PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS is a five-year project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and affiliated with UC/ACCORD. It consists of a series of mixed-methods studies of the educational pathways of California's lower-income youth. Through a series of research briefs and reports, the project aims to advance research on poverty, produce useful tools that improve educational practice, and inform the U.S. policy agenda on the relationship between poverty and education. In *The Impact of Punitive High School Discipline Policies on the Postsecondary Trajectories of Young Men*, Terriquez, Chlala, and Sacha draw attention to the lasting effects of expulsion and suspension on college pathways. They offer recommendations that aim to improve discipline policies and contribute to student achievement.

RESEARCH BRIEF

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The Impact of Punitive High School Discipline Policies on the Postsecondary Trajectories of Young Men

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Following the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, U.S. schools began applying "zero tolerance" policies that aimed to remove students deemed as threats to others from the classroom setting. While initially meant to promote safe and drug-free schools (Cornell & Mayer, 2010), these punitive discipline policies—which include suspensions and expulsions—have been increasingly used to address student misconduct for non-threatening infractions (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). Data from the 2011–2012 school year show, for example, that in California over 53% of suspensions and expulsions were administered for "willful defiance" of a school authority for a wide range of non-violent, non-drug related offenses such as utilizing a cellphone in class, habitual tardiness, profanity, or failure to do homework (Freedberg, 2013).[1]

Given the broad implementation of punitive discipline policies, it is hardly surprising that since the early 1990s there has been a rise in the number of students who have been suspended or expelled from school (Reyes, 2006). Because students who experience these forms of punishment miss out on classroom learning, educators, policymakers, and advocates have begun to question their effectiveness in improving students' academic achievement and providing equitable learning opportunities (Shah, 2011; Rebora, 2013). This research brief aims to inform efforts to improve school discipline policies by presenting new data on how students' experiences with suspension or expulsion shape their postsecondary trajectories. We draw on the recent California Young Adult Study (CYAS), which contains self-reports of young adults' experiences with school discipline and postsecondary school enrollment.

We focus primarily on the experiences of young men who were enrolled in California's schools before the age of 17 and who grew up as these punitive discipline policies became the norm. Our findings highlight gender and income differences in students' experiences with suspension and expulsion. We show that for young men, being suspended or expelled is associated with a greatly reduced likelihood of four-year college enrollment, regardless of high school academic performance and income background. We also offer policy recommendations that could lower the number of suspensions and expulsions and improve postsecondary educational achievement rates for young men in California.

This policy brief draws from the 2011–2012 California Young Adult Study (CYAS), a mixed-methods investigation of the postsecondary educational, employment, and civic engagement experiences of California's youth, and a component of the broader PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success project. This brief relies on telephone survey responses from 2,200 young adults who attended school in California before the age of 17 but who were no longer in high school at the time of the survey. The survey was administered in English and Spanish between April and August of 2011.

We identify students as low-income if they were eligible for free or reduced price lunch while in high school, or their parents relied on public assistance while their children were in high school.

The analysis presented here relies on young adults' retrospective, self-reported experiences with either suspension or expulsion. As such, our data are likely to undercount the number of youth who have experienced such school discipline. The data do not distinguish between suspension and expulsion, nor do they provide a count of the number of times students experienced these forms of discipline. For more information about the CYAS visit http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~vterriqu/.

WHO IS EXPERIENCING PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE?

Over one in four young men in California report being suspended or expelled from high school. As Figure 1 shows, 27% of young male adults say they were suspended or expelled at some point while they were in high school. This is more than double the percentage of female respondents (13%) who reported experiences with punitive discipline. Because of the gender imbalance in suspension and expulsion trends, the remainder of this brief focuses exclusively on young men's experiences with punitive school discipline.

Young men from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately suspended or expelled from school. As Figure 2 shows, more than one in three low-income young men experienced punitive discipline. Low-income students tend to disproportionately attend schools with high teacher turnover rates (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006), high student-to-teacher ratios (Rogers, 2011), and an over-reliance on school police to monitor student behavior (Rios, 2011). As a result, these schools sometimes lack capacity to effectively promote positive student conduct. Likewise, low-income students may experience poverty-related challenges and neighborhood violence that contribute to their high rates of suspension and expulsion (Cameron, 2006).

FIGURE 1 Experience With Punitive Discipline By Gender

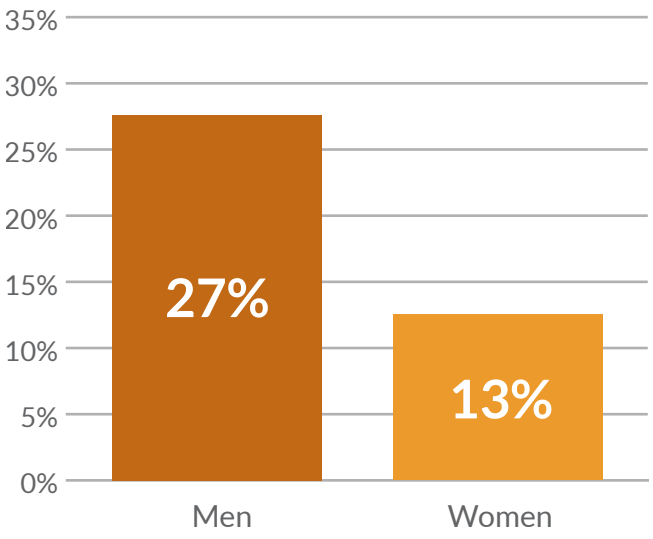
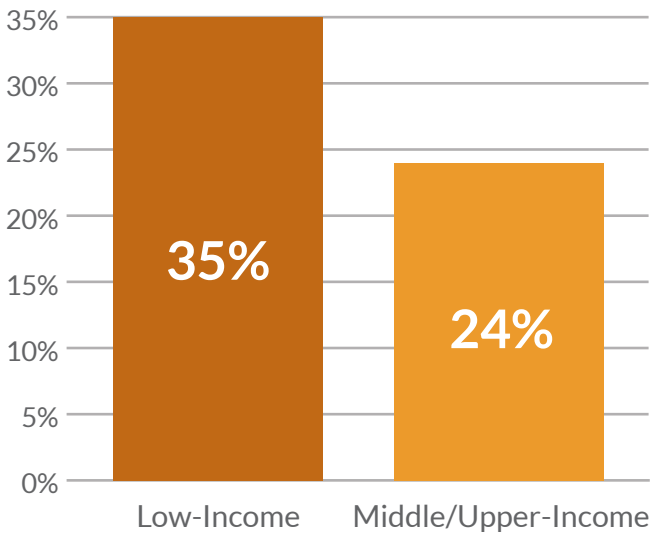


FIGURE 2 Young Men's Experiences With Punitive Discipline By Income Background

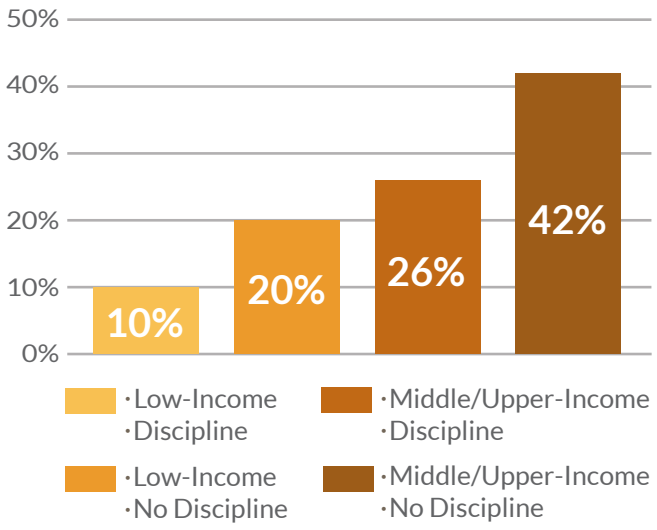


Young men from more affluent backgrounds also experience high rates of suspension and expulsion. Previous research has shown that with the rise of zero tolerance policies, young men are disproportionately suspended or expelled because teachers, administrators, and school policies interpret or label their behavior as disruptive, aggressive, or threatening (Nolan & Willis, 2011). CYAS data suggest that the application of punitive policies is not just an issue affecting low-income young men, but also those from more privileged backgrounds. Nearly one in four (24%) young men from middle/upper-income backgrounds have experienced punitive discipline.

HOW DOES PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE RELATE TO POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS?

Young men who have been suspended or expelled are far less likely to enroll in four-year colleges. Roughly one third (34%) of young men in California report ever enrolling in a four-year college, but income background and disciplinary history both affect the likelihood of enrollment. Statistical analysis that holds constant young men's high school grade-point averages indicates that only 10% of young men who have been suspended or expelled from high school are likely to enroll in four-year institutions, compared to 20% of those with similar grades and income backgrounds who have not experienced punitive discipline (Figure 3). We see a similar pattern among middle/high-income young men. Specifically, 26% who have been suspended or expelled are likely to enroll in four-year colleges, compared to 42% of those who have not experienced punitive discipline.[2]

FIGURE 3 Predicted Probabilities For Young Men's Four-Year College Enrollment By Income Background And Experience With Punitive Discipline



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the California Young Adult Study (CYAS) demonstrate that punitive school discipline policies impact the lives of young men of all income backgrounds across the state. In particular, being suspended or expelled is associated with lower rates of four-year college attendance.

These findings can partially be explained by mental health, behavioral, or other personal challenges that these young men may have encountered (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). At the same time, being suspended or expelled could have caused them to fall behind on classroom assignments and instruction (Noguera, 2008; Rausch, Skiba, & Simmons, 2005), leading to lower educational attainment. Evidence also indicates that experience with suspension or expulsion can have a long-term impact on students' achievement motivation (Arcia, 2006; Raffaele Mendez, 2003). Students who are suspended or expelled subsequently experience a weakened bond to their school institutions (Sprott, Jenkins, & Doob, 2005), feel alienated from their classmates and teachers (Way, 2011), and engage more frequently with negative peer groups (Hemphill et al., 2006). Any of these factors could have an effect on postsecondary pathways.

These findings make clear that high rates of punitive discipline among young men and the potential negative impact on their educational attainment merit attention. We therefore propose the following:

1. Implement a case management approach to address the root causes of student behavior. Some students engage in disruptive behavior in school because they are dealing with multiple challenges in their personal lives, including alcohol and drug abuse and poor academic preparation (Gregory et al., 2010). Moreover, young men's behaviors are often linked to socioeconomic vulnerability and how they are socialized to respond to negative peer group pressures and other challenges (Rios, 2011; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009).

A case management approach involving administrators, teachers, and other school professionals can address the root causes of student misbehavior. When appropriate, the case management team could refer students to mental health providers, anger management courses, support groups, rehabilitation services, tutoring, or other necessary services. Such an approach may prevent future misbehavior and develop students' abilities to cope with personal challenges in healthy ways (Cameron, 2006).

2. **Implement proven alternatives to punitive discipline, including those that rehabilitate individuals and repair the harm created by student misbehavior.** When students' misbehavior does not pose a threat to themselves or to other students, alternatives to punitive discipline can be used to ensure that they both remain in school and repair the damage created by the behavior. For example, restorative justice programs bring students who have broken rules together with those who have been negatively affected by their behavior. Under the guidance of trained staff or students, the two parties develop a resolution that holds students accountable for the behavior (González, 2011). Restorative justice and other similar programs, when properly implemented, have proven to reduce suspension rates and in many cases have resolved problems created by student infractions (González, 2011; Lewis, 2009; Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010).

3. **Train and support teachers so that they can utilize best practices in classroom management.** Ongoing training must be made available to teachers so they can work effectively with students who encounter mental health, poverty-related, and other challenges that lead to behavioral issues. Teachers will benefit from tailored guidance on how to maintain order in the classroom. Such professional development can help teachers understand how they view student behavior and why they respond to particular groups—for example, young men versus young women—differently (Dupper, Theriot, & Craun, 2009). These trainings could also increase cultural sensitivity among educators, to ensure that they do not interpret the diverse ways students engage with learning as disruptive or aggressive (Gregory et al., 2010). Teacher professional development should be guided by lessons learned from effective academic and social-emotional behavioral interventions (Osher et al., 2012).

4. **Monitor and respond to suspension and expulsion data.** Districts and schools should disaggregate suspension and expulsion data by gender, race, type of offense, and school personnel responsible for administering disciplinary action. In order to promote a positive student culture, improve safety, and reduce suspension and expulsion rates, the analysis of such data could be used to identify and intervene with individual teachers or administrators who use punitive discipline at high rates or inequitably across student subgroups. At the same time, this data could also be used to foster school-wide dialogue among school staff about improving school disciplinary policies and procedures and ensuring equitable, fair administration of specific punishments (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008).

Significant proportions of young men of all income backgrounds are suspended or expelled from California schools. As our findings have shown, those who experience such punitive discipline enroll in four-year colleges at comparably low rates. California's leaders—political, cultural, and economic alike—cannot afford to ignore this statewide trend. Addressing the root causes of student misbehavior and halting the excessive use of punitive discipline policies can contribute to the creation of healthy, safe school communities and improve young men's chances of obtaining four-year college degrees.◆

NOTES

[1] According to California Education Code 48900(k), "willful defiance" includes students who have "disrupted school activities or otherwise willfully defied the valid authority of supervisors, teachers, administrators, school officials, or other school personnel."

[2] To calculate predicted probabilities, we used multinomial regressions that examined the likelihood of young men's enrollment in community colleges, four-year colleges, or no college. The analysis excluded young men who were not old enough to have enrolled in college.

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