

School Exclusionary Discipline and the School-to-Gang Pipeline: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT: *In 1994, the Federal government enacted the Gun-Free School Zones Act (Pub. L. No. 103-882, § 14601), requiring public schools to impose at least a one-year expulsion for students found bringing weapons onto school property to qualify for federal funding. This led to a surge in zero-tolerance policies—automatic, punitive measures for specific infractions, regardless of behavioral or mitigating circumstances (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Fabelo et al., 2011; Kang-Brown et al., 2013). These policies contributed to the emergence of the school-to-prison pipeline, where students, particularly marginalized youth, are pushed from the academic setting into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. A subsidiary to these policies and practices, the school-to-gang pipeline has developed: research suggests that students suspended even once are more likely to join gangs, and repeated suspensions further heighten this risk (Widdowson, Guarduno, & Fisher, 2020).*

The following case study examines the relationship between exclusionary school discipline and youth gang affiliation by analyzing survey data from 35 current and former male gang members in New York's Nassau and Suffolk counties. The findings reveal a correlation between gang involvement and a history of suspensions or expulsions, with Black and Brown participants disproportionately subjected to these punitive measures.

KEYWORDS- *gang, school, exclusionary rule, zero-tolerance, juvenile*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Gang members have invariably grown up in broken, chaotic homes; they have truanted from school, and many have been formally excluded...”

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The 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act accelerated the adoption of zero-tolerance policies in schools, requiring strict disciplinary consequences for predetermined behaviors (Mallett, 2016; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). While these policies aimed to promote safety, they often resulted in unintended negative outcomes. Stemming from the “get tough on crime” era of the 1980s, zero-tolerance policies removed consideration for student motivation and behavioral circumstance (Kang-Brown et al., 2013; Mallet, 2016).

Harsh, discipline environments hinder academic achievement (DeWitt, 2017; Dutil, 2020; Hirschfield, 2010; Kupchik, 2010), increasing risks of academic failure and dropout (Welch & Payne, 2012; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Being suspended or expelled can negatively affect social-emotional development, academic performance, and life trajectories (American Institutes of Research, 2020). Suspensions predict student dropout rates and can generate future negative behaviors (Federation of Teachers, 2011).

Exclusionary discipline alienates youth from school, leading to disengagement (Diehl, 2018). Disengaged students are less interested and involved, which may increase conduct problems and delinquent behaviors (Klasen, Stewart, & Lapshina, 2020). According to Diehl (2018), disengaged adolescents may seek acceptance and belonging elsewhere, raising the likelihood of gang association. Students of color face a greater risk of exclusionary discipline: they are suspended at three times the rate of their white peers. According to the National Institute of Educational Statistics, during the 2013–2014 school year, 2.6 million public school students were suspended, with Black youth accounting for the largest proportion (17.6%). Pyrooz and Sweeten (2015) found that youth gang members are disproportionately Black and Hispanic.

This study surveys 35 current and former New York gang members, aged 18–30, to examine the relationship between exclusionary school punishments and gang membership. The data supports the existence of the school-to-gang pipeline, although it must be noted that exclusionary disciplines have not been determined as risk predictors of youth gang affiliation.

II. Review of Literature

Zero-tolerance policies were intended to deter misbehavior but often had the opposite effect, increasing the likelihood of adverse outcomes (Welsh & Little, 2018). Many studies demonstrate that exclusionary discipline leads to academic disenfranchisement, failure, dropout, and the potential for criminalization (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Exclusionary practices like suspensions and expulsions have long-term negative impacts on students’ social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Huguley et al., 2022; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017).

These policies may also increase the likelihood of gang membership, fueling the school-to-gang pipeline. The Department of Justice describes gangs as groups of three or more individuals forming an identity to inspire fear or intimidation (2023). Pyrooz and Sweeten (2015) estimated that there were 1,059,000 youth gang members in the US in 2010, with roughly 400,000 joining each year. The National Gang Center (2022) has reported that approximately 8% of American youth have joined a gang before the age of twenty.

A Suffolk County (NY) report found 38% of local gang members were aged 16–18, with 8% younger than sixteen. According to the American Academy of Adolescent Psychiatry (2017), children are recruited into gangs at earlier ages, some as young as elementary school. Pyrooz and Sweeten (2015) identified age 13 as the peak risk for gang membership. Gass and Laughter (2015) found sixth grade (age 11) to be a pivotal year for at-risk youth.

Exclusionary discipline disproportionately affects youth of color (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Mallet, 2016). The National Institute of Educational Statistics (2013 – 2014) concluded that approximately 2.6 million public school students received one or more out-of-school suspensions, with Black youth receiving the highest percentage

(17.6%) compared to any other racial or ethnic group. In New York City, Black and brown youth are most affected by exclusionary discipline (Rodriguez & Welsch, 2022) and are overrepresented in gangs (Carson, 2018).

When young people are forced out of school, either through truancy or official school exclusions, they become much more vulnerable to joining gangs. Without the structure of school and spending free time unsupervised in the streets, they often lose important support. Being excluded from school often leads to feeling socially isolated, which pushes some young people to look elsewhere for belonging and acceptance, making gang involvement more likely.

Suspensions result in significant loss of instructional time. In May 2020, out-of-school suspensions led to 11,392,474 days of instruction lost, or 62,596 years (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Hemez, Brent, & Mowen, 2020; Welsh & Little, 2018). Low academic performance and school discipline increase the likelihood of gang membership (Higgins et al., 2018; Widdowson et al., 2020). Suspensions and expulsions can trigger academic difficulties and dropouts (Andrews & Bonta, 1998; Balfanz et al., 2014; Hill et al., 1999; Le Blanc & Lanctot, 1998).

The following case study examined the interrelationship between exclusionary punishments and future gang association. Through the distribution, collection, and evaluation of data collected from 35 current and former gang members, the subsequent study exemplifies a causal link between the two variables, supporting the existence of the school-to-gang pipeline (STGP).

The following study examined what percentage of the research sample experienced some form of exclusionary punishment before their gang affiliations. Through an analysis of participant responses, this study aimed to provide validation to the existence of the STGP in Nassau and Suffolk counties (New York).

III. Research Design and Methods

A qualitative exploratory case study was used, involving 35 current and former male gang members, to explore the connection between exclusionary school discipline and gang membership. Exploratory case studies are useful for finding insights that standard quantitative methods may miss and can help toward the development of new theories (Nutall, Shankar, Beverland, & Hooper, 2011; Chu, et. al., 2010). According to Wellner and Pierce-Friedman (2019), “the exploratory study is designed to bring the researcher to a deeper understanding through either initial investigation or ongoing research, which adds depth to what is already known about a phenomenon to be examined” (p. 84).

This study aims to identify factors that may contribute to the school-to-gang pipeline. The main goal is to evaluate how many participants experienced exclusionary discipline during their academic years and whether those experiences are connected to gang involvement. Based on participants' answers, the study examines the strength of the school-to-gang pipeline.

Labeling theory guided the study. Howard Becker (1963) argued that deviance is not a natural trait, but a label assigned by society, which can become central to a person's identity. Edwin Lemert (1951) expanded on this by introducing primary deviance (minor rule-breaking) and secondary deviance (embracing a deviant identity after being labeled). Research shows that suspensions can increase the risk of future deviant behavior (Gerlinger et al., 2021).

Exclusionary discipline can lead to negative labeling with long-term effects. Paternoster and Iovanni (1989) found that excluded students often form closer ties with other deviants. Widdowson, Guarduno, and Fisher (2020) explained how being suspended can increase time spent with unsupervised peers, raising the risk of joining a gang. Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher (1993) found that negative labels from teachers increased the chances of gang membership by eighth grade. Novak and Krohn (2020) also showed that labeled students are more likely to hang

out with deviant peers and get involved in delinquent behavior. Once the “gang member” label is accepted, it can lead to continued deviance (Mann, 2019; McShane, Williams & Dolny, 2008).

This research design helped uncover factors that contribute to the shift from school exclusion to gang involvement, supporting the idea of a school-to-gang pipeline.

Research questions included:

- Were you ever suspended or expelled from school, and at what age?
- At what age did you join a gang?
- Did your gang involvement occur before or after suspension/expulsion?

The study involved 35 current and former gang members from Suffolk and Nassau Counties, New York. To be eligible, participants had to be male, English-speaking, between 18–30 years of age, and either current or former gang members.

Participants were told about the study's purpose and given consent forms, surveys, and pencils. To protect privacy, signed consent was waived, and all responses were submitted in sealed envelopes. Participation was voluntary and had no time limit, which helped reduce pressure and limit personal identifiers.

The survey asked about school discipline experiences, initial gang involvement, and the timing between the two. Conducting the study locally allowed easier access to participants.

All 35 participants completed a survey with multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Responses were analyzed using NVivo software to find key themes. The coding process involved reviewing and rechecking the data to ensure it was accurate and consistent.

3.1 Results

Survey data were entered into NVivo for thematic analysis. The questions addressed education level, suspensions, expulsions, gang involvement, current membership status, and demographic information.

Among the 35 participants, all aged between 18 and 30, the age distribution was as follows:

- The largest group (29%) was 18 years old.
- Other age groups included: 22 years old (14%), 19 and 20 years old (11% each), 21, 24, and 25 years old (9% each), and 23, 28, and 30 years old (3% each).
- Three percent of participants declined to report their age.

These findings are summarized in Table 1.

Among the 35 participants, racial identification was reported as follows:

- 7 participants (20%) identified as Black/African American
- 11 participants (31%) identified as Latino/Hispanic
- 10 participants (29%) identified as White/Caucasian
- 7 participants (20%) declined to state their racial identity

These results are summarized in Table 2.

Gang entry ages among participants were distributed as follows:

- 60% reported joining a gang between the ages of 11 and 15
- 26% joined between 16 and 20 years old
- 14% reported joining as early as ages 5 to 10

These findings are presented in Table 3.

Disciplinary histories among participants revealed the following patterns:

- 77% reported having been suspended during their academic years, while 23% had not experienced suspension.
- Regarding expulsions, 57% reported having been expelled, 37% had not been expelled, and 6% did not respond to the question.
- Most disciplinary actions were related to violent or disorderly conduct.

These findings are presented in Table 4.

Most participants had been suspended from school for violent or disorderly conduct. The reasons for expulsions were similar to those for suspensions. The data indicated that most participants experienced some form of exclusionary discipline. All 35 male participants were between the ages of 18 and 30, with nearly one-third being 18 years old. This age range provided participants with enough distance from their school years to reflect on their educational experiences and the factors that contributed to their involvement in gang activities.

3.2 Findings and Discussion

Participants (60%) reported joining gangs between the ages of 11 and 15, while another 26% became involved between the ages of 16 and 20; 14 percent reported gang involvement as early as ages 5 to 10. These findings suggest that gang affiliation often begins during critical developmental stages (childhood and adolescence) when identity formation and the need for social belonging are still developing (Erikson, 1968; Steinberg, 2014).

Adolescents are especially vulnerable to external influences. For many, gangs may offer a sense of belonging, identity, and protection—particularly when support systems such as family stability, positive peer groups, or school engagement are lacking (Decker & Curry, 2000; Thornberry et al., 2003).

The racial breakdown of participants revealed that over half (51%) identified as Black or Latino/Hispanic—31% Latino/Hispanic and 20% Black/African American. These findings align with national trends showing that youth of color are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary school discipline. Extensive research confirms this disproportionality (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Mallet, 2016). Racial disparities in school discipline, often referred to as the “discipline gap,” are well-documented (McIntosh et al., 2018; Mittleman, 2018; Mowen & Brent, 2018).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013–2014), approximately 2.6 million public school students received one or more out-of-school suspensions, with Black students receiving the highest percentage (17.6%) compared to any other racial or ethnic group. During the 2014–2015 academic year, the U.S. Department of Education reported that Black students were 3.8 times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions than their white peers. In New York City, Black students are the most frequently subjected to exclusionary discipline due to racial disproportionality (Rodriguez & Welsch, 2022). In 2016, Black students in New York State made up 27.1% of the student population but accounted for approximately half of all suspensions (The Alliance for Quality Education, 2019).

While a significant portion of participants identified as Latino/Hispanic (31%) and Black/African American (20%), nearly 29% identified as White/Caucasian. This suggests that gang involvement and exclusionary discipline can affect youth across racial lines. Additionally, 20% of participants declined to disclose their racial identity, possibly due to concerns about anonymity or mistrust.

The above study revealed a high prevalence of exclusionary measures: 77% of participants had been suspended, and 57% had been expelled during their academic years. Most of these actions were related to violent or disruptive behavior. These findings suggest that behavioral challenges were often met with punitive measures rather than supportive interventions. Schools often respond to such behaviors with exclusion rather than addressing underlying causes such as mental health concerns or unmet needs, thereby pushing students out of the educational system and, in some cases, into gang environments where they may find a sense of acceptance and belonging.

School discipline was a common experience among participants: only about a quarter had never been suspended, and just over a third had never been expelled. This reinforces the idea that exclusionary discipline can be a contributing factor in the school-to-gang pipeline.

Most participants joined gangs during early adolescence, 60% between ages 11 and 15, and 14% between ages 5 and 10. This early involvement reveals the heightened vulnerability of youth during formative years, and the role exclusionary school practices may play in increasing the risk of gang affiliation.

Overall, these findings emphasize that while youth of color are disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline, such policies and their consequences are not exclusive to any one racial group. Most participants in this study experienced exclusionary discipline during their educational years. According to labeling theory, labeling students as "troublemakers" or "delinquents" may alter their self-image and how others perceive them, often leading students to adopt behaviors associated with those labels. Exclusion and stigma can lead students to look for different groups where they feel accepted and find their identity, such as gang membership.

These disciplinary practices can unintentionally reinforce negative behaviors and limit opportunities for academic success and personal growth. Labeling theory explains how school discipline, intended to correct misconduct, can unintentionally keep students feeling excluded and push them toward gang affiliation. This shows the need for fair and supportive school discipline that helps all students and tackles the real reasons behind behavior problems.

Research has shown that restorative practices are linked not only to improvements in student behavior but also to reductions in suspensions and expulsions (Armour, 2013; Klevan, 2021). Implementing restorative methods in schools can positively affect student conduct and reduce disciplinary disparities (Klevan, 2021; Lewis, 2009). These approaches give students a chance to take responsibility for their actions without being stigmatized by a negative label, an important step in dismantling the pipeline that often leads from school discipline to gang membership.

In response to the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline, many states have begun limiting the use of suspensions and expulsions. In 2022, the New York State Safe Schools Task Force found that exclusionary discipline in New York schools unfairly targeted students of color. The Task Force recommended limiting these practices, focusing on restorative justice and support instead of punishment, and providing more help for students in creating fairer school environments.

In 2014, the California Legislature stopped suspending young kids for minor infractions to reduce unfair punishments. Then in 2023, they extended this to all grades and pushed schools to use restorative justice practices instead of suspensions.

Texas House Bill 6 affords Texas schools more options for handling student behavior. It lets schools keep students in in-school suspension for up to 10 days and allows younger students (below 3rd grade) to be suspended out of school only if they are a safety risk or constantly disrupt class.

House Bill six (HB 6) works well with restorative justice, which focuses on fixing problems and helping students take responsibility, instead of just punishing them. Restorative practices can prevent bigger issues and improve student behavior. Combined, HB 6 and restorative justice can help make schools safer and fairer for all students.

These policy modifications exemplify the need for greater awareness of the school-to-gang pipeline, where harsh school discipline can push students out of school and into environments where gangs offer identity, acceptance, and protection.

If restorative approaches can reduce the overuse of suspensions and expulsions, they may also help prevent youth from gang membership and ultimately, the juvenile and criminal justice systems. The financial implications are significant. For example, in 2019, it cost over \$82,000 per year to incarcerate one person in a typical New York county jail, and over \$115,000 per year in a state prison (The Vera Institute, 2021). In Indiana, it costs about \$19,200 per year to incarcerate an individual under age 18 (Indiana State Government, 2023).

This research demonstrates a correlation between exclusionary school discipline and future gang affiliation, which may lead to long-term justice system involvement. If schools continue to push students out instead of offering support, the pipeline from school to gangs—and ultimately to prison—remains firmly in place.

IV. FIGURES AND TABLES

Table 1: Age of Male Current and Former Gang Members

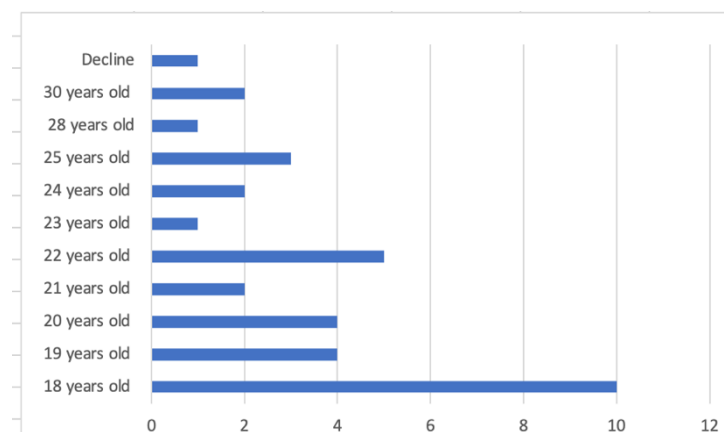


Table 2: Racial Breakdown of Male Gang Members in New York State

Race	Number of Participants
Black (African American)	7
Latino	11
White (Caucasian)	10
Decline	7

Table 3: Age When Gang Was Joined

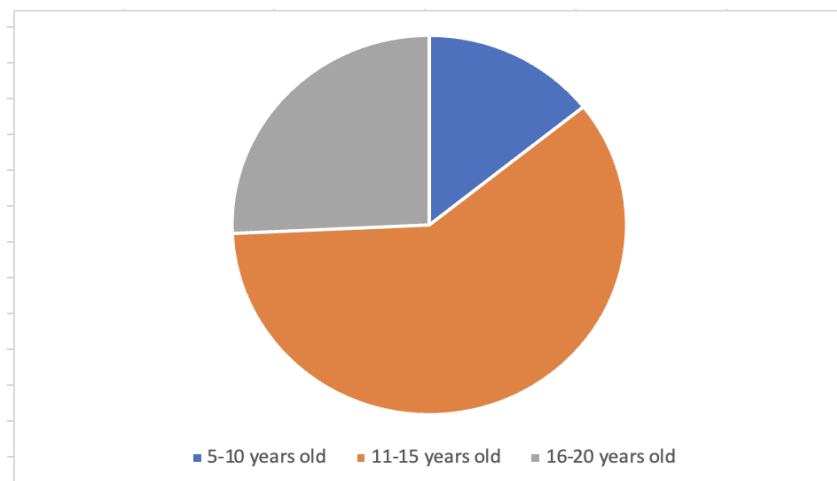
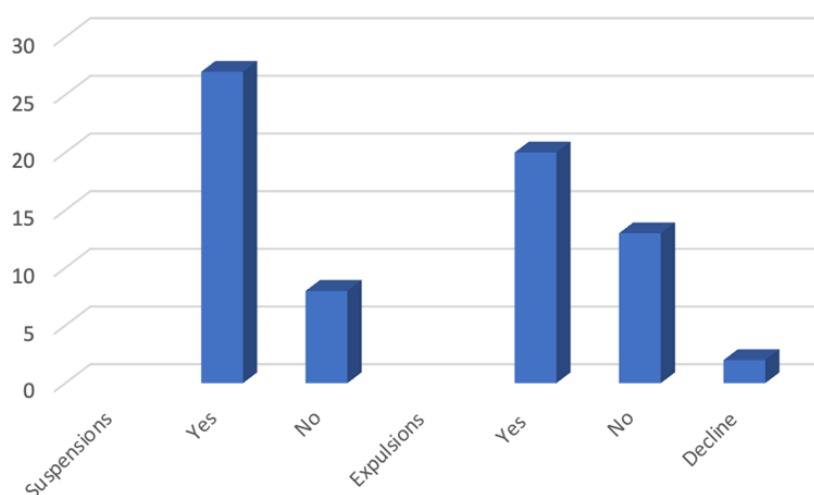


Table 4: Male Participants Suspended or Expelled from School



IV. Conclusion

The findings from this study support a correlation between school exclusionary measures and the school-to-gang pipeline. Exclusionary discipline, when paired with stigma and lack of support, can isolate students and push them toward gang involvement as an alternative source of identity and belonging. Restorative practices offer a way to interrupt this cycle by addressing the root causes of behavior and keeping students connected to school.

The findings contend that, for the protection of our education system as a pedagogic environment geared toward learning and success, as well as the safety and promise of American youth, it is critical that reforms continue to be a focal concern for both educational leaders and legislative bodies.

Research Limitations

This study surveyed 35 current and former gang members from Nassau and Suffolk Counties, New York, a relatively small and localized sample. This limits the ability to generalize findings to broader populations or different geographic areas. Including participants from additional counties and states could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the STGP. The researchers have acknowledged the existing flaws associated with survey data: lack of memory, response exaggeration, boredom, and contrived responses to please the researchers and satisfy the intentions of the study. Despite these limitations, the research offers valuable insights into the correlation between exclusionary discipline and gang involvement, reinforcing the urgent need for reform in school disciplinary practices.

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