

The Effectiveness of Suspension and Expulsion as School Safety Strategies: Evidence, Equity, and Implementation Considerations

REPORT TO THE WASHINGTON STATE OFFICE OF FIREARM SAFETY AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

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Purpose and Scope

Suspension and expulsion are among the most severe disciplinary actions available to schools. They are often justified as necessary responses to serious misconduct, including firearm violations, with the goal of maintaining safety and preventing future harm. This brief summarizes the empirical evidence on whether suspension and expulsion achieve these goals and examines their broader educational, developmental, and equity implications. This brief also explores the efficacy of other school-based violence prevention strategies in improving school safety, reducing future violent behavior, and promoting positive long-term outcomes for students and school communities.

Evidence on Safety and Deterrence

The empirical literature does not support the conclusion that suspension or expulsion improves school safety. Multiple studies find no association between higher rates of exclusionary discipline and levels of school violence, disorder, or disruptive behavior across all school levels: elementary, middle, and high school.^{1,2} Evidence suggests schools that rely more heavily on suspension and expulsion are not safer than schools that use these practices less frequently, even after accounting for student demographics and baseline levels of misconduct.¹⁻³

Zero-tolerance policies, which mandate suspension or expulsion for specified offenses, were widely adopted following the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994. Subsequent evaluations of these policies showed that they increased the use of exclusionary discipline without producing measurable gains in safety.^{1,2} Principals in states with mandatory exclusion laws have not reported lower levels of fighting, drug use, or classroom disruption than principals in states without such laws.¹ The absence of deterrent effects is particularly notable given the severity and certainty of punishment embedded in these policies.^{1,3}

Evidence specific to firearm-related outcomes is limited, in part because such incidents are rare. However, the available research does not suggest that mandatory expulsion for weapon possession produces broader preventive effects.^{1,4} Instead, firearm-related exclusions appear to follow the same pattern as other forms of exclusionary discipline: removal of the student without evidence of reduced risk at the school or community level.^{1,4}

Evidence on Student Behavior, Educational, and Criminal Legal System Outcomes

Suspension and expulsion are consistently associated with negative educational outcomes for excluded students. These students are more likely to experience academic disengagement, grade repetition, and increased risk of dropout.^{1,2,5} These associations persist after adjusting for prior behavior and academic performance, suggesting that exclusion itself may contribute to harm rather than simply reflecting underlying risk.¹⁻³

Exclusionary discipline has also been associated with increased contact with the juvenile legal system. Students who are suspended or expelled face higher probabilities of subsequent arrest and court involvement, even when controlling for baseline delinquency.¹⁻³ These findings may reflect reduced school attachment and increased exposure to unsupervised environments during periods of exclusion.^{2,3}

From a behavioral standpoint, exclusion does not appear to reduce misconduct. Students who are suspended or expelled are more likely to experience repeated disciplinary action, particularly when exclusion is not paired with behavioral supports, mental health services, or structured reintegration planning.^{1-3,5}

Developmental and Health Implications

The timing of suspension and expulsion may matter for subsequent student outcomes. Childhood and adolescence are periods of rapid cognitive, emotional, and social development, during which exclusion can disrupt routines, relationships, and access to supportive adults and resources.^{1,2,6} These disruptions may explain empirical links between exclusionary discipline and increased risks of depression, anxiety, substance use, and exposure to violence later in life.^{1,2,6}

For adolescents, prolonged exclusion coincides with heightened vulnerability to peer influence and risk-taking behavior, while for younger children it disrupts foundational skill development and emotional regulation.^{1,2,6} A one-year expulsion has different educational and developmental implications for a first-grade student acquiring foundational literacy skills than for a twelfth-grade student approaching graduation.^{1,2,6} Developmental stage shapes both the educational costs and the behavioral consequences of exclusion, helping to explain its association with long-term adverse outcomes.^{1,2,6}

Equity and Disparities

Exclusionary discipline is not applied evenly. Black students, Hispanic students, and students with disabilities experience suspension and expulsion at substantially higher rates than their peers.^{1,2} These disparities persist after accounting for differences in behavior severity and frequency.^{1,2}

Mandatory discipline policies that expand exclusion, limit discretion, and allow broad interpretation of infractions may intensify inequities in practice. Research indicates that zero-tolerance and mandatory expulsion policies are associated with widened racial disparities in discipline and increased system involvement among already marginalized students.¹⁻³ These patterns contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline by concentrating exclusion and justice-system contact among groups already facing structural disadvantage.¹⁻³ Quasi-experimental evidence indicates that school exclusion increases subsequent juvenile justice involvement, even after accounting for prior behavior that may intensify inequities.¹³ This pattern reflects a structural pathway in which exclusion increases unsupervised time, reduces school attachment, and increases exposure to formal legal systems.

Equity concerns are not ancillary to effectiveness. Policies that undermine fairness and legitimacy can weaken trust, reduce student engagement, and degrade school climate—factors associated with poorer safety outcomes and increased long-term societal costs.^{2,3} Furthermore, schools that implement restorative socio-structural approaches to violence prevention and response show opportunities to disrupt structurally racist exclusionary policies that deprive low-income, Black, Brown, and other non-white students.⁷ Such socio-structural approaches offer transformative, individualized interventions tailored to meet the needs of students on a case-by-case basis, incorporating principles from restorative justice and community building. Through integrations of these principles, K-12 urban schools have seen not only a reduction in incidents of violence, but also in more positive, healthier learning environments that all students benefit from.^{2,8,9}

Evidence on Alternatives and Comparative Effectiveness

The evidence indicates that school discipline approaches emphasizing connection to school and limiting exclusion are associated with reductions in exclusionary discipline and improvements in school climate.^{1,2,10} Trauma-informed practices, restorative approaches, and structured behavioral interventions demonstrate reductions in suspensions and related disciplinary outcomes in some experimental and quasi-experimental studies, though effects vary by context, implementation quality, and available resources.^{1-3,5,8} Systematic reviews report more mixed findings for impacts on serious violence outcomes, underscoring that no single intervention eliminates risk and that implementation resources and contextual factors matter.^{4,10}

Comparative reviews of school safety strategies distinguish between approaches focused on physical security and those centered on building supportive school communities. Evidence suggests that measures such as metal detectors, expanded law enforcement presence, and arming school staff have limited effectiveness in preventing firearm incidents or reducing school violence, while strategies that strengthen relationships, expand mental health supports, adopt social-emotional learning, and implement restorative practices are more consistently associated with improved school climate and reduced violence.⁸ This distinction aligns with public-health frameworks that emphasize prevention, protective environments, and coordinated supports rather than primarily reactive responses.^{11,12}

Restorative practices, including restorative circles and conferences, are associated with improved relationships, social-emotional skills, and conflict-resolution capacity, while reducing reliance on exclusionary discipline in some settings.^{2,10} Evidence suggests these approaches are most effective when embedded within broader systems of student support. In a small, intensive study combining restorative practices with Dialectical Behavior Therapy–based social-emotional learning, participants demonstrated improvements in academic performance, attendance, and disciplinary outcomes, with findings indicating that ongoing reinforcement may be necessary to sustain gains.²

Preventive and upstream strategies further expand alternatives to exclusionary discipline. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identify youth-violence prevention approaches that focus on skill-building, positive relationships, and supportive environments, rather than punitive responses after incidents occur.¹¹ The CDC’s Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model similarly emphasizes integration across education, health, mental health, family engagement, and community partnerships to promote student safety and well-being.¹² Community-based strategies adapted for school contexts, such as Safe Passage programs that place trained and trusted adults in areas surrounding schools, aim to prevent conflicts before they escalate and complement in-school supports.¹³

Evidence on school security measures and law-enforcement presence points to tradeoffs rather than uniform benefits. Quasi-experimental research using Department of Justice grant variation finds that adding school resource officers (SROs) is associated with increased reporting and arrests on school grounds, including among younger students, without clear evidence of reductions in serious violence.¹⁴ Because SROs often serve as the first point of contact in weapon-related incidents, their presence can shape referral pathways in ways that increase formal disciplinary and arrest outcomes.^{14,15} Mixed-methods research further suggests that while some students perceive SROs as safety enhancing, others report heightened perceptions of risk, emphasizing the importance of role clarity and implementation.¹⁶

In situations involving immediate safety concerns, temporary separation may be used as a time-limited, supportive response. Evidence indicates that such approaches are most effective when applied sparingly, paired with trauma-responsive services, and followed by structured, supportive reentry that promotes healing and reintegration.^{2,3,6}

Policy Implications

As a safety strategy, suspension and expulsion show limited effectiveness and substantial collateral harm for individuals, communities, and society including downstream educational, health, and criminal legal system costs.^{1-3,5} Policies that rely on exclusion alone are unlikely to reduce violence and may increase long-term risks through educational disruption, inequitable system involvement, and other adverse outcomes.^{2,3} Where exclusion is required by law, its impacts appear to depend heavily on what happens during and after removal from school, including educational continuity, mental health support, and reentry planning.^{2,3,6}

Evidence suggests that effective policy design should focus on ensuring continuity of education, embedding reintegration supports, and prioritizing investment in preventive, trauma-informed, and restorative practices.^{2,3,6,16} Monitoring outcomes by race, disability status, and age is essential to assess whether disciplinary systems promote safety without reproducing harmful inequities.

Conclusion

The evidence does not support suspension and expulsion as effective stand-alone tools for improving school safety or preventing future violence. These practices are associated with negative educational, developmental, and disparities in behavioral outcomes, with no clear deterrent benefit.¹⁻⁵ When exclusion is used, its effectiveness depends on the presence of safeguards that maintain school connection and address underlying needs.^{2,3,6,9,10} Policymakers seeking to prevent firearm-related incidents in schools or support students facing violations should consider alternative, upstream, or restorative practices highlighted in the literature as evidence-based practices. The literature underscores that schools employing such alternative methods to exclusion offer the potential for a healthier learning environment, leading to reduced disparities across marginalized groups of students and a reduction in incidents of violence.

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