STUDENT WELL-BEING

Students Move Further Down School-to-Prison Pipeline With Every School Suspension

By Sarah D. Sparks — July 12, 2019 5 min read

On the school-to-prison pipeline, school suspensions may be a key shut-off valve.

That's because, regardless of students' past behaviors, every school suspension weakens their connection to school and increases their odds of committing theft, assault, and other crimes. This is the conclusion of a new national longitudinal study published Friday in Justice Quarterly, a journal of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

"I really expected to see that once we accounted for the effect of prior offending on future offending, the effect of suspension would go away," said Thomas Mowen, an assistant professor of sociology at Bowling Green State University, who led the study. "Actually what we found was almost the opposite. ... It's not offending that's predicting future offending so much as it is actually that punishment that the child receives at school."

Using federal longitudinal data, Mowen and colleagues at Bowling Green and Eastern Kentucky University tracked more than 6,800 middle and high school students in four "waves." Each year, the students were asked how many times they had been suspended in or out of school, and how often they had engaged in six different criminal behaviors: assaulting someone, carrying a gun, selling illegal substances, destroying property, and stealing items worth less and more than $50. The students were also asked whether they

thought the school's discipline and grading systems were fair, whether they liked and felt safe at school, and whether they felt their teachers were interested in them.

This may seem like a chicken-and-egg problem: Students are suspended for delinquent behavior, so it seems like common sense that those who are suspended are more likely to commit crimes later on. But the researchers took into account students' behavior before the start of the study, including prior discipline and whether the student had ever dropped out of school. After controlling for previous behavior, the link between suspensions and future crimes got stronger, and a student's risk of criminal behavior worsened with each subsequent suspension:

'Cumulative Disadvantage'

The risk of offending rose for students of every race and income level, but additional punishments created a "cumulative disadvantage," particularly for vulnerable students. For example, black and Hispanic students reported fewer crimes than white students over time, but they were suspended more often; and being suspended had a stronger effect on them than on their white peers.

Moreover, Mowen said the younger a student was at the time of the first suspension, the worse the effect: "For younger kids, it definitely seems to catapult them into higher pathways of offending."

Other similar findings have prompted more than 16 states and Washington D.C. to ban or

severely limit exclusionary discipline in early elementary grades. Fewer states ban suspensions at higher grades, though several states bar the practice for specific offences, such as using out-of-school suspensions to punish truancy.

‘Dissolution of bonds to school’

The background questions provided a hint about why suspension proved to be such a turning point: With every suspension, students’ feelings of connection to the school weakened. They became more likely to have friends who were also delinquent, and their family bonds suffered too.

“When you’re getting punished in school or sent home it can lead to dissolution of these bonds to the school. That may promote resentment, anger, frustration, fear, anxiety … all these internal mechanisms that don’t set students up for success,” Mowen said. “And when a child is suspended—in particular, when they’re repeatedly suspended—maybe they get treated differently and labeled, not just by teachers and administrators, but also by peers. So it can lead to formation of friendship ties with other ‘delinquents,’ which then kind of perpetuates this cycle of offending.”

Prior studies have also shown that the hours of missed school from suspensions can add up faster than administrators may realize. For example, a 2018 study of California students found that in the first 100 days of school, black students in grades 7 and 8 alone lost 76 days of school due to suspensions for every 100 students enrolled.

And while the study did not look specifically at students with disabilities, Penn State University criminologist Dave Ramey, who was not involved with the study, said in an email that he has found some evidence that school suspensions are also associated with a higher risk that a student will be medicated, such as for attention-deficit disorders.

The results come on the heels of another recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which showed the other side of the coin: Students who felt a strong connection to school became less likely to commit crimes and engage in unhealthy behavior as adults.

The study provides more fodder for ongoing debates about the use of discipline that takes students out of school, which in recent years has come to include not just in- and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, but also arrests on campus, as the federal civil rights data at left show.

"American schools have increasingly relied on exclusionary sanctions, zero-tolerance policies, and criminal justice appendages to maintain control and safety. These 'criminalized' strategies have become a natural part of school environments without much evidence as to their effectiveness," the study concludes. "Findings from this study add to the growing body of literature outlining some of the negative—and seemingly unintended—consequences of the use of punitive discipline."

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