

## Differences in Out-of-School Suspension Assignments by the Ethnicity/Race of Texas High School Students

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### ABSTRACT

*Examined in this study was the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 9 and Grade 10 White, Black, and Hispanic students in Texas for the 2013-2014 school year. Inferential statistical procedures revealed the presence of inequities in the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Black and Hispanic Grade 9 and 10 boys and girls. Grade 9 and Grade 10 Black boys and Black girls were assigned statistically significantly more out-of-school suspensions than Grade 9 and Grade 10 White boys and White girls. Grade 9 and Grade 10 Hispanic boys and Hispanic girls were also assigned statistically significantly higher rates of out-of-school suspension than Grade 9 and Grade 10 White boys and White girls. Implications of the findings are discussed and suggestions for further research are made.*

**Keywords:** *out-of-school suspension, Grades 9 and 10, Black, Hispanic, White, boys, girls*

### INTRODUCTION

A relatively quick and efficient way for school administrators to deal with student behavioral problems is to assign students to an out-of-school suspension (Skiba et al., 2011). Unfortunately, out-of-school suspension assignments have led to the disproportionate and inequitable assignments of students of color and students of non-Hispanic origin (Noltmeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Ryan & Goodram, 2013). Although school administrators have defended the use of out-of-school suspensions as a solution for maintaining school order and safety, numerous researchers (e.g., Gregory & Thompson, 2010; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Tajalli & Garba, 2014) have indicated that out-of-school suspensions against Black and Hispanic students, particularly Black and Hispanic boys, perpetuates poor attendance rates, academic underachievement in reading and mathematics, and the School-to-Prison pipeline (Monger, 2007). A closer examination of the extent to which differences in out-of-school suspension assignments by ethnicity/race is needed if achieving equitable discipline consequences are to be realized.

Sullivan, Klingbeil, and Van Norman (2013) conducted a multilevel logistic regression on the relationship between individual and school characteristics and the probability of a student

receiving an out-of-school suspension. Student characteristics included age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status; school characteristics included governing policies, graduation rates, teacher characteristics, and discipline rates. Sullivan et al. (2013) analyzed archival suspension data on approximately 18,000 students attending 39 schools from a diverse urban school district in Wisconsin. In their study, race, gender, and socioeconomic status were statistically significantly linked to out-of-school suspensions whereas school variables were not related. Black boys and students with disabilities were determined to be most at risk of receiving multiple suspensions when compared to students who had been assigned one or less out-of-school suspensions.

In a study directly related to this empirical investigation, Lopez and Slate (2015) analyzed the assignment of Discipline Alternative Education Program to Grade 7 and Grade 8 Texas middle school White students as a function of their economic status. Discipline Alternative Education Program archival data for the 2010-2011 school year were retrieved from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System for 115,121 Grade 7 White students and 114,111 Grade 8 White students. After conducting inferential analyses, Lopez and Slate (2015) established that Grade 7 and Grade 8 White students who were economically

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disadvantaged were disproportionately assigned DAEP at four times and three times the rate, respectively, when compared to their counterparts.

Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) explored the achievement gap across racial/and ethnic groups by aggregating disproportionate out-of-school suspension rates for Black and Hispanic subpopulations in selected urban school districts nationwide. Because methodological issues are prevalent in measuring disproportionality, contributing factors such as income, neighborhood conditions, behaviors, and differential processing were studied in depth and revealed consistent findings of systemic stereotypes against both minority groups at the educational policy level. Subsequently, Black and Hispanic students received 44% more out-of-school suspensions than their White and American Indian peers after data disaggregation. Gregory et al. (2010) suggested that school reform at the policy making level was needed to improve the equitable assignment of out-of-school suspensions among all student groups to increase overall student attendance, extracurricular involvement, and graduation rates.

Furthermore, Gregory and Thompson (2010) analyzed Black high school student data to determine if teacher perceptions of low academic achievement influenced teacher referrals for out-of-school suspensions. Thirty five incoming ninth-grade, low performing Black students from a public high school in a southeastern city of Virginia were tracked for one year in the core subject areas of math and English. All teachers identified themselves as White except for one Black teacher. Upon completion of their hierarchical linear modeling that included various cultural beliefs and statements about these students, Gregory and Thompson (2010) concluded that over 80% of teachers demonstrated substantial cultural departures from their students and therefore behavior across classrooms were interpreted unfairly according to the school's student code of conduct. Gregory and Thompson (2010) offered teacher relationship building training as a means to improve teacher perception discrepancies of their Black students who are at risk.

Similar to Gregory et al. (2010), Ryan and Goodram (2013) were concerned with the deleterious academic achievement effects brought on by out-of-school suspensions, particularly among Black and Hispanic students. The authors investigated three consistent trends across these

areas:

- Assignment of out-of-school suspensions,
- Administrative cultural misunderstandings, and
- Negative academic and high school graduation impacts.

Substantial disparities among these three categories for these students prompted further examination into the reasons why out-of-school suspensions are issued at high rates by school administrators as the first measure for behavioral correction. Such reasons included overlooked mental health treatments for Black students with disabilities and Hispanic students living in poverty. Ryan and Goodram (2013) presented multiple alternatives to out-of-school suspensions, with an emphasis on restorative justice and social work as a positive and corrective behavioral best practice and as a way to maximize instructional time to improve academic achievement for minority students.

Finally, Skiba et al. (2011) reviewed the out-of-school suspension discipline records in 364 Indiana elementary and middle schools for the 2005 and 2006 school year to discern if ethnic disparities exist between Black and White students and whether such divides in discipline referrals resulted in low academic achievement and matriculation rates. Out-of-school suspension data were retrieved from the Web-based School-wide Information System. After performing a logistic regression analysis, the authors established a definitive racial gap between Black students receiving 64% of out-of-school suspensions when compared to their White peers at 18% for the same documented discretionary misbehaviors. Skiba et al. (2011) suggested a complete overhaul of school discipline practices, especially at the primary school levels, to address the pervasive ethnic/racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions and to improve the academic achievement and graduation rates of minority and at risk students.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Beginning with the 2013-2014 school year, Texas high schools receive one of the following three accountability rating labels:

- Met Standard;
- Met Alternative Standard; and
- Improvement Required.

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These ratings are assigned based on each school's performance against a standard established each year in four indices:

- Student Achievement;
- Student Progress;
- Closing Performance Gaps; and
- Postsecondary Readiness.

Student achievement on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exams is the primary component for the calculation of performance in each index. Because STAAR measures the extent to which students can apply the knowledge and skills they are taught over the course of the school year, classroom attendance and participation becomes a critical factor for mastering the objectives. When students are involuntarily excluded from their classrooms for disciplinary reasons, they miss valuable instructional time, which can have large effect on their STAAR achievement and, subsequently, school accountability ratings. Because Black and Hispanic students are statistically at higher risk than White students of receiving out-of-school suspension, involuntary removal from their typical learning environment only exacerbates the achievement gaps that exist between them and Whites (Ryan & Goodram, 2013). As the Met Standard accountability rating becomes increasingly more challenging to attain, and as more schools are increasingly becoming more ethnically/racially diverse, reforming student disciplinary policies represents a potential opportunity for educators and administrators to reverse the widening achievement gap, improve overall student outcomes, and overcome the increase in school performance expectations.

### Significance of the Study

Although extensive research has been conducted on the correlation between out-of-school discipline for Black students and the school dropout to jail pipeline, few researchers have focused their efforts on the long-term effects of out-of-school suspension for other races/ethnicities or the impact that out-of-school suspension has on minority STAAR testing and, ultimately, school accountability ratings. The findings of this study could have practical application for Texas high school administrators to consider alternative disciplinary programs, such as positive behavioral intervention systems, as a method to maximize classroom

attendance for students most at risk of receiving an out-of-school suspension. Moreover, the findings could also indicate the need for Texas high school administrators to conduct professional development programs for their staff to raise cultural awareness, promote diversity, and reduce exclusionary discipline.

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which differences were present among Grade 9 and Grade 10 Texas high school boys and girls in the assignment of out-of-school suspensions as a function of their race/ethnicity. Specifically addressed was the degree to which inequities were present in the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grades 9 and 10 Texas White, Black, and Hispanic high school boys, as well as for girls. Such inequities, if determined to be present, could be construed as violations of these students' civil rights.

### Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this investigation:

- What is the difference in the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 9 boys as a function of their race/ethnicity (i.e., White, Hispanic, and Black)?
- What is the difference in the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 9 girls as a function of their race/ethnicity?
- What is the difference in the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 10 boys as a function of their race/ethnicity?; and
- What is the difference in the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 10 girls as a function of their race/ethnicity?

### METHODS

#### Research Design

In this study, the research design used was a quantitative, causal comparative, non-experimental research design (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). A causal comparative design is a research design that attempts to find relationships between independent and dependent variables after the action has already taken place (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The action already taken was the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 9 and Grade 10 White, Hispanic, and Black students. The independent variable was the assignment of out-

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of-school suspension (i.e., out-of-school suspension was received, out-of-school suspension was not received) and the dependent variables were race/ethnicity (i.e., White, Hispanic, Black).

### Participants

Participants in this study were White, Hispanic, and Black Grade 9 and Grade 10 students in Texas who received an out-of-school suspension in the 2013-2014 school year. The total Grade 9 sample was 295,856 students, of which 202,280 boys and 93,576 girls were present. With respect to Grade 9 boys, 39,574 Grade 9 boys received an out-of-school suspension, of which 2,367 White, 24,424 Hispanic, and 12,783 Black boys were present. Regarding Grade 9 girls, 12,563 Grade 9 girls received an out-of-school suspension, of which 313 White, 6,847 Hispanic, and 5,403 Black girls were present. Regarding Grade 10 students, a total of 154,713 students was present, with 107,429 boys and 47,284 girls. Concerning Grade 10 boys, 15,950 Grade 10 boys received an out-of-school suspension, of which 1,205 White, 8,587 Hispanic, and 6,158 Black boys were present. Regarding Grade 10 girls, 4,463 Grade 10 girls received an out-of-school suspension, of which 100 White, 1,874 Hispanic, and 2,489 Black girls were present.

### Instrumentation and Procedures

Accordingly to the Texas Education Code 37.001 (2002), an out-of-school suspension is action taken by an administrator that requires a student to be temporarily removed from the home campus for no more than three consecutive days. Out-of-school suspension data are submitted by school districts to the Public Education Information Management System, which is used by Texas Education Agency to rate school districts and campuses. Data were requested from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System through a Public Information Request form. Once obtained, the data were imported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software program. Because school districts submit their out-of-school suspension data directly to the Texas Education Agency via standardized computer files, minimal errors in the data are assumed to be present.

## RESULTS

To analyze whether differences were present in

the assignment of out-of-school suspensions to Grade 9 and Grade 10 Texas high school students, the Pearson chi-square statistical procedure was used. This statistical procedure was chosen because frequency data were present for the assignment of out-of-school suspensions (i.e., Assigned, Not Assigned) to Grade 9 and Grade 10 boys and girls by their race/ethnicity (i.e., White, Hispanic, and Black). The Pearson chi-square procedure is the preferred statistical method when both variables are categorical (Slate & Rojas-LeBouef, 2011). Further, the sample size per cell was greater than five. Consequently, the requirements for using the chi-square procedure were met.

With respect to the first research question regarding the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 9 boys as a function of their race/ethnicity, the result was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 3962.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . The effect size for this difference, Cramer's V, was small, .14 (Cohen, 1988). As presented in Table 1, Grade 9 Hispanic boys were 2.17 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 9 White boys. Similarly, Grade 9 Black boys were 3.17 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 9 White boys. Even though Grade 9 Hispanic boys received 11,641 out-of-school suspensions, nearly double the amount, as Grade 9 Black boys, Grade 9 Black boys were 1.5 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension when compared to Grade 9 Hispanic boys. With respect to the second research question regarding the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 9 girls as a function their of race/ethnicity, the result was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 2769.944$ ,  $p < .001$ . The effect size for this difference, Cramer's V, was small, .17 (Cohen, 1988). As revealed in Table 2, Grade 9 Hispanic girls were 3.11 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 9 White girls. In addition, Grade 9 Black girls were 6.32 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 9 White girls. Although Grade 9 Hispanic girls received 1,444 more out-of-school suspensions than Grade 9 Black girls, Grade 9 Black girls were 2.0 times more likely to receive an out-of-school when compared to Grade 9 Black girls.

With respect to the third research question regarding the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 10 boys as a function of their race/ethnicity, the result was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 2722.37$ ,  $p < .001$ . The

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effect size for this difference, Cramer's V, was small, .16 (Cohen, 1988). As presented in Table 3, Grade 10 Hispanic boys were 1.98 times

more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 10 White boys.

**Table1.** Frequencies and Percentages of Out-of-School Suspension for White, Hispanic, and Black Texas Grade 9 and 10 Boys

Grade Level and Race/Ethnicity	Received an Out-of-school Suspension		Did Not Receive an Out-of-school Suspension	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Grade 9</b>				
White	2,367	8.72	24,766	91.28
Hispanic	24,424	18.96	104,428	81.04
Black	12,783	27.61	33,512	72.39
<b>Grade 10</b>				
White	1,205	6.79	16,547	93.21
Hispanic	8,587	13.41	55,451	86.59
Black	6,158	24.02	19,481	75.98

Correspondingly, Grade 10 Black boys were 3.53 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 10 White boys. Despite Grade 10 Hispanic boys receiving 2,429 more out-of-school suspensions than Grade 9 Black boys, Grade 10 Black boys were 1.79 times more likely to receive an out-of-school when compared to Grade 10 Hispanic boys. With respect to the fourth and final research question regarding the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Grade 10 girls as a function their of race/ethnicity, the result was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 1954.22$ ,  $p <$

.001. The effect size for this difference, Cramer's V, was small, .20 (Cohen, 1988). As revealed in Table 4, Grade 10 Hispanic girls were 3.60 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 10 White girls. Also, Grade 10 Black girls were 10.16 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than Grade 10 White girls. Moreover, Grade 10 Black girls received 615 more out-of-school suspensions than Grade 10 Hispanic girls as well as were 2.82 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension when compared to Grade 10 Hispanic girls.

**Table2.** Frequencies and Percentages of Out-of-School Suspension for White, Hispanic, and Black Texas Grade 9 and Grade 10 Girls

Grade Level and Race/Ethnicity	Received an Out-of-school Suspension		Did Not Receive an Out-of-school Suspension	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Grade 9</b>				
White	313	3.60	8,369	96.40
Hispanic	6,847	11.19	54,333	88.81
Black	5,403	22.78	18,311	77.22
<b>Grade 10</b>				
White	100	1.83	5,363	98.17
Hispanic	1,874	6.59	26,566	93.41
Black	2,489	18.60	10,892	81.40

## DISCUSSION

In this study, the degree to which differences were present in the assignment of out-of-school suspension to Texas high school students by their race/ethnicity were analyzed for the 2013-2014 school year. Inferential statistical analyses yielded statistically differences in all comparisons for Grade 9 and 10 boys and girls. Grade 9 White boys comprised 13.41% of the

total sample, however, they received only 5.98% of the total out-of-school suspensions that were assigned. As such, a ratio of 0.45 was presented which may be interpreted to mean that Grade 9 White boys were underrepresented the out-of-school suspensions they received. Grade 9 Hispanic boys constituted 63.70% of the total sample and received 61.72% of the total out-of-school suspensions that were assigned. Their

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ratio of 0.97 was reflective that Grade 9 Hispanic boys were appropriately represented, and not overrepresented in their assignment to an out-of-school suspension. Of importance to readers is that Grade 9 Black boys comprised less than a fourth of the total sample, 22.89%,

but received almost a third, 32.30%, of the total out-of-school suspensions than were assigned. Their ratio of 1.41 may be interpreted to mean that Grade 9 Black boys were assigned a very inequitable rate of out-of-school suspensions. These ratios are delineated in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Representation Ratios of Out-of-School Suspension for White, Hispanic, and Black Texas Grade 9 and 10 Boys

Grade Level and Race/Ethnicity	Received an Out-of-school Suspension		Total in Grade Level		Representation Ratio
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>r</i>
<b>Grade 9</b>					
White	2,367	8.72	27,133	13.41	0.45
Hispanic	24,424	18.96	128,852	63.70	0.97
Black	12,783	27.61	46,295	22.89	1.41
<b>Grade 10</b>					
White	1,205	6.79	17,752	16.52	0.46
Hispanic	8,587	13.41	64,038	59.61	0.90
Black	6,158	24.02	25,639	23.87	1.62

With respect to Grade 10, Grade 10 White boys were 16.52% of the total sample but received only 7.55% of the total out-of-school suspensions that were assigned. Their ratio of 0.46 may be interpreted to mean that Grade 10 White boys were underrepresented in being assigned to an out-of-school suspension. Grade 10 Hispanic boys comprised 59.61% of the total sample but received only 53.84% of the total out-of-school suspensions that were assigned. They had a ratio of 0.90, which was reflective that Grade 10 Hispanic boys were somewhat underrepresented in being assigned an out-of-school suspension. Of importance to readers is that Grade 10 Black boys comprised almost a fourth, 23.87%, of the total sample but received more than a third, 38.61%, of the total out-of-school suspensions that were assigned. Their ratio of 1.62 may be interpreted to mean that Grade 10 Black boys were assigned a very inequitable rate of out-of-school suspensions. Table 3 contains these ratios for Grade 10 boys.

With respect to girls, Grade 9 White girls comprised 9.28% of the total sample, however, they received only 2.49% of the total out-of-school suspensions that were assigned. Their ratio of 0.27 may be interpreted to mean that Grade 9 White girls were underrepresented in being assigned to an out-of-school suspension. Grade 9 Hispanic girls constituted the largest ethnic/racial group, 65.38%, of the total sample, however, they received only 54.50% of the total out-of-school suspensions than were assigned. Similar to Grade 9 White girls, the ratio of 0.83

for Grade 9 Hispanic girls was reflective that Grade 9 Hispanic girls were somewhat underrepresented in being assigned an out-of-school suspension. Of importance to readers is that Grade 9 Black girls constituted slightly over a fourth, 25.34%, of the total sample but received almost half, 43.01%, of the total out-of-school suspensions than were assigned. Their ratio of 1.70 may be interpreted to mean that Grade 9 Black girls were assigned a very inequitable rate of out-of-school suspensions. Delineated in Table 4 are the ratios for girls.

Grade 10 White girls were 11.55% of the total sample but received only 2.24% of total out-of-school suspensions. Their ratio of 0.70 was reflective that Grade 10 White girls were underrepresented in being assigned an out-of-school suspension. Grade 10 Hispanic girls constituted 60.15% of the total sample but received only 41.99% of total out-of-school suspensions. Their ratio of 0.70 may be interpreted to mean that Grade 10 Hispanic girls were underrepresented in being assigned an out-of-school suspension. Of importance to readers is that Grade 10 Black girls constituted more than a fourth, 28.30%, of the total sample but received more than half, 55.77%, of the total number of out-of-school suspensions that were assigned. As such, their ratio of 1.97 may be interpreted to mean that Grade 10 Black girls were assigned a very inequitable rate of out-of-school suspensions. Table 4 contains the ratios for Grade 10 girls.

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**Table 4.** Representation Ratios of Out-of-School Suspension for White, Hispanic, and Black Texas Grade 9 and Grade 10 Girls

Grade Level and Race/Ethnicity	Received an Out-of-school Suspension		Total in Grade Level		Representation Ratio
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>r</i>
<b>Grade 9</b>					
White	313	3.60	8,862	9.28	0.27
Hispanic	6,847	11.19	61,180	65.38	0.83
Black	5,403	22.78	23,714	25.34	1.70
<b>Grade 10</b>					
White	100	1.83	5,463	11.55	0.19
Hispanic	1,874	6.59	28,440	60.15	0.70
Black	2,489	18.60	13,381	28.30	1.97

As established in the findings of this investigation, Grades 9 and 10 White boys and girls were consistently underrepresented in the assignment of out-of-school suspensions. Grades 9 and 10 Hispanic boys and girls were either slightly underrepresented or appropriately represented in their out-of-school suspensions. The most salient findings of this study are the out-of-school suspension results for Grades 9 and 10 Black boys and Black girls. Both Black boys and Black girls were disproportionately assigned to out-of-school suspension, substantially more than their percentage of the student enrollment. These disparities in the assignment of out-of-school suspensions to Grades 9 and 10 Black boys and Black girls are clearly cause for concern. Because Grade 9 and Grade 10 Black students are most at risk of being suspended, they are equally at risk of missing instructional time, learning the objectives tested on STAAR, and negatively impacting the accountability rating of the school. With Grade 9 and Grade 10 Black students comprising more than 1/5 of the total sample, it is imperative that educational leaders make every effort to use corrective, restorative disciplinary measures aimed at keeping students in their typical classroom setting before using traditional, punitive methods.

It should be noted that no attempt was made to differentiate between students who received more than one out-of-school suspension. It should also be noted that no attempt was made to compare results across grade levels, for that was not the focus of this study. As a result, these issues should be explored in future studies, along with attempting to understand why differences in the assignment of out-of-school suspensions between Grade 9 and Grade 10 White, Hispanic, and Black students existed in

the first place. Such differences worthy of exploration include student characteristics (e.g., students who are economically disadvantaged) and school characteristics (e.g., typology). Texas high school administrators interested in experimenting with alternative forms of discipline, like positive behavioral intervention systems, should exercise caution in generalizing these findings. Out-of-school suspension data were analyzed for only the 2013-2014 school year and could represent as an outlier when compared to multiple years of data.

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