

Race, social context, and social control: An examination of disparity in school discipline

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation will examine differential use of social control by school administrators, applying minority threat and labeling theory. Data from a sample of approximately 3,200 students enrolled in 29 schools in seven diverse cities allow for examination of both individual and school-level effects on school disciplinary experiences. Broader research exploring the use of social control has revealed that members of certain groups (i.e. minorities, lower SES) are more likely than whites to be subjected to formal social control. Additionally, some have suggested that how punishment is applied is different across contexts. While much of this research has concentrated on the justice system, some work suggests that the same pattern of disparity exists within schools. As school administrators have increasingly embraced "zero tolerance" practices in response to student misbehavior, the rationalization for discipline has moved from facilitation of learning to social control. Some researchers have argued that this shift in philosophical orientation, coupled with the increased presence of justice system symbols (e.g. officers, metal detectors), has created an environment similar to that found in juvenile correctional institutions. The end result, some argue, has been the disparate use of punishment along racial lines similar to that of the justice system. To date, however, much of the research investigating this issue has been conducted at the aggregate level, ignoring important micro-level measures that could strengthen the argument for the existence of disparity. In this dissertation I take into account not only school-level context but also incorporate student level characteristics to investigate who is punished in schools. Second, I investigate whether minority students are more likely to be sanctioned than are similarly situated White students. Third, I explore whether the effects of individual level predictors such as race and delinquency vary significantly by school. Last, I examine which school level characteristics help to explain the variation in important individual level predictors.

Results indicate that Blacks are more likely than are Whites to receive both detentions and suspensions. However, Hispanics are only more likely to receive detentions but not suspensions. Furthermore, individual level factors that are more easily observed by school officials (e.g. GPA, pro-social involvement) are most salient in predicting punishment at all levels. Random slopes models reveal that the effects of race and ethnicity and delinquency on detention are non-varying across schools. However, there is some evidence to suggest that similar measures have significantly different effects across schools. Finally, the effects of race and delinquency appear to be conditioned by school level context. The results offer limited support for labeling and minority threat theories.