

Correlates that Limit Crime Prevention and the Impact on Levels of Disciplinary Infractions

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ABSTRACT

This paper shares perceptions of correlates that limit crime prevention efforts and the impact on levels of disciplinary infractions as reported by principals in U.S. public high schools. Data was drawn from the 2017-2018 School Survey on Crime and Safety. Responses representing approximately 10,649 high schools were analyzed. Correlates limiting crime prevention were categorized into four areas: (1) Systematic Inadequacies, (2) Retaliatory Issues, (3) Policy Issues and (4) Federal and State Regulations. Limitations were studied across three school settings; city, suburban, and rural. Systematic Inadequacies were identified as having the greatest limit on crime prevention efforts. Results also demonstrated statistically significant differences in correlates across the different school settings.

KEY WORDS: principals, criminal activity, disciplinary infractions

Introduction

Ideally, teaching and learning should be the focus of activities at public schools in the United States (U.S.); but repeatedly students, staff, faculty, and administrators contend with incidents that are recognized as criminal and/or violent. The 2019 Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public School document reports that there were 962,300 violent and 476,100 non-violent incidents in U.S. public schools in the 2017-2018 academic school year. A majority of schools have been affected; 71% of schools listed having at least one violent incident and 65% of schools listed having at least one nonviolent incident (Diliberti, Jackson, Correa & Padgett, 2019). Those incidents were classified as violent included rape, sexual assault other than rape, and physical attacks or fights, and robberies with or without a weapon. Non-violent incidents included theft, vandalism, bullying/cyberbullying, possession of a firearm or explosive device, knife or sharp objects, and possession or use of illegal drugs, alcohol, or prescription drugs.

It has been noted that acts of violence and crime at schools can impact the individuals directly involved, but may also adversely affect others at the school and in the surrounding community. Historically, a plethora of reactions have been documented among students who witness or are the victims of the acts, including mental illness, poor academic performance, truancy, and dropping out (Carlton, 2021; Cornell, et al, 2021; Cornell, 2020; MacMillan & Hagan, 2004; Nansel et al, 2001; Prinstein, et al 2001; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). For victimized teachers, job satisfaction diminishes and for others, disengagement from the profession is the end result (Karcher, 2002; Moon, et. al, 2021).

Review of Literature

Most school districts have practices and programs to promote school safety and address crime and violence, guided by Federal and/or State regulations. Options to address the behavior of a student who compromises school safety include: out of school suspension; transfer to a specialized school; or removal from the school, with no continued services, for a specified period of time. There have been several published reports that provide guidelines to help principals establish effective discipline policies in their schools (Curran and Finch, 2021; Gullo and Beachum, 2020; Meador, 2019). Although Meador (2019) suggest that principals will be more successful at controlling disciplinary infractions when they create a productive and positive school environment; the study also list six components that principals need to provide in establishing effective school discipline. These components include the following: (a) create a plan for Teachers to follow, (b) support the Teachers, (c) be Consistent and fair, (d) documentation of issues, (e) be calm, but be stern, and (f) know your district policies and pertinent state laws.

Even though these and other studies have provided effective guidelines for disciplinary policies, some studies have also pointed to biases in implementation of these policies (Loveless, 2017; Owens, et al, 2016; Sorensen, 2021; Sorensen, et al, 2022). One major bias the studies have pointed out is racial disparities in “Out-of-School Suspensions” (OSS). Loveless (2017) for example, looked at state data in California and found that African-American students OSS rates were three to four times higher than the state average. Furthermore, when comparing OSS rates across ethnicities, African-American students’ rates were 17.8 per 1000 students compared to 5.2 for Hispanic students, 4.4 for White students, and 1.2 for Asian students. On the national level, the OSS rates for African-Americans students also continue to outpace White students.

(DeMatthews, et al, 2017; Owens, Shelton, & Cummings, 2016). OSS rates for African-American students were 10.5 per 1000 compared to 5.5 for White students (Owens, el. al 2016).

A second major concern with school disciplinary policies has been applying these policies consistently across school settings (Crosier, 2018; Logan and Burdick-Will, 2018). Settings include public, private, and charter schools in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Studies have shown that how school disciplinary policies are applied can be unique to community setting. Principals in urban school for example, are more likely to be faced with student behavior problems associated with student absenteeism and classroom discipline compared to other schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). This uniqueness is associated with levels and types of disciplinary infractions that occur in the different school settings. Therefore, principals in these different settings often must focus on school disciplinary policies that are more tailored to their environment. Although these and other studies have examined disparities in applying school disciplinary policies; none of these studies have looked at causes that might limit implementation of school disciplinary policies. Furthermore, none of these studies have associated disciplinary policies limits to actual levels of disciplinary infractions. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine high school administrators' perceptions of correlates that limit their crime prevention efforts and the impact on levels of disciplinary infractions. Data analyzed was collected as part of the 2017-2018 School Survey on Crime and Safety, developed and managed by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The results were compared across urban suburban and rural school settings.

Methods

Sample

The survey included 857 public school administrators' responses representing approximately 10,476 high schools across the country. There were about 252 schools representing 3278 city schools, 378 schools representing 3909 suburban schools, and 227 schools representing 3289 rural schools. The schools listed in a "town" were not included in the present analysis. According to the U.S. Census, city schools are defined as those located inside an urbanized area and inside a principle city. Suburban schools are situated outside a principle city and inside an urbanized area. Rural schools are those positioned less than or equal to five miles from an urbanized area.

Instrument

The survey examined school-related factors as reported by a school administrator that limited efforts to reduce and prevent crime. These factors were categorized into four areas: (1) systematic inadequacies, (2) retaliatory issues, (3) policy issues, and (4) Federal and State regulations. Three items used to measure systematic inadequacies included: (a) lack of Teacher training in classroom management, (b) lack of or inadequate alternative placement programs for

disruptive students, and (c) inadequate funds. Four items classified as retaliatory issues were: (a) fear of student retaliation, (b) fear of litigation, (c) parental complaints, and (d) fear of district or state reprisal. Three items used to access policy issues encompassed: (a) lack of teacher support for school policies, (b) lack of parent support for school policies, and (c) inconsistent application of policies. The final area; Federal and State regulations, were measured using the following three criteria: (a) Federal, State, or District policies on disciplining special education students, (b) Federal policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students and (c) State or District policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students.

The instrument also reported the number of disciplinary infractions reported at each of the schools included in the sample.

Procedure

Data was collected online between February and July 2018. The survey was administered to Principals in public schools at the primary, middle, and high school levels. School administrators were asked to indicate whether certain correlates were potential limits to their school efforts to reduce or prevent crime. The possible responses for these items ranged from “does not limit” to “limits in a major way”. Only responses from high school personnel are presented in this paper.

Analysis

Sample weights were provided and used in the analysis to replicate population estimations and allow for population generalizations from the data. To examine how the correlates impacted disciplinary infractions, a series of linear models were constructed and tested regressing for each of the factors on levels of reports of disciplinary incidences at each school. To account for the ordinal measures of the independent variables, a dummy coding method was used with the level “does not limit” being used as the reference (Walter, Feinstein, & Well, 1987). Separate models were also composed for the three school settings; namely city, suburban, and rural, to compare the impact of the four categories of factors across the different school settings. It should be noted that due to multiple items being tested under each subscale and sample weights being used, alpha levels were set at $p < .001$.

Results

Table 1 reports descriptive outcomes for each measure associated with the four correlates in the study. The factor school administrators perceived as having the greatest impact on their effects to reduce or prevent crime was “systematic inadequacies”. Approximately 30% of the school administrators responded that “lack of or inadequate alternative placement programs for disruptive students” posed limits.

Similarly, about one-third (33%) of the school administrators indicated that “inadequate funding” was a potential major limitation to crime prevention. Almost 20% of the school administrators also viewed “Federal, State, or District policies on disciplining special education students” as major factors in their efforts to reduce or prevent crime.

Over 40% of the school administrators recorded “inconsistent application of policies” and “lack of teacher training in classroom management” as minor issues in crime prevention. Over 30% of respondents identified “fear of litigation”, parental complaints” and “lack of teacher support for school policies” as minor issues to prevent crime. Finally, over 70% of school principals perceived the “fear of district or state reprisal” and “fear of student retaliation” as having no impact on their crime prevention efforts.

Table 2 reports the results of the overall ordinal regression model; along with the use of each of the subscales, as predictor variables and the reported number of disciplinary infractions as the dependent variable. In the first model, items used to assess “systematic inadequacies” were used as predictor measures of disciplinary infractions. The overall model indicated that disciplinary infraction levels were positively related to principals who perceived “lack of teacher training” as a major issue at their school.

The second model regressed items measuring “retaliatory issues” on disciplinary infractions. The overall model produced one statistically significant predictor, “fear of District or State reprisal”. The overall model indicated that disciplinary infraction levels were positively related to principals who perceived “fear of District or State reprisal”, as a major issue at their school.

The third model regressed items measuring “policy issues” on disciplinary infractions. Principals had major concerns about “inconsistent application of policies”, an issue which was significantly related to disciplinary infractions. The fourth and final model indicated the principals who perceived “State or District policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students” as a major limitation associated with increased levels of disciplinary infractions.

Table 3 reports the results of the overall ordinal regression model, along with using each of the subscales as predictor variables across the three school settings. In the first model, items used to measure “systematic inadequacies”, identified principals in rural schools who perceived “lack of teacher training” as a major limitation associated with higher levels of disciplinary infractions. No other school settings indicated that the measure, “systematic inadequacies” was associated with disciplinary infractions.

When examining “retaliatory issues”, principals from rural schools perceived “fear of student retaliation” and “parental complaints” as major limitations associated with disciplinary

infractions. Principals from city schools on the other hand viewed “fear of District or State reprisal” as a major limitation associated with disciplinary infractions. There were no “retaliatory issues” limitations associated with disciplinary infractions for principals in suburban schools.

When examining “policy issues” principals from both city and rural schools viewed “inconsistent application of policies” as a major limitation associated with disciplinary infractions. No other “policy issues” were associated with disciplinary infractions. Furthermore, there were no “policy issues” associated with disciplinary infractions reported by suburban principals.

In the final analysis in this section “Federal and State regulations”; both city and rural school principals had major limitations associated with disciplinary infractions. Principals from city schools viewed all three measures of “Federal and State regulations” as major limitations associated with higher disciplinary infractions. These included “Federal, State, or District policies” on disciplining special education students; Federal policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students; and State or District policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students. Findings for rural school principals indicated that “Federal policies” on discipline and safety other than those for special education students” and “State or District policies” on discipline and safety other than those for special education students were statistically significant.

Discussion

Reducing disciplinary infractions continues to be a mandate in public schools across the United States. As incident rates continue to increase in many schools, much of the blame is generally placed on school administrators. Therefore, in order to better understand how administrators contend with disciplinary infraction levels in their schools; factors that limit their efforts need to be explored.

The first important finding in this study is associated with the descriptive measures produced in the analysis. In this case, School Principals were most concerned with items associated with “systematic inadequacies”. Issues such as inadequate alternative placement of students and inadequate funding were viewed as major restrictions in their efforts to reduce disciplinary infractions.

The second important finding was related to the ordinal regression model that associated limitations to reduce and prevent crime as predictors of disciplinary infractions. “Systematic inadequacies” produced one item that was statistically significant “lack of Teacher training in classroom management”. Under “retaliatory issues”; “fear of District or State reprisal” was a significant predictor of disciplinary infractions. “Policy Issues” produced one item that was

statistically significant; “inconsistent application of policies”. “Federal and State regulations” also produced one item that was a statistically significant predictor; State or District policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students. Each of these predictors are supported by previous studies and reports that have highlighted effective school disciplinary policies (Curran and Finch, 2021; Gullo and Beachum, 2020; Meador, 2019). “Lack of Teacher training in classroom management” for example, is an essential element in reducing disciplinary infractions (Franklin and Harrington, 2019; Imms and Byers, 2017). Teachers are often viewed as the first line of defense because they have more interaction with students. Well trained teachers can often recognize potentially violent situations and defuse anticipated disciplinary infractions. “Fear of District or State reprisal” can be directly associated with academic standing of the school. Moreover, previous studies have shown that levels of disciplinary infractions are predictors of overall school performance (Meador, 2019; Sorensen, 2021). Therefore, schools with a high level of disciplinary infractions are more likely to produce low performing students and are more likely to be scrutinized by their District and at the State level.

“Inconsistent application of policies” has also been well documented in the literature (Loveless, 2017; Owens, et al, 2016; Sorensen, 2021; Sorensen, et al, 2022). Further studies are needed to isolate components within school discipline policies to get a better understanding of why. Is it just related to school settings or is there some pre-conceived thoughts or philosophies that are causing the inconsistencies? Case studies or more refined studies are needed. Finally, “State or District policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students” can also be unique across different States and Districts in the U.S.

The third and final finding was related to the ordinal regression model that associated limitations to reduce and prevent crime as predictors of disciplinary infractions across school settings. Only in rural schools when “lack of Teacher training in classroom management” becomes a major issue, levels of disciplinary infractions increase significantly. Comparing school setting across “retaliatory issues” indicated that in rural schools, when the “fear of student retaliation” and “parent complaints” become a major issue, levels of disciplinary infractions increase significantly. Urban school on the other hand, under “retaliatory issues” when the “fear of District or State reprisal” become a major issue, levels of disciplinary infractions increase significantly. None of the “retaliatory issues” impacted suburban schools. Comparing “policy issues” across school setting; both urban and rural schools indicated that when “inconsistent application of policies” becomes a major problem, disciplinary infractions increase significantly.

Comparing the final component “Federal and State regulations” across school settings indicated that when “Federal policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students” become major issues, disciplinary infractions increase significantly at both urban and rural schools. When “Federal, State, or District policies on disciplining special education

students” become a major issue at urban schools, disciplinary infractions increase significantly. Finally, when “State or District policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students” becomes a major issue at rural schools, disciplinary infractions increase significantly.

Conclusion

This study identifies factors that limit administrators’ efforts to reduce levels of disciplinary infractions. The factors are noted to differ across school settings. The differences may account for inconsistencies in applying disciplinary policies. Principal are adapting policies to address the most common disciplinary infractions that are occurring at their school. The “lack of Teacher training in classroom management” for example, leads to higher levels of classroom discipline problems. Therefore, principals facing this as a major issue will have to allocate more efforts and resources to address this problem. Finally, it should be pointed out that there were no major issues associated with suburban schools that significantly predicted levels of disciplinary infractions. This might help to explain the importance of “inconsistent application of policies” as a significant predictor of disciplinary infractions. The infractions may increase because urban and rural schools are faced with different issues associated planning and implementing their school safety policy. Future research is needed to take an in-depth look at “inconsistent application of policies” not only across setting but also within school settings to determine the uniqueness of policies that work best in their environment.

Table 1. Responses for Each Item by Percent
N= 10,476

Category of Limitations	Does Not Limit	Limits in Minor Way	Limits in Major Way
Systematic Inadequacies			
Lack of teacher training in classroom management	56.8	38.1	05.1
Lack of or inadequate alternative placement programs for disruptive students	35.6	34.8	29.6
Inadequate funds	34.0	32.8	33.2
Retaliatory Issues			
Fear of student retaliation	68.5	29.3	02.2
Fear of litigation	58.7	34.4	06.9
Parental complaints	70.6	25.7	03.7
Fear of district or state reprisal	73.9	21.8	04.3

Policy issues

Lack of teacher support for school policies	69.6	27.8	02.6
Lack of parent support for school policies	55.6	35.8	08.6
Inconsistent application of policies	44.6	44.5	10.8
Federal and State Regulations			
Federal, state, or district policies on disciplining special education students	41.8	39.2	19.0
Federal policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students	56.5	33.8	09.7
State or district policies on discipline and safety other than those for special education students	56.4	32.9	10.7

Table 2. Standardized Beta Coefficients Comparing Ordinal Levels of Limiting Factors (No Limitation Used as the Reference Measure)
N= 10,476

	Minor	Major
Systematic Inadequacies		
Lack of teacher training	.091	.138*
Lack of alternative placement	.037	.112
Inadequate funds	.011	.011
Retaliatory Issues		
Fear of student retaliation	.102	.089
Fear of litigation	.015	.085
Parental complaints	.061	.009
Fear of district or state reprisal	.118	.144*
Policy Issues		
Lack of teacher support	.097	.063
Lack of parent support	.046	.101
Inconsistent application of policies	.059	.184*
Federal and State Regulations		
Federal policies/special education	.105	.136
Other federal policies	.020	.187
Other state/district policies	.075	.239*

p= ≤ .001

Table 3. Standardized Beta Coefficients Comparing Ordinal Levels of Limiting Factors Across City, Suburban, and Rural Schools (No Limitation Used as the Reference Measure)
N= 12,580

	City		Suburban		Rural	
	Minor	Major	Minor	Major	Minor	Major
Systematic Inadequacies						
Lack of teacher training	.208	.085	.002	.131	.059	.213*
Lack of alternative placement	.067	.015	.083	.183	.149	.137
Inadequate funds	.067	.035	.020	.025	.029	.136
Retaliatory Issues						
Fear of student retaliation	.034	.081	.074	.097	.085	.216*
Fear of litigation	.003	.147	.007	.087	.045	.035
Parental complaints	.044	.069	.080	.078	.098	.216*
Fear of district or state reprisal	.102	.246*	.137	.121	.024	.101
Policy Issues						
Lack of teacher support	.122	.132	.046	.051	.056	.117
Lack of parent support	.023	.075	.058	.145	.017	.036
Inconsistent application of policies	.048	.230*	.044	.132	.128	.238*
Federal and State Regulations						
Federal policies/special education	.147	.250*	.104	.124	.001	.109
Other federal policies	.111	.279*	.042	.072	.049	.455*
Other state/district policies	.125	.176	.088	.114	.252	.501*

p= ≤ .001

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