Principal Attitudes Regarding Zero Tolerance and Racial Disparities in School Suspension

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Abstract
Researchers have expressed concern that zero tolerance disciplinary policies have contributed to the national rise in suspensions, disproportionately affecting Black students. The present study investigated a possible association between principal attitudes toward zero tolerance and racial disparities in Virginia suspension practices. High school principals (n=306) completed a state-mandated survey that included a Zero Tolerance Attitudes scale. Statistical analyses demonstrated significant differences between White and Black short- and long-term suspension rates. Regression analyses showed that principal endorsement of zero tolerance was moderately associated with short-term suspension rates after controlling for poverty and enrollment; however, it was not associated with the size of the racial disparity in suspension rates.

Rationale
There has been a national rise in school suspensions, a disciplinary practice associated with a host of negative outcomes (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Researchers have noted racial disparities in this trend, with Black students suspended at much higher rates than White students (Fabelo et al., 2011). Previous studies have found that racial differences in suspension rates cannot be adequately explained by differences in student misbehavior, and that variability in suspension rates across schools might be influenced by individual differences in the attitudes of school principals toward zero tolerance as a disciplinary practice (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

Study Questions
1. Are there racial disparities in suspension rates in Virginia?
2. Are principal attitudes favoring zero tolerance associated with higher suspension rates?
3. Are there racial differences in the types of offenses that result in suspensions?

Participants
The sample included 306 high school principals who completed the 2012 Virginia School Safety Audit, a state-mandated survey completed by 100% of the public high schools in the state. Data on student discipline and demographics were obtained from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), which maintains an online database of suspension and enrollment demographics. Virginia high schools enrolled a total of 357,353 students in grades 9-12, with a racial/ethnic breakdown of 56% White, 24% Black, 12% Hispanic, 6% Asian American, and less than 2% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Native American, or multi-racial. Thirty seven percent qualified for free or reduced price meals (FRPM).

Method
All Virginia high school principals took the Safety Audit Survey, which included the Zero Tolerance Attitudes (ZTA) Scale, a four-item scale (alpha=.75) selected from the best-discriminating items in Skiba’s 60-item Disciplinary Practices Survey. Higher scores indicate more favorable attitudes towards the use of zero tolerance and suspension:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zero Tolerance Attitudes Scale</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Zero tolerance makes a significant contribution to maintaining order at this school.</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Zero tolerance needs a clear message to disruptive students about appropriate behaviors in school.</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Suspension is a necessary tool for maintaining school order.</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Schools cannot afford to tolerate students who disrupt the learning environment</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.62</td>
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A two-step linear regression analysis found that overall percentage of White students in a school explained 6.1% of the variance in suspension rates after controlling for school size and FRPM, F(1,283)=455.523, p < .001. Another two-step linear regression analysis was conducted to address the second question. School enrollment and FRPM accounted for 31.3% of the variance in school suspension rates, F(2, 281)= 63.6, p < .001. At step two, ZTA accounted for an additional 3.1% of the variance. F(3, 281)=49.14, p < .001. To address the third question, student offenses resulting in long or short-term suspension were disaggregated by type of offense. All 130 disciplinary offenses used in Virginia schools were collapsed into the following four categories:
1. Aggressive behavior toward others: Assault, bullying, harassment, and threats (violent and physical)
2. ATOD: Alcohol, tobacco, and other drug-related offenses
3. Disruptive or Disrespectful Behavior: Defined by the VDOE as conduct that obstructs the learning environment, including inattention, defiance of authority, and campus disruption
4. Other: Non-violent offenses including theft, property, and technology

Results
Analyses were based on school-level discipline data from the 2011-12 school year and controlled for school enrollment size, student body poverty (percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price meals), and percentage of White students. The first set of analyses examined the magnitude and extent of racial disparities in suspension rates for Virginia high schools. The school-level rate of short-term suspensions was 8 suspensions per 100 White students and 17 per 100 Black students. Short-term suspension rates averaged 3 suspensions per 1000 White students and 7 per 1000 Black students. Long-term suspension rates averaged 1 suspension per 1000 White students and 7 per 1000 Black students. Our findings are consistent with research demonstrating that Black students are suspended at a higher rate than White students, even when poverty and related sociodemographic variables are controlled for at the school level. The results demonstrate a statistically significant racial disparity in both short- and long-term suspension rates. Principal endorsement of zero tolerance was significantly and positively associated with short-term suspensions, holding school-level demographic factors constant. However, support for zero tolerance was not associated with the size of the racial disparity in suspension rates.

Discussion
Our findings are consistent with research demonstrating that Black students are suspended at a higher rate than White students. Racial disparities in suspension rates were found even when poverty and related sociodemographic variables were controlled for at the school level. The results demonstrate a statistically significant racial disparity in both short- and long-term suspension rates. Principal endorsement of zero tolerance significantly and positively associated with short-term suspensions, holding school-level demographic factors constant. However, support for zero tolerance was not associated with the size of the racial disparity in suspension rates.

The finding that Black students are significantly more likely to be suspended for offenses classified as disruptive or disrespectful is consistent with previous research findings (Fabelo et al., 2011) and raises concern about schools’ use of suspension for disciplinary disciplinary actions or lower-level, non-violent offenses. Future analyses will investigate whether principal support for zero tolerance contributes to the use of suspension for such infractions and will incorporate additional student-level information, such as gender, IEP eligibility, grade, and frequency of offending.

References
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