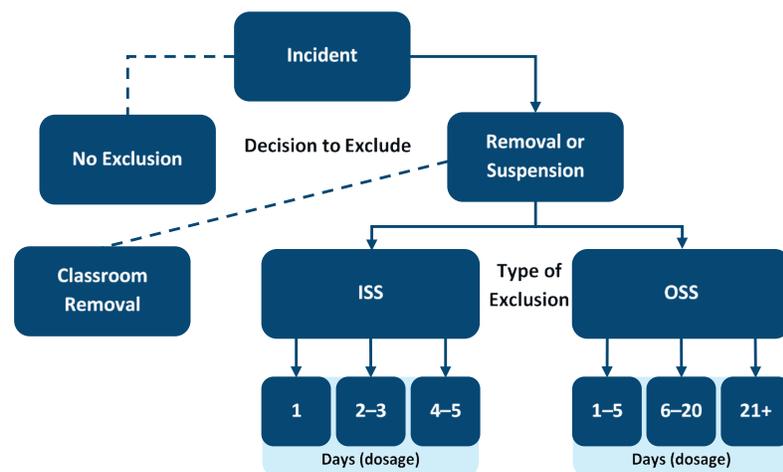
The use of exclusionary discipline practices, such as out-of-school suspension (OSS) and in-school suspension (ISS), is prevalent in the United States—of the 50.6 million students enrolled in K–12 public schools in 2015–16, 2.7 million students received one or more OSSs.¹ Furthermore, substantial disparities persist, with certain subgroups of students, such as Black students and students with disabilities, experiencing exclusionary discipline at much higher rates.²

Exclusionary discipline is grounded in deterrence theory. The presumption is that harshly punishing a student will have a deterrent effect on future misbehavior for the offending student and the student’s peers, and that the removal of certain students will yield a more productive learning climate for those students who remain.³ However, a large body of research has found that exclusionary discipline practices are associated with negative educational and later life outcomes for individual students and for their peers.⁴ More recent quasi-experimental evidence suggests that these associations might be causal.^{5,6,7,8,9,10,11} Little is known, however, about how the type and length of suspension a student receives in response to being involved in a particular behavioral infraction affects the academic and school behavioral outcomes for the disciplined student and the student’s peers.

This Study

We build on the literature by estimating the effect of discipline type and duration, in response to a specific type of behavioral incident, on students’ later school behavior, the disciplinary responses they receive to future infractions, their attendance, and their academic outcomes. We also estimate spillover effect on their peers’ outcomes and school climate. To estimate these effects, we employ 10 years (2009–18) of administrative data for middle

Figure 1. Disciplinary Decision Tree



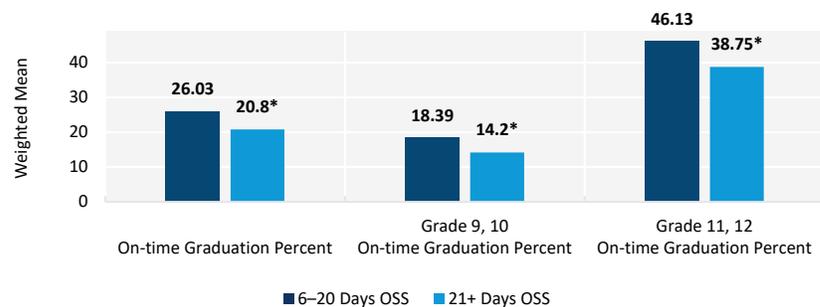
and high school students attending New York City public schools. During these 10 years there were 1,239,841

reported student behavioral incidents (an incident involving two students for example would constitute two student behavioral incidents, one for each student). Reported behavioral incidents ranged in severity from minor offenses such as insubordination to severe violent offenses including use of a weapon. We leverage the fact that NYCDOE collects detailed data on each incident, that many students commit the same infractions and that the severity of the punishment they receive varies. We follow students through graduation, their absence from the data (e.g., drop out or leaving the district, or 2018 for students still enrolled), and estimate the effect of receiving a harsher discipline by comparing the outcomes of students who received the harsher disciplinary response to the outcomes of students who are similar on observable characteristics, engaged in the same behavioral infractions, yet received a less harsh response. We examine five comparisons: (1) OSS versus ISS; (2) ISS of 2 or 3 days versus ISS of 1 day; (3) ISS of 4 or 5 days versus ISS of 2 or 3 days; (4) OSS of 6 to 20 days versus OSS of 1 to 5 days; and (5) OSS of 21 or more days versus OSS of 6 to 20 days (see Figure 1).

Findings

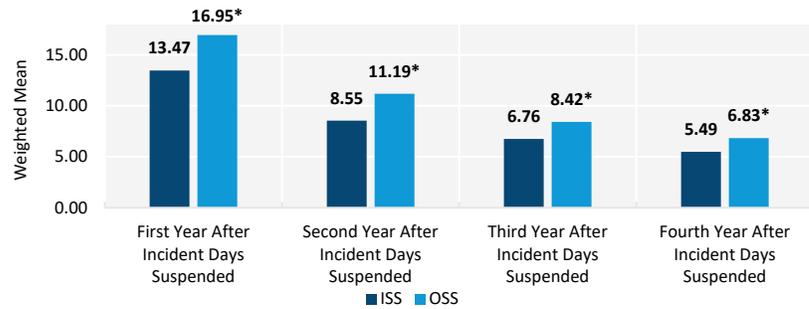
1. **More severe exclusionary discipline had a consistent negative effect on middle and high school students' math and English language arts (ELA) credit accumulation.** For example, high school students who received an OSS rather than an ISS were approximately 3 percentage points less likely to attain both a math and an ELA credit the following year.
2. **More severe exclusionary discipline, even as early as in middle school, had a consistent and substantial negative effect on the likelihood that a student will graduate on time from high school.** Again, suspensions of 21 or more days had a particularly large negative effect on students' likelihood of graduating—a 5 percentage point, or 20%, decrease in the likelihood of graduating.
3. **More severe exclusionary discipline has a consistent negative effect on middle school students' future reported behavior.** Receiving an OSS rather than an ISS and receiving an OSS of 21 or more days rather than 6–20 days had particularly negative consequences. No effects were found for high school students. This evidence suggests that more severe exclusionary discipline does not serve as a deterrent to future misbehavior and, for younger children, may exacerbate future misbehavior or increase the likelihood of being reported as misbehaving.

Figure 2. Effect of Receiving an OSS of 21 or More Days Instead of 6–20 Days on the Probability of Graduating On-time, by Grade Level



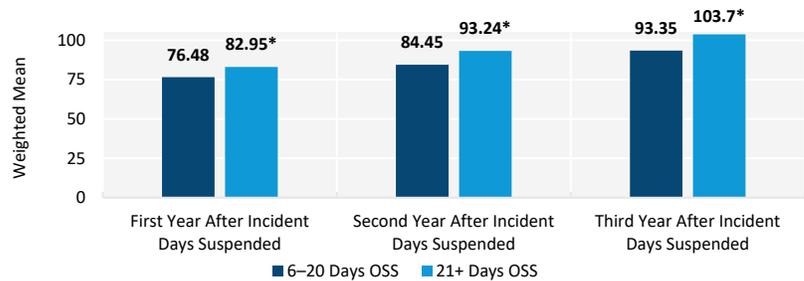
4. **Middle and high school students both missed more days due to suspension in subsequent school years when they were given a more severe disciplinary response.** This was true even though high school students' reported behavior did not differ.

Figure 3. Effect of Receiving an OSS Instead of an ISS on Days Suspended 1 Through 4 Years Later—Middle School



5. **More severe exclusionary discipline has a consistent negative effect on middle and high school students' (not suspension related) future attendance.** Again, the largest negative effects occurred when a student received an OSS rather than an ISS and when a student received an OSS of 21 or more days rather than 6–20 days.

Figure 4. Effect of Receiving a 21+ Day OSS Instead of a 6–20 Day Suspension on Days Absent 1 Through 3 Years Later—High School



6. **We did not find any effect of the severity of discipline a student receives on the student's peers' behavior, attendance, ELA or math standardized test scores, or credit accumulation.** Peer effects were estimated for students in the same grade and the same school during the year that the incident took place.

7. **Teacher and student reports of school climate, including school safety and the classroom learning environment, were not affected by the severity of the discipline a student received.**

8. **The effects of exclusionary discipline on students' later behavior and educational outcomes were similar for all students regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or disability.** Effects were similarly harmful for all students, with OSS instead of ISS and OSS of 21 or more days being the most consistently harmful.

Discussion

We found that more severe types and lengths of exclusionary discipline have no positive effect on students' future involvement in behavioral incidents, suggesting that more severe discipline fails to reduce students' undesirable behavior either through changing their internal thought processes (i.e., the student learns that the behavior was wrong and changes in order to be a better person) or by simply serving as an external deterrent (i.e., the student changes their behavior in a desire not to experience punishment). Further, for younger students there is evidence that more severe punishment can result in more negative behavior, or at least more reported negative behavior, in the future. More severe types and lengths of exclusionary discipline also have substantial negative effects on students' attendance, academic achievement, and likelihood of graduating. National trends and prior research has found that black students are written up for more serious behavioral infractions and receive more severe punishment than white students, even when involved in the same incident.¹²

Similarly, Black students in New York City had a far greater risk of being reported for a behavioral incident and of receiving severe exclusionary discipline as compared to white students. For example, Black middle and high school students had a relative risk of being suspended for 21 or more days that was 8 and 6 times that of white middle and high school students respectively. These results suggest that, despite the negative effects of receiving a more severe exclusionary discipline response being similar regardless of race, the disparate use of exclusionary discipline by student race contributes to the racial achievement gap and the racial gap in high school graduation.

These negative educational effects on students are not accompanied by any improvements to their peers' outcomes or school's climate. As such, these results do not support claims that removing misbehaving students from the classroom is necessary to deter other students from similar behavior and to ensure that their peers are able to learn and feel safe within their school.

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2018). *Civil rights data collection: School climate and safety*. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf>
- ² U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2018). *Civil rights data collection: School climate and safety*. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf>
- ³ Ewing, C. P. (2000). Sensible zero tolerance protects students. *Harvard Education Letter*, 16(1). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED456938.pdf>
- ⁴ Noltemeyer, A. L., Ward, R. M., & McLoughlin, C. (2015). Relationship between school suspension and student outcomes: A meta-analysis. *School Psychology Review*, 44(2), 224–240.
- ⁵ Anderson, K. P., Ritter, G. W., & Zamarro, G. (2019). Understanding a vicious cycle: The relationship between student discipline and student academic outcomes. *Educational Researcher*, 48(5), 251–262.
- ⁶ Hinze-Pifer, R., & Sartain, L. (2018). Rethinking universal suspension for severe student behavior. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93(2), 228–243.
- ⁷ Hwang, N. (2018). Suspensions and achievement: Varying links by type, frequency, and subgroup. *Educational Researcher*, 47(6), 363–374.
- ⁸ Hwang, N., & Domina, T. (2020). Peer disruption and learning: Links between suspensions and the educational achievement of non-suspended students. *Education Finance and Policy*, 1–44. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00308
- ⁹ Lcoe, J., & Steinberg, M. P. (2019). Do suspensions affect student outcomes? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 41(1), 34–62.
- ¹⁰ Perry, B. L., & Morris, E. W. (2014). Suspending progress: Collateral consequences of exclusionary punishment in public schools. *American Sociological Review*, 79(6), 1067–1087.
- ¹¹ Steinberg, M. P., & Lcoe, J. (2018). Reforming school discipline: School-level policy implementation and the consequences for suspended students and their peers. *American Journal of Education*, 125(1), 29–77.
- ¹² Girvan, E., McIntosh, K., & Santiago-Rosario, M.R. (2020). Associations between Community-level Racial Biases, Office Discipline Referrals, and Out-of-School Suspensions. *Office Discipline Referrals, and Out-of-School Suspensions (October 8, 2020)*.



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