

Compositional Differences or Unequal Treatment: A Decomposition of Black-White Differences in School Suspension and its Relation to High School Graduation.

Linsey Edwards

Abstract

Suspension and expulsion from school because of poor behavior is an educational disruption that is unevenly distributed—previous work has consistently found that black students are more likely to be punished compared to their white peers. This inequality has the potential to contribute to differences in educational outcomes and stall, or even preclude, the transition into a productive adulthood for certain students. However, there is very little systematic evidence for what explains differences in punishment and its relation to key educational outcomes. Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88), this paper seeks to: a) determine the relative contribution of behavior differences versus unequal treatment in explaining black-white inequality in school discipline, and b) assess the degree to which suspension/expulsion differences explain black-white gaps in high school graduation. Results from multilevel models and nonlinear decomposition suggest that measures of behavior are insufficient for explaining school punishment differences, and that measures of poor behavior are more likely to be associated with the punishment of black students. Additionally, while suspension and expulsion were significantly associated with a decreased odds of graduating high school, it was not differentially so by race nor did differences in punishment explain black-white gaps in graduation. These findings provide much needed evidence for why differences in suspension occur and whether it has implications for important academic outcomes.