

POLICY BRIEF

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Beyond Texas School Walls: A Closer Look at Disparities in Exclusionary Discipline Practices

By Dina Ghazzawi, Ph.D., Christopher Burnett, Ph.D., Chaunte White, Ph.D., and Catherine Horn, Ph.D., University of Houston

Executive Summary

In this study, we investigate the prevalent and concerning issue of disciplinary action in Texas public schools and its intersection with race and socioeconomic status. Our study descriptively follows a cohort of students over four years, beginning in Grade 9 during the 2010–2011 academic year, to determine the characteristics of students more likely to experience disciplinary action during their final school years. We investigate school disciplinary action by type and across student sociodemographic and academic variables, such as socioeconomic status, English language learner status, limited English language proficiency status, special education status, and high school campus ratings. Findings indicate wide disparities in the proportion of Black and Hispanic students facing disciplinary action compared with White peers. A large percentage of students facing disciplinary action were economically disadvantaged, and the majority were identified as at-risk students.

Purpose of the Study

Racial inequalities in school exclusionary discipline practices have been widely acknowledged as a critical and prevalent public school issue. Though prior literature shows how Black and Hispanic youth are disproportionately affected by this system, little research has examined the long-term impact that exclusionary discipline practices—such as suspension, expulsion, and removal to juvenile justice—have on the larger community through lost academic and economic opportunity.

KEY FINDINGS

Approximately half of the students in our cohort experienced disciplinary action at least once during their last four years of school.

Nearly 65% of Black students and nearly 52% of Hispanic students faced disciplinary action, compared with 35% of White students.

63% of students facing disciplinary action were economically disadvantaged, compared with 47% of students in the overall cohort.

32% of out-of-school suspensions were given to Black students and nearly 52% to Hispanic students, compared with 14.3% to White students.

This study aims to quantify exclusionary discipline patterns and their intersection with race and socio-demographic variables through the use of the statistical techniques of descriptive analysis. As part of a broader set of studies that examines the correlation of school discipline patterns with key educational and workforce outcomes, this policy brief offers a rich descriptive overview of student characteristics and school discipline patterns across race/ethnicity.

Background

Recent discourse in higher education research has focused on the effect of exclusionary discipline policies on marginalized student populations, particularly on Black and Hispanic youth. According to the *Breaking Schools' Rules* report, published in 2011 by the Council of State Governments Justice Center and the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University, the school discipline system disproportionately affects Black and Hispanic youth compared with their White peers (Fabelo et al., 2011). The report found that 83% of Black male students and 74% of Hispanic male students in Texas public schools faced removal from the classroom at least once due to discretionary violations, compared with 59% of White males. In addition, approximately 75% of students receiving special education faced expulsion or suspension at least once throughout their school years (Fabelo et al., 2011). Findings from the report emphasized a system that has failed millions of vulnerable students, but this evidence of disproportionate school disciplinary action has not led to systematic change.

Prior research emphasizes the negative consequences of exclusionary discipline practices on academic outcomes such as high school completion and grade retention (Allen et al., 2009). Dropout rates hinder students' future employment opportunities and increase their likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system (Marchbanks et al., 2013). Additional findings from the literature conclude that the use of punitive practices to discipline students is often found to be ineffective and accentuates race- and gender-based disparities in student achievement (Fabelo et al., 2011). These findings provide grounds for improving racial and gender equality in school discipline, which is cen-

83%

The proportion of Black male students in Texas public schools who faced removal from the classroom at least once due to discretionary violations; 74% of Hispanic male students and 59% of White male students also fell into that category, according to a 2011 *Breaking Schools' Rules* report.

tral to the state's effort to advance equity in educational outcomes.

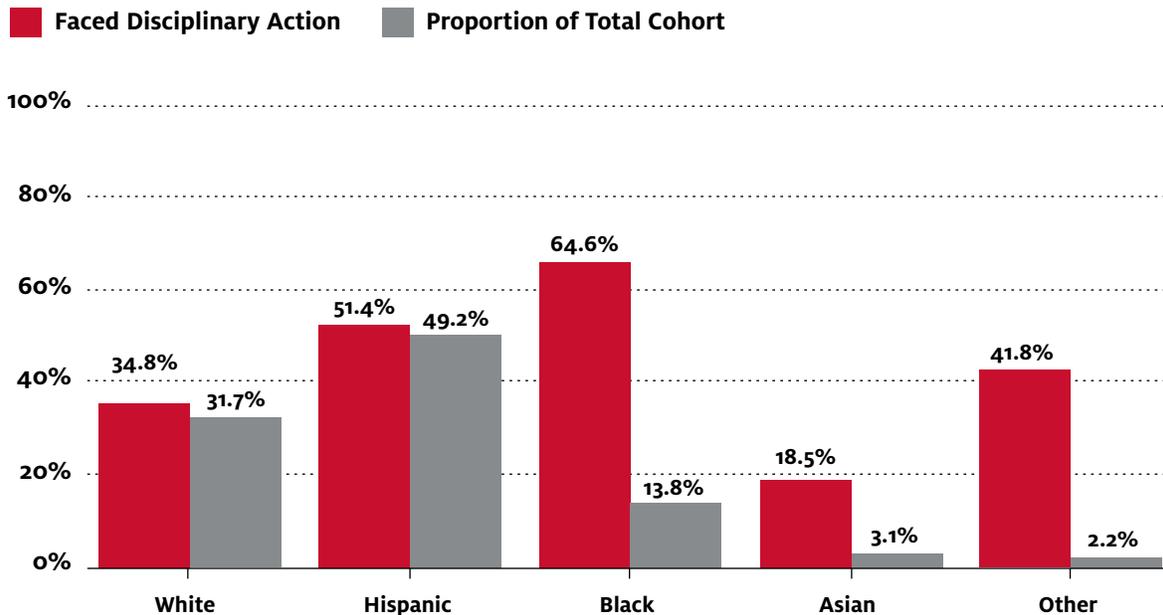
The research conducted in this study was born out of a partnership with Houston's Citywide Effort to Address Implicit Bias in School Discipline. This partnership provides an opportunity to address one of the major recommendations brought forward through the initiative: to "quantify the academic and economic impact of exclusionary discipline practices by utilizing longitudinal data." This research aims to support the case for school discipline and juvenile justice reform by describing longitudinal patterns of exclusionary discipline practices across key student-level variables. In future studies, we also aim to take the research further than previous studies by investigating how exclusionary practices affect long-term academic and workforce outcomes. By better understanding the impact of these practices, this research can help make the case for school districts to address the issue and for communities to advocate for equity-focused policies and systematic transformation efforts.

Data and Methods

This study used administrative data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) that was obtained through the University of Houston Education Research Center. The data analyzed a cohort of stu-

FIGURE 1

Students Facing Disciplinary Action, By Race/Ethnicity



dents in Texas public schools who were in the ninth grade during the fall of 2010 (n=391,975) and were tracked through the spring of 2014. TEA data provided information on students who faced disciplinary action as well as the type of disciplinary action received and whether the student was referred to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) or a Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP).

The study relied on the technique of descriptive analysis to identify student-level characteristics associated with disciplinary action. Cross-tabulations were used to identify the proportion of disciplinary action types across several key characteristics. These characteristics include race, socioeconomic status, type of disciplinary action (in-school or out-of-school suspension), at-risk status, English language learner status, special education status, and limited English language proficiency status. Finally, we merged school campus information with TEA

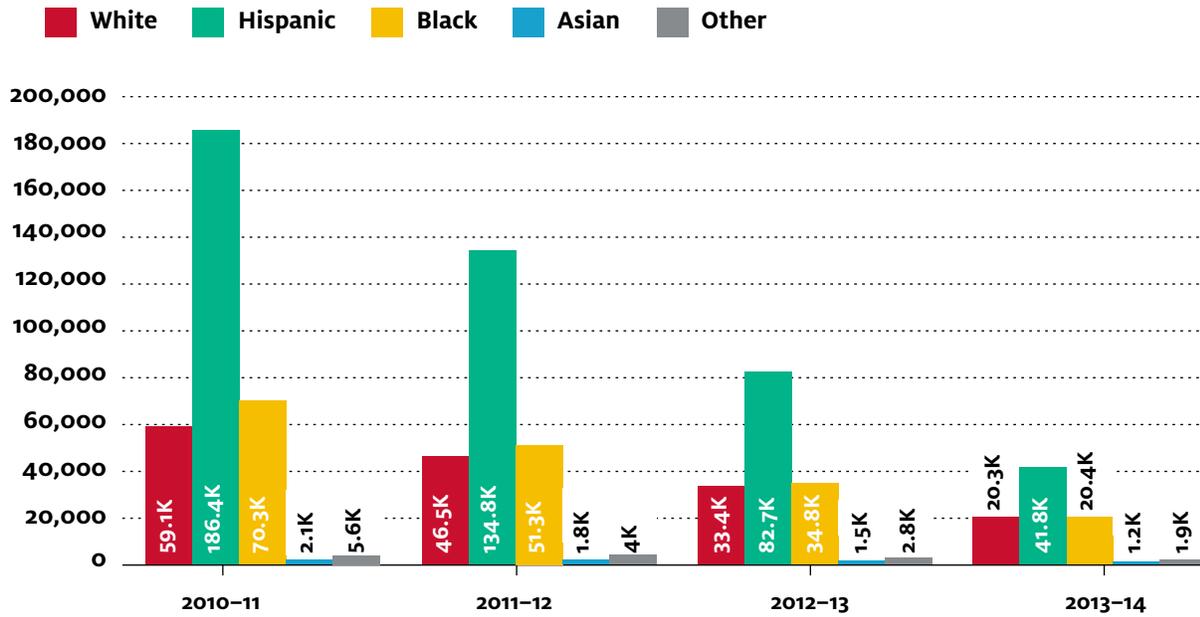
campus ratings to examine the school rankings of students facing disciplinary action.

Findings

There were 391,975 Texas public school students in the ninth grade during the 2010–2011 academic year. Approximately 47% of these students (183,198) experienced disciplinary action at least once during their last four years of school. Figure 1 shows the number and proportion of students facing disciplinary action in the overall cohort across racial/ethnic background. Of Black students in the cohort, 64.6% experienced disciplinary action, despite comprising only 13.8% of the student population. A little more than half (51.4%) of Hispanic students in the cohort experienced disciplinary action, compared with 34.8% of White students. Approximately 63% of students facing disciplinary action were socioeconomically disadvantaged, compared with 47% of students in the overall cohort, and 14% were in special education, compared

FIGURE 2

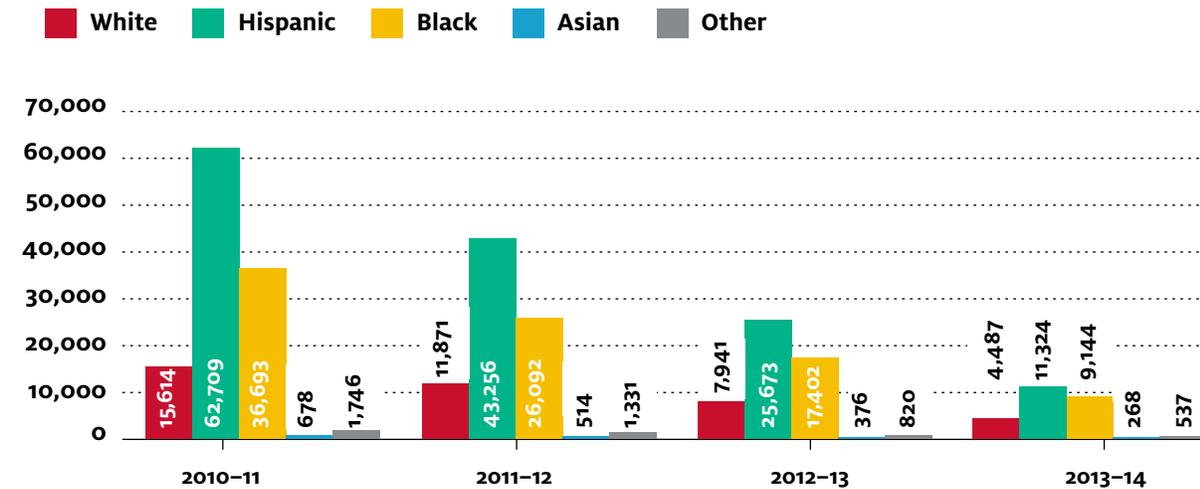
In-School Suspensions by Race/Ethnicity



Note. Findings may represent multiple infractions per student.

FIGURE 3

Out-of-School Suspensions by Race/Ethnicity



Note. Findings may represent multiple infractions per student.

with 10.8% overall. Figures 2 and 3 present the proportion of in-school suspensions and out-of-school suspensions by race/ethnicity.

Our findings also indicated that between 2010 and 2014, Black and Hispanic youth in the cohort studied comprised approximately 23% and 54% of referrals to DAEP, respectively, compared with 21% for White youth. And Black and Hispanic youth comprised nearly 23% and 55%, respectively, of referrals to JJAEP compared with 21% for White youth.

Descriptive findings on limited English language proficiency and English language learner status revealed that 6% of students facing disciplinary action were placed in English language courses at least once during their school years, and 9% were categorized as having limited English language proficiency. TEA high school campus ratings indicated that approximately 30% of campuses attended by cohort students facing disciplinary action received a rating of C or below.

Policy Recommendations

Findings from this study offer substantial grounds to support significant interventions that include additional teacher and administrative training as well as alternative disciplinary options aimed at reducing racial disparities in punitive practices and the negative outcomes on student academic and workforce success. To further support reform efforts in this space, further empirical research is needed to investigate the broader community impacts of exclusionary discipline and how alternative disciplinary policies, such as restorative practices, could alter student outcomes. Findings from this study and future research will offer policymakers feasible, research-based recommendations centered on supporting marginalized populations, their families, and the communities in which they live.

Disclaimer: This policy brief is a result of approved research conducted using data through the University of Houston Education Research Center (UH ERC). Results, opinions, recommendations or points of view expressed in this policy brief represent the work and consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the University of Houston, the UH ERC and/or its funding organizations.

Findings from this study and future research will offer policymakers feasible, research-based recommendations centered on supporting marginalized populations, their families, and their communities.

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