

HOMOGENEITY AND INEQUALITY: SCHOOL DISCIPLINE INEQUALITY AND THE ROLE OF RACIAL COMPOSITION

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Abstract

Research has consistently demonstrated that Black students are disproportionately subject to sanctions on their behavior. Most extant explanations of these differences focus on interpersonal factors, such as teacher perceptions and the role racial stereotypes. However, there is little knowledge about school-level variation and the contextual factors that create conditions for this inequality. Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, this paper explores the relationship between school racial composition and racial inequality in discipline. Prior work in sociology and related fields suggests that demographic composition is an important predictor of perceptions related to harsh punishment of minorities. Accordingly, a threat framework would predict that increases in Black student enrollment correspond to increases in punitive school policies. Results from this paper find some support for this general hypothesis, finding that the percent of black students in a school is related to increased odds of suspension/expulsion, and that differential effects of poor behavior attenuate these relationships. These school level differences explain a significant portion of racial inequality—by unequally exposes Black students to harsh discipline. However, I also find that a traditional threat narrative may be insufficient. Specifically, I find that when compared to White students in the same school, Black students are *least* likely to experience unequal sanctions on their behavior in racially mixed contexts. In other words, inequality is most likely in racially homogenous schools—whether homogenous Black or homogenous White. These results suggest that more research is needed to understand how the social organization of schools contributes to discipline inequality.