

A Descriptive Analysis of the Most Common Student Misbehaviors for Texas Middle School Students

Shara B. Schlitzberger and John R. Slate

Sam Houston State University, USA

*Corresponding Author: Shara B. Schlitzberger, Sam Houston State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Examined in this study were the most frequent reasons that resulted in discipline consequences assigned to Texas middle school students. Data were downloaded from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System for the 2013-2014 school year. A descriptive analysis of the 5 most common reasons that discipline consequences were assigned was conducted separately for Grades 7, 8, and 9 boys and girls. Analyses revealed that boys, regardless of grade level, had 3 times the number of discipline referrals as girls. The most frequent reasons that discipline consequences were assigned, across all grade levels and for boys and girls, were violations of the code of conduct. Serious/persistent misconduct violations and fighting/mutual combat were two other common misbehavior reasons identified in this study. Truancy was also a common misbehavior reason across all grade levels for both boys and girls. Implications are discussed and suggestions for future research are made.

Keywords: student misbehavior reasons, discipline consequences, school to prison pipeline, office referrals, violations of the code of conduct, serious/persistent misbehavior, truancy, controlled substance/drug possession

INTRODUCTION

Issues exist in Texas, as well as in other states, with school discipline and the School-to-Prison pipeline. According to Fowler, Lightsey, Monger and Aseltine (2010), this School-to-Prison pipeline refers to a disturbing pattern of school disciplinary problems escalating from suspension to removal from school, juvenile justice system involvement, and school dropout. Previous researchers (e.g., Christle et al., 2004; Henkel, 2015; Hilberth & Slate, 2014a; Skiba et al., 2009) have indicated a link between exclusionary discipline assignments, low student achievement and higher student dropout rates.

Discipline consequences occur on a daily basis to thousands of students in the United States. According to Fowler et al. (2010), "Numerous studies by national experts in the fields of education, criminal justice, and mental health have established a link between school discipline, school dropout rates and incarceration" (p. 10). The single most important predictor of student future involvement in the juvenile justice system is a prior history of disciplinary referrals at school (Fowler et al., 2010). According to Tiger and Slate (2017), student academic achievement

may be adversely influenced by disparities in the assignment of discipline consequences, disparities that exist between boys and girls and by student economic status (i.e., Not Economically Disadvantaged, Moderately Poor, and Extremely Poor)

In a study directly related to this article, Curtiss and Slate (2015) investigated whether discipline consequence assignment and the reasons why students were disciplined differed for Grade 4 and Grade 5 boys and girls in Texas. They analyzed data on all Grade 4 and Grade 5 students who received a discipline consequence in the 2013-2014 school year. Although their findings were not statistically significant, differences were noted in the reasons why students were assigned a discipline consequence and the discipline consequences that were assigned between boys and girls.

Grade 4 girls were assigned to partial day suspensions at a higher rate, 18.6%, than boys, 12.8%. The primary reason that Grade 4 girls were assigned a discipline consequence was due to a violation of the code of conduct. Boys also had as their primary reason violations of the code of conduct, however, they also had numerous instances of fighting and persistent misconduct.

Curtiss and Slate (2015) also established that boys received more suspensions than girls. They documented that no girls were permanently removed from classrooms; however, 11 boys were permanently removed from the classroom setting by their classroom teacher. Researchers (e.g., Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011; Butler, Lewis, Moore III, & Scott, 2012; Gregory et al., 2010) have previously established the presence of statistically significant differences in disciplinary consequences by race and gender for middle school and high school students. Butler et al. (2012) determined that boys were 0.81 times more likely to receive an exclusionary discipline consequence than girls.

In another investigation related to this article, Coleman and Slate (2016) analyzed the extent to which differences existed in discipline consequence assignments for students in Grade 6 by their ethnicity/race and economic status. Black students received three and a half times more suspensions or expulsions than White students, although Black students only comprised 18% of the population. According to Coleman and Slate (2016), Black and Hispanic students were more than 3 to 5 times more likely than White students to receive discipline referrals for violations of the code of conduct. In addition to race/ethnicity, researchers have determined that economic status also has a statistically significant effect on discipline statistics.

With respect to the economic status analyses conducted by Coleman and Slate (2016), students in poverty have received statistically significantly more assignments of discipline consequences and more severe consequences than their peers who were not in poverty. In a most recent Texas statewide investigation, Tiger and Slate (2017) examined the extent to which poverty was related to the assignment of discipline consequences for Grade 4 and Grade 5 girls and boys. Participants in their study were 371,869 Grade 4 and 5 Texas students who received a discipline consequence in the 2013-2014 school year and 378,882 Grade 4 and 5 students in the 2014-2015 school year. In their investigation, statistically significant differences were present in the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions assigned to Grade 4 and Grade 5 girls and boys based on their economic status. Boys who were extremely poor were disproportionately assigned to discipline consequences (Tiger & Slate, 2015) than boys who were not poor.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Boys are assigned a higher number of discipline consequences than are girls (Curtiss & Slate, 2015). According to Curtis and Slate (2015), students who received discipline consequences had increased absences, low motivation, lower self-esteem, higher drop-out rate, and lower achievement than students who did not receive discipline consequences. Therefore, the inequitable rate of discipline consequences may have a negative effect on academic achievement (Curtis & Slate, 2015). Further, low student achievement and higher student dropout rates have been linked to exclusionary discipline assignments (Tiger & Slate, 2015). According to Fowler et al. (2010), a connection exists between school discipline, school dropout rates, and incarceration by experts in the fields of mental health, criminal justice, and education. High school drop-outs represent 80% of Texas adult inmates (Fowler et al., 2010). Leaders in the Texas public school system need to identify which misbehaviors are occurring most frequently so that they develop practices to reduce the number of discipline referrals, thus stopping the flow of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the top five most frequent reasons boys and girls were assigned discipline consequences. These determinations were made separate for boys and for girls in Grades 7, 8 and 9. Another purpose was to ascertain the degree to which the most frequent reasons for being assigned a discipline consequence was similar for boys and girls across these three grade levels.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this investigation:

- What are the five most frequent misbehaviors for which Grade 7 boys receive a discipline consequence?;
- What are the five most frequent misbehaviors for which Grade 7 girls receive a discipline consequence?;
- What are the five most frequent misbehaviors for which Grade 8 boys receive a discipline consequence?;
- What are the five most frequent misbehaviors for which Grade 8 girls receive a discipline consequence?;
- What are the five most frequent misbehaviors for which Grade 9 boys receive a discipline consequence?; and

A Descriptive Analysis of the Most Common Student Misbehaviors for Texas Middle School Students

- What are the five most frequent misbehaviors for which Grade 9 girls receive a discipline consequence?

Significance of Study

Understanding what students are doing that result in a discipline consequence is important to know. Discovering the misbehaviors in terms of gender, is important to address the discipline issues. If school administrators understand which misbehaviors students are exhibiting most frequently, research can be conducted to determine why students are misbehaving in those areas to be able to find solutions to decrease discipline referrals, decrease suspensions, and increase academic performance, thus reducing the number of students in the School-to-Prison pipeline.

To date, only limited research exists in which the most common misbehavior reasons were identified separately for both boys and girls and then separately for three grade levels. More detailed information than is currently available will be provided. Through these results, educational leaders could examine their own school campuses to ascertain the generalizability of these results to their own settings.

METHOD

Research Design

A descriptive statistics analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) was used for this study. According to Johnson and Christensen (2012), in descriptive statistics “the researcher attempts to convey the essential characteristics of the data by arranging the data into a more interpretable form and by calculating numerical indexes, such as averages, percentile ranks, and measures of spread” (p. 452). Archival data were used to represent past events (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Gender and grade level constituted the different samples on which descriptive statistics were calculated. A descriptive statistics analysis was appropriate for this study because the five most frequent reasons why boys and girls are assigned discipline consequences were identified. The purpose of a descriptive study is to find the variables that are important to a problem, so other researchers can further investigate what may be causing the problem and how to solve it.

Participants/Instrumentation

Individual student level data were obtained from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System database for all Texas students in Grades, 7, 8 and 9 for the 2013-2014 school year. Data were previously

obtained by submitting a Public Information Request through the Texas Education Agency. The Public Education Information Management System dataset that was analyzed included reasons students had been assigned a discipline consequence, along with their gender and grade level. Because the data were provided by the Texas Education Agency, the assumption made herein is that the data were accurately reported, particularly given the fact that the Texas Education Agency conducts routine audits of school districts and of school campuses.

Definition of Terms

The focus of this study was to determine the top five most frequent reasons students are being referred to the office for discipline problems and to identify trends in why students are being suspended from school. The following misbehaviors were identified: Violations of Code of Conduct, fighting/bodily contact, truancy of three unexcused absences, truancy of 10 unexcused absences, serious/persistent misconduct, and possession of a controlled substance.

RESULTS

In this study, descriptive statistics were calculated on all discipline consequences that were assigned to Grade 7, 8, and 9 students. The calculations of the frequencies and percentages of discipline consequences were determined separately for boys and for girls. Moreover, these frequencies and percentages were calculated separately by grade level. Then the results were compared for boys and for girls across the three grade levels. In this research investigation, Texas statewide data on all Grade 7, 8, and 9 boys and girls who were assigned a discipline consequence in the 2013-2014 school year were analyzed. A total of 120,957 Grade 7 boys had been assigned a discipline consequence in this school year, compared to fewer Grade 7 girls, 51,030, who had been assigned a discipline consequence. Of these students, Grade 7 boys constituted 70% of the Grade 7 students who had been assigned a discipline consequence. Grade 8 boys were assigned a discipline consequence fewer times than girls during the school year, at 122,997 compared to fewer Grade 8 girls, at 49,021. Of the Grade 8 sample, 71.50% were boys. A total of 202,741 Grade 9 boys received a discipline consequence during this school year, compared to fewer girls, 93,680. Boys accounted for 68.40% of the sample of Grade 9 students. Frequencies and percentages of Grade 7, 8 and 9 students by gender are presented in Table 1.

A Descriptive Analysis of the Most Common Student Misbehaviors for Texas Middle School Students

Table1. Frequencies and Percentages of Grade 7, 8, and 9 Most Common Discipline Consequences of by Student Gender

| Grade Level and Gender | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|------------------------|----------|---------|
| Grade 7 | | |
| Boys | 120,957 | 70.33 |
| Girls | 51,030 | 29.68 |
| Grade 8 | | |
| Boys | 122,997 | 71.50 |
| Girls | 49,021 | 28.50 |
| Grade 9 | | |
| Boys | 202,741 | 68.40 |
| Girls | 93,680 | 31.60 |

The misbehavior that occurred the most for Grade 7 boys was that they violated the local code of code, 98.4%. Fighting/Mutual combat was the second most frequent misbehavior, at 1.0%. Serious/persistent misconduct was the third most frequent misbehavior, at 0.40% for boys. Next, truancy of three unexcused

absences, at 0.10%, and truancy of 10 unexcused absences, at 0.10%, represented the fourth and fifth misbehaviors, respectively. Table 2 contains the frequencies and percentages of the five most common reasons for discipline by Grade 7 boys.

Table2. Frequencies and Percentages of Five Most Frequent Reasons Grade 7 Boys Were Assigned a Discipline Consequence

| Student Misbehavior | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|--------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Violated Local Code of Conduct | 118,986 | 98.40 |
| Fighting/Mutual Combat | 1,152 | 1.00 |
| Serious/Persistent Misconduct | 452 | 0.40 |
| Truancy-3 Unexcused Absences | 166 | 0.10 |
| Truancy-10 Unexcused Absences | 71 | 0.10 |

Concerning Grade 7 girls, the misbehavior that occurred most frequently was that they violated the local code of conduct, 98.1%. Fighting/Mutual combat was the second most frequent misbehavior that occurred, at 1.2%. Truancy of unexcused absences, at 0.30%, followed as the third most frequent misbehavior. Next, serious/persistent misconduct represented

the fourth most frequent misbehavior, 0.20%. The fifth most frequently committed misbehavior was truancy of 10 unexcused absences at 0.10%. Readers are directed to Table 3 for the frequencies and percentages of the five most common reasons for discipline for Grade 7 girls.

Table3. Frequencies and Percentages of Five Most Frequent Reasons Grade 7 Girls Were Assigned a Discipline Consequence

| Student Misbehavior | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|--------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Violated Local Code of Conduct | 50,073 | 98.10 |
| Fighting/Mutual Combat | 599 | 1.20 |
| Truancy- 3 Unexcused Absences | 166 | 0.30 |
| Serious/Persistent Misconduct | 84 | 0.20 |
| Controlled Substances/Drugs | 22 | 0.00 |

Violations of the code of conduct were the most frequent misbehavior for Grade 8 boys, at 97.90%. Serious/Persistent misconduct was the second most frequent misbehavior, at 0.70%. The third most frequently committed misbehavior was fighting/mutual combat, at 0.70%. Fourth was controlled substance/drug

possession, at 0.20%. The fifth most frequently committed misbehavior for boys was truancy of three unexcused absences, at 0.20%. Table 4 contains the frequencies and percentages of the five most common reasons for discipline by Grade 8 boys.

A Descriptive Analysis of the Most Common Student Misbehaviors for Texas Middle School Students

Table4. *Frequencies and Percentages of Five Most Frequent Reasons Grade 8 Boys Were Assigned a Discipline Consequence*

| Student Misbehavior | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|--------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Violated Local Code of Conduct | 120,384 | 97.90 |
| Serious/Persistent Misconduct | 911 | 0.70 |
| Fighting/Mutual Combat | 881 | 0.70 |
| Controlled Substance/Drugs | 298 | 0.20 |
| Truancy-3 Unexcused Absences | 251 | 0.20 |

With respect to Grade 8 girls, the misbehavior that occurred most frequently was that they violated the local code of conduct, 98.0%. Fighting/Mutual combat was the second most frequent misbehavior that occurred, at 1.0%. Third was truancy of three unexcused absences, at 0.30%. The fourth most frequent misbehavior

was truancy of 10 unexcused absences, at 0.20%. The fifth most frequently committed misbehavior was serious/persistent misconduct, at 0.20%. Frequencies and percentages of the five most common reasons for discipline for Grade 8 girls are delineated in Table 5.

Table5. *Frequencies and Percentages of Five Most Frequent Reasons Grade 8 Girls Were Assigned a Discipline Consequence*

| Student Misbehavior | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|---------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Violated Local Code of Conduct | 48,027 | 98.00 |
| Fighting/Mutual Combat | 511 | 1.00 |
| Truancy - 3 Unexcused Absences | 149 | 0.30 |
| Controlled Substances/Drugs | 92 | 0.20 |
| Truancy - 10 Unexcused Absences | 87 | 0.20 |

The misbehavior that occurred the most for Grade 9 boys was that they violated the local code of conduct, 94.80%. Truancy of 10 unexcused absences was the second most frequent misbehavior, at 1.30%. Serious/persistent misconduct, at 0.40%, was the third most frequent misbehavior for Grade 9 boys.

Possession of a controlled substance/ drugs was the fourth misbehavior, at 1.0%. The fifth most frequently committed misbehavior was fighting/mutual combat, at 0.90%. Table 6 contains the frequencies and percentages of the five most common reasons for discipline by Grade 9 boys.

Table6. *Frequencies and Percentages of Five Most Frequent Reasons Grade 9 Boys Were Assigned a Discipline Consequence*

| Student Misbehavior | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|---------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Violated Local Code of Conduct | 192,156 | 94.80 |
| Truancy – 10 Unexcused Absences | 2,651 | 1.30 |
| Serious/Persistent Misconduct | 2,103 | 1.00 |
| Controlled Substance/Drugs | 2,021 | 1.00 |
| Fighting/Mutual Combat | 1,859 | 0.90 |

Regarding Grade 9 girls, the misbehavior that occurred most frequently were violations of the local code of conduct, at 95.20%. Truancy of 10 unexcused absences was the second most frequent misbehavior that occurred, at 2.0%. The third most frequently occurring misbehavior was truancy of three unexcused absences, at

1.20%. Fighting/Mutual combat was the fourth most frequent misbehavior, at 1.0%. The fifth most frequent misbehavior for Grade 9 girls was serious/persistent misconduct, at 0.20%. Frequencies and percentages of the five most common reasons for discipline for Grade 9 girls are presented in Table 7.

Table7. *Frequencies and Percentages of Five Most Frequent Reasons Grade 9 Girls Were Assigned a Discipline Consequence*

| Student Misbehavior | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|---------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Violated Local Code of Conduct | 89,171 | 95.20 |
| Truancy – 10 Unexcused Absences | 1,903 | 2.00 |
| Truancy- 3 Unexcused Absences | 1,165 | 1.20 |
| Fighting/Mutual Combat | 936 | 1.00 |
| Serious/Persistent Misconduct | 228 | 0.20 |

DISCUSSION

In this study, the top five most frequent misbehavior reasons Grade 7, 8, and 9 boys and girls were assigned a discipline consequence were examined. Data from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System for the 2013-2014 school year were analyzed. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted separately for boys and for girls and for the three grade levels previously mentioned.

The percentage of boys who received discipline consequences was at least three times higher than girls for all three grade levels. The most common misbehavior across all grade levels, for boys and girls, was violated the code of conduct, at a significantly higher percentage, nine times more than other misbehaviors. Interestingly, misbehaviors were similar for boys and girls in the same grade level. Moreover, the same five top misbehaviors were present in all three grade levels, but in different percentages. After code of conduct violations, serious/persistent misbehavior, fighting/mutual combat, truancy of 3 unexcused absences, truancy of 10 unexcused absences and possession of controlled substances/drugs were the top five misbehaviors in this study. The percentage of boys who earned a discipline consequence for fighting/mutual combat was higher than girls in Grade 7; however, girls had a higher percentage than boys for fighting/mutual combat in Grades 8 and 9. The percentage of boys who had a truancy of 10 unexcused absences increased by 2% in Grade 9, when boys were in their first year of high school.

According to Skiba et al. (2011), the key to academic success is to remain engaged in academic instruction. As noted previously, boys are assigned more discipline consequences than girls are assigned. Tiger and Slate (2017) contended that inequities in discipline consequences and discipline assignments between boys and girls may contribute to inequities in the academic achievement of boys and girls by their economic status (i.e., Not Economically Disadvantaged, Moderately Poor, and Extremely Poor). Findings were congruent with the previous literature and confirmed that boys receive higher rates of discipline referrals than girls. Additionally, disciplinary assignments differ between boys and girls, with boys receiving more exclusionary assignments than girls (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

Readers should note that this study was limited to Grade 7, 8 and 9 students in the State of Texas. Although a large sample size was present, the degree to which these results might be generalizable to other states is not known. Future studies could be conducted over other grade levels and/or in other states to see if findings would be similar in other states. Future researchers would be encouraged to examine reasons for discipline consequences by race/ethnicity. Because the top reasons students are receiving discipline consequences were identified, a future qualitative study is recommended to determine why students are receiving discipline in the areas delineated in this study. In addition, one year of data was examined in this study. As such, researchers are encouraged to analyze data from multiple years to improve the generalizability of the results.

REFERENCES

- [1] Blake, J. J., Butler, B. R., Lewis, C. W., & Darensbourg, A. (2011). Unmasking the inequitable discipline experiences of urban Black girls: Implications for urban educational stakeholders. *Urban Review*, 43, 90-106. doi:10.1007/s11256-009-0148-8
- [2] Butler, B. R., Lewis, C. W., Moore III, J. L., & Scott, M. E. (2012). Assessing the odds: Disproportional discipline practices and implications for educational stakeholders. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 81, 11-24.
- [3] Coleman, C. L., & Slate, J. R. (2016). Inequities in disciplinary reasons and consequences by ethnicity/race and economic status for Grade 6 students in Texas. *Journal of Global Research in Education and Social Science*, 9(1), 1-7.
- [4] Curtiss, K. N., & Slate, J. R. (2015). Differences in disciplinary consequences and reasons for Texas elementary students by gender. *Journal of Education Research*, 8(4), 1-8.
- [5] Fowler, D., Lightsey, R., Monger, J., & Aseeltine, E. (2010). *Texas' School-To-Prison pipeline: School expulsion*. Austin, TX: Texas Appleseed.
- [6] Johnson, R. B., & Christensen, L. (2012). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches*. (3rd ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [7] Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 59-68. doi:10.3102/0013189X09357621
- [8] Skiba, R. J., Horner, R. H., Choong-Geun, C., Rausch, M. K., May, S. L., & Tobin, T. (2011).

A Descriptive Analysis of the Most Common Student Misbehaviors for Texas Middle School Students

- Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review*, 40(1), 85-107.
- [9] Texas Education Agency. (2010). *Education Code 37. Alternative settings for behavior management*. Retrieved from <http://www.statutes.legis.state.tx.us/Docs/ED/htm/ED.37.htm>
- [10] Tiger, K. N., & Slate, J. R. (2017). Differences in discipline consequences as a function of economic status by gender. *Journal of Ethical Educational Leadership*, 4(3), 1-22.