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Suzanne Rea
Students of Color with Special
Needs: An Analysis of Exclusionary
Disciplines in Massachusetts's
Public Schools

ABSTRACT

Grounded in zero tolerance policies in public school systems, this secondary-analysis of Massachusetts's statewide data is used to ascertain information about the rates of exclusionary disciplines for students of color with special needs for the 2010-2011 academic school year. Literature has shown that students of color, and students with special needs are at higher risk for being given more frequent exclusionary disciplines than white students, and students without special needs; however, studies of students of color with special needs have not yet been conducted.

The data used in this analysis was collected by the U.S. Department of Education and made publically accessible. Per Massachusetts's disciplinary reporting policies, each behavioral incident (N=60,610), that results in an exclusionary discipline of 10 days or more is provided with the student's demographical information.

Some of the major findings of this analysis include the following: (1) students of color miss fewer days of school for exclusionary disciplines than their white counterparts; however, when looking at nonviolent behaviors, students of color receive more out-of-school suspensions while white students receive more in-school suspensions; (2) students of color with special needs

miss more days of school than their white counterparts; (3) students of color receive more out of school suspensions than white students, and white students receive more in school suspensions than students of color.

Implications for clinical practice, policy reform, and future studies are discussed.

**STUDENTS OF COLOR WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: AN ANALYSIS OF
EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINES IN MASSACHUSETTS'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2013

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Researchers have examined how students of color with special needs are at higher risk for getting suspended more frequently than students who are white and do not have special needs (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). This study looks at who is being removed from the classroom for nonviolent behaviors in Massachusetts's public school system. For this study, I examined the intersection between students of color and special needs for students in Massachusetts's public school system who received exclusionary disciplines. I explored the exclusionary disciplines (i.e. suspensions), influenced by zero tolerance policies that were given to students of color with special needs who exhibited nonviolent deviant behaviors within the school setting. Zero tolerance policy is defined as "a philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context" (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 852). Researchers have shown that students of color are impacted at higher rates under the zero tolerance philosophy, are reported more frequently for nonviolent offenses and often receive suspensions or expulsions more often than their white peers. Once students are kicked out of school, they often do not have the resources to get their educational needs met (i.e. a diploma). It is then argued that they are put onto a trajectory to the juvenile courts and eventually, prison.

This trajectory is commonly referred to as the “Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline” (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011a).

This study is applicable to the field of social work, education policy, and individual educators. By identifying which students are at higher risk for getting exclusionary disciplines for behaviors that do not pose a risk to safety, school social workers, administrators, and policy makers will be able to prevent students from entering the Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline.

In the subsequent chapters, I discuss the history of the literature that describes zero tolerance policies and their influence on students in the public school systems and the proposed study; the methods by which I conducted the study; the results of the study; and the implications of the results that were elucidated; limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research and clinical practice.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

In this chapter, I review the literature that includes the history of zero tolerance policies; the effectiveness of exclusionary disciplines; Massachusetts's school reporting policies; zero tolerance policies and the Cradle to Prison Pipeline; the racial disparities within zero tolerance policies; and students of color with special needs within zero tolerance policies.

History of Zero Tolerance Policy

The United States Customs Agency developed a “zero tolerance” philosophy during the 1980’s “war on drugs” era as the State and Federal governments were trying to combat drugs (Skiba, 2000). Zero tolerance policies became nationally recognized in 1986, when U.S. Attorney Peter Nunez in San Diego impounded sea vessels carrying any amount of drugs. This led to U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese highlighting the program as a national model, in which officials in Customs were to seize vehicles with any trace amounts of drugs, and charge them in federal court (Skiba, 2000). The idea was that people should criminalize and “get tough” on minor crimes in order to deter the more serious crimes (Teske, 2011). This zero tolerance philosophy was increasingly utilized to address many issues, such as trespassing, homelessness, and eventually education (Skiba, 2000).

In the late 1980s, school districts in Kentucky, New York, and California adopted the zero tolerance policies to monitor students’ behaviors in schools. Soon after, students were

expelled from school for use and/or possession of drugs, fighting, or gang-related activity. By the early 1990s, this policy became later adopted across the nation (Skiba, 2000). This led to the Clinton Administration's Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) of 1994, in which Congress mandated that states receiving Federal funds must expel for a minimum of 1 year a student who brings a firearm to school (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Within this policy, Congress allows the school's chief administering officer, such as the superintendent or principal, to modify the discipline on a case-by-case basis with a written notification to the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The GFSA does not include knives in its definition of a weapon; however, state government officials can decide to include knives (Pelliccioni, 2003), alcohol, drugs, or any other item that might be disruptive to students' education (Skiba, 2000).

The Gun-Free Schools Act originally focused on dangerous and violent behaviors, such as bringing a firearm to school; however, now school administrators apply zero tolerance policies in school districts that have extended this mandated predetermined consequence for specific behavioral offenses, violent or nonviolent, in response to the heightened fear about safety concerns (McNeal & Dunbar, 2010), even though, during that time crime in schools was not increasing (Price, 2008). Some of the nonviolent behaviors under the zero tolerance philosophies include, but are not limited to, swearing, disrespect (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008), insubordination (Dupper, 2010; Martinez, 2009), and violation of dress codes (Axtman, 2005). These consequences typically result in out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and transferring students to other schools due to disruptive behavior. In addition having these predetermined consequences also ensures fairness in students – that all students will be treated equally (Koch, 2000). Teachers, principals, and superintendents are understandably, under pressure to maintain school safety, which often results in students receiving the maximum

penalty, even when it may not be necessary. This leads students to be automatically given suspensions or expulsions based on behavior, even if it is not considered dangerous (Children's Defense Fund, 2011a).

The zero tolerance policies and disciplinary actions are created at the school-district level, however, they are often ambiguous, and do not allow circumstantial factors to be taken into consideration when analyzing the behavior; this leaves the school administrators to make subjective assessments about and interpret the behavior when it is nonviolent (Martinez, 2009). However, when a behavior is deemed potentially violent, school administrators must give up their discretion about the details of the violation and rely on the preset disciplinary policies (McNeal & Dunbar, 2010). These policies do not allow for the context and student's perspective for which a behavior is deemed a violation to be taken into consideration (Children's Defense Fund, 2011a). Frequently, behaviors that were intended to be considered dangerous, such as bringing a pocket knife to school, have resulted in expulsions when the behavior was in fact, not posing a threat to safety (Children's Defense Fund, 2011a). In a case example, a 10-year-old girl's mother packed a steak knife in her lunch box for school. Knowing that she was not allowed to have knives at school, she gave her teacher the knife. She was expelled from her school, despite that the intended use was not for a violent crime, and she was not aware that the knife was in her possession (Hirschfield, 2008). This has led others to believe that zero tolerance policies have been overused and misused in the public school system (Dupper, 2010; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). In another case example:

Paul was a sixth-grade student who walked to and from school daily. One afternoon, his school administrators received phone calls from two sets of angry parents who stated that Paul had a nail file and threatened to harm their sons with it. Under the school district's

zero-tolerance policy, the nail file was classified as a weapon because it was believed that Paul intended to use it to cause harm. Therefore, he was suspended for 10 days and recommended for expulsion. During due process, it was learned that the two boys had been teasing and taunting Paul on a daily basis throughout the school year. On one occasion, the boys took Paul's backpack and threw it into a lake. On another occasion, the boys pushed Paul off a sidewalk and into oncoming traffic. However, under the zero-tolerance policy, Paul was punished for threatening the two boys, yet there were no consequences for what the boys had done to Paul (Martinez, 2009, p. 153).

Ensuring the safety of students at schools is at the highest priority in school systems; and yet, there have been unintended consequences that have impacted the public school system and its students, when so frequently these behaviors do not pose a threat to safety. These policies have led to much higher results in exclusionary disciplinary consequences, such as out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and removal to another disciplinary education setting (Children's Defense Fund, 2011a). According to the Children's Defense Fund (2011b), national statistics indicate that during the 2009-2010 academic calendar school administrators have consistently used out-of-school suspensions for both violent and non-violent offenses. During this time, it was reported that 75% of the total offenses (violent and nonviolent) resulted in out-of-school suspensions. Among the violent offenses, 86% resulted in out-of-school suspensions; and among the nonviolent offenses, 67% resulted in out-of-school suspensions. While all of these exclusionary disciplines occur, there is little evidence that it has made any impact on reducing disruptive behaviors in schools (Skiba et al., 2002).

As long as school officials are provided with the option of reporting student behaviors under broadly defined catchall categories such as insubordination, there will always be a

question about whether a given student's behavior is serious enough to warrant a suspension or whether a teacher or administrator is misusing his or her authority to arbitrarily punish certain students, especially those students who continually challenge his or her authority” (Dupper, 2010, p. 68).

The Effectiveness of Exclusionary Disciplines

There is a dearth of research that examines the effectiveness of exclusionary disciplines in reducing the rate of disruptive behaviors in schools. In one research study, Chen (2008) surveyed seven-hundred-twelve secondary schools to examine how school community characteristics, students’ backgrounds, “school climate” (Chen, 2008, p. 301) and exclusionary disciplines interact to affect disruptive behaviors and crime in schools. By the term “School climate” (Chen, 2008, p. 301) refers to school size and the number of disruptive behaviors in the school setting. Through Chen’s (2008) research, it was discovered that exclusionary disciplines negatively impact the general culture in a school as well as the school climate, and do not tend to show any reduction in school misbehavior.

There is little evidence supporting the notion that exclusionary disciplines reduce disruptive behavior. According to the Department of Education’s (2002) report on school safety, in each state in the U.S., during the 1999-2000 academic school year, there was a thirteen percent decrease in students bringing firearms to school. However, in Massachusetts there was an eighty percent increase in students bringing firearms to schools between the 1990-2000 and the 2000-2001 academic school years (Gray, Sinclair, & U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The difficulty with these reports is that it is not possible to relate it to exclusionary disciplines. Additionally, approximately 40% of school suspensions are for students who have already been

suspended, suggesting that this form of discipline may not have a direct effect on students' behaviors.

Massachusetts School Reporting Policies

In the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975), the U.S. Supreme Court deemed a short-term suspension to be missing ten days of school or less. The case, *Goss v. Lopez*, was filed on behalf of 10 students in an Ohio public school who were suspended without a hearing before or shortly after the suspension. At issue were the due process rights of the students and clarification of what constitutes suspension. While the Supreme Court ruled that the Ohio school system violated the students' due process rights, it also clarified that the decision addressed solely short suspensions not exceeding 10 days. As a result of this decision, anytime an incident involves a violent or drug-related activity, public school administrators in Massachusetts are mandated to file several reports to the principal and superintendent. If a non-violent or drug-related incident occurs that warrants a suspension of more than 10 consecutive school days, a detailed report must also be made (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). However, should a nonviolent incident result in a suspension of fewer than 10 days, a full report is not required, and the behavioral offense is called an "unassigned offense," in which the targeted behavior is not reported. As discussed earlier, these "unassigned offenses" can include behaviors such as insubordination, swearing, and other nonviolent actions (Children's Defense Fund, 2011b). A Student Discipline Record must also be completed for non-drug or violence related incidents which result in suspensions of more than 10 consecutive school days for General Education students, or which result in any disciplinary action for Special Education students (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012).

School Reporting Procedures for Students with Special Needs

In 1975, Congress enacted the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), with the purpose of ensuring that children with special needs receive a free education (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012a). It has been revised several times since, with its most recent amendments made in 2004 by President George W. Bush. Within IDEA, there are policies that describe how discipline should be handled for students with special needs. These policies include:

- School personnel may consider any unique circumstances on a case-by-case basis when determining whether a change in placement...is appropriate for a child with a disability who violates a code of student conduct.
- School personnel may remove a student to an interim alternative educational setting for not more than 45 school days without regard to whether the behavior is determined to be a manifestation of the child's disability, if the child carries a weapon to or possesses a weapon at school, on school premises, or to or at a school function;...knowingly possesses or uses illegal drugs, or sells or solicits the sale of a controlled substance, while at school, on school premises, or to or at a school function;...or, has inflicted serious bodily injury upon another person while at school, on school premises (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 1).
- School personnel...may remove a child with a disability who violates a code of student conduct from his or her current placement to an appropriate interim alternative educational setting, another setting, or suspension, for not more than ten consecutive school days...and for additional removals of not more than ten consecutive school days in

that same school year for separate incidents of misconduct as long as those removals do not constitute a change of placement (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 2).

Both policies that state a student may be removed from an educational setting up to 45 days, regardless if the behavior is connected to the disability, and that a student may be removed from the setting for up to 10 days, aim to create a safe environment that fosters education (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012b). It is argued, however, that these same policies create and allow for an environment that removes students from the education setting without hearing the students' perspective, but instead, use a catch-all exclusionary discipline for any behavior. Additionally, IDEA promotes inclusion between students with special needs and students with out special needs. One of the unintended consequences is that students with special needs, particularly those with emotional and behavioral problems, tend to be more disruptive in classes and result in more exclusionary disciplines (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

Zero Tolerance Policies and the Cradle to Prison Pipeline

The Cradle to Prison Pipeline, a campaign advanced by the Children's Defense Fund, describes the path of children – particularly black and Latino students - in schools into the criminal justice system (Children's Defense Fund, 2011a). According to the Children's Defense Fund (2011a), the Pipeline is driven by 6 factors: "poverty, racial disparities, inadequate health and mental health care, gaps in early childhood development, disparate educational opportunities, and overburdened and ineffective juvenile justice systems" (p. 7). It is also largely fueled and perpetuated by the zero tolerance policies in schools that predominantly impact students of color. For children who were born after 2001, one out of three black and one out of six Latino boys are at risk for incarceration in their lifetime, based on prior national actuarial

calculations. Statistics taken from 2001 show that only 51% of American Indian, 53% of Hispanic, and 50% of Black students graduated compared to 75% of White students (Hatt, 2011). And while boys are at a particularly higher risk than girls, there is still a high population of girls in the juvenile system (Children's Defense Fund, 2011).

The literature suggests that students of color are frequently given more exclusionary disciplines than white students (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; W. J. Blanchett et al., 2009; Skiba et al., 2002) and many students of color also live in poorer, more urban areas (Blanchett, 2011). These students often struggle to get the resources they need once they are out of school. It is argued that these students are then put on the trajectory, or “pipeline,” to juvenile court and/or prison (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011a; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006). This leaves a disproportionate percentage of youth, especially of color, without diplomas, resulting in higher risks for unemployment, poverty, and imprisonment (Hatt, 2011).

The Impact of Exclusionary Disciplines

Exclusionary disciplines in Massachusetts include out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, expulsions, and the removal of a student from the current school to be placed in a school that better meets the student’s needs, which specifically refers to students with an Individualized Education Plan (Chen, 2008, p. 201). These consequences have created long-lasting effects on the students who have received such exclusionary disciplines. Researchers (Hemphill, Toumbourou, Herrenkohl, McMorris, & Catalano, 2006) conducted a longitudinal study between Washington State and the state of Victoria, Australia to examine the development of antisocial behavior, substance use, and related behaviors in 4000 students between the ages of twelve and sixteen, who had been given at least 1 exclusionary discipline for related behavior.

Students were given the first self-assessment in 2002 and then another, one year later in 2003. Through the surveys, the researchers examined involvement in antisocial behaviors and substance use.

Through these self-assessment surveys, Hemphill et. al (2006) found that there was an increase of antisocial behavior and involvement in the criminal justice system:

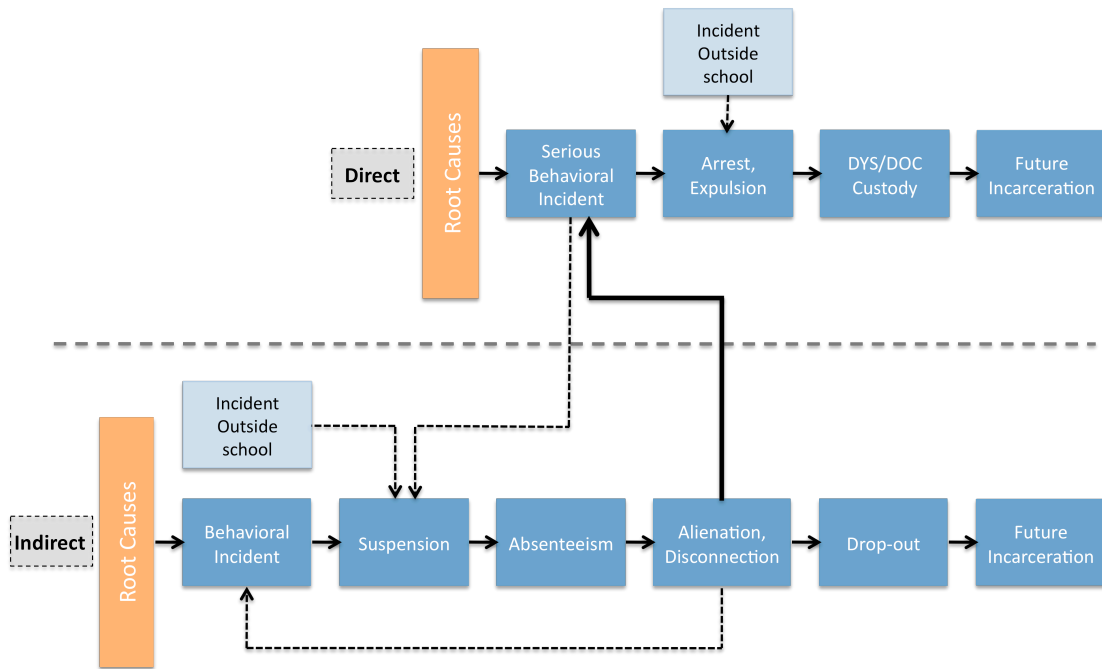
Societal responses at the first assessment increased the likelihood of subsequent antisocial behavior more than five times. Each unit increase in association with antisocial peers elevated the likelihood of antisocial behavior at the one-year follow-up more than seven-fold (2006, p. 741).

Researchers found these results even when controlling for various protective factors such as positive family involvement, individual beliefs in values and morals, and school grades. These results would appear to suggest that exclusionary discipline has little to no effect on the antisocial behaviors of students, and can possibly exacerbate antisocial behavior. Hemphill et. al, (2006) suggested the following explanations for these results: (1) students may react by rebelling against authority and continue to engage in further antisocial behavior; (2) when students are suspended, they are removed from an environment that can encourage pro-social behavior, and have the possibility of spending time with other suspended students, thus increasing the possibility of antisocial behavior and associated risk factors, such as not completing school; and (3) these students may become stigmatized in their school community.

Paths to Prison. The members of the Children's Defense Fund (2011) wrote about two paths to prison: a direct and indirect path, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Direct and Indirect Paths to Prison¹.



As Figure 1 shows, while there is a direct way young people are sent to prison, involving behavioral incidents that lead to arrest or expulsion, involvement with youth services or corrections and incarceration, there are also other, more indirect ways, in which young people find themselves in the criminal system. Through these zero tolerance policies in which students can be given out-of-school suspensions for nonviolent offenses, such as talking back to a teacher, children find themselves becoming more isolated and disconnected from their schools which often leads them to further engaging in disruptive behavior, perpetuating the cycle (Children’s

¹ (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011a, p. 6).

Defense Fund, 2011a). Additionally, suspended and/or expelled students are frequently unsupervised and are without constructive activities to occupy their time when they're out of the classroom. Furthermore, making up old school assignments and catching up to where the class is, continues to perpetuate disengagement at school and eventually dropping out of school (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012).

Once students are involved in the juvenile justice system, it makes it difficult for them to return to school. School district administrators may chose not enroll students coming from the juvenile justice system for many reasons. One of the primary reasons is that they may fear that these students pose a threat to safety or may be disruptive and impact other students' education. At times, there also may be a fear that because these students haven't been in the public school system, they may perform poorly on standardized tests. This can result in administrators inadvertently encouraging students to drop out of school or enroll in alternative education programs (Feierman, Levick, & Mody, 2009).

Racial Disparities in Zero Tolerance

As discussed earlier, reporting nonviolent behaviors is up to the subjective opinion and assessment of the teacher, but the consequences remain predetermined and inflexible to the situational context (Children's Defense Fund, 2011a). Qualitative and quantitative researchers have suggested that the subjectivity of administrators' reporting of behaviors resulted in more reports involving students of color than their white peers (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Brown & Beckett, 2006; Desai, Falzer, Chapman, & Borum, 2012; Dupper, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002; Swain & Noblit, 2011). For example, data taken from 2006 Massachusetts's public school systems indicates that 17% of students were self-identified as black, and yet, they represented 37.4% of students who were suspended and 37.9% of students

who were expelled (Children's Defense Fund, 2011b). It is argued that these discrepancies are in part due to the zero tolerance policies particularly around nonviolent offenses (Children's Defense Fund, 2011a).

Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) analyzed data from an urban, Midwestern public school district to examine disproportionality in school discipline. The data were drawn from disciplinary records of eleven-thousand-and-one students in 19 middle schools between grades 6, 7, 8; and 4 students from Grade 9. The students were predominantly either black (56%) or white (42%); Latino students represented 1.2% of the population and .7% identified as Asian-American. Of these students, 65.3% met criteria for free-lunch program, which reflected their family's socioeconomic status. Students who did not qualify for the free-lunch program were not included in the study in order to control for socioeconomic status. The researchers took disciplinary data from a data-collection service that mandates school administrators' disciplinary reports. Through their data analysis, the researchers found that there was no difference between the number of days missed between white and black students for the same reported behavior; however, black students were given more consequences and referrals to the principals' offices for more ambiguous behaviors that left room for interpretation. Their behaviors included: disrespect, excessive noise, threats, and loitering; while white students were more likely to get referrals for smoking, leaving school without permission, vandalism, and obscene language. Skiba et al. (2002) also discovered that male students were more likely to receive disciplinary actions for all disallowed behaviors, except for truancy, for which female students were more likely to be referred.

Much of the research reflecting these racial differences has been conducted in public schools located in more urban areas, where there were larger sample sizes of students of different

racess; however it might not be applicable to more rural areas. In order to look at other factors that might explain the racial differences in school exclusionary disciplines, researchers have been able to confirm that students of color are given exclusionary disciplines more frequently than white students in other public school systems, even when controlling for socioeconomic status, geographical location, and urbanization (Meiners, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002). Additionally, it has also been shown that male students, across most races, are given more exclusionary disciplines than female students; however, the rate to which female students are receiving these suspensions and expulsions is increasing (Children's Defense Fund, 2011b). This is not to say that more students living in poverty or more urbanized areas will not be subjected to higher rates of suspensions, but that race has become a mitigating factor in these consequences and behavioral reports. Because these statistics are found even when controlling for other salient factors, it can be argued that the ambiguity of the zero tolerance philosophy has led to the racial profiling of students within the public school system (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

A possible explanation for students of color getting exclusionary offenses more frequently than their white peers is shown in ethnographical qualitative research (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Vavrus and Cole (2002) collected data from two high school classes over a 5-year period. The researchers examined videotaped recordings; researchers' notes from classroom observations; and interviews with teachers, administrators, safety personnel, and students. They analyzed the language and behaviors that appeared to be salient in students getting removed from the classroom. When examining the discourse between students and teachers these researchers found that behaviors resulting in unassigned offenses are largely based on how teachers interpret students' behavior, discursive interactions, and disruption of cultural norms within the classroom

(Vavrus and Cole, 2002). This research may not be generalizable and has very low sample sizes; however, if classrooms include white students and teachers, a “disruption of cultural norms” in which the cultural norm is defined by the dominant white race, inevitably impacts racial minority students. This is evidenced by students getting suspended for exhibiting subjective nonconformities of typical social behavior, in conjunction with the African American and Latino students receiving more severe consequences than the white students. Additionally, once these students are not fitting into a behavioral, social, or racial norm, they become labeled as “troublemakers,” and then they may be more frequently reported for nonviolent behaviors and given more exclusionary disciplinary consequences (Fenning & Rose, 2007).

Students of Color with Special Needs and Zero Tolerance Policies

There is a dearth of literature that examines the intersection between students of color and students with special needs. Researchers, Zhang, Katsiyannis, and Herbst (2004) analyzed disciplinary exclusionary data from 2000-2004 that was made available by the U.S. Department of Education for students with special needs and students of color from all 50 U.S. states, including the District of Columbia. They found that there was an increasing trend in exclusionary policies in the public school systems for students with special needs; however, the researchers did not discuss the racial identities of these students. They also found the same trend for students from diverse ethnic and racial background, but they did not discuss whether or not these students had special needs. However, the researchers did find that students with special needs, particularly emotional disturbances, were given more exclusionary disciplines than students with other types of special needs such as mental retardation or learning disabilities (Zhang, Katsiyannis, and Herbst, 2004).

Zhang, Katsiyannis, and Herbst's (2004) finding that students with special needs with emotional disturbances are more often given exclusionary disciplines is important when thinking about the intersection between special needs and race. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), both black students and white students are overrepresented as having emotional disturbances, putting them in the special needs category; however, of these students, black students are significantly disproportionately represented than white students, which has been speculated to be due to a racial bias (Douglas & Kauffman, 2005). "In various interpretations, this bias may be individual and intentional, or otherwise—systemic, institutional, 'cultural incompetence,' unconscious, or other manifestations" (Douglas and Kauffman, 2005, p. 394). Based on these findings, it is possible to speculate that students of color are going to be disproportionately given exclusionary disciplines than other racial groups.

Overall, there is also a high disproportion of students of color placed in special education programs, which has implications for zero tolerance policies. Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera (2011) (2011) examined the reasons behind the overrepresentation of Black and Latino students in special education classes in two multiracial suburban school districts. The researchers were specifically looking at how the perceptions of race, class, and culture impact students' and administrators' ideas of students' abilities and disabilities. They collected district demographic data, special education data, and referral data over 4 years. They also conducted evaluations, focus groups, and individual interviews with people from a 20-member district team; they surveyed teachers and administrators; and analyzed documents related to district policies and practices. The researchers also examined school districts' policies relating to disproportionality.

Through this process, Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera (2011) found that one of the core reasons for disproportionality is that administrators, teachers, and even students believe that

poverty influences cognitive ability. Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera argued that the judgments and assumptions teachers make about their students, stemming from the “culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds” (2011, p. 2245) of those students, are based on the teacher’s own ideas of what they consider appropriate behavior for the classroom. “Black and Latino students who possess academic knowledge and ability, but are unable to display it in the manner deemed appropriate by their teacher, may be more likely to be viewed as incompetent, incorrigible, or learning disabled” (Ahram et al., 2011, p. 2245).

When asked about the disproportionality of Black and Latino students, especially those from families of lower socioeconomic status, as having special needs and/or performing lower academically, teachers referred to socioeconomic status or their “culture” and home-life as primary factors that impair their ability to learn. The idea that teachers may perceive student behaviors as “incompetent, incorrigible, or learning disabled,” despite having academic knowledge and ability has further implications for how teachers may perceive disruptive behaviors that do not necessitate an expulsion under the GFSA, such as insubordination. The second reason for disproportionality in school refers to a lack of institutionalized policies to help those students who are struggling most in classes. Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera (2011) found that the majority of students with disabilities were on a “Level 1 (below proficiency)” (p. 2252) on the New York State English language arts exams; however, the majority of teachers’ training is to help students who were at least a slightly higher reading level than the Level 1 students. “These ‘Level 1 students’ become expendable or beyond the pale of help, and...end up classified as disabled” (p. 2252).

The way in which students receive exclusive disciplinary actions and are labeled as “disabled” in the public school systems are similar. In the public school system, students are

suspended often for nonviolent behaviors that are subjectively – based upon teachers’ personal beliefs of appropriate behavior – considered disruptive, much in the same way students can be perceived as “disabled.” This especially applies to students who may struggle academically, and are then not given the opportunity to a fair chance in education (marked by not having teachers trained in improving students’ ability to read who are at Level 1). As the Children’s Defense Fund (2000) members discussed, students who are not succeeding in school, tend to feel isolated from their peers and classes, resulting in disruptive behaviors that can lead them down the path of becoming suspended.

Students of color with such disabilities are also known as being in “double jeopardy” . “Double jeopardy” is a term used to describe the finding that the majority of students of color, who are also in special education, are subjected to two separate socially discriminating factors: students of color are often in poorer urban areas with minimal educational resources; this then gets compounded when they are placed in publically funded special education programs, which have even less funding. These students are also faced with discrimination for both their race and their placement in special education programs (Blanchett et al., 2009).

Due to social factors and discrimination based on race, educational differences and disabilities, students of color in these special education programs are sometimes subjected to segregated classrooms, limited access to the curriculum in general education classrooms, higher dropout rates, and poorer outcomes post-graduation (Blanchett, et al., 2009). Nationally, in public school classrooms 54% of students who are considered “special needs” are in the general classroom during 80% of the day. However, students of color are segregated into non-inclusive classrooms and placed with other students of color with the same disability more than white students with the same disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Additionally, these

students are often given teachers who have lower licensure qualifications than those who are not in the segregated, special education classrooms (Blanchett et al., 2009). This has led to the segregation of the public school system and the argument that students of color are not given the same access to education, and put in an educational system that perpetuates institutionalized racism and lower self-esteem among students of color with special needs (Blanchett, 2011; Howard, 2008).

Some researchers have studied the trends of exclusionary disciplining for students of racial minorities and students with special needs within Maryland between 1995 – 2009 (Krezmien, Leone & Achilles, 2006). Krezmien, Leone, and Achilles (2006) studied data drawn from state-reported records of enrollment, suspensions, and special education services of all public school students in Maryland. Data included the number of suspensions and the number of students suspended, disaggregated by five racial groups: African American, Latino, Asian, American Indian, and white. The researchers found that students of color, particularly African Americans and Hispanics, with various disabilities (i.e. learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, health impairments) are given more exclusionary disciplines than their white peers with and without those disabilities (Krezmien et al., 2006). The researchers did not report the reasons for school suspensions, nor the type and description of the exclusionary discipline, or environmental factors such as socioeconomic status (Krezmien et al., 2006).

When school administrators and teachers find that a student cannot get his or her educational needs met at the public school, they can be referred to an alternative education setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). While this can appear to be something that is in the best interest of the student – and at times it is – it is often perceived and sanctioned as a disciplinary action for frequent disruptive behavior (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011a). Booker

and Mitchell (2011) examined African American, Latino, and white students' probability of being placed in an alternative education setting, as a disciplinary action, for behaviors that would either mandate a school-removal or be based on discretionary reasons. They also studied whether students could return to their original school within the same year. They examined 269 students at disciplinary alternative programs in both urban and suburban school districts in the Southwest. Sixty-percent of these students were also economically disadvantaged. The researchers examined the reason for placement; whether the behavior mandated an expulsion under the GFSA or whether an administrator based it on a discretionary decision. Booker and Mitchell (2011) found that students of a racial minority were significantly more likely than white students to be placed in disciplinary alternative education for discretionary reasons and were more likely to return to their original school within the same school year. Boys were no more likely than girls to be put in the alternative education setting for discretionary reasons. Additionally, there was no significant difference between students qualifying for special education and those who did not qualify for special education to be put in this alternative setting for mandatory or discretionary reasons.

Besides looking at differences between mandatory and discretionary reasons for expulsion, an analysis of reporting procedures must be taken into consideration. For example, within the Massachusetts public school system, the disciplinary reporting requirements are different for students who are labeled as "special needs" than students who are not. While unassigned behavioral incidences involving students who are not labeled as "special needs" do not need to be reported if they are suspended for less than 10 days, all incidences, regardless of suspension length, involving students who are labeled as "special needs" need to be reported to the state (Children's Defense Fund, 2011a). It can be argued that this disparity in reporting

creates the illusion that students with special needs, and especially those who are of color, are more disruptive. Qualitative researchers have shown that many students of color are aware of the racial disparities and racism within their schools (Kupchik & Ellis, 2008; Vavrus & Cole, 2002), and other researchers (Blanchett et al., 2009) have found that students who believe discipline is unfair tend to exhibit more disruptive behaviors, thus potentially perpetuating the cycle for youth who are already disciplined at disproportionate rates.

In conclusion, students have been subjected to stringent disciplinary actions that are either determined by preset zero tolerance policies or given these exclusionary disciplines for nonviolent behaviors. While school administrators and teachers have the responsibility for maintaining safety for their students and faculty, these exclusionary disciplines also come at a cost, and increase the risk for students getting put on the Cradle to Prison Pipeline. In order to decrease the risk of students getting on the trajectory towards imprisonment, it is important to identify who is getting exclusionary disciplines for behaviors that do not pose a threat to safety. In the next chapter, I discuss the methods used to conduct the study and identify these students.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss how I conducted the study and identified the students, paying special attention to students of color with special needs, who are at highest risk for getting exclusionary disciplines for nonviolent offenses.

This study examines which behaviors of students of color with special needs receive exclusionary disciplines in Massachusetts's public school system for the academic school year, 2010-2011. Exclusionary disciplines are defined as: (1) in school suspensions; (2) out of school suspensions; (3) removed by personnel to an alternative setting; (4) removed by an impartial hearing officer to an alternative setting; and (4) permanent expulsion. The term, "special need" is defined by students having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Students who have an IEP include "educational disabilities," in the following areas: "Autism, Intellectual, Emotional, Physical, Health, Developmental Delay, Neurological, Communication, Specific Learning, [and] Sensory: Hearing, Vision, Deaf-Blind" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2011, p. 8).

Employing a non-experimental, quantitative cross-sectional design to get a large data set, the tested hypotheses are:

(1) Exclusionary disciplines for behavioral incidences of nonviolent behaviors are more likely to be reported and result in more days missed among males without special needs than among their female counterparts without special needs.

(2) Exclusionary disciplines for behavioral incidences of nonviolent behaviors are more likely to be reported and result in more days missed among students of color with special needs than among their white peers with special needs.

(3) When controlling for socioeconomic status, exclusionary discipline for behavioral incidences of nonviolent behaviors are more likely to be given to students of color with special needs than to their white peers with special needs.

(4) The student's race, special education status and socioeconomic status will be significantly positively correlated with the number of days missed from school

Cross sectional designs provide a snapshot of phenomena at one point in time. They allow comparisons among naturally occurring groups, such as the comparisons between racial, socioeconomic, and special education groups proposed in this study.

Sample and Data Collection

For this study, non-probability convenient sampling methods were used. The sample was taken from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) publically accessible data that includes information of students from preschool to 12th grade, from the 2010-2011 academic year for the Massachusetts's public school system. Each year, school administrators are mandated to report data that reflects disruptive behaviors that are considered dangerous in schools that result in exclusionary disciplines, and are requested to report data that reflects disruptive behaviors that are not necessarily considered dangerous, but result in exclusionary disciplines (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). The data includes the following students' information: grade; race; special education status; socioeconomic status; proficiency level in English; if the behavior is considered dangerous; the category of the behavior; and the resulting discipline. The Massachusetts

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.) reported the following students attended preschool through the 12th grade during the academic school year 2010-2011 in Table 1².

Table 1. Enrollment in MA public elementary, middle, and high schools 2010-2011

| Enrollment 2010-2011 | |
|-------------------------------------|---------|
| Total count | 955,563 |
| Race/ethnicity % | |
| African American or Black | 8.2 |
| Asian | 5.5 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 15.4 |
| Multi-racial, non-Latino | 2.4 |
| Native American | .2 |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | .1 |
| White | 68.0 |
| Gender | |
| Male | 51.3 |
| Female | 48.7 |
| Selected Populations | |
| Low income | 34.2 |
| Students in special education | 17.0 |

These data show that the largest percentage of students in the Massachusetts public schools are white and male and that a higher percentage are Hispanic/Latino followed by Blacks and Asians.

² U.S. Department of Education, n.d. *2010 Massachusetts report card*. retrieved from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/staterc/enrollment.aspx?fyCode=2010> on June 6, 2013

Only 17% were reported as enrolled special needs students, while slightly more than a third are of low income.

While the above table reports the students enrolled in the school system, the data for this research reflects the behaviors, not the students. The data is not mutually exclusive and is not distinguished by students, but by behavioral incidents resulting in a discipline. This means that there will not be a specific number of participants, but rather, a number of behavioral incidents reported. It could be possible to accidentally skew the data by presenting it as individual participants, as opposed to behavioral incidents when looking at racial differences and special needs identifiers.

Regarding reliability, schools are not required to report out-of-school suspensions that are less than 10 days for nonviolent offenses. Even though these data include out-of-school suspensions for less than 10 days, it is possible, if not likely, that many schools do not report all of these suspensions, resulting in reporting biases. Using non-probability sampling methods decreases generalizability and external validity; though I will examine the whole state's public school population, because it is not randomly selected across the U.S., it can only be applied to Massachusetts.

Data analysis

I used a cross-sectional design to provide a perspective of the phenomena at one point in time in order to allow comparisons between racial, socioeconomic, and special education groups proposed in this study.

Statistical analyses were conducted to determine the difference in mean days missed for the following:

1. All students of color compared to white students;
2. Students with special needs compared to students without special needs;
3. Students with lower socioeconomic status compared to those with moderate to higher socioeconomic status
4. Students of color with special needs compared to their white counterparts;
5. Females of all racial identities without special needs compared to their male counterparts;
6. Females of color without special needs compared to their male counterparts;
7. Students of color with special needs, in lower socioeconomic families who commit nonviolent behaviors, compared to their white counterparts
8. Students of color who committed violent offenses compared to students of color who did not commit violent behaviors

Chi-square tests were also calculated to determine the relationship between students' demographic identifiers (race, gender, socioeconomic status, and special needs status) and disciplines they received for violent and nonviolent behaviors: in school suspension, out of school suspension, removal by school personnel to an alternative setting, removal by impartial hearing officer to an alternative setting, or permanent expulsion. In the next chapter, I discuss the results of the aforementioned hypotheses.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

In this chapter, I discuss the results of the hypotheses and tests that were run to examine who was more at risk for being put on the trajectory of the Cradle to Prison Pipeline, paying special attention to students of color with special needs. In the dataset, collected by the U.S. Department of Education, there were 60,610 incidences in which students received disciplines for disruptive behavior.

Differences in Days Missed

The first hypothesis to be tested stated: exclusionary discipline for behavioral incidences of nonviolent behaviors will result in more days missed among males, of all races, without special needs than among their female counterparts. To test for a difference in days missed by gender among all students without special needs, a t-test was run and no statistically significant difference was found ($t=.606$; $df=11198.094$; $p=.545$). The mean score for days missed among all males without special needs was ($M=5.3382$) compared to a mean score in days missed ($M=5.2239$) for all females without special needs.

A second hypothesis was posed that focused on a comparison of days missed by race. The hypothesis stated that students of color will, overall, miss more days of school due to exclusionary disciplines compared to white students. To test this, a t-test was computed to test the mean difference in days missed between students of color and white students. There was no statistically significant difference found in days missed by race ($t(60608)=-.966$, $p=.07$). The

mean score of days missed among students of color was 3.317 compared with a mean score of 3.25 among white students.

The third hypothesis posed was: exclusionary disciplines for behavioral incidences of nonviolent behaviors are more likely to be reported and result in more days missed among students of color with special needs than among their white peers with special needs. To examine whether there was a difference in days missed by race among students in special education, a two-tailed t-test was run and a statistically significant difference was found ($t(41413.84)=2.998$, $p=.003$). The mean number of days missed for white students with special needs was lower ($M=2.268$) than for special needs students of color ($M=2.426$). As shown in Table 2, students of color with special needs miss slightly more days of school for reported nonviolent behaviors than their white peers with special needs.

Table 2. Comparison of Days Missed by Race

| Groups | N | M | t | df | P |
|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|-------------|
| White Students | 19633 | 2.268 | 2.998 | 41413.839 | .003 |
| Students of Color | 21844 | 2.426 | | | |

Hypothesis 4 stated that students with special needs miss more days of school due to exclusionary disciplines than students without special needs. To test this hypothesis, a t-test was used and revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean days missed by whether or not students received special education ($t(6016.788)=31.294$, $p=.000$, two-tailed). As

shown in Table 3, those who received special education missed a lower mean number of days (M=2.3514) than those not receiving special education (M=5.3064).

Table 3. Comparison of Days Missed Between SPED and NON-SPED

| Groups | N | M | t | df | P |
|----------|-------|--------|---------|----------|-------------|
| SPED | 41477 | 2.3514 | -31.294 | 6016.788 | .000 |
| NON-SPED | 19133 | 5.3064 | | | |

The next hypothesis stated that exclusionary disciplines for behavioral incidences of nonviolent behaviors will result in more days missed among males of color without special needs than among their female peers of color without special needs. To look at whether there was a difference in days missed determined by gender, of students of color without special needs, a t-test was computed and no statistically significant difference was found among males (M=5.3382) and females (M=5.4874) of color ($t=.250$; $df=6016.788$; $p=.802$).

The sixth hypothesis posited that students of all races with lower socioeconomic status miss more days of school due to exclusionary disciplines. To test this hypothesis, a t-test was used to compare students with lower SES with those with higher SES. In the data, students who come from families with lower incomes were identified by eligibility for the free lunch program. The analysis shows that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean days missed by whether or not students had lower socioeconomic status ($t(34903.06)=8.438$, $p=.000$, two-tailed). Those without lower SES missed a lower mean number of days (M=3.0697) than those with higher SES (M=3.7178).

Table 4. Comparison of Days Missed by Low Income Families

| Groups | N | M | t | df | P |
|----------------|-------|--------|-------|-----------|-------------|
| Low Income | 20060 | 3.7178 | 8.438 | 34903.058 | .000 |
| Not low income | 40550 | 3.0697 | | | |

The next hypothesis posited that students of color with special needs and from lower income families who commit nonviolent offenses will miss more days due to exclusionary disciplines compared to their white counterparts. To look at lower income students with special needs who committed nonviolent offenses, a t-test was run to determine if there was a mean difference in days missed by race, and a statistically significant difference was found ($t(7362)=2.055$, $p=.040$, two-tailed). White students had a lower number of days missed ($M=1.597$) than students of color ($M=1.6698$).

Table 5. Comparison of Days Missed for Students in Special Education from Low-income Families

| Groups | N | M | t | df | P |
|-------------------|------|--------|--------|------|-------------|
| White students | 2755 | 1.5978 | -2.055 | 7362 | .040 |
| Students of color | 4609 | 1.6698 | | | |

Measure in Differences for Discipline Descriptions

The next set of hypotheses compared in-school and out of school suspensions. The first hypothesis regarding in-school and out of school suspensions posited that a higher percentage of in-school suspensions were found among white students, and a higher percentage of out of school suspensions were found among students of color. To test this, a chi-square analysis was used to test this hypothesis because both the independent and dependent variables were nominal.

As the table below indicates, there was a statistically significant difference in discipline descriptions by race ($X^2 = 72.893$, $df=4$, $p = .000$). A higher percentage of in-school suspensions were found among white students (24.7%) than students of color (22.1%), while a higher percentage of out of school suspensions were found among students of color (77.3%) than among white students (74.9%).

Table 6. Cross-tabulation of Discipline Description by Race

| Groups | Discipline Description | | | | |
|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--|---|---------------------|
| | In school suspension | Out of school suspension | Removed by school personnel to alternative setting | Removed by impartial hearing officer to alternative setting | Permanent expulsion |
| White students | 24.7% | 74.9% | .1% | .0% | .3% |
| Students of color | 22.1% | 77.3% | .1% | .0% | .5% |

The next hypothesis tested whether students with special needs will be given more in-school suspensions than students not in special education, and whether students without special education will be given more out of school suspensions than students in special education. To test this, a chi-square was calculated, and as table 7 below indicates, there was a statistically significant difference in discipline descriptions by special education status ($X^2 = 1779.946$, $df=4$, $p = .000$). A higher percentage of in-school suspensions were found among students in special education (28%) than students not in special education (23.4%), and a higher percentage of out of school suspensions were found among students not in special education (85.5%) than students in special education (71.7%).

Table 7. Cross-tabulation of Discipline Description by Special Education Status

| Groups | Discipline Description | | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--|---|---------------------|
| | In school suspension | Out of school suspension | Removed by school personnel to alternative setting | Removed by impartial hearing officer to alternative setting | Permanent expulsion |
| Students with special needs | 28.0% | 71.7% | .2% | .0% | .1% |
| Students without special needs | 23.4 | 85.8% | .0% | .0% | .9% |

A hypothesis comparing SES and discipline description was posed, which stated that students with lower income families were given more out-of-school suspensions than students with families who did not have lower incomes, and that students who were not from families with lower income were given more in-school suspensions than students with families who did

have a lower income. To test this, a chi-square was calculated, and as shown in Table 8 there was a statistically significant difference in discipline descriptions by SES. ($X^2 = 449.433$, $df=4$, $p = .000$). A higher percentage of in-school suspensions were found among students with families who are not considered in lower income (25.9%) than students from lower income families (18.3%), and a higher percentage of out of school suspensions were found among students from lower income families (80.9%) than students who do not come from lower income families (73.7%).

Table 8. Cross-tabulation of discipline description of special needs students by income level

| | Discipline Description | | | | |
|----------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--|---|---------------------|
| | In school suspension | Out of school suspension | Removed by school personnel to alternative setting | Removed by impartial hearing officer to alternative setting | Permanent expulsion |
| Low income | 18.3% | 80.9% | .1% | .0% | .6% |
| Not low income | 25.9% | 73.7% | .1% | .0% | .3% |

Summary of Findings

This study showed several significant findings that apply to Massachusetts’s public school system. These significant findings include the following:

- Students of color with special needs miss slightly more days of school for reported nonviolent behaviors than their white peers with special needs;

- Students who have been identified as having special needs missed a fewer mean days of school than those not receiving special education;
- Students who come from families with lower incomes miss more days of school than those who do not;
- Students of color with special needs, and who come from families with lower incomes miss more days of school than their white counterparts;
- In-school suspensions were more frequently found among white students than students of color, while a higher percentage of out of school suspensions were found among students of color than among white students;
- In-school suspensions were found more frequently among students in special education than students not in special education, and a higher percentage of out of school suspensions were found among students not in special education than students in special education;
- A higher percentage of in-school suspensions were found more frequently among students with families who are not from families with lower income than students in lower income families, and a higher percentage of out of school suspensions were found among students in lower income families than students who do not come from lower income families.

In the next chapter these results will be discussed in light of the previous literature summarized in Chapter II.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Previous research has shown that students of color are at a high risk of getting put on to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline's trajectory (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Dupper, 2010; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006). The Cradle to Prison Pipeline, a term attributed to the Children's Defense Fund, describes a trajectory that students of color are set on due to frequent exclusionary disciplines, often for nonviolent behaviors, that set the pathway into the prison system (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Dupper, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). Schools have the responsibility of maintaining the safety of their students and staff, and consequences must be determined based on students' behaviors that threaten safety. Data, however, have shown a trend, which indicates that students are also receiving exclusionary discipline that takes them out of the school setting for behaviors that do not necessarily threaten school safety. While exclusionary disciplines may be necessary, they come at a high cost to these students who may be unnecessarily and preemptively removed from the classroom setting (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Dupper, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002).

The purpose of this study was to examine the exclusionary disciplines, influenced by zero tolerance policies that were given to students of color with special needs who exhibited disruptive behaviors within the school setting for all public schools, kindergarten through high

school, in the state of Massachusetts. The testing of many hypotheses elucidated important findings about students of color with special needs receiving exclusionary disciplines. This study does not show that these students will end up on the Cradle to Prison Pipeline; however, it does suggest that because Massachusetts's public school administrators' and educators' practices of discipline are in alignment with the literature (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Dupper, 2010; Krezmien et al., 2006) these kids may be at a higher risk of being put in the pipeline.

Days Missed Due to Exclusionary Disciplines

The analysis of the public school data shows that students of color, overall, did not miss more days of school due to exclusionary disciplines than white students. This finding contradicts much of the literature (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Edelman, 2009; Skiba et al., 2002) in which it is reported that an overall disproportion of students of color miss more days of school than white students due to exclusionary disciplines. This trend, as reflected in the literature and previous studies, is what has been used to support the notion for the Cradle to Prison Pipeline. Despite much of the previous literature, the findings from this study can possibly be explained by the U.S. Department of Education's (2002) determination that white students are also disproportionately overrepresented for having emotional disturbances, and that students with emotional disturbances, in general, are more likely to be given exclusionary disciplines (Zhang, Katsiyannis, and Herbst, 2004). Another possible explanation is that because school administrators are not required to report a suspension that requires students to miss fewer than 10 days of school there could be reporting biases (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2000); therefore, it is possible that there is

more of a disproportion of racial inequities in exclusionary disciplines than what is reflected in the reported data.

In this study I also found that when not taking students' racial identities into account, students with special needs miss fewer days of school due to exclusionary disciplines for nonviolent behaviors; however, when looking at students' racial identities, it was found that students of color with special needs miss more days of school for these same type of behaviors than white students with special needs. This may suggest that students' racial identities play a role in receiving exclusionary disciplines for nonviolent behaviors. This is consistent with Krezmien, Leone, and Achilles's (2006) findings that students of color with various special needs (learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and health impairments) typically receive higher rates of exclusionary disciplines than white students with special needs. This finding could possibly be explained by the idea that there may be less tolerance for students of color with special needs, compared to white students with special needs, especially if students of color are typically over-diagnosed with having emotional disturbances (Zhang, Katsiyannis, and Herbst, 2004).

This study also revealed that regardless of race, students from lower income families miss more days of school due to exclusionary disciplines for nonviolent behaviors than students who do not come from lower income families. This finding remains consistent when looking at students of color with special needs from lower income families: these students miss more days due to exclusionary disciplines for nonviolent behaviors compared to white students with special needs from lower income families. This means that in addition to having special needs and not being part of the dominant race present as risk factors for exclusionary discipline, coming from a family with a lower income does, as well. This is consistent with Chen's (2008) study which

showed that being from a lower income family, marked by eligibility for the free-lunch program, presents as a moderate risk for exclusionary discipline.

Type of Exclusionary Discipline

When looking at these data, it is also important to distinguish between the types of exclusionary discipline, especially between in-school suspensions (ISS) and out-of-school suspensions (OSS). The literature shows that to some degree, in-school suspensions are protective in nature: they allow the students to remain in the school grounds during the day, supervised by adults, and continue to work on their schoolwork in a setting that can foster continued learning (Skiba et al., 2002). When students are taken out of the classroom, these protective factors inherently disappear. While it is possible that students' family members and/or other adults in their lives may be able to stay with them during the day, it is not guaranteed and/or realistic for them to take the time away from work and other responsibilities. As discussed in the Literature Review, research shows that students who are given OSS are also at risk for future disruptive behavior (Hemphill et al., 2006).

My study also showed that students with special needs, regardless of racial identity or family income, were given more ISS than students not in special education. Students without special education were given more OSS than students in special education. While the literature (Zhang, Katsiyannis, and Herbst, 2004) supports that students with special needs are at higher risk for receiving exclusionary discipline overall, this finding speaks to the idea that they are less at risk from literally being excluded from the school campus than students without special needs. This might allude to the idea that there may be more tolerance for students with special needs' nonviolent behaviors when thinking about exclusionary disciplines in the public school system.

This study also revealed that students who broke a nonviolent school rule who came from lower income families were given more OSS than students who also broke a nonviolent rule who came from families who did not have lower incomes. Students with families who did not have lower incomes will be given more in-school suspensions than students with families who were considered lower income. This means that students who come from economically privileged families are more frequently also given the protective factor of an ISS, compared to students from economically disadvantaged students. Families who are economically disadvantaged may not always have the resources to supervise their children or arrange for supervision while at work or taking care of other responsibilities. This often leaves these children unattended to and can possibly increase risk for future disruptive behavior (Hemphill et al., 2006).

As discussed earlier, the results of this study showed that students of color and white students do not miss a significant difference in the number of days missed, including ISS and OSS, from school due to exclusionary discipline for nonviolent behaviors. However for all students with special needs, this study did reveal that students of color are given OSS more than white students and that white students are given more ISS than students of color. This means that students of the dominant white race continue to get a protective form of exclusionary discipline, and that students of color continue to get exclusionary disciplines that fully remove them from the school setting, even when both sets of students have exhibited nonviolent behaviors. This finding is consistent with other literature that shows that students of color are more likely to get exclusionary discipline (Dupper, 2010; Edelman, 2009; Skiba et al., 2002).

Exclusionary disciplines have negative consequences for students, and there has been little evidence to show their effectiveness in correcting disruptive behaviors (Skiba et al., 2002), but that they also tend to increase these behaviors through a chain of events (Cass et al., 2007;

Hemphill et al., 2006). This chain of events, otherwise known as the Cradle to Prison Pipeline, starts as a behavioral incident – violent or nonviolent – that results in a suspension in which the student is removed from the classroom or school setting. Once the student is removed from this environment, they may feel alienated by or disconnected from peers and teachers and may act out as a means of connecting with peers and/or teachers, which perpetuates the cycle of suspensions. When children are frequently suspended, there is usually a correlated decrease in self-esteem and belief in self-competency and they may eventually drop out of school. Once children and adolescents are not in school and without a high school degree, there is an increased risk for incarceration (Cass et al., 2007). Students of color with special needs, and especially those from families with lower incomes, are particularly at higher risk for getting onto this trajectory towards imprisonment.

Limitations

A limitation to this study was the sampling method. This study was a secondary analysis in which the data were derived from the U.S. Department of Education’s publically accessible database; this inherently means that I had no control over how the data were collected or represented. The data used for this study reflects the number of behavioral incidents, as opposed to the number of students. It is likely that several reported behaviors came from one student, and therefore, it is not possible to know if students are repeatedly given exclusionary disciplines for the same behavior. Additionally, the gender category is set up in the binary. The reports do not reflect students’ gender identity if they do not identify and/or present themselves as their biological sex, or do not identify with either of the genders. Based on this data, is it not possible to know how many students who may not identify with the gender binary of ‘male’ and ‘female.’

Furthermore, nonprobability-sampling methods were used, and therefore, the generalizability was decreased and the findings can only be applied to Massachusetts.

An additional limitation to this study is the regulations that require schools to report when teachers discipline students. First, “nonviolent” offenses within the data were reported as “unassigned,” regardless of the offense, and the U.S. Department of Education does not operationalize “nonviolent” offenses, therefore, the data is not discretely identified to what these offenses are. These types of behavioral offenses could include anything from chewing gum, to verbal and/or cyber bullying. Though there is a growing awareness of the impact of bullying on children, it is not considered a violent offense unless there is a physical threat involved (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). The absence of the identification of what these nonviolent offenses were, allows school administrators to not regulate the behaviors for which students are being suspended, and the disciplines that students are given to ensure that the consequence is appropriate for the behavior. This also means that in the research, there may be disruptive behaviors cited that may inherently threaten the safety of another, but might not qualify as a violent behavior under the GFSA.

An additional limitation is that teachers are not required to report suspensions that are given for less than ten days if the behavior was noted as an “unassigned offense” (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). This is a serious problem because it does not reflect the frequency with which students are taken out of school for these offenses. It is also possible that because they are suspended for fewer than 10 days, these offenses were considered “less serious” than the suspensions that merit a minimum of 10 days. However, these students are still taken out of school for up to almost 2 weeks without it being reported. Within the data used for this study, suspensions that are under 10 days for unassigned offenses were

frequently reported, but because it is not a requirement to report these suspensions, any missing reports would skew some of the data.

Implications for Future Studies and Clinical Practice

Clinical practice. This study revealed implications for clinical practice, particularly within a classroom setting. One of the primary implications for clinical practice is examining disciplinary techniques in the classroom setting prior to the behavior escalating to a point that necessitates an exclusionary discipline. Researchers have shown that teachers, especially those who are stressed and overworked, spend more time focusing on students' disruptive behaviors than on their positive behaviors (Alvarez, 2007; Stormont, 2002); this dynamic between teachers and students often leads to an increase in disruptive behaviors instead of a behavioral correction that sustains over a period of time (Gebbie, Ceglowski, Taylor, & Miels, 2011). The field of education and social work could benefit from further research on developing ways to address these socioemotional needs and disruptive behaviors that foster sustaining positive changes in students' behaviors. Furthermore, it could be beneficial for social workers to provide teacher-trainings on mental health in the school system, and the relevancy of students' socioemotional needs to their behaviors. This could give teachers additional perspective to the disruptive behaviors and allow them to work with students in more productive and successful ways than potentially unnecessarily removing them from the classroom.

In addition to implications for direct classroom practice, this study also revealed that there are opportunities for school administrators, teachers, and school social workers to increase their awareness of the impact that race, special education, and family income have on students who exhibit disruptive behaviors and their consequences. School social workers, in particular,

can actively look at how these factors may impact the type of discipline that is given for violent and nonviolent disruptive behaviors. By actively looking at these factors, they can advocate for more equity for students of color with special needs regarding exclusionary disciplines, and for a reduction in the number of days these students miss from school. Additionally, if educators, administrators, and social workers are aware of their racial identity and class in relation to that of their students, they may have a greater capacity to recognize their racial biases, and therefore, hopefully decrease exclusionary disciplines that may be a product of racism and discrimination. This, of course, makes the assumption that creating equity within exclusionary disciplines is a value and goal in the public school systems.

Policy reform. In addition to implications for clinical practice, there are also implications for education policy makers to consider. First, it would be beneficial for reporting policies to require that school administrators report all behaviors that necessitate any number of days missed, not just over 10 days, in order to give an accurate, comprehensive representation of who are receiving exclusionary disciplines for violent and nonviolent behaviors. Secondly, a report including an anonymous record of the students that shows repeated behaviors per each student, could also help researchers, school personnel, and policy makers get a more accurate and fuller representation of who is getting exclusionary disciplines more frequently. Having more discrete information about students' disciplines could possibly help administrators and educators understand who is receiving exclusionary disciplines most frequently and hopefully prevent and reduce the number of exclusionary disciplines.

Future Studies

This study examined a single year in the Massachusetts public school system. The field of social work would benefit from a longitudinal study that looks at trends in exclusionary

disciplines for students of color with special needs over a period of years. It would also be important to look at the discrete racial identities for students of color to see if there are trends within the different races. This study looked at the public school system. It is recommended that this research also be conducted in private schools for students with special needs to determine if there are disciplinary differences between public school and private schools. Additionally, this study, due to exclusionary discipline reporting policies, did not include students' specific disruptive non-violent behaviors, as these behaviors are noted as "unassigned," as discussed earlier; however, it is possible to look at students' specific violent behaviors. In the future, it will be important for researchers to examine which violent behaviors specific students most frequently commit.

This study is incongruent with previous research that has found that students of color typically miss more days of school due to exclusionary disciplines for nonviolent behaviors than white students in Massachusetts's public schools. Despite this, this research showed that, overall, students of color, especially if they have special needs and/or come from families with lower income, are still at risk for missing more days of school for behaviors that do not pose a risk to others' safety. This leaves ample room for school systems to improve the way they use discipline in the classroom, while ensuring that teachers have enough support and training in mental health. Additionally, the field of social work and education would benefit from further research that takes a closer look at the examined hypotheses by looking at how these factors impact specific racial identities. Due to the nature of using data from a secondary source, there is no control over how the data is represented; however, it would also be beneficial for the data to represent each individual student to determine if disruptive behaviors and exclusionary disciplines occur more frequently with one student over another.

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