

Race Differences in School Exclusions and Anti-social Behavior

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Many studies have reported that there are race differences in school suspensions and exclusions in the United States. The incidence of school suspensions and exclusions is highest in blacks, followed by Native Americans, Hispanics, and whites, and lowest in East Asians. A Task Force set up by the American Psychological Association to consider these differences has concluded that “there are no data supporting the assumption that African American students exhibit higher rates of disruption or violence that would warrant higher rates of discipline. Rather, African American students may be disciplined more severely for less serious or more subjective reasons...the disproportionate discipline of students of color may be due to lack of teacher preparation in classroom management, lack of training in culturally competent practices, or racial stereotypes”. It is argued that race differences in school suspensions and exclusions are more reasonably attributable to differences in anti-social behavior.

Key Words: race; school suspensions and exclusions; psychopathic personality; anti-social behavior.

A number of studies have shown that in the United States there are race differences in school suspensions and exclusions. Forty years ago, Backman (1970) reported that blacks were 2.5 times more suspended and excluded than whites. Six later studies confirming this result are reported in Lynn (2002). In the largest of these studies, Gordon, Piana, & Keleher (2000) reported the results of data collected in 1999 for 1.8 million school children drawn from public schools in Chicago, San Francisco, Durham NC, Denver, Austin TX, Boston, Los Angeles, Miami, Missoula, Providence, and Salem OR. Data for the five major racial

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and ethnic groups showed the greatest suspension and exclusion rate for blacks (12.8%), followed in descending order by Native Americans (11.0%), Hispanics (9.5%), whites (8.4%), and East Asians (3.2%) (these percentages are for the year 1999). The distinction between suspensions and exclusions is that suspensions are shorter than exclusions and normally do not exceed ten days; exclusions are longer and can be either temporary or permanent.

Table 1.

Race differences in school suspensions and exclusions for the school year 2002-2003. Source: American Psychological Association (2008)

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Hispanics</i>	<i>Native Americans</i>	<i>Blacks</i>
Suspension	1.0	1.23	1.52	2.84
Expulsion	1.0	1.50	1.98	2.47

In 2004 the American Psychological Association (APA) set up a Task Force to examine these racial differences in school suspensions and exclusions, focussing on whether “zero tolerance” attempts to reduce these have been successful, and also to consider the explanation for the race differences. The Task Force reported its conclusions in December, 2008 (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). It documents new evidence for race differences in school suspensions and exclusions for the school year 2002-2003 and reports the same differences as have been reported in several previous studies. The results are shown in Table 1. The proportions of Hispanics, Native Americans and blacks that were disciplined are calculated in relation to 1.0 for whites. Thus, with regard to suspension, Hispanics were 1.23 times more suspended than whites, Native Americans were 1.52 times more suspended than whites, and blacks were 2.84 times more suspended than whites. It will be noted that the suspension and exclusion rate of blacks (2.84 times that of whites) is almost the same as that reported forty years ago by Backman (1970) (2.5 times that of whites). The

intermediate position of Hispanics and Native Americans also confirms the results of previous studies.

The Task Force report concludes that “there are no data supporting the assumption that African American students exhibit higher rates of disruption or violence that would warrant higher rates of discipline. Rather, African American students may be disciplined more severely for less serious or more subjective reasons...the disproportionate discipline of students of color may be due to lack of teacher preparation in classroom management, lack of training in culturally competent practices, or racial stereotypes” (p. 854). This is a remarkable assertion because the most common reason for school suspensions and exclusions is conduct disorders (also termed behavior problems or “oppositional defiance disorder”), consisting of excessive aggression, violence, disobedience, and criminal offenses such as drug dealing), and a number of studies have reported that racial differences in these are similar to those in suspensions and exclusions. These studies are summarized in Table 2. Racial differences in these studies are expressed as d scores (i.e. in standard deviation units) when the results are reported as means and standard deviations. Some studies express the racial differences as Odds Ratios (OR) with whites set at 1.0. Other studies express the racial differences as Odds Ratios (OR) with whites set at 1.0.

The first eight rows in Table 2 present data for the Continental United States. Row 1 gives data for blacks and whites from a study of 1,027 children in North Carolina assessed for conduct disorder by teachers and shows mean scores of blacks about half a standard deviation higher ($d = .53$) than whites. Row 2 shows a closely similar result with mean scores of blacks again about half a standard deviation higher ($d = .49$) than whites, and also gives results for East Asians with a much lower score ($d = -1.12$) than whites. The next six studies confirm these results showing that black, Hispanic and Native American children consistently manifest greater conduct disorder than whites, and East Asian children consistently show less conduct disorder than whites. Row 9 presents data from Hawaii for white and East

Asian children (ethnic Chinese, Japanese and Korean with some Southeast Asian), and shows lower conduct disorder ($d = -.33$).

Table 2.

Race differences in conduct disorders

	<i>Location</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>East Asian</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Native American</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Reference</i>
1	US	d	.53	-	-	-	.00	Epstein et al.,1998
2	US	d	.49	-1.12	-	-	.00	Feng & Cartledge,1996
3	US	d	-	-	-	.35	.00	Dion et al.,1998
4	US	d	-	-.56	-	-	.00	Chang et al.,1995
5	US	%	5.9	3.0	8.0	-	3.4	Miller et al.,1995
6	US	%	-	-	46	50	11	Swain et al., 1997
7	US	OR	1.6	-	1	-	1	McDermott & Spencer,1997
8	US	%	51	37	52	-	39	Ellikson & Morton,1999
9	Hawaii	d	-	-.33	-	-	.00	Loo & Rapport,1998
10	Britain	%	38	-	-	-	10	Rutter et al.,1974
11	Britain: boys	OR	3.9	-	-	-	1	Tizard et al., 1988
12	Britain: girls	OR	2.3	-	-	-	1	Tizard et al., 1988
13	Britain	%	35	-	-	-	25	Goodman & Richards,1995
14	Netherlands	%	33	-	-	-	15	Junger & Polder, 1993
15	Hong Kong	d	-	-.49	-	-	.00	Luk & Leung,1989

Rows 10 through 13 present four studies from Britain showing the same substantially higher prevalence of conduct disorder among blacks as among whites. Rows 11 and 12 give behavior problems assessed by teachers of 3-5 year old boys and girls at the same inner city schools in London and shows black boys have 3.9 times the scores of white boys, and black girls have 2.3 times the scores of white girls. Row 14 presents data from the Netherlands in which 12-17 year old boys reported on their own delinquent behaviors of stealing, fighting, vandalism, etc. and shows the prevalence of these delinquent behaviors about twice as great among blacks from the former Dutch colony of Surinam and as among whites. Row 15 presents data for children in Hong Kong

compared with white American children and shows lower scores for conduct disorder among the Hong Kong Chinese as among American white children. The data in the table are consistent in showing that black, Hispanic and Native American children consistently manifest greater conduct disorder, while East Asian children consistently show less conduct disorder, as compared with white.

Table 3.

Black-white differences in delinquency in the United States expressed as odds ratios

	<i>Offense</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Reference</i>
1	Conviction	8.1	14.1	Gold,1966
2	Institutionalization	9.8	13.9	Gold,1966
3	5+ Police contacts	4.8	-	Wolfgang et al., 1972

The higher prevalence of conduct in blacks than in whites shown in Table 2 is also present in juvenile crime (delinquency). American studies showing this are summarized in Table 3. The results are presented as odds ratios giving the numbers of blacks to one white). Row 1 shows that in the 1960s ratio of black to whites for criminal convictions for boys was 8.1:1, while for girls the ratio of blacks to whites was 14.1:1. Row 2 shows similar ratios for institutionalization for criminal offenses. Row 3 gives the results of studies summarized by Hindelang, Hirshi & Weis (1981) showing a black-white ratio of 4.8:1 for police contacts arising from delinquent behavior. Notice that the rate of school expulsions and suspension for blacks reported by the Task Force for blacks are only 2.6 times that of whites (see Table 1), and therefore that the black-white differences in criminal convictions are considerably greater than the difference in school exclusions and suspensions. This suggests that teacher bias is unlikely to be the reason for the racial difference in school expulsions and suspensions. In fact, the greater differences in criminal convictions suggests that teachers are more tolerant of anti-social behaviour in blacks.

Race differences in adolescent delinquency are also

present in adult crime. This is shown for homicides in Table 4. Rows 1 and 2 give data for the United States for convictions for homicide per 10,000 of the population for blacks, Native Americans and whites for 1979-81. They show the homicide rate for black males was about six times greater than for whites, and the homicide rate for Native American males was about three times greater than for whites. For females, the rates for blacks and Native Americans were about four times greater than for whites. Rows 3 and 4 give data for South Africa and show the black male homicide rate about six times greater than the white, and the black female rate about double the rate of whites.

Table 4.

Race differences in convictions for homicide per 10,000 population in the United States and South Africa

<i>Location</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Native American</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Reference</i>
US	1979-81	m	6.4	3.3	1.0	Lester, 1989
US	1979-81	f	1.3	1.1	0.3	Lester, 1989
S. Africa	1978-84	m	4.1	-	0.7	Lester, 1989
S. Africa	1978-84	f	0.6	-	0.2	Lester, 1989

These race differences in homicide are also found for other serious crimes. These are shown as differences in imprisonment in Table 5, and are largely for robbery and assault. Statistics for race differences in prison in the United States, England, Canada, France and Sweden all show much higher rates for blacks than for whites. In the United States, the rate of imprisonment for blacks is 8.26 times greater than that for whites, while in France, the rate of imprisonment for blacks is almost the same at 8.12 times greater than that for whites. In England the rate of imprisonment for blacks is 5.9 times greater than that for whites, and in Canada about the same at 5.2 times greater than that for whites. In Sweden the crime rate for blacks is

2.4 times greater than that for whites.

A further curious feature of the Task Force's report is that it fails to mention that fewer East Asians than whites are suspended and excluded from schools, as shown in the United States by Gordon, Piana, & Keleher (2000), and by Costenbader, & Markson (1994), and also in England (Gillborn, & Gipps, 1996). This also seems to undermine the Task Force's suggestion that teacher racial stereotypes are responsible for the high rate of suspensions and exclusions of Hispanics, Native Americans, and African Americans, unless the Task Force would wish to suggest that teachers are more prejudiced against whites than against East Asians. There is nothing surprising about the low rate of school suspensions and exclusions of East Asians. This is to be expected because several studies have shown that East Asians have a lower incidence of conduct disorders, delinquency and crime than whites and other groups, shown in Tables 2 and 5.

We are left with the puzzles of why the Task Force failed to mention that race differences in school suspensions and exclusions are consistent with those in conduct disorders and crime, and in number of other expressions of anti-social behavior, and are most satisfactorily explained by these, and further why the Task Force failed to mention the low rate of school suspensions and exclusions of East Asians. Perhaps the Task Force was unaware of these studies. Alternatively, perhaps the Task Force was aware of them but preferred to ignore them and blame the higher rates of suspensions and exclusions of Hispanics, Native Americans, and African Americans on the "lack of teacher preparation in classroom management, lack of training in culturally competent practices, or racial stereotypes" of white teachers. Whatever the explanation, the conclusion of the American Psychological Association Task Force that "there are no data supporting the assumption that African American students exhibit higher rates of disruption or violence that would warrant higher rates of discipline" (p. 854) can only be regarded as bizarre.

Table 5.

Race differences in prison (per 10,000 population) and crime (odds ratios for Sweden)

<i>Location</i>	<i>Measure</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>East Asian</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Native American</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Reference</i>
US	Prison	1994	mf	157.1	9.1	68.8	51.9	19.3	Taylor & Whitney, 1999
England	Prison	1993	m	203.9	-	-	-	34.5	Smith, 1997
Canada	Prison	1992	mf	369.0	35	-	199	71.0	Ontario, 1996
France	Prison	1995	mf	54.6	-	-	-	6.7	Tournier, 1997
Sweden	Crime	1985-9	mf	2.4	1.1	-	-	1.0	Martens, 1997

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