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RESEARCH BRIEF

A Mixed Methods Study of Black Girls' Vulnerability to Out-Of-School Suspensions: The Intersection of Race and Gender

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods research is to: (a) examine the out-of-school suspension (OSS) of Black girls, and (b) consider implications for reducing OSS by building on girls' own attempts to resist micro-aggressions and self-advocate at school.

Background & Purpose

Disproportionality in out-of-school suspension (OSS) is a persistent, multi-level social justice and child well-being issue affecting youth, families, schools, and society as a whole. Although the disproportionate suspension of Black boys has long been recognized as an issue, the apparent vulnerability of Black girls to harsh disciplinary practices is of relatively recent concern to educators and researchers (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Nationally, Black boys are suspended at a rate 3.3 times higher than the rate for White boys, but Black girls are suspended at a rate 5.3 times higher than the rate for White girls (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). For Black girls, harsh discipline can pathologize their behavior and perpetuate stereotypes that undermine their developmental and educational outcomes (Morris, 2016). Harsh discipline also can undermine their agency and discourage their autonomy (Wun, 2016).

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Disproportionality in OSS is a complex, multiple-level social problem that will require an equally complex, multiple-level response. Issues of race and ethnicity, student-to-student victimization, students' experiences of trauma, and various social issues originating outside of the school setting all contribute to disproportionalities in OSS (Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, & Marshall, 2014). The design of effective remedies will require an adequate understanding of the problem, as well as the historical and sociocultural contexts in which it emerged and is perpetuated. In this report, we focus on Black girls' experiences of OSS.

Our research questions were:

1. *What are the experiences of OSS of Black girls, their caregivers, and educators?*
2. *Are there disproportionalities in OSS in Minnesota across race and gender?*
3. *To what extent are there any disparities in the severity of disciplinary actions imposed during OSS across race and gender?*
4. *How can we reduce the disproportionalities in the number and severity of suspensions of Black girls?*

School of Social Work
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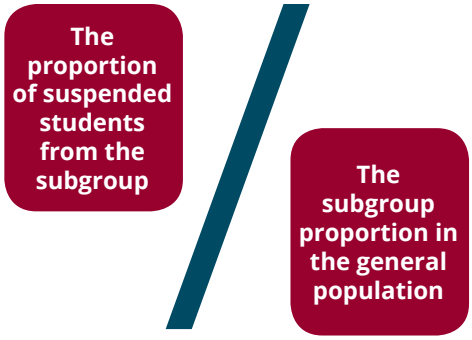
Methods

Using a sequential mixed methods design, we first interviewed 10 Black girls between 11 and 15 years of age who were suspended, their 10 caregivers, and five educators. Then we examined statewide administrative data from the Minn-LInK project to detect any disproportionalities in OSS rates.

The current research is a part of a larger program of research examining OSS (Gibson & Haight, 2013; Gibson et al., 2014; Haight, Gibson, Kayama, & Wilson, 2014; Kayama, Haight, Gibson, & Wilson, 2015; Haight, Kayama, & Gibson, 2016). We employed a sequential mixed methods design for the purposes of triangulation and elaboration (Haight & Bidwell, 2016). The qualitative inquiry was conducted in a large public school serving approximately 700 students from Grades 6–12 in Minnesota's largest metropolitan area. We conducted semi-structured, in-person, individual interviews with 10 Black girls age 11–15 who were suspended from school during the 2012–2013 academic year, their 10 caregivers, and 5 educators. We utilized cross-system data (available from the Minn-LInK project) linking student data from multiple State agencies (including the Minnesota Department of Education, Human Services, and Judicial Branch) to get a comprehensive account of racial and gender disparities in OSS rates. The study sample was drawn from all students enrolled in seventh grade (N=60,827) in Minnesota public schools in the academic year 2008–2009. Of those students, we identified 3,305 students receiving OSS. Disproportionality indexes (DI) were constructed as the ratio of the proportion of suspended students from each subgroup and the subgroup's proportion in the general population (Figure 1).

Figure 1:
Calculation of Disproportionality Index (DI)



Findings

Black girls were overrepresented in OSS relative to White, Asian, and Hispanic boys and girls, and Native girls. Furthermore, Black girls were sanctioned more harshly than were White students for disruptive, disorderly, and violent behaviors.

Participants described Black girls being sanctioned more frequently and harshly than were Whites for the same behaviors. In their narratives, 15 participants (seven girls, seven caregivers, and one educator) explicitly referred to the suspension as "*unfair*," or involving favoritism of other students. Several participants explicitly referred to the sanctions imposed on Black girls as "*meaner*" or "*harsher*" than those imposed on White girls for similar infractions. Some participants explicitly referred to racial differences. For example, one 11-year-old girl commented, *"[I'm] not trying to be racist – but Whites don't get in trouble as [much] as we do. Like if we [both] do something we [Black students] gotta take more consequences than they have to."* Some participants' narratives suggested that Black girls receive more or harsher OSS due to intersecting vulnerabilities of gender and race. Twelve participants described that some educators failed to respond to girls' complaints of bullying or sexual harassment, sometimes even trivializing their complaints. For example, one male administrator referred to a 12-year-old Black girl's request for help as an example of "*girl drama.*"

Some teachers criticized suspension polices focused on suspend-able behaviors as failing to consider the context of girls' infractions or their overall behavior. For example, some educators noted that Black girls' infractions may have resulted from their responses to persistent sexual harassment and bullying, issues not resolved by suspending the girls. A Black male educator described a typically well-behaved 14-year-old girl who received OSS for behavior in response to repeated bullying by a White girl:

> *I wouldn't have advocated for that big [five days] suspension. She's getting straight As, her behavior—she's never been written up—she's never shown any of that behavior before. So I felt that it was harsh when you look at the full picture of everything.*

Quantitative analysis of cross-system, administrative data of seventh-grade students in Minnesota revealed Black girls were overrepresented in OSS relative to White, Asian, and Hispanic boys and girls, and Native girls. Results from disproportionality indexes by race

Figure 2. Disproportionality index by race and gender

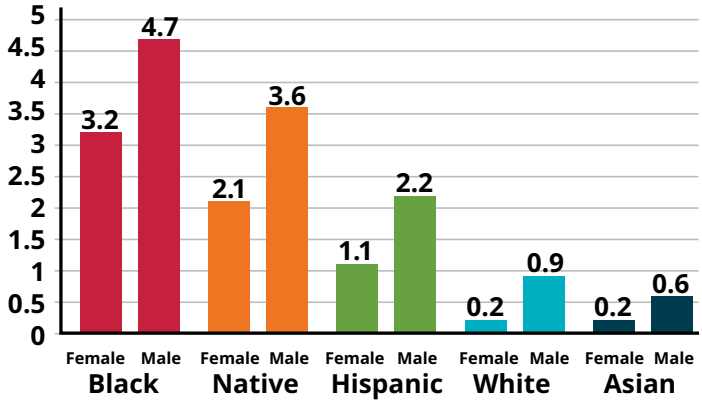
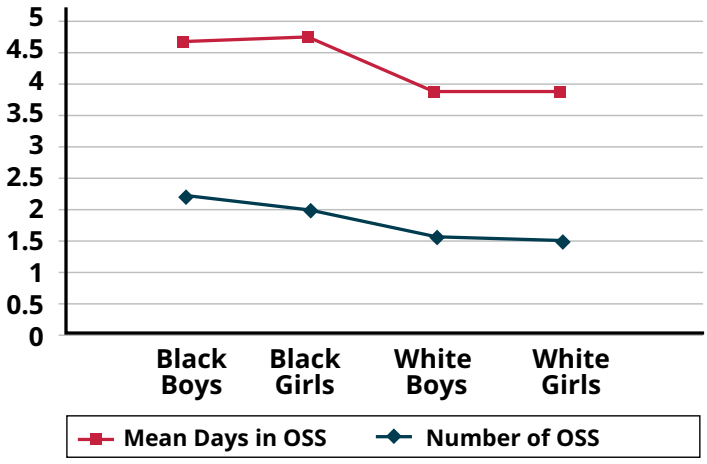


Figure 3: Mean number of OSS and Mean days in OSS



indicated that Black (DI: 4), Native American (DI: 3), and Hispanic (DI: 1.7) students were overrepresented in OSS. In contrast, White (DI: 0.6) and Asian (DI: 0.4) students were underrepresented. Disproportionality indexes by race and gender (Figure 2) were: Black boys (4.7), Native American boys (3.6), Black girls (3.2), Hispanic boys (2.2), Native American girls (2.1), Hispanic girls (1.1), White boys (0.9); Asian boys (0.6), Asian girls (0.2), and White girls (0.2).

Furthermore, ANOVA tests on mean days in OSS for each of the seven infractions suggest that Black girls were sanctioned more harshly than were White students for disruptive or disorderly behavior/insubordination ($F(3, 646) = 23.16$, $p = .000$) and violent behaviors ($F(3, 1462) = 15.26$, $p = .000$). Specifically, the mean days in OSS for Black students were longer than White students when they were suspended for disorderly conduct. In addition, Black girls received more days in OSS than Black boys, White boys, and White girls when they were suspended for violent behaviors (Figure 3).

Finally, qualitative data suggested strategies to reduce disproportionality in the frequency and severity of OSS for Black girls. First, Black girls attempted to strengthen relationships between family and school, what Bronfenbrenner (1995) would characterize as their family-school mesosystems. Some girls described sharing their experiences with their parents, who then approached educators to explain their daughters' experiences. For example, a mother initiated contact with her daughter's principal, thereby forming a family-school mesosystem to support her daughter's educational success. Likewise, a number of educators clearly recognized the importance of strengthening family-school relationships, especially building trusting relationships with families. One Black educator explained that:

> *Well, you realize that if you're gonna work with a parent and you're going to work with a family, they've got to be able to trust you. And if you need them to trust you, you need to be open with them and have conversations with them. That trust isn't something that is just built overnight. You're like, "Why doesn't the parent want to talk to me?" "Well, what have you done to reach across the table?" You know what I mean? Once they realize, "Okay, this person's at least trying and he's done this and done that," then it's much easier to do that.*

Second, Black girls developed communities of trusted adults and friends at school. Trusted adults provided psychological support and acted as advocates and problem solvers. Relationships with these trusted educators sometimes crossed racial lines. One 14-year-old girl reflected on the support of a trusted White educator, *"I told her [educator] to stop [by classroom]. She came into my room and was willing to sit down [and help me]."* A number of girls followed their caregivers' advice to consider carefully which peers to *"move with."* They described both the psychological support and the physical protection they received from these friends. One 14-year-old girl described her friends' response when another girl tried to initiate a fight with her. *"And then so [peers] were guarding [me] like in front of me, behind me and on the side of me, like holding me."* Girls also attempted to mitigate the actions of other Black girls that might result in OSS. For example, they described making suggestions to each other to ignore certain discriminatory actions, be silent instead of talking back to educators, and walk away from some confrontations with peers.

EDUCATORS, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN LEADERSHIP ROLES, CAN WORK TO ELIMINATE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND BULLYING EXPERIENCED BY BLACK GIRLS AND TO CREATE PROGRAMS TO BUILD UPON THEIR SELF-ADVOCACY SUCH AS DEVELOPING SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES OF OTHER BLACK GIRLS AND TRUSTED ADULTS AT SCHOOL..

Conclusion

Our goal was to increase our understanding of the experiences of Black girls to suggest ways to strengthen educational policies and practices that could reduce their disproportionate OSS and support their positive school engagement. The use of quantitative data extended our qualitative understandings by specifying the behaviors for which educators sanction Black girls more harshly. Black students were more harshly sanctioned than White students for disruptive or disorderly behavior, and Black girls were sanctioned more harshly for violent behavior. Black girls were sanctioned more severely for violent behavior than Black and White boys as well as White girls.

Our qualitative data suggest ways forward to reduce the overrepresentation of Black girls in OSS and support their educational engagement. Educators who hold positions of power, especially principals and behavioral deans, can reduce the need for Black girls to defend themselves by taking action to eliminate sexual harassment and bullying at school. Educators can actively support strong family-school relationships (for example, by reaching out to Black families to establish relationships in contexts other than disciplinary actions). Educators can support Black girls' self-advocacy and active resistance to oppression. OSS will not help Black girls develop effective strategies for dealing with the microaggressions they will likely experience throughout life. Coaching by trusted adults in collective social action may build on girls' communities to transform so-called disruptive/disorderly/insubordinate behaviors into more effective, collective strategies for responding when being ignored, silenced, and treated unfairly by those in positions of power.

Limitations

While we focused on the intersectionality of race and gender, students also experienced inequities related to low income and child maltreatment. Qualitative interviews probed issues of race but did not specifically ask about gender or intersectionality. More research is needed to explore issues of intersectionality with girls, their caregivers, and educators. A better understanding of the disproportionality and disparity in OSS requires the examination of factors beyond those considered here, including traumatic experiences, disabilities, and school environments.

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