

School Punishment and Delinquency: How May Suspension and Expulsion Affect Future Deviancy?

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The school-to-prison pathway (SPP) is a series of mechanisms placing some students with deviant behavior at a higher risk for incarceration (Homeset al., 2020). A phenomenon known as disproportionate minority contact leads to significant overrepresentation of African American youth in juvenile justice systems (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Home and school environments play a role in these systems. African American youth are more likely to experience community violence and those with high exposure to violence show higher rates of delinquency (Burnside et al., 2018; Liet al., 1999). School suspension has been positively correlated with contact in the justice system, suggesting school disciplinary tactics may do more harm than good in preventing delinquent behavior and incarceration (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Therefore, the current study sought to investigate the association of exclusionary school punishment (i.e., suspension and expulsion) with future delinquent predisposition in a sample of detained youth. We hypothesized that as the number of suspensions increased the risk for delinquency would also increase.

Data were collected from adjudicated male youth ($n = 1,535$) residing in a court-mandated treatment program for serious delinquent behavior (Mean age: 16.34 years; Race: Non-white, 54.6%; White, 45.4%). There were two variables of interest in this study: number of school suspensions and delinquent predisposition. The number of self-reported school suspensions was obtained during pre-treatment interview. The Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI; Millon, 1996) was used to measure delinquent predisposition.

We used a linear regression approach to model the number of suspensions as a predictor variable of delinquent predisposition. The sample had a mean score of 25.1688 ($SD = 52.57$) on number of suspensions and 67.61 ($SD = 23.68$) on delinquent predisposition. The

number of self-reported suspensions and/or expulsions was positively correlated with delinquent predisposition (Pearson's $r = .140, p = .00$). However, as seen in Figure 1, multiple outliers may be influencing the association. Results of the linear regression were significant, $F(1, 1533) = 30.41, p = 0.00, \eta^2 = 0.04$, but only accounted for 4% of the variance. These results imply a model with additional variables may better explain this relationship in future studies.

Overall, support for the SPP was found with out-of-school punishment positively associated with self-reported delinquent predisposition. Our results indicate out-of-school disciplinary tactics may increase the likelihood of unintended consequences, such as exposure to violence and delinquency. Thus, schools may play a role in decreasing risk for delinquency by implementing changes to these policies. Implications of this study also pertain to student trust in rehabilitative support structures, since suspension also removes access to school counselors and psychologists. Alternative forms of discipline should be considered to better serve students broadly. It is also clear that a complex set of processes contribute to delinquency, and a wholistic approach is needed to understand it more fully. With this in mind, future studies should consider demographic variables and the intergenerational effects of SPP. Understanding the mechanisms which schools and communities can take together to mitigate the effects of the SPP on minority communities is critical.

Statement of Research Advisor

Taylor's research was supported by a more than 20-year public-public partnership with the Alabama Department of Youth Services and the Auburn University Department of Psychological Sciences. A contract funds the Accountability Based Sex Offense Prevention Program (ABSOPP), an evidence-based treatment program for youth adjudicated for illegal sexual behavior

in the state. Taylor is investigating their work as a College of Liberal Arts Undergraduate Research Fellow. This research highlights some of the excellent student scholarship produced from The Juvenile Delinquency Lab.

-Kelli R. Thompson, *Psychological Sciences*

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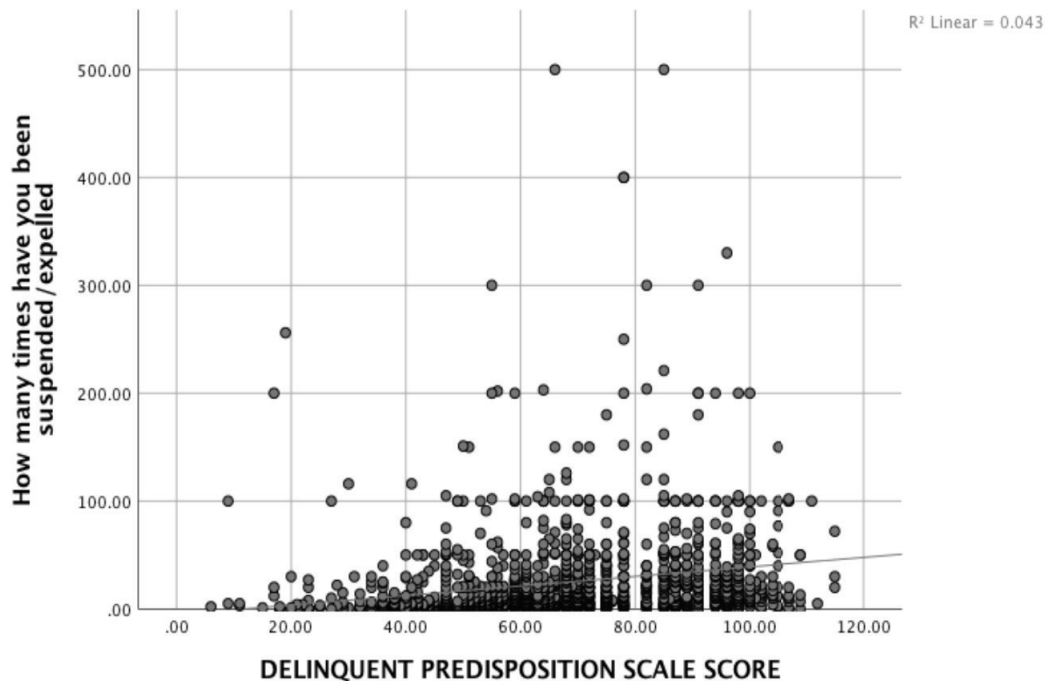


Figure 1. Simple scatter plot with fit line for number of suspensions/expulsions by delinquent predisposition.