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TITLE: Office Referrals and Suspension: Disciplinary Intervention in Middle Schools

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AUTHOR ABSTRACT

While school discipline and student behavior represent major concerns to the public and to the schools, surprisingly little research has been completed on the disciplinary referrals of students for discipline or inappropriate behavior. This report, consisting of two studies conducted in two Midwestern cities (one across multiple schools, and the other in a single school), examines a variety of descriptive issues related to school discipline as documented in archived office disciplinary referral data. These were analyzed in order to examine the reasons for the referral, circumstances of the situation, the extent of use of various disciplinary response options, the rate of student suspension, and other characteristics of the disciplinary incidents. Behaviors that led to office referral were primarily not those that threaten safety, but those that indicate noncompliance or disrespect. In both studies, about 40% of all students receive at least one office referral in the middle school during the school year. Results indicated that most disciplinary referrals originate in the classroom, and provided little evidence of a consistent relationship between seriousness of offense and severity of consequence. Finally, these studies show a pattern of disproportionality in the administration of school discipline based on race, SES, gender and disability.

The problem of disruptive student conduct in the school has been, and continues to be, among the most pressing problems facing educators (Duke & Jones, 1984; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993; Kadel & Follman, 1993). Recently, increased attention to issues of school violence (APA, 1993; Gorski & Pillotto, 1991) has lent an urgency to consideration of behavior management and discipline. Traditional disciplinary approaches, such as detention and suspension, have been consistently identified as the most frequently imposed disciplinary reaction to student infraction (Center & McKittrick, 1987; Rose, 1988; Uchitelle, Bartz, & Hillman, 1989). Yet despite an increased focus on developing and enforcing school discipline codes and policies (McNaughton & Johns, 1991), research describing current disciplinary strategies is limited (McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Rose, 1988). This study used extant data from middle schools in two urban school districts to describe current practice in school disciplinary measures, especially suspension.

Increased concern over school violence has led to "get-tough" or "zero-tolerance" approaches to school discipline that would increase the use of traditional disciplinary policies (Vail, 1995). Yet questions have been consistently raised about the efficacy and fairness of traditional disciplinary procedures. Shores, Gunter, & Jack (1993) argue that traditional punitive approaches may interact with student non-compliance to generate a coercive cycle that may increase the likelihood of disruptive behavior. In the long term, suspension appears to be correlated with increased risk of school dropout: Findings from the High School and Beyond study showed that 31% of dropouts were previously suspended (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986).

Surveys of administrators have shown that the offense most likely to result in suspension is aggression (Costenbader & Markson, 1994). Yet low levels of inter-rater agreement between principals on a definition of aggression (Pisarra & Giblette, 1981) suggest that consensus may be illusory. Other behaviors that tend to be frequent causes of office referral and suspension are disrespect, noncompliance, defiance, and general school disruption (Imich, 1994; McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992).

Lastly, truancy and tardiness constitute a significant proportion of school suspensions (Edelman, Beck & Smith, 1975; McFadden et al., 1992). Estimates of the prevalence of suspension vary widely. The Children's Defense Fund (1974) reported that one in every 24 elementary children, and one in every 13 children at the secondary level, was suspended at least once during the school year; some school districts reported suspension rates up to 40.9%. In Wu, Pink, Crain and Moles' (1982) analysis of national survey data, 11% of students reported being suspended at least once during their school career; figures are somewhat higher in urban districts, and higher in high school than in middle or junior high school. Costenbader and Markson (1994) reported data from ten states which indicated that 42% of all suspensions were for students who had been suspended one or more times before.

Low socioeconomic, minority and special education students appear to be at greater risk for receiving a variety of harsh disciplinary practices, including suspension, expulsion, and corporal punishment. Brantlinger (1991) reported that students from both high and low income brackets perceived that secondary school disciplinary practices were disproportionately targeted at low SES students. Studies of school discipline have also indicated bias due to race, gender (Panko-Stilmock, 1996), and handicapping condition (Cooley, 1995) in the administration of a range of disciplinary strategies, including corporal punishment (Shaw & Braden, 1990), out-of-school suspension (McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1990), and expulsion (Rose, 1988). Data have consistently shown that African-American students are suspended at a rate two to three times that of Caucasian students (Costenbader & Markson, 1994; Children's Defense Fund, 1974; McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1986). This study examined disciplinary practices in urban middle schools across two school systems. School disciplinary files were analyzed in order to examine the most common types of disciplinary referrals and consequences, the relationship between those, and other characteristics of the disciplinary incidents. Descriptive data about the relationship of disciplinary practices to demographic characteristics such as gender, race, SES, and disability label will be explored. Study I examines data across schools, while Study II examines more detailed descriptive information about one middle school. Finally some observations will be made regarding the importance of, potential problems with, and uses of office discipline referral data.

STUDY I

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Subjects for Study I were the entire middle school population in a large, urban Midwestern public school district. The district is among the 15 largest cities in the United States, serving over 50,000 students. The district is about 50% African-American. A charter school program was put in place shortly before the data reported herein were collected, to increase school integration across the city.

The data was drawn from the disciplinary records of all 11,001 students in 19 middle schools in the district. Students were evenly divided between grades six, seven, and eight, with four students listed as being in ninth grade. Male students accounted for 51.8% (5,698) of the participants compared to 48.2% female (5,303) participants in the study. The majority of students were categorized either as Caucasian (42%), or African American (56%). Latino students represented 1.2% of the middle school population, while 0.7% of the students were designated Asian American and 0.1% were described as Native American. Students in general education accounted for 83.2% (9,095) of the middle school population. A total of 2,006 (16.8%) students were

eligible for special education services. The largest special education category in the district was comprised by the 982 (9.8%) students with learning disabilities, while there were 580 (5.3%) students with mild or moderate mental handicaps in the sample. There were 193 (1.8%) students classified as emotionally handicapped, and 85 (.8%) students classified as communication handicapped. Information on socio-economic status for this sample was represented by qualification status for free or reduced cost lunch. Of the middle-school sample, 7,287 (65.3%) students, families met the criteria required for free lunch. Another 2,923 (26.6%) students were eligible for reduced cost lunch. Students, either non-eligible for free or reduced lunch or for whom meal status data was not recorded, represented 8.1% (891) of the total number of students. The 19 middle schools were located in predominantly urban settings. Of the 19 public middle schools, four had less than 400 students, 11 schools had student bodies ranging from 400 to 800, and four had a school population greater than 800.

PROCEDURES

The disciplinary data were drawn from an extant data collection system for recording disciplinary contacts in the district. When a formal referral was made to the office in any of the middle schools, a standardized coding form was filled out by the administrator receiving the referral. That form includes information regarding the nature of the incident triggering the referral, and the resulting action taken by the administrator. Data was scanned into the mainframe database and organized and maintained in a central database by the district's research and data team. Information about disciplinary referrals and consequences was based on the district's disciplinary policy, as outlined in the student handbook. There were 33 reasons for referral and 22 disciplinary consequences listed on the coding sheet. The coding form required that at least one reason for referral be marked, with an option of applying up to two secondary codes; only the primary reason for referral, however, is included in these analyses. Other general information reported on the coding form were referral date and time, by whom and to whom the referral was made, previous actions taken, date of administrative action, and whether parents were contacted. After appropriate human subjects and district clearance and removal of individual identifying information, disciplinary incident files were transferred from the district's mainframe computer, as well as registration data for all middle school students in the district. The registration data provided demographic information: gender, ethnic status, special education disability label, and whether the student received free or reduced cost school lunch (used as an index of socioeconomic status). The data on these records encompasses all middle school students counted as formally registered at one of the 19 middle schools during the 1994-1995 academic year. Students who transferred out of the district, were expelled, or dropped out were not included in these analyses. The registration and disciplinary incidents file were merged, so as to represent those students who were registered, but did not have a disciplinary incident during the school year. Data were analyzed both at the level of incident, and aggregated by student to provide descriptive data concerning types of offenses leading to disciplinary referral, and administrative actions taken in response to those referrals. One-way analysis of variance was used to test for differences in the dependent variables of either number of referrals or number of suspensions by four independent variables drawn from the demographic data: gender, ethnic status, disability label, and eligibility for free or reduced cost lunch.

RESULTS

Office referrals. As noted, there were 11,001 students represented in the data base at 19 middle schools. Of these, 4,521 (41.1%) of the students had a record of

disciplinary contact; these students had a total of 17,045 office referrals. Across all students, the mean number of referrals was 1.5 over the course of the school year. It is important to note, however, that 6,480 (58.9%) of the sample were not referred to the office during the school year. Among those referred at least once to the office, the mean number of disciplinary referrals was 3.77 during the school year. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of the 21 possible reasons for referral. Disobedience is the most frequent cause for disciplinary referral, followed by conduct, disrespect, and fighting. It is interesting to note that those behaviors that are most often noted to be most serious, such as possession of a weapon, vandalism, or setting fire, are also among those reported least frequently.

Characteristics of students referred. There were clear racial differences in the likelihood of at least one referral to the office, $F(4, N = 11,001) = 326.21, p < .001$, and in the average number of referrals to the office, $F(4, 10,996) = 44.63, p < .001$. Follow-up tests using the Student-Newman-Keuls procedure indicated that African-American students received a higher number of referrals on average than students from any other ethnic background except Native American. There were also differences in numbers of disciplinary referrals by school lunch status, $F(2, 10,998) = 57.91, p < .001$, and disability label, $F(4, 4500) = 24.22, p < .001$. Follow-up tests, again using the Student-Newman-Keuls procedure, indicated that students receiving free or reduced cost lunch were more likely to have a disciplinary referral than those on full-pay status; students labeled Emotionally Handicapped (EH) were more likely to receive a disciplinary referral than any other students in special or general education. Finally, boys were more likely to receive a disciplinary referral than girls, $F(1, 10,999) = 209.44, p < .001$.

Administrative disciplinary actions. Disciplinary consequences for the referrals are presented in Table 2. Suspension accounts for 33.3% of all disciplinary actions, making suspension by far the most frequently used form of discipline. Harsher consequences, such as arrest or corporal punishment, are among those least used, but so are milder consequences, such as behavioral contracting, apology, or counseling.

Suspensions. Among all students, the mean number of suspensions was quite low, averaging 0.5 suspensions per student. Students who received a disciplinary referral at least once during the school year averaged 1.25 suspensions over the course of the school year. The maximum number of suspensions for any student was 22. There were significant differences by race across all students for number of suspensions, $F(4, 10,996) = 24.01, p < .001$, with African-American students receiving more suspensions than all other students except Native Americans. There were also large significant differences in average number of suspensions as a function of socioeconomic status, $F(2, 10,998) = 46.45, p < .001$, and disability label. Follow-up tests showed that students who received free or reduced cost lunch were more likely to be suspended than those paying full cost. Students labeled emotionally handicapped were more likely to be suspended than all other students in special or general education, while both students classified as learning disabled or mildly mentally handicapped were suspended more often than students not served in special education. Boys again were suspended significantly more frequently than girls, $F(1, 10,999) = 209.04, p < .001$.

Relationship between type of referrals and administrative actions. To what extent do different types of disciplinary referral result in different types of consequences? In order to characterize overall disciplinary practices, a number of consequences were classified as mild (parent contact, counseling, reprimand, conference, behavior contract, apology, peer counseling, withdrawal of privileges, or extra work), and contrasted with suspension. Figures 1a and 1b compare the most frequent referrals receiving mild

consequences, and those receiving suspension as a consequence. As can be noted from the figure, fighting appears to result in a suspension more frequently. Otherwise, however, the distributions across referrals are strikingly similar for suspension and mild consequences.

STUDY II

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Subjects for Study II were students in one middle school in a medium sized, Midwestern city's public school district in another state and approximately 600 miles from the district in Study I. The city population for Study II is approximately 200,000 with virtually no metropolitan area (suburbs) beyond the city itself. The district serves over 30,000 students, including approximately 6,770 students served in the district's nine middle schools. The overall minority population in the district was 11.5% (African American 5.1%, Asian American 3.0% Hispanic American 2.4% and Native American 1.1%), and the minority percentage by grade for the middle school grades ranged from about 12.2% to 13.2%. By building for the middle schools, it ranged from 4.2% to 31.5%. Gender of students was approximately 48.9% female and 51.1% male. Approximately 25% of the middle school students qualified for the school lunch program, with about 69% of those qualifying for free as opposed to reduced price lunches. Individual building populations ranged from approximately 6% to 50% qualified for school lunch.

One particular school was chosen for data analysis. Data were readily available for this school, the school was generally representative of the middle schools in the district, and the cooperation of the building's administration led the researchers to conclude that the office referral form was being employed in a conscientious and consistent way throughout the school year. In addition, it seemed to the researchers that some of the descriptive data available for this school would illustrate the office referral/discipline system. During 1995-1996, this building identified as "Building B" served 610 students in grades 7-9 (195 at seventh grade, 203 at eighth grade, and 212 at ninth grade). Of the 610 students, 56 (9.2%) were African American, 9 (1.5%) were Asian American, 5 (0.8%) Hispanic American and 3 (0.5%) Native American students, yielding a total minority population of 73 or 12.0%. The school has about 29.5% of students meeting free or reduced lunch criteria.

PROCEDURES

As in the first study, the disciplinary data were drawn from a central office computer file. The data for this study represented the general information on office referrals for one of the district's nine middle schools. The reports were broken down for two time periods during the 1995-1996 school year. The first report covered the first semester (first half) of the school year from 8/28/95 to 1/24/96, while the second covered the second semester from 1/29/96 to 6/9/96. Additionally some data for the 1993-94 school year for the same middle school was also analyzed, which were based on an earlier version of the same office referral form.

When a student was referred to the office by a staff member for a disciplinary infraction, a standardized form was completed, and sent to the office as well. The form included information about the nature of the incident, the situation where the incident occurred, the previous actions taken by the staff member and the staff member recommendation to the building administrator. There was also a place for the building administrator to indicate what action was taken related to the incident. Once completed, these forms were entered into the district's mainframe computer in a separate district wide file for this data by clerical staff on terminals within each building

where the referral was generated. For the researchers, then, the data were pre-existing archived data. The researchers had no influence on the categories on the form, the instances of when the data were gathered, nor the procedures for handling data and encoding it onto the mainframe computer.

Once on the district's mainframe computer, the data could be accessed both within buildings by persons with appropriate coded access, and at the district level. Several specific pre-formatted reports were available, including a general report showing all of the coded data which could be called up to date, building or other parameters. These reports were used for the 1995-1996 data in Study II.

The office referral form in the school district in Study II included eighteen reasons for referral or offenses based on the district's Student Code of Conduct, with multiple "reasons" possible on each form; these were not ranked in order of importance. Thus, for Study II, all of the checked items were reported and analyzed when more than one was checked on the office referral form. As a result of the source of the list in school policy and archived data, the listed offenses were not entirely discrete, with items like "Insubordination/verbal abuse" possibly overlapping to some degree with items like "Inappropriate/profane/abusive language".

RESULTS

Office referrals. During the 1995-1996 school year, 846 office referrals were coded in this building, and on those referrals were coded a total of 1,421 reasons for referring students to the office. This is an average of 1.7 offenses marked per office referral form.

As can be noted in Table 3, there was little difference between the first and second half of the school year, either in overall number of office referrals or in the distribution of the reasons for referral (there were an equal number of days in both semesters). For the year this amounts to an average of 4.6 office referrals made in this building for each day school is in session (184 student days). Although 1993-1994 data are not presented, reasons for office referral between the 1993-1994 and the 1995-1996 school years for Middle School B were quite similar, although the forms used during those two years were not exactly the same. It is interesting to note that even with a decline in the student population at Middle School B from 667 in 1993-1994 to 577 in 1995-1996, the number of referrals per student population per year remained virtually constant at 1.48 and 1.46 for each of the two years examined.

As can be seen in Table 3, the most common reasons for referral were "Lack of cooperation" and "Insubordination/verbal abuses, followed by Excessive tardiness/absences" and "Inappropriate/profane/abusive language". As in Study I, disobedience and disrespect are the most frequent misbehaviors resulting in a referral, while more serious behaviors such as "Possession/use of a weapon", "Stealing", "Destructive to property", and "Sexual harassment/assault" occurred relatively infrequently, with less than a dozen instances of each for the entire year. "Assault/fighting" and "Threats/intimidation" occurred less frequently in this particular middle school than in the middle schools in Study I, accounting for about 6% of all referrals.

Characteristics of students referred. Data from the 1993-1994 school year were used to assess the characteristics of students who received office referrals. Data indicated that 255 different students (38.2% of the school's population) comprised the 988 office referrals that year, while 412 (61.8%) had no referrals. Of the 255 students with one or more referral, 164 or 24.6% had from 1-3 referrals, 50 (7.5%) had from 4-6 referrals, and 41 students (6.1%) had 7 or more referrals to the office during the year. The number of referrals for any one student ranged from one to 28.

Of the 988 1993-1994 year office referrals, 745 or 75.4% were received by males. There also appeared to be some over-representation by socioeconomic or special education status. Although 32.2% of the school population that year was eligible for free or reduced cost lunches, 47.1% of all office referrals were for students eligible for free or reduced cost lunch. Similarly, while 15.6% of the school population was served in special education, 38.6% of referrals were for identified special education students.

Characteristics of referral. The referral form included several characteristics describing the nature of the referred incident. For example, one item noted to whom the behavior resulting in the referral was directed. For School B during the 1995-96 school year, other students were the target in 21.7% of the incidents, adults were the target in 38.6% of incidents, both in 12% of incidents, and neither/not applicable in 27.7% of the incidents. In terms of location, most incidents (523, 58%) occurred in the classroom during the 1993-1994 in Middle School B. Other locations included 96 (13%) occurring in the hall, 41 (5%) occurring in the gym or locker room, 19 (3%) occurring on the playground. About 1% of the incidents occurred in the lunch room, or at assembly/auditorium, while fewer than 1% of the incidents occurred in the restroom or on the bus. It should be noted that a separate form was in use for bus related conduct, and the office referral data likely does not reflect the extent of bus related misconduct. The recording form also included data on the situation in which the behavior occurred during 1993-1994. The vast majority of the referrals (506 or 74.7%) were indicated to have occurred during class, with 81 (13.3%) occurring during passing time, 71 (7%) occurring after school, and 31 (4%) occurring before school.

Prior actions. Educators who made the referral (most often the classroom teacher) reported on the data form that they had typically engaged in several interventions prior to completing the referral form (see Table 4). The most common of these was "conferencing with the student" and "telephoning the parent." Changing the student's "seating assignment," "consulting counselor," and "sending a report home" were also high frequency interventions. On the other hand, holding a conference with the parents, or referring the student to other programs, administrators, or agencies occurred quite infrequently.

Administrative disciplinary actions. Administrative actions taken by the building administrator in response to the referral are reported in Table 5. By far the most frequent response was to send a report home, an action that occurred for 72% of all of the referrals. In addition, the parent was called in a substantial 22% of the referrals, while in-school suspension and suspension represented much smaller percentages of responses (9% and 6%, respectively) than had been found in Study I.

Data from the 1993-1994 school year indicated that the three building administrators made about 18.2% (180) of the 988 office referrals, while teachers and other staff made about 70% (692) of the total referrals (11.7% or 116 were missing this information). Of the 692 referrals to the office made by staff members other than the three building administrators, a total of 58 different staff members were involved in making referrals. Of these, 37 made from 1-9 office referrals comprising 27.2% of the total number of these referrals, 11 teachers made from 10-19 office referrals comprising 24.6% of the referrals, and 10 teachers made 20 or more office referrals, comprising 48.2% of the referrals.

DISCUSSION

The two studies are consistent in finding that problems of insubordination and noncompliance are the most frequent reasons for disciplinary referral in middle school, and that the most serious types of disciplinary infractions appear to be relatively uncommon. These findings are consistent with literature showing that the most frequent

problems tend to be problems with authority, rather than behaviors that place others in danger. Edelman, Beck, and Smith (1975) reported that almost two thirds of the suspensions reported in Office of Civil Rights data were for “non-serious” offenses. The data are also consistent with findings that noncompliance and defiance are among the least well-tolerated of student behaviors in the classroom (Cooley, 1995; Landon & Mesinger, 1989; Safran & Safran, 1984).

Both studies suggest that a relatively large percentage of students are involved in at least one office referral. Study I indicating that 41.1% of all middle school students had at least one referral, while Study II indicated that about 38.2% of the students in Building B had at least one referral over the course of the school year. Given the differences in the two school systems, and a geographic separation of three states, these rates seem remarkably similar, and might suggest an expectation that a 40% referral rate is common for middle schools over the course of a school year.

Developmentally, middle school students are struggling with issues of identity and authority; thus it is not surprising that problems with authority represent the most common reason for disciplinary referral at the middle school level. Nevertheless, if school discipline represents a punitive response to developmentally appropriate behavior, one might well conclude that middle schools are not organized to deal effectively with these kinds of behaviors. Data suggesting relatively stable rates of these behaviors across time and location at the middle school level may indicate that punitive responses are not likely to have much effect on reducing these behaviors. These data suggest that training in non-punitive methods for dealing with non-compliance might substantially reduce disciplinary referrals at the middle school level.

Although problems of violence and severe disruption caused by students are a topic of great concern in the media and general public (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1996), the behaviors typically viewed as most serious—such as weapons possession or drugs and alcohol—appear to be low frequency behaviors in these middle schools. It may well be that continuing media attention to drug and violence problems has led to an overestimation of the proportion of occurrence of these behaviors. On the other hand, more violent behaviors may receive attention in school due to their intensity, not their frequency. One incident of a weapon or vandalism may create a significant problem in a middle school through the fear, disruption and loss of property it causes for others in that environment.

Data on administrative actions taken in response to office referrals were less straightforward. As in previous studies, the rate of suspension appears to be highly variable in different locations (Edelbrock et al., 1975; Wu et al., 1982). Suspension occurred in response to 33% of the Study I referrals, but only in about 6% of the Study II referrals. It is unclear whether these differences represent district-wide differences, differences in categories of administrative action, or simply a lower rate of suspension at the particular school in Study II. Certainly one might expect significant differences by building in the use of various disciplinary options; it may well be that the lower rate of suspension at Middle School B is due to the extensive use of other options, such as parent contact. Finally, findings concerning the relationship between student offense and administrative consequence seem somewhat counterintuitive. With the exception of referrals for fighting, there appeared to be no consistent differences in whether different types of offenses received suspension, or more mild consequences, such as parent contact or reprimand.

Previous studies have suggested that a substantial proportion of variability in school discipline may be attributable to school factors such as teacher attitudes, centralization of discipline, and school governance climate (Wu et al., 1982). Study II suggested that

most behavior that precipitated an office referral occurred in the classroom, and that most such referrals are written by teachers. In addition, findings from Study II that almost half of the referrals were due to a small proportion of teachers who made high numbers of referrals. These data suggest that further study is warranted to identify specific classroom- and school-based factors associated with office referral and discipline, as well as specific interventions that might reduce the overall rate of exclusionary discipline.

Overrepresentation by race, SES, gender, and disability label has been among the most consistent findings in studies of school discipline (Brantlinger, 1991; Costenbader & Markson, 1994; Edelman et al, 1975; NCAS, 1986; Panko-Stilmock, 1996; Rose, 1988; Wu et al, 1982,). Both of the current studies found overrepresentation of low SES students, males, and special education students in terms of both school referrals and rate of suspension. Study I found that, even in a district with a high proportion of African-American students, African-Americans were referred to the office significantly more frequently than other ethnic groups. While the data reported here does not permit a judgement of whether minority overrepresentation is an indicator of bias, previous studies (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Wu et al., 1982) have indicated that minority overrepresentation in school discipline appears to be independent of both student behavior and socioeconomic status. Overuse of any disciplinary procedure that is not based on a corresponding overrepresentation of behavior may be an indicator of discriminatory treatment at some point in the disciplinary process. It is critical that further research seek to identify the sources of racial disproportionality in the application of suspension.

This study did not address the effects of school discipline on students; to our knowledge there have been no investigations that have systematically studied either the short- or long-term effectiveness of typical school discipline. Yet both these and previous data raise disturbing questions about current practice, and suggest that a search for alternatives may be fruitful. Exposure to exclusionary discipline has been shown, not to improve school outcomes, but in fact to be associated with higher rates of school dropout (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). recent developmental formulations tracing the course of conduct disorder suggest that students at-risk for delinquency become progressively alienated from school, especially around middle school age, and more likely to associate with antisocial peers outside of school (Patterson, 1992). One must be very concerned about a procedure that puts a student at-risk for school alienation on the street for days at a time, where the most available peers will be those who have already chosen an antisocial course. Together, the data on exclusionary discipline raise troubling doubts about a practice that may increase the likelihood of dropout and delinquency, especially when that procedure has been consistently overused with minorities.

Ultimately, alternatives that stress prevention, and instruction as appropriate alternatives may have a greater likelihood of affecting the behavior of disruptive students. Crisis intervention (Pilcher & Poland, 1992), conflict resolution and peer mediation (Bodine, Crawford, & Schrupf, 1995), school-based problem solving teams (Short, Short, & Blanton, 1994) and building-wide behavior management plans (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993) have all demonstrated potential as effective and feasible alternatives to suspension and expulsion. In addition, school- and district-wide disciplinary policies and data collection can help address minority overrepresentation in the application of school discipline (Williams, 1989). Finally, instructional approaches to management that teach appropriate behavior, rather than simply punishing misbehavior, offer a promising alternative to exclusionary discipline (Cessna & Skiba, 1996; Colvin, Sugai, & Patching, 1993; Kameenui & Darch, 1995).

Given the complexity of the lives of students exhibiting disruptive behavior, it seems highly likely that multi-component instructional interventions will be necessary in order to effectively address school conduct problems.

The limitations of analysis of an extant data base should be noted. It is impossible to gauge the absolute accuracy of the school records used in both studies; there may, for instance, be implicit understandings at the building or district level that encourage or discourage certain types of office referrals. It is also likely that, even within district, there are wide variations in behavioral definitions or teacher tolerance, and that these may yield variation in the type or rate of incidents reported. Finally, either disciplinary referral or suspension may be used by administrators as a negotiating tool. Bowditch (1993) found that leniency in the administration of suspension appears to co-vary with the student's previous disciplinary history, academic record, and the degree of remorse exhibited for the misbehavior. The complexity of factors influencing office referral and reporting suggest that these data be regarded as rough estimates of student behavior and administrative response; their validity must be judged by their consistency across the two studies, and with previous findings.

In this investigation, consistency across the two studies was in general quite good. As in previous investigations, behaviors that lead to office referral were primarily not those that threaten safety, but rather, those that indicate noncompliance or disrespect. In both studies, about 40% of all students receive at least one office referral in the middle school during the school year. Perhaps most importantly, these data provide further evidence of disproportionality in the administration of school discipline based on race, SES, gender, and disability, and raise serious concerns about the use of exclusionary discipline at the middle school level.

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Table 1. Types of Disciplinary Offenses for Middle School Students in Study I

Type of Offense	Frequency	Percent of all Incidents
Disobedience	4696	27.6
Conduct Interference	2175	12.8
Disrespect	1824	10.7
Fighting	1800	10.6
Excess Noise	1015	6.0
Abusive Language	853	5.0
Other	810	4.8
Endangering Behavior	608	3.6
Obscene Language/Gesture	513	3.0
Tardy	465	2.7
Truancy	436	2.6
Left without Permit	426	2.5
Throw/Propel Objects	287	1.7
Threat	245	1.4
Loitering	167	1.0

Theft	146	.9
Vandalism	112	.7
Minor Offense	92	.5
Sexual Act	62	.4
Gambling	44	.3
Indecent Exposure	41	.2
Coercion	35	.2
Hazing	34	.2
Smoking	34	.2
Drugs/Alcohol Possession	32	.2
Cheat	27	.2
Spit/Defecate/Urinate	25	.1
Weapon	21	.1
False or No ID	8	.0
False Fire Alarm	6	.0
Extortion	3	.0
Soliciting Funds	2	.0
Set Fire	1	.0
Total	17045	100.0%

Table 2. Types of Disciplinary Consequences for Middle School Students Study I

Consequence	Frequency	Percent of All Incidents
Suspension	5673	33.3
Reprimand	2095	12.3
In-School Suspension	1721	10.1
Parent Contact	1599	9.4
Other	1465	8.6
Counseling	1191	7.0
Conference	898	5.3
Detention	833	4.9
Isolation	624	3.7
Bus Suspension	373	2.2
Arrest	168	1.0
Apology	121	.7
Extra Work	52	.3
Expulsion	47	.3
Withdraw Privileges	46	.3
Referral	38	.2
Behavior Contract	37	.2
Corporal Punishment	37	.2
Peer Counseling	11	.1
Total	17,029	100%

NOTE

Suspension is an aggregate of five categories, one through five day suspensions.

Table 3. Reason for office referrals (Offenses) for Middle School B

Reason for Referral:	First Semester		Second Semester	
	8/28/95-1/24/96		1/29/96-6/9/96	
	#	%	#	%
Lack of cooperation	213	52%	218	50%
Insubordination/verbal abuse	154	37%	169	39%
Excessive tardiness/absences	67	16%	74	17%
Inappropriate/profane/abusive language	65	16%	70	16%
Other	77	19%	43	10%
Repeated lack of classroom materials	33	8%	19	4%
Truancy	25	6%	28	6%

Assault/fighting	28	7%	22	5%
Threats/intimidation	15	4%		5%
Repeated violation of rules or law	18	4%	17	4%
Destructive to property	7	2%	4	1%
Dress code/inappropriate attire	4	1%	4	1%
/indecenty				
Sexual harassment/assault	5	1%	2	0%
Stealing	4	1%	3	1%
Smoking/possession of tobacco	5	1%	1	0%
Bus conduct	1	0%	1	0%
Possession/use of a weapon	1	0%	0	0%
Controlled substance use/possession	0	0%	1	0%
TOTALS FOR REASONS MARKED	722	175%	699	153%
Total forms entered	413	49%	433	51%

NOTE

The total number of referral forms was 846, with 1,421 reasons marked.

Table 4. Actions Taken Prior to Current Referral for Middle School B

Prior Actions Taken by Referrer:	First Semester		Second Semester		TOTAL	
	8/28/95-1/24/96		1/29/96-6/9/96		1995-1996	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Conference with student	225	54%	219	51%	444	52%
Telephoned parent	208	50%	212	49%	420	50%
Changed student seat	142	34%	129	30%	271	32%
Consulted counselor	130	31%	119	27%	249	29%
Detained student after school	120	29%	113	26%	233	28%
ent a report home	74	18%	84	19%	158	19%
Modified/individualized class work	67	16%	76	18%	143	17%
Other actions	60	15%	63	15%	123	15%
Checked student folder	57	14%	48	11%	105	12%
Referral to office/administration	34	8%	33	8%	67	8%
Held conference with parent	32	7%	22	5%	54	6%
Referred to student assistance team	0	0%	4	0%	4	0%
Referred to SCIP or other program	0	0%	1	0%	1	0%
TOTAL Actions Indicated	1,149	278%	1,123	259%	2,172	257%
Total forms entered	413	49%	433	51%	846	100%

NOTE

The total number of referral forms was 846 with 2,172 prior actions marked.

Table 5. Administrator Actions Taken in Response to Office Referral for Middle School B

Present Action by Administrator:	First Semester		Second Semester		TOTAL	
	8/28/95-1/24/96		1/29/96-6/9/96		1995-1996	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Report sent home	276	67%	335	77%	611	72%
Other actions	136	33%	63	15%	199	24%
Parent called	91	22%	92	21%	183	22%
Student will make up time	45	11%	41	9%	86	10%
In-school suspension	40	10%	40	9%	80	9%
Before or after school detention	22	5%	49	11%	71	8%
Student suspended	25	6%	22	5%	47	6%
Parent conference	14	3%	13	3%	27	3%
Student contract developed	10	2%	7	1%	17	2%
Referred to student services	5	1%	3	0%	8	1%
Police called	0	0%	2	0%	2	0%

Other authorities called	0	0%	1	0%	1	0%
TOTAL Actions Indicated	664	161%	668	154%	1,332	157%
Total forms entered	413	49%	433	51%	846	100%

NOTE

The total number of referral forms was 846, with a total of 1,332 administrator actions marked.

Figure 1. Most frequent referrals receiving mild consequences (e.g., parent contact, counseling, reprimand, conference, behavior contract, apology, peer counseling, withdrawal of privileges, or extra work).

Figure 2. Most frequent referrals leading to suspension.

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