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Discipline Beyond Suspensions: Racial/Ethnic Disparities Across the Spectrum of Disciplinary Actions*

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ABSTRACT: Little research examines whether the alternatives to suspension reduce racial/ethnic discipline disparities. Using unusually rich administrative data from a large district in the South, we investigate how schools use a range of disciplinary actions and the racial/ethnic gaps in their use. School leaders may respond to discipline incidents with a variety of guidance-based and punitive actions, but most commonly apply a single punitive action. Moreover, non-exclusionary alternatives are applied unequally; among students involved in the same fight, White students are more likely to lose privileges as their harshest consequence, while Black students are more likely to receive suspensions or be reported to a school resource officer. Our results highlight that alternatives to suspensions can themselves be sources of racial/ethnic inequality.

KEYWORDS: School Discipline, Office Discipline Referrals, Racial/Ethnic Differences, Differential Processing

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1 Introduction

School discipline has long been a source of inequalities in U.S. schools (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Gopalan et al., 2024). Black students are disproportionately suspended relative to their White peers (Darling-Hammond & Ho, 2024). Exclusionary discipline in the form of suspensions and expulsions has negative impacts on academic performance, on-time graduation, and college enrollment (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Noltemeyer et al., 2015), and can push students out of school and into the criminal justice system, the so-called “school-to-prison pipeline” (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2024; Skiba et al., 2014; Sorensen et al., 2022).

Awareness of the negative consequences of out-of-school suspension (OSS) has led to a decline in suspension use over the past decade and a search for alternative types of behavior management; nevertheless, racial/ethnic discipline gaps are enduring. To date, however, only a few studies have described the prevalence of these alternative disciplinary actions beyond suspensions (Skiba et al., 1997, 2011; Welsh, 2022), and little is known about their disproportionalities by race/ethnicity. Using data from 2005-2006, Skiba et al. (2011) documented racial/ethnic discrepancies in in-school suspensions (ISS), detentions, and other minor actions as well, finding that Black and Hispanic students were more likely to receive OSS and expulsions than minor actions for the same types of infractions. Recently, studies illuminate that children of color are more susceptible to soft exclusionary practices, such as taking a break outside the classroom (Steyer et al., 2025; Williford et al., 2021). These studies, while informative, are dated and limited to smaller numbers of actions and earlier grades (pre-K–5), where discipline gaps tend to be much smaller than in middle and high schools (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

Our study has two key contributions to the literature. Disciplinary actions do not operate in

isolation; in practice, administrators select one action from many, either foregoing other options or combining multiple responses. Prior studies that analyzed the receipt of disciplinary actions as discrete outcomes (Darling-Hammond & Ho, 2024; Gopalan & Nelson, 2019) could not capture whether administrators take milder punishments preceding exclusionary discipline, or how often they offer any guidance followed by suspensions to redirect students. By framing all actions as a continuous spectrum, our study is the first to investigate whether and how schools apply non-exclusionary responses along with suspensions in response to each referral. That is, this approach enables us to distinguish referrals that result in a suspension alone from those combined with other alternatives, and to examine how the application of these actions varies by student race/ethnicity.

Examining whether students of color receive discriminatory treatment requires stronger causal evidence to account for underlying student behavioral differences. To this end, previous studies used fixed effects (FE) models to exploit variation within the same infraction type or incident, as well as controlling for students' referral histories (e.g., Kinsler, 2011; Liu et al., 2024). Yet, studies employing this plausibly causal identification strategy have exclusively focused on one outcome—suspension—among the many disciplinary responses schools impose (Anderson & Ritter, 2020; Barrett et al., 2021; Kinsler, 2011; Shi & Zhu, 2022), or at best, the conversion of office discipline referrals (ODR) to suspensions (Liu et al., 2024). For this reason, what disciplinary actions White students receive instead of OSS has been unexplored, which could be ISS, even milder punishments or restorative strategies. By applying this FE strategy to a broader range of outcomes across the integrated spectrum of disciplinary actions, our study examines the specific actions White peers in the same incident are more likely to receive in lieu of suspensions, pinpointing potential intervention points to reduce discipline gaps.

In this study, we examine an integrated spectrum of disciplinary actions by using exceptionally

rich administrative and ODR datasets from our partner district in the South from 2022–2024. Our data record 47 disciplinary consequences that can be assigned to each incident, including less- and non-exclusionary punishments, guidance, and even report to school police (i.e., school resource officer (SRO)). First, we describe the types, numbers, and combinations of disciplinary actions schools take to address ODRs, providing the most comprehensive and detailed documentation to date on the distribution of disciplinary actions. Then, following prior literature (Liu et al., 2024; Shi & Zhu, 2022), we apply multiple empirical strategies (including an incident FE model) to control for the underlying student behavioral differences, allowing us to investigate whether students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds receive different treatments for the same infractions.

Our findings show that disciplinary actions are roughly evenly split between punitive and guidance-based responses (i.e., non-punitive, non-exclusionary discipline alternatives in the ODR system focused on redirection and support), indicating that the sole focus on punitive actions may overlook a significant portion of the disciplinary landscape. When administering guidance, schools heavily rely on administrator conferences (34% of total actions) and seldom use other alternative practices (less than 2% of each), despite the popularity of Restorative Justice (RJ) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). That said, even this traditional form of guidance is rarely extended to students who are suspended, as the majority of referrals result in a single punitive consequence. Black students are overrepresented in non-exclusionary punishments as well as in OSS. Within the same fight, Black students are more likely to receive OSS and to have an SRO involved than their White peers. Their White counterparts, in contrast, are more likely to lose classroom privileges as the most severe consequence of their fights, with escalation to suspension being uncommon.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews literature on school discipline and the

sources of racial/ethnic discipline disparities, and outlines our conceptual framework. Section 3 presents our original data. Section 4 elaborates on the key disciplinary action outcomes and FE models. Section 5 shows our finding that schools rarely offer guidance to punished or suspended students, and in the same incident, White students are more likely to receive non-exclusionary punishments while Black students tend to have more extreme punishments. Section 6 concludes with discussions of the practice and policy implications.

2 Literature Review

Discipline beyond Suspensions

In this section, we review the literature on school disciplinary actions beyond OSS, particularly ISS, detention, and other less-exclusionary punishments, non-punitive interventions, and SROs. ISS is a type of exclusionary discipline that requires students to stay in a designated room on the school campus other than their regular classroom (Fabelo et al., 2011). Though often considered milder than OSS, ISS occurs more frequently than OSS in schools, similarly deprives students of learning time, and is negatively associated with educational outcomes (Jabbari & Johnson Jr., 2023; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). In examining racial/ethnic discipline disparities, studies either combine OSS and ISS as suspensions, a single disciplinary outcome (e.g., Bacher-Hicks et al., 2024; Barrett et al., 2021; Lindsay and Hart, 2017), or present both as two independent outcomes (e.g., Darling-Hammond and Ho, 2024; Gopalan, 2019; Skiba et al., 2011). However, neither approach speaks to how educators replace OSS with ISS or vice versa, in ways that may vary by student race/ethnicity.

Beyond the ISS-OSS distinction, schools also routinely employ less or non-exclusionary actions (Welsh, 2022). Detention, though sometimes classified as exclusionary (Alexander et al.,

2023), is generally regarded as less exclusionary than suspensions, as it typically occurs outside of instructional time and keeps students on school grounds (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Besides detention, existing studies touch on a variety of other non-exclusionary actions—ranging from mild punitive measures, such as loss of student privileges and bus suspension, to guidance-based responses, including administrator conferences and counselor referrals (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Welsh, 2022). Despite the pervasiveness of these less severe disciplinary measures, evidence is sparse on whether educators use these actions differently by student race/ethnicity, let alone if they substitute for or complement suspensions.

Over the past 15 years, many schools have invested in more positive and supportive discipline systems intended to reduce overall discipline use, and, ideally, mitigate discipline disparities (Welsh & Little, 2018). RJ and PBIS are the most common systems (Alexander et al., 2023), and these alternative interventions have partly, though not entirely, replaced the use of suspensions and referrals (Augustine et al., 2018; Barrett & Harris, 2018; Bradshaw et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Flannery et al., 2014). However, studies report that Black students continue to be more likely than their White peers to receive suspensions after RJ implementation (Anyon et al., 2016; Davison et al., 2022; Hashim et al., 2018), suggesting that administrators may not turn to these non-punitive alternatives equitably.

In contrast to these restorative approaches, sworn law enforcement personnel, known as SROs, have become a fixture of public schools, primarily aimed at preventing school shootings and campus violence (Curran et al., 2021; Sorensen et al., 2023). In 2021-22, 45 percent of public schools across the U.S. had SROs, and they were typically assigned to public high schools that served more diverse student populations (Lindsay et al., 2018; Nolle et al., 2024). While evidence on whether SROs reduce school crime and improve perceived safety remains mixed (Curran et al., 2021; Got-

tfredson et al., 2020; Welsh & Little, 2018), this greater investment in school police may come at a cost. Studies show that the increased presence of SROs contributes to the increased use of suspensions, expulsions, and school arrests (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Sorensen et al., 2021; Theriot, 2009), widening racial/ethnic disparities along the school-to-prison pipeline (Crosse et al., 2022). Advancing these findings, we argue that disproportionate SRO involvement is better understood as part of educators' disciplinary decision-making, given that such involvement largely falls within the discretion of teachers and principals (Curran et al., 2019).

Taken together, prior studies that examine disciplinary actions beyond OSS, such as ISS and detention, treat each as an isolated outcome rather than as an interrelated set of responses that may substitute for or complement one another. Moreover, studies on non-punitive alternatives and SROs have not investigated how educators select these disciplinary responses when they report and process student behavior. Our study addresses these gaps by covering all potential administrator actions as a disciplinary spectrum, providing more systematic evidence of racial and ethnic differences in these actions.

Sources of Racial/Ethnic Discipline Disparities

The disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in response to incidents involving Black and Hispanic students has been a longstanding concern (Darling-Hammond & Ho, 2024), particularly given its far-reaching negative consequences (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2024; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019). The existing literature on sources of racial/ethnic discipline disparities has evolved from ruling out individual-level explanations to identifying two mechanisms through which educator decision-making drives the disparities—differential selection and differential processing (Gregory et al., 2010; Piquero, 2008).

An extensive body of literature indicates that individual characteristics, such as socioeconomic

and behavioral differences, do not fully explain the racial/ethnic discipline gaps (Welsh & Little, 2018). When examining such gaps, however, the empirical challenge lies in isolating behavioral differences, as student behavior is largely unobservable to researchers. To address this, studies adopt various strategies, such as controlling for the type of infraction reported in administrative data (Anderson & Ritter, 2020; Kinsler, 2011) and using an incident FE to compare students from different racial/ethnic groups who are involved in the same incident (Barrett et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024; Shi & Zhu, 2022). Others control for self- and/or adult-reported behavior scores in surveys as a proxy for the severity of student behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Owens & McLanahan, 2020). Collectively, these studies demonstrate persistent racial/ethnic gaps in suspensions and referrals beyond observable student characteristics, pointing to the need to examine the role of educators in disciplinary decisions.

Research identifies two mechanisms through which educators' interpretation of and decisions on student behavior contribute to racial/ethnic discipline gaps. The first, differential selection, refers to educators' tendency to overdetect or overreport the behaviors of certain minority groups (Gregory et al., 2010; Piquero, 2008). Several studies examine this by analyzing ODRs. They find that racial/ethnic gaps are already prominent at the referral stage (Liu et al., 2023, 2024; Rodriguez & Welsh, 2022; Welsh & Rodriguez, 2024), and particularly for subjective infractions such as defiance (Girvan et al., 2016; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Smolkowski et al., 2016). Experimental evidence points in the same direction; when randomly assigned to evaluate identical misbehavior committed by students of different racial/ethnic groups, teachers are more likely to feel troubled by the behavior of students of color and to impose harsher disciplinary actions (Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Owens, 2022). Studies attribute such reactions to cultural mismatches and teachers' deficit-based views, which may reinforce negative expectations and stereotypes toward

students of color (Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011).

Beyond differential selection, differential processing—whereby administrators treat reported behaviors of certain student groups more punitively—is another important source of racial/ethnic discipline gaps (Gregory et al., 2010; Piquero, 2008). A handful of studies find racial/ethnic gaps in principals’ use of suspensions for similar or identical incidents (Barrett & Harris, 2018; Liu et al., 2024; Shi & Zhu, 2022). Studies on ODR-to-suspension conversion rates further disentangle differential processing from differential selection; conditional on receiving an ODR, students of color experience a higher “conversion rate” than their White peers (Liu et al., 2023, 2024; Rodriguez & Welsh, 2022; Welsh & Rodriguez, 2024). Administrators’ roles and circumstances contribute to differential processing. As the final arbiters of school discipline, they hold broad discretionary power, which—without clear guidelines or alternative resources—can produce inconsistent and exclusionary disciplinary responses (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Findlay, 2015). They also tend to rely on secondhand accounts of disciplinary incidents and face pressure to ensure school-wide safety (Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020), conditions that may leave greater room for implicit bias.

In sum, both teacher reporting of student behavior through differential selection and the adjudication process by administrators through differential processing might have a compounding effect on racial/ethnic discipline disparities (Gregory et al., 2010; Piquero, 2008). Empirical evidence on the differential processing of the same incidents primarily focuses on OSS as the main outcome (Liu et al., 2024; Shi & Zhu, 2022). In this study, we expand our understanding of administrators’ differential processing of ODRs by examining how they leverage the continuous spectrum of disciplinary actions beyond suspensions and whether their use of these actions varies by race/ethnicity for the same types of referrals and same incidents.

Conceptual Framework

Building on the concepts and empirical evidence on differential selection and differential processing (Gregory et al., 2010; Piquero, 2008), we employ a framework developed by Rodriguez and Welsh (2022) to guide our study. Their model conceptualizes the process as involving multiple decision points shaped by many factors, including educators' discretion and teacher-student-administrator relationships. However, since the model primarily focuses on exclusionary endpoints, there is room to extend it to incorporate other potential actions described in the section above. Our conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

The novelty of our framework is that it covers all types of administrator disciplinary actions within the ODR processing. An administrator determines a formal response to ODRs by selecting from the actions outlined in the district code of conduct. Their potential options encompass OSS, ISS, less exclusionary but punitive actions (e.g., detention, loss of privilege), relatively non-punitive, or guidance-based ones (e.g., administrative conference), and SRO involvement.¹ Guided by this framework, we examine racial/ethnic discipline disparities across the spectrum of exclusionary, non-exclusionary, and non-punitive actions. Research questions are as follows:

Research Question 1. What Disciplinary Actions Are Used and How Are They Used? Beyond OSS, what types of disciplinary actions are used to address incidents documented in ODRs? How many actions are typically applied per ODR, and how are they combined?

Research Question 2. Who Receives Which Actions? Are there racial/ethnic differences in the application of disciplinary actions? How does the application of actions vary by race/ethnicity?

Research Question 3. Do Same Infractions Result in Different Actions? Do students of different races/ethnicities receive different disciplinary actions for the same incident?

3 Data

We use administrative data from a large school district in the South, covering two post-pandemic school years, 2022-23 and 2023-24.² The district serves a total of around 70,000 students per school year in 125 schools. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for both the entire student body and students who receive at least one ODR during the two school years we examine. For the whole district, 42% of the students identify themselves as Black, 27% as White, 19% as Hispanic, 7% as Asian, and 6% as American Indian, Pacific Islander, or multiracial.³ Twenty-four percent (20,187 unique students) received at least one ODR during the two years (See ODR Sample in Table 1). Black students, male students, and students with special education are overrepresented in the ODR sample. Although Black students represent 42% of the district's student population, 62% of referred students are Black. Students enrolled in special education make up 13% of the population, but 18% of them have been referred at least once. Middle and high school students are more likely to be referred than elementary school students. Hispanic, Asian, and English Language Learner students are underrepresented in the ODR sample relative to their presence in the district.

The discipline data we use is unusually rich for three reasons. First, our data include details for each referral, including the time and location the incident occurred, the specific offense, and the identities of all students receiving the referral, similar to the dataset used in Liu et al. (2024). By linking this information to student demographics, we identify incidents involving students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, which is central to our empirical strategy.

The second distinctive feature of our data is that it tracks all the disciplinary actions in the system a student may receive in response to each referral, including a total of 47 different actions. These actions range from exclusionary measures (e.g., OSS, ISS), non-exclusionary punishments

(e.g., loss of privilege), guidance-based responses (e.g., administrative conference), and restorative practices (e.g., RJ, counseling).

Lastly, the infraction types for referrals are highly detailed. Our data capture 34 distinct infraction rules that lead to ODRs when violated, which offer more granular details on the referral reasons than prior studies have been able to examine (e.g., Anderson and Ritter, 2020). Based on the district’s code of conduct, these rules are classified into four levels. Level 1 is the lowest level of severity (e.g., noncompliance), while Levels 3 and 4 are the most severe (e.g., fighting, arson, possession of weapons). Hereafter, we combine Levels 3 and 4 into a single group due to the small sample size in Level 4. In this district, referrers assign one rule of infraction as the reason for an ODR in the system. Then, one or multiple disciplinary consequences are determined and documented by an administrator. Both rules and severity levels of referrals provide important information and modeling flexibility to compare ODRs that are similar in nature.⁴

4 Methods

Classification of Disciplinary Actions

We observe 47 disciplinary actions in total that schools use in response to referrals, and each referral may end in multiple actions. Thus, we consolidate these actions into broader groups based on their relative severity and conceptual similarities, while also drawing on district leaders’ suggestions. Each group comprises multiple subactions; for example, detention includes before-school, in-school, lunch, and after-school detentions. We arrive at seven categories of actions: SRO involvement, OSS, ISS, detention, loss of privilege, guidance, and other. For those labeled solely as “other” ($n = 3,628$), we preserve this label and analyze this group separately.

We also classify all named actions as either punitive or guidance actions through team discus-

sion. The punitive category spans exclusionary actions, less severe non-exclusionary punishments, and SRO involvement (Appendix Table A1 shows a more detailed breakdown of punitive actions). The guidance category covers 30 different actions that are not punitive in nature, such as administrator conferences, parent contact, referrals to a counselor or a social worker, participation in supplemental programs (e.g., a substance abuse program) as well as various classroom management and PBIS strategies. They are designed to support and redirect behavior through additional time rather than excluding students from instruction or depriving them of benefits, and are therefore classified as guidance-based in our framework, even if individual students may experience them differently (See Appendix Table A2 for detailed guidance actions).

We construct two sets of indicators to characterize the type of disciplinary actions. The first captures the nature of the response—whether actions are punitive only, guidance only, or a mix. The second indicates the most severe action taken, ordered from highest to lowest severity: SRO involvement, OSS, ISS, detention, loss of privilege, and “guidance.” To illustrate, if a student receives an administrative conference, detention, and ISS for a referral, this referral is coded as ISS and considered as a mix of disciplinary actions. We use these two categorical variables to document the prevalence of disciplinary actions across severity levels and race/ethnicity.

This classification moves beyond the dichotomous framing of disciplinary outcomes by distinguishing referrals that are escalated to exclusionary actions from those receiving only less punitive or guidance-based alternatives. In doing so, our study identifies racial/ethnic gaps across the full array of disciplinary actions, revealing where disparities are most pronounced.

Estimation of Racial/Ethnic Disparities

In examining racial/ethnic discipline gaps, we employ two types of FE models to mitigate different sources of bias that might otherwise confound observed racial/ethnic differences. The

outcomes are binary indicators derived from the two categorical variables described above: five indicators for the most severe action taken and punitive-only and guidance-only responses, each relative to all other responses. We regress each of these disciplinary action indicators on student race/ethnicity, conditional on student-level covariates, school-by-year FE, and rule FE. Using the referral (student-by-incident) as the unit of analysis, the estimated coefficients on race/ethnicity capture, among referrals issued for the same rule violation within the same school and year, the difference in the probability of receiving a specific type of disciplinary action between students of color and their White peers. This regression model is specified as below:

$$Y_{ijst} = \alpha + \beta Race_i + \gamma X_{ijst} + \eta Rule_j + \theta_{st} + \varepsilon_{ijst} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ijst} is a binary indicator for whether one type of disciplinary action was given to student i in incident j in school s in year t . We control for student characteristics X_{ist} , including prior state standardized test scores in math and reading and ODR history in the prior year (t-1), and previous ODR records in the current school year that occurred prior to the incident j , gender, special education status, and English language learner status. $Rule_j$ enables us to leverage variation in referrals for the same rule violation to isolate racial/ethnic differences from those attributable to infraction rules. School-by-year FE (θ_{st}) absorbs time-invariant school characteristics and yearly shocks that affect all students in a school in a given school year. Standard errors are clustered at the school level.

Even after controlling for the rules violated, unobserved behavioral differences between students may still bias our estimates, limiting causal attribution of differential disciplinary responses based on race/ethnicity. For example, two referrals, both classified as classroom disruptions, may

differ substantially in severity; these incident-level differences that affect disciplinary responses are unobservable to researchers. To account for the varied nature of each incident, our second model replaces the rule FE by an incident FE. We thus compare disciplinary actions for students involved in the same incident by leveraging variation only from incidents involving multiple students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. This model is specified as follows:

$$Y_{ijst} = \alpha + \beta Race_i + \gamma X_{ijst} + \theta_j + \epsilon_{ijst} \quad (2)$$

where the outcomes (Y_{ij}) and student-level covariates (X_{ist}) are the same as in Model (1). The incident FE (θ_j) also makes the school-by-year FE redundant, as an incident is specific to a school and year. It is worth noting that while fights are the most common and intuitive multi-student incidents—and the focus of prior literature (Barrett et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024; Shi & Zhu, 2022), there is a much wider range of incidents that involve multiple students in our sample. The coefficient of interest, β , captures the difference in the probability of receiving a specific disciplinary action for students in a given racial/ethnic group relative to their White peers in the same incident.

5 Results

RQ1. What Disciplinary Actions Are Used And How Are They Used?

Type of Actions

In Table 2, punitive actions make up 52.9% of actions, followed by guidance actions (43.1%). Among punitive actions, the use of suspensions is the most common; ISS and OSS account for 21.0% and 17.0% of all actions, respectively. These patterns suggest that focusing exclusively on OSS would have missed a significant fraction of the disciplinary landscape, not only the broader

range of punitive responses but also the nearly equal share of guidance-based actions. Detention is much less common (6.9%), with OSS being 2.5 times more likely to be assigned and ISS 3.0 times more likely. Loss of privilege, a type of non-exclusionary classroom-level penalty, is likewise uncommonly used in only 7.3% of actions taken, suggesting that once an infraction reaches an administrator through ODRs, the response rarely de-escalates to milder disciplinary measures. SRO involvement, referring to incidents reported to an SRO, comprises only 0.7% of actions ($n = 751$ across two years), which may indicate that SROs seldom engage in behavior management. (See Appendix Table A1 for details of punitive actions.)

In Table 2, an administrator conference, with or without parent or guardian involvement, is the most common among guidance actions (33.6%). By contrast, the other 26 guidance actions are rarely implemented (with frequencies of each around 2%, and in total 9.5%) and are therefore collapsed for analysis. A teacher's contact with a parent/guardian comprises 2.1% of all actions taken. Referring to/consulting with counselors, social workers, school psychologists, or other staff members combined totals 1.9%. Restitution and restorative discipline account for only 0.7%. As these other guidance actions include many interventions that are difficult to classify, we provide details in Appendix Table A2.

Number of Actions

As a student may receive one or multiple actions for a referral, we present, in Table 3, the distribution of the number of actions per referral intersected with the type of actions. We disaggregate referrals into three categories: single action, two actions combined, and three or more actions combined. 83.1% of all referrals result in a single action, and in particular, 51.9% of all referrals involve a single punitive action without accompanying guidance. Put differently, when schools punish students, the punishments are rarely preceded or followed up by any guidance. In contrast,

multiple actions entail both punitive and guidance actions. Most of the referrals with three or more actions contain punitive or guidance actions simultaneously (5.9% of all referrals).

Combination of Actions

We next examine how disciplinary actions are used in combination, and specifically, whether punitive and guidance-based responses complement or substitute for one another. Table 4 shows the results. The first row reports the percentage of referrals in which the action is used as the single action, with actions in each column ordered by severity. Subsequent rows show the percentage of referrals in which each action is combined with each additional action type, also ordered by severity. Note that multiple sub-actions within the category of ISS, detention, loss of privilege, and guidance only are recoded as a single action; when a referral results in both “Detention, Lunch” and “Detention, After School,” the referral is coded as a single action of “Detention.”

SRO involvement is rarely used as a standalone action. Representing 0.9% of all referrals ($n = 743$), 97.7% of referrals that involve SROs also include other punitive actions, most commonly OSS. In fact, 82.1% of referrals involving SROs are combined with OSS, underscoring the exclusionary nature of the actions taken on referrals reported to SROs. However, despite the potential severity of police contact, they are hardly paired with guidance from educators (6.9%). This also implies that schools may use SRO involvement not as a standalone disciplinary measure but to help mediate the incident. Based on our conversations with district leaders, SROs sometimes show up to assist in searching a student suspected of carrying a weapon or breaking up a fight, which further confirms the wide range of roles SROs play (Curran et al., 2019; McKenna et al., 2016).

By contrast, more than 82% of OSS, ISS, and detentions are typically administered in isolation (ranging from 82.7% to 86.9%). Although these exclusionary actions are not often paired with other actions, when they are, they tend to be with a guidance action rather than with less

severe punishments. 13.2% of referrals with OSS involve guidance actions, whereas only 0.2% of OSS referrals also lead to detention. For non-exclusionary punishments, such as loss of privilege, although they are still most likely to be used alone, they are relatively more likely to be used alongside guidance actions (37.0%) than their more exclusionary counterparts. Tables 3 and 4 collectively suggest that administrators may have a tendency to impose the most severe available response directly to referrals, bypassing less punitive alternatives. Additionally, the harsher the actions they choose to impose, the less likely they are to accompany them with guidance actions.

We visualize the distribution of actions within each severity level of infractions in Figure 2. As illustrated earlier, Level 1 is the lowest level of severity (e.g., noncompliance), while Levels 3+ is the most severe (e.g., fighting and possession of weapons). Not surprisingly, since Level 1 and Level 2 offenses are the least severe, guidance-only actions are the most prevalent (35.0% for Level 1 and 33.7% for Level 2). ISS is the most common punitive action for Level 1 offenses (31.4%). In contrast, for Level 2 offenses, ISS is used at a similar rate as OSS (ISS 21.9% and OSS 19.7%), whereas only slightly over 10% of Level 1 offenses lead to an OSS (10.7%). In contrast, nearly half of Level 3+ infractions result in action(s) up to an OSS—four times higher than the rate for Level 1 infractions involving OSS. When prevalence is broken down by severity and school level, we find that loss of privilege and guidance-only actions decline substantially in upper grades, whereas OSS increases in middle and high schools (See Appendix Figure A1). In elementary schools, loss of privilege accounts for 29.3% of referrals—second to guidance-only actions (41.9%), but drops sharply to 9.5% in middle schools and 1.2% in high schools. Guidance-only actions similarly decline from elementary to middle school, with a sharp decline for Level 3+ infractions. In contrast, OSS is the most prevalent for high school Level 3+ referrals (nearly 80%).

Despite the general trend toward harsher responses for more severe infractions, the variation in

actions for each infraction level points to the meaningful role of administrator discretion. Among Level 1 infractions, 10.7% result in OSS, an extremely punitive response for minor misbehavior. Conversely, despite the high severity of the Level 3+ infractions, only half end in OSS (47.1%), and the other half receive less severe responses, including 18.8% resolved through guidance-only actions. In the next question, we further explore this variation in the use of actions with a focus on race/ethnicity.

RQ2. Who Receives Which Actions?

We analyze the representation of racial/ethnic groups in disciplinary actions, and find that Black students are substantially overrepresented in all punitive actions (Figure 3). Despite being only 42.3% of the district population, they account for about 61.8% of referrals (Recall Table 1). Moreover, 73.9% of referrals for Black students result in OSS, indicating that they are overrepresented at the referral stage and become even more overrepresented in OSS. By contrast, although White students make up 26.7% of the district student population, their share of punitive actions is below 17%. Their likelihood of receiving OSS is the lowest relative to other punitive actions; only 9.2% of OSS are given to White students.

Asian and Hispanic students are also underrepresented in the receipt of punitive actions. Unlike previous studies that report discipline disparities for Hispanic students (e.g., Skiba et al., 2011), we find proportionate representation or slight underrepresentation of Hispanic students across the receipt of OSS, ISS, and other milder punitive actions. Specifically, Hispanic students account for 18.7% of the district and receive 12.7% of SRO involvement, 9.2% of OSS, and 13.7% of ISS. However, we find marginal overrepresentation of multiracial, American Indian, and Pacific Islander students compared to their share of the district's racial/ethnic composition. Multiracial/Other students make up 5.6% of the district, but they receive 7.3% of referrals that result in SRO involve-

ment, which is likely to be combined with OSS (Recall Table 4).

Our findings highlight that Black students are disproportionately subjected to all types of punitive actions, particularly OSS. In contrast, non-Black students mostly experience lower rates of punishments relative to their district composition. We further dig into whether this overrepresentation of Black students can be attributed to race/ethnicity or other student and incident characteristics. For instance, if students of a certain race/ethnicity tend to violate rules that carry harsher punishments, the differential weighting of rules could also affect racial/ethnic disparities. Hence, we turn to FE models to analyze racial/ethnic differences after accounting for the rules of infractions and student characteristics.

RQ3. Do Same Infractions Result in Different Actions?

Building on the descriptive results that show Black overrepresentation across all punitive actions, we further examine whether and how racial and ethnic disparities persist after accounting for infraction differences. If adjudication differs by race/ethnicity despite presumably similar infractions, this could be interpreted as a stronger piece of causal evidence of the educator’s differential judgments by race/ethnicity (Barrett et al., 2021; Shi & Zhu, 2022). While behavioral differences in disciplinary infractions cannot be fully observed, we employ multiple strategies to isolate racial/ethnic differences: accounting for school-by-year FE, rule FE, and student prior and current year ODR histories in our first model, and replacing rule FE with incident FE in our second model.

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Actions for the Same Rule Violation

First, we compare students who are referred for the same rule violation within the same school and year, holding their ODR and academic records and demographic characteristics constant. Columns 1 to 5 in Table 5 present estimates for the *most severe* action taken as binary outcomes—from SRO involvement to loss of privilege. Columns 6 and 7 show whether a referral

results in all punitive actions or all guidance actions as outcomes, respectively.

As Panel A shows, other than a few exceptions, the use of specific punitive actions does not significantly differ by race/ethnicity. Multiracial/Other students are about 1.5 percentage points more likely than White students to receive OSS for the same violation (9% increase relative to the White student mean), though the difference is marginally statistically significant ($p < 0.1$). Multiracial/Other students are 1.2 percentage points less likely than White students to receive detention for the same type of rule infraction ($p < 0.1$). Together, these findings suggest that referrals for Multiracial/Other students may be more readily resolved with harsher disciplinary actions in the form of OSS.

Panel B in Table 5 focuses on fighting as a specific type of infraction and examines whether racial/ethnic disparities in actions are more evident. We focus on fighting for two reasons. First, prior studies find that racial/ethnic suspension gaps are most pronounced in fighting incidents (Barrett et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024). Second, fighting is the second most common infraction type for referrals in this district and the leading cause of OSS. Consistent with the prior literature, we find that Black students are 3.6 percentage points more likely than White students to receive OSS ($p < 0.01$) when both are referred for fighting, which is about a 9% increase. We further find that Black students' likelihood of receiving ISS is 1.8 percentage points lower than that of White students ($p < 0.05$), corresponding to a 12% decrease. In other words, this suggests that when being on the margin of being considered for either an OSS or ISS as they fight with their peers, Black students are more likely to receive up to an OSS while their White peers are more likely to receive up to an ISS. The punitive-guidance dichotomy in columns 6 and 7 confirms the disproportionate disciplinary pattern against Black students. Black students are 3.9 percentage points more likely than White students to receive exclusively punitive responses for fights ($p < 0.01$), and 2.2

percentage points less likely to receive guidance-only actions ($p < 0.1$).

In sum, although we do not find much racial/ethnic disparity across the entire set of infractions, our analyses corroborate prior evidence of disproportionate OSS use for Black students in fighting incidents. Our findings highlight that OSS are more likely to be issued in lieu of ISS. Black students are also more likely to face punitive actions without guidance, while White students are corrected using non-punitive approaches such as administrator conferences.

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Actions for the Same Incident

The Black and White gap for fighting infractions may still be a weak causal claim, as individual fights vary in their degree of violence and harm, which may make it difficult to attribute differential disciplinary actions to race/ethnicity alone. Next, by limiting the analytic sample to incidents involving multiple students of different races/ethnicities, we compare racial/ethnic differences in actions within the same incident.⁵ In our data, there were 67,482 incidents resulting in ODRs; 19.3% involved multiple students, and 39.2% of those involved students of different races/ethnicities (7.6% of all incidents). Thus, the number of unique multi-race ODRs that are included in the model is 13,633 for the full sample and 4,150 for fighting ODRs; the number of unique multi-race incidents is 5,096 and 1,823, respectively. Table 6 presents the estimates from equation (2). As with the previous model, columns 1 to 5 identify the most severe action taken for each incident, followed by indicators for the punitive-only and guidance-only action groups.

Black and White gaps are salient in the most extreme punishments, OSS and SRO involvement. Panel A of Table 6 demonstrates that within the same incident, across all s, Black students are 0.2 percentage points more likely than White students to have SRO involvement ($p < 0.05$). This estimate is substantial given the low baseline prevalence of SRO involvement, representing an 18.2% increase relative to the White student mean of 1.1%. In Panel B, Black students are 0.5 percentage

points more likely to face SRO involvement when in the same fight with a White student. Although the estimate is only marginally significant ($p < 0.1$), potentially due to the much smaller sample size, this corresponds to a 167% increase, or 2.7 times the probability of their White counterparts. Additionally, Black students are 2.5 percentage points more likely to receive OSS compared to White students involved in the same fight ($p < 0.1$), 5.7% increase.

Notably, we reveal what White students receive instead of OSS in the same fight: non-exclusionary punishments, loss of privilege. Black, Hispanic, and Asian students are less likely than White students to have loss of privilege as the most severe consequence, particularly pronounced for fighting incidents. For Hispanic and Asian students in fighting referrals, although coefficients of OSS are not statistically significant, they are positive and large in magnitude. These findings taken together imply that for the same fight, students of color may face more exclusionary responses, when White students just receive a loss of privilege.

Racial/ethnic gaps are most pronounced between Black and White students and occur at both ends of disciplinary actions. Administrators are more likely to give extremely punitive actions, SRO involvement and OSS, to Black students. Previously, in the rule FE model, White students were more likely to receive ISS instead of OSS for the same infraction rules; when restricted to the identical fighting incident, the responses White students received tended to be milder, widening the racial/ethnic disparities in discipline severity.

6 Conclusion & Discussion

This study, to our knowledge, provides the first systematic documentation of how school administrators use the full range of disciplinary actions when processing ODRs, extending prior work focused primarily on suspensions. We also find suggestive evidence of racial/ethnic disparities at

both ends of the disciplinary action spectrum—within the same fight, Black students are more likely to receive OSS, and SRO involvement, whereas their White peers instead receive far less severe penalties, such as loss of privilege. These disparities persist across multiple comparisons: within the same school and year, controlling for discipline histories and rule violations, and within the same multiracial fights.

Despite the availability of less punitive and guidance-based options in the district, the most common form of disciplinary response is a single, punitive action (e.g., OSS, ISS, or detention). Besides administrator conferences, other intensive guidance actions involving school staff or special programs rarely occur. These guidance actions are implemented either independently or, at most, in combination with mild punishments like loss of privilege, but are rarely paired with exclusionary discipline. This pattern suggests that administrators may treat exclusionary measures as a default response rather than a last resort when all other possible forms of guidance and milder punishments have been attempted. Administrators may expect classroom teachers to use all non-punitive, redirective strategies before submitting ODRs (Welsh, 2023), thereby justifying the severity of their decisions once an ODR is submitted. However, it remains uncertain whether teachers and staff members consistently provide sufficient guidance before issuing ODRs, especially given the potential for differential selection in reporting them (Girvan et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2023; Smolkowski et al., 2016). Understanding this structural gap between the availability of less punitive options and their actual use is an important question for mitigating inequities in administrators' disciplinary decisions by their over-reliance on exclusionary measures.

We corroborate prior evidence that Black students are more likely than White students to receive OSS for the same fighting incident (Barrett et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024), extending these findings to a large, predominantly Black district in the South during the post-pandemic years. Con-

sistent with the literature, the Black-White disparities in administrator actions we observe are most prominent in infractions related to physical aggression/fights. Our findings appear to diverge from studies that highlight the contribution of minor, subjective infractions to ODR disproportionalities (Girvan et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2023; Smolkowski et al., 2016). However, this distinction raises the possibility that administrators' discretion may operate differently from that of teachers, and that it may be worth probing discipline disparities in more serious incidents, which are often assumed to be objective. In particular, considering prevailing prejudice against Black youth as dangerous and violent (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Oliver, 2003), adjudication of fighting incidents may not be immune to racial/ethnic bias.

Our study is, to our knowledge, the first to frame SRO involvement in disciplinary incidents as a response to ODRs and to examine the racial/ethnic disproportionalities in such involvement. By framing SROs as part of disciplinary actions, we further explain the exclusionary nature of SRO involvement. Based on our finding of the frequent co-occurrence of SRO involvement and OSS, SROs may function less as a source of professional support or student protection and more as an immediate tool to restrain perceived misbehavior, followed by exclusionary discipline. This framing also points to a potential mechanism underlying SROs' disproportionate contribution to exclusionary discipline for students of color (Crosse et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2021); educators may be more likely to report Black students to SROs or request their intervention in otherwise similar situations. Given that district leaders confirm SROs intervene across a broader range of situations than formal regulations suggest (e.g., breaking up fights and investigating truancy or vape use), the conditions under which educators involve SROs warrant closer investigation as a potential site of racial/ethnic bias in disciplinary decision-making.

Administrators may be more lenient with White students than other students of color by opting

for non-exclusionary alternatives. This aligns with prior studies that schools serving predominantly Black students rely less on milder punitive and restorative approaches (Payne & Welch, 2015; Welch & Payne, 2010), as these patterns may not only occur across schools but also within schools across racial/ethnic groups. Our findings also partially echo prior evidence that discipline reforms, such as RJ, change discipline practices in ways that benefit White students but not others (Davison et al., 2022; Hashim et al., 2018), in part because administrators may be less inclined to draw on discipline alternatives when responding to students of color. Future research and policy should consider how these alternative, non-punitive actions can be implemented more frequently and equitably.

Exploring an integrated spectrum of disciplinary actions deepens our understanding of racial/ethnic discipline disparities. In processing ODRs, school administrators navigate this spectrum from severe exclusionary measures to guidance-based alternatives—and racial/ethnic disparities are embedded throughout. Alongside the nationwide increase in alternatives to suspensions, when involved in the same fight, White students are more likely to receive non-exclusionary responses, whereas students of color face elevated rates of the most severe exclusionary consequences. Our study, therefore, reveals that racial/ethnic inequalities can also emerge within non-exclusionary alternatives, which a focus on suspensions alone would miss.

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Endnotes

¹ We include SRO involvement as distinct from the spectrum of disciplinary actions. This is because, based on the literature and communications with district leaders, we noted that whether the SRO role should be characterized as punitive or supportive remains ambiguous (Fisher & Hennessey, 2016). Nonetheless we incorporate SRO involvement into our outcome variables to examine overlooked racial/ethnic disproportionalities in SRO reporting.

² While our district partners also provided us with earlier data, they advised against using the earlier school discipline records due to data quality concerns and pandemic-related disruptions. We thus retrieved only lagged variables, such as ODR histories and test scores, from earlier years as control variables and focused our analysis on the two most recent years.

³ We categorize American Indian ($n = 276$), Pacific Islander ($n = 127$), and multiracial unique students ($n = 4,370$) over the two years into a single group named “Multiracial/Other” students due to their small sample sizes.

⁴ Some of the offense codes in the student code of conduct were changed between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. For consistency, we harmonized all offense codes based on the 2023-24 definitions.

⁵ Note that focusing on specific types of incidents may limit the generalizability of the racial/ethnic disparities to all types of incidents.

Figures and Tables

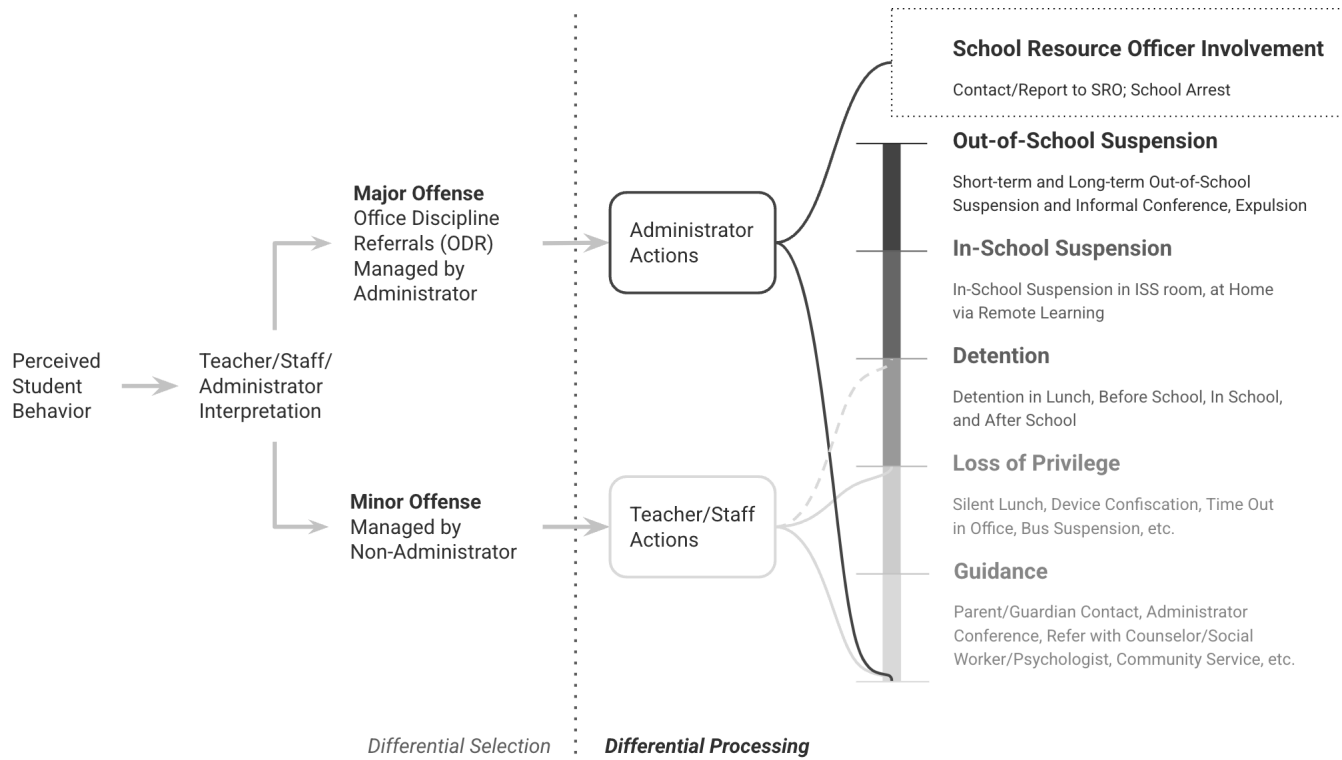


FIGURE 1: Conceptual Framework of Discipline Process in Schools

Notes: We develop this framework referring to Rodriguez and Welsh (2022). SRO involvement is not included in the spectrum, considering the mixed nature of the SRO role. A distinction exists between disciplinary actions that teachers implement directly and those that require administrative authority. Detention is officially classified as an administrative action in this district; however, teachers can also initiate or recommend it in practice, which is represented by a dashed line among teachers' actions. Teachers often use classroom-level management strategies and guidance actions without administrative approval, such as redirection, parent contact, and loss of privilege. ISS and OSS must be assigned by an authorized administrator. Teachers may contact SROs directly; however, such involvement is eventually likely to result in administrative reporting and oversight.

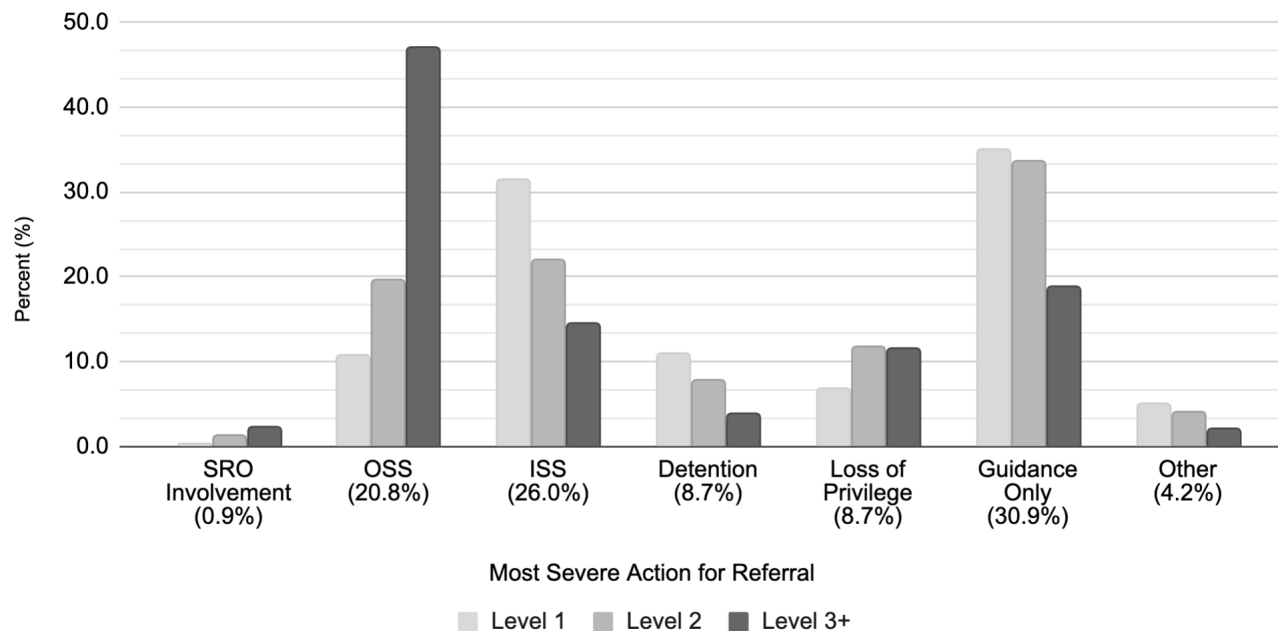


FIGURE 2: Types of Actions by Severity Level

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the referral level (student-by-incident). Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. For each severity level, the figure displays the percentage of specific administrative actions taken; among all Level 3+ referrals, 49% result in an OSS. The full sample ($N = 86,184$) includes SRO involvements ($n = 743$), OSS ($n = 17,946$), ISS ($n = 22,335$), detention ($n = 7,485$), loss of privilege ($n = 7,455$), guidance-only action ($n = 26,592$), and “Other” actions ($n = 3,628$). These actions are distributed across Level 1 ($n = 52,756$), Level 2 ($n = 12,594$), and Level 3+ ($n = 20,834$) infractions.

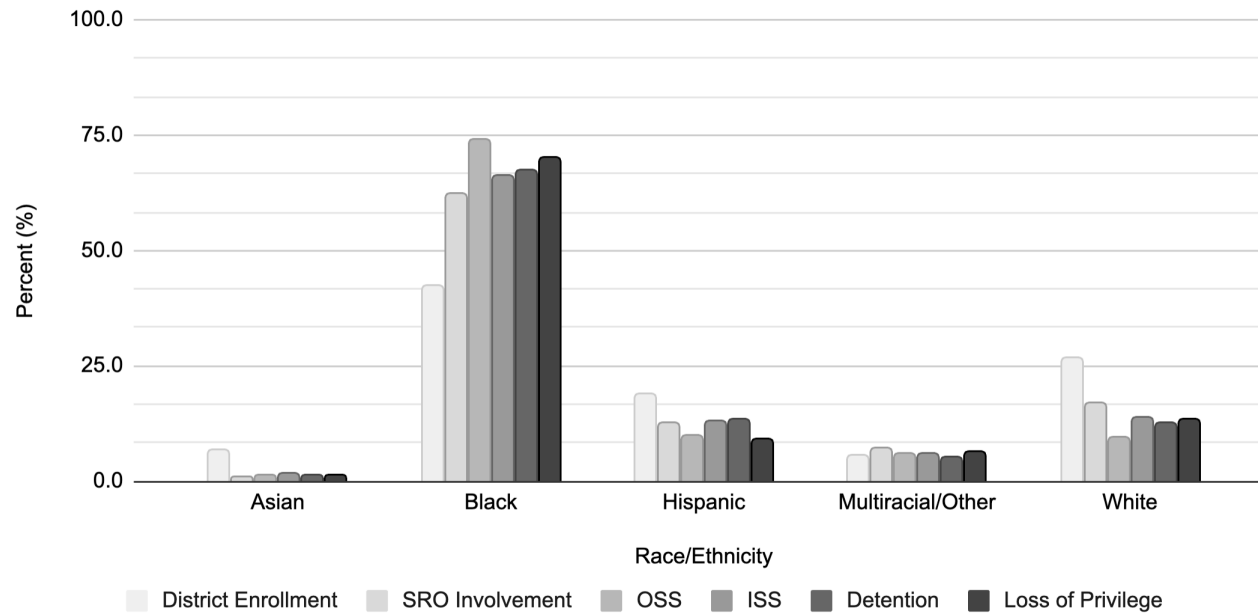


FIGURE 3: Proportion of Disciplinary Actions by Race/Ethnicity

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the referral level (student-by-incident), except for “District Enrollment” category, where the unit of analysis is at the student-by-year for reference. Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. For each group, the figure shows the percentage breakdown by race/ethnicity; among all referrals of which the most severe action was OSS, 70% of them were given to Black students. “Other” is replaced unless it is the sole action ($n = 3,628$). The full sample ($N = 86,184$) includes SRO involvements ($n = 743$), OSS ($n = 17,946$), ISS ($n = 22,335$), detention ($n = 7,485$), and loss of privilege ($n = 7,455$). By race and ethnicity, the data comprise Black ($n = 59,846$), White ($n = 10,093$), Hispanic ($n = 9,924$), Multiracial/Other ($n = 5,185$), and Asian ($n = 1,136$) referrals.

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics of the District

	Whole District	ODR Sample
Asian	6.7	2.1
Black	42.3	61.8
Hispanic	18.7	14.6
Multiracial/Other	5.6	5.9
White	26.7	15.5
Female	48.7	36.9
Student with Special Education	13.3	18.2
English Language Learner Student	12.3	9.0
Standardized Reading Test Scores	0.0 (1.0)	-0.3 (0.8)
Standardized Math Test Scores	0.0 (1.0)	-0.2 (0.7)
Elementary	43.9	21.3
Middle	22.5	37.2
High	33.5	41.4
Number of Student-by-Year	141,516	26,297
Number of Unique Students	82,849	20,187
Number of Unique Students in 2022-23	71,248	13,151
Number of Unique Students in 2023-24	70,268	13,146

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the student-by-year level in grades K-12. Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. The table presents descriptive statistics comparing the full population and the ODR sample—students who received at least one ODR. Multiracial/Other includes American Indian, Pacific Islander, and students reporting two or more races. All values are percentages except test scores. Test scores are standardized, lagged scores from the previous year, and 8th-grade scores for students in grades 9–12. Missing rates for these test scores are approximately 50% for the district population and 34% for the ODR sample, largely due to non-tested grades (K–3), transfers, and pandemic-related closures. Standard deviations for non-binary measures are in parentheses.

TABLE 2: Types of Disciplinary Actions

Disciplinary Action Types	N	Percent (%)
Punitive action	57,940	52.9
School Resource Officer (SRO) Involvement	751	0.7
Out-of-School Suspension (OSS)	18,583	17.0
In-School Suspension (ISS)	22,967	21.0
Detention	7,596	6.9
Loss of Privilege	8,043	7.3
Guidance action	47,234	43.1
Administrator Conference	36,812	33.6
Other Guidance Action	10,422	9.5
Other	4,414	4.0
Total Number of Actions	109,588	

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the action-by-referral level (action-by-student-by-incident); multiple actions per incident are counted independently. Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. SRO involvement primarily refers to contact with an SRO, and includes four cases that were coded as school-related arrests. OSS includes one case of expulsion. See Appendix Tables A1 and A2 for the full list of punitive and guidance actions.

TABLE 3: Number of Actions per Referral by Type of Actions

	Total	Punitive Only	Guidance Only	Guidance & Punitive	Other
Single Action (%)	83.1	51.9	27.0	0.0	4.2
Two Actions Combined (%)	9.8	1.2	2.8	5.8	-
Three or More Actions Combined (%)	7.1	0.1	1.1	5.9	-
Total N of Referral	86,184	45,821	26,592	10,143	3,628

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the referral level (student-by-incident). Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. Percentages are cell percentages; for example, among all referrals, 51.9% of them result in a single, punitive only action.

TABLE 4: Actions per Referral by Type of Combined Actions

	SRO Involvement	OSS	ISS	Detention	Loss of Privilege	Guidance Only	Other	Total
As a Single Action (%)	2.3	82.7	84.0	86.9	62.9	97.8	4.2	86.4
Adding OSS (%)	82.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Adding ISS (%)	6.9	2.9	-	-	-	-	-	-
Adding Detention (%)	0.7	0.2	0.3	-	-	-	-	-
Adding Loss of Privilege (%)	0.8	0.8	0.5	1.0	-	-	-	-
Adding Guidance (%)	6.8	13.2	15.1	12.0	37.0	-	-	-
Adding Other (%)	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	2.2	-	-
N	743	17,946	22,335	7,485	7,455	26,592	3,628	86,184
Total (%)	0.9	20.8	25.9	8.7	8.7	30.8	4.2	100.0

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the referral level (student-by-incident). Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. Rows indicate whether an action type was given alone or in combination with additional, less severe actions, ordered by punitiveness. Percentages are column percentages. Referrals with multiple actions are classified by the most severe action; “other” is replaced unless it is the sole action ($n = 3,628$). Multiple sub-actions within the ISS, detention, loss of privilege, and guidance only are recoded as single actions; for example, when a referral results in both “Detention, Lunch” and “Detention, After School,” it is recoded as a single action of detention. Dashes indicate not applicable.

TABLE 5: Racial/Ethnic Differences in Actions for the Same Rule Violation

	(1) SRO Involvement	(2) OSS	(3) ISS	(4) Detention	(5) Loss of Privilege	(6) Punitive Only	(7) Guidance Only
<i>Panel A: All referrals (N = 82,555)</i>							
Black	-0.001 (0.001)	0.009 (0.006)	-0.008 (0.005)	0.000 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)	0.009 (0.007)	0.002 (0.007)
Hispanic	0.001 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.008)	0.003 (0.010)	0.004 (0.007)	-0.005 (0.005)	0.011 (0.011)	-0.001 (0.010)
Asian	-0.004 (0.003)	0.010 (0.011)	0.005 (0.018)	-0.012 (0.009)	-0.009 (0.012)	0.015 (0.025)	0.010 (0.026)
Multiracial/Other	0.001 (0.001)	0.015+ (0.009)	-0.011 (0.007)	-0.012+ (0.006)	0.000 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.012)	0.007 (0.011)
White Student Mean	0.013	0.169	0.312	0.096	0.101	0.473	0.309
Baseline Controls	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Rule Fixed Effects	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Adjusted R^2	0.108	0.262	0.154	0.140	0.207	0.186	0.134
<i>Panel B: Fighting (n = 18,725)</i>							
Black	0.001 (0.002)	0.036** (0.013)	-0.018* (0.008)	-0.001 (0.004)	0.003 (0.010)	0.039** (0.014)	-0.022+ (0.012)
Hispanic	0.006 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.017)	-0.010 (0.015)	0.008 (0.007)	0.006 (0.013)	0.025 (0.017)	-0.009 (0.015)
Asian	-0.005 (0.006)	0.007 (0.035)	0.008 (0.031)	-0.002 (0.013)	-0.002 (0.028)	-0.002 (0.032)	-0.006 (0.034)
Multiracial/Other	0.002 (0.002)	0.017 (0.017)	-0.018+ (0.010)	-0.003 (0.007)	0.017 (0.014)	0.044** (0.016)	-0.016 (0.016)
White Student Mean	0.005	0.387	0.151	0.040	0.178	0.510	0.239
Baseline Controls	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Rule Fixed Effects	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Adjusted R^2	0.055	0.246	0.112	0.107	0.253	0.306	0.141

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the referral level (student-by-incident). Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. Panel A controls for 34 unique infraction rules. Panel B restricts the sample to fighting referrals, eliminating the need for rule FE. White students are the omitted racial/ethnic group. Controls include student gender, IEP status, English learner status, grade levels, lagged test scores, and ODR histories. Clustered robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. Lagged test scores represent the end-of-grade (EOG) reading scores and the EOG or end-of-course (EOC) math scores in the previous year; 8th-grade scores are used for 9-12 for consistency. ODR histories include the total number of referrals from the previous year and the number of ODRs given earlier in the same year prior to the infraction. Robust standard errors clustered at the school level are shown in parentheses. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

TABLE 6: Racial/Ethnic Differences in Actions in the Same Incident

	(1) SRO Involvement	(2) OSS	(3) ISS	(4) Detention	(5) Loss of Privilege	(6) Punitive Only	(7) Guidance Only
<i>Panel A: All referrals (N = 13,021)</i>							
Black	0.002* (0.001)	0.002 (0.006)	-0.005 (0.006)	0.000 (0.003)	-0.006 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.007)	0.008 (0.007)
Hispanic	0.000 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.007)	0.002 (0.004)	-0.008+ (0.004)	-0.004 (0.007)	0.011 (0.007)
Asian	0.001+ (0.001)	0.011 (0.010)	-0.002 (0.016)	0.004 (0.005)	-0.013 (0.008)	0.007 (0.015)	-0.001 (0.016)
Multiracial/Other	0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.008)	-0.003 (0.008)	0.001 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)	0.006 (0.010)	-0.003 (0.009)
White Student Mean	0.011	0.215	0.305	0.103	0.077	0.530	0.291
Incident Fixed Effects	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Adjusted R^2	0.903	0.856	0.805	0.855	0.883	0.835	0.808
<i>Panel B: Fighting (n = 4,050)</i>							
Black	0.005+ (0.003)	0.025+ (0.014)	0.000 (0.011)	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.020+ (0.012)	0.014 (0.010)	-0.008 (0.013)
Hispanic	0.001 (0.001)	0.017 (0.016)	0.001 (0.015)	-0.006 (0.008)	-0.025* (0.011)	-0.001 (0.012)	0.012 (0.015)
Asian	0.004 (0.002)	0.036 (0.025)	0.023 (0.026)	-0.006 (0.008)	-0.021+ (0.012)	0.03 (0.027)	-0.036 (0.023)
Multiracial/Other	0.006 (0.004)	0.008 (0.018)	0.000 (0.013)	0.004 (0.007)	0.001 (0.012)	0.027+ (0.015)	-0.020 (0.016)
White Student Mean	0.003	0.441	0.195	0.037	0.111	0.604	0.212
Incident Fixed Effects	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Adjusted R^2	0.753	0.788	0.706	0.760	0.842	0.820	0.676

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the referral level (student-by-incident). Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. There were 67,482 unique incidents resulting in ODRs; 19.3% involved multiple students, and 39.2% of those involved students of different races/ethnicities (7.6% of all incidents). The number of unique multi-race referrals is 13,633 for the full sample and 4,150 for fighting referrals; the number of unique multi-race incidents is 5,096 and 1,823, respectively. White students are the omitted group. Controls include gender, IEP status, English learner status, grade levels, lagged test scores, and ODR histories. Robust standard errors clustered at the school level are shown in parentheses. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Appendix

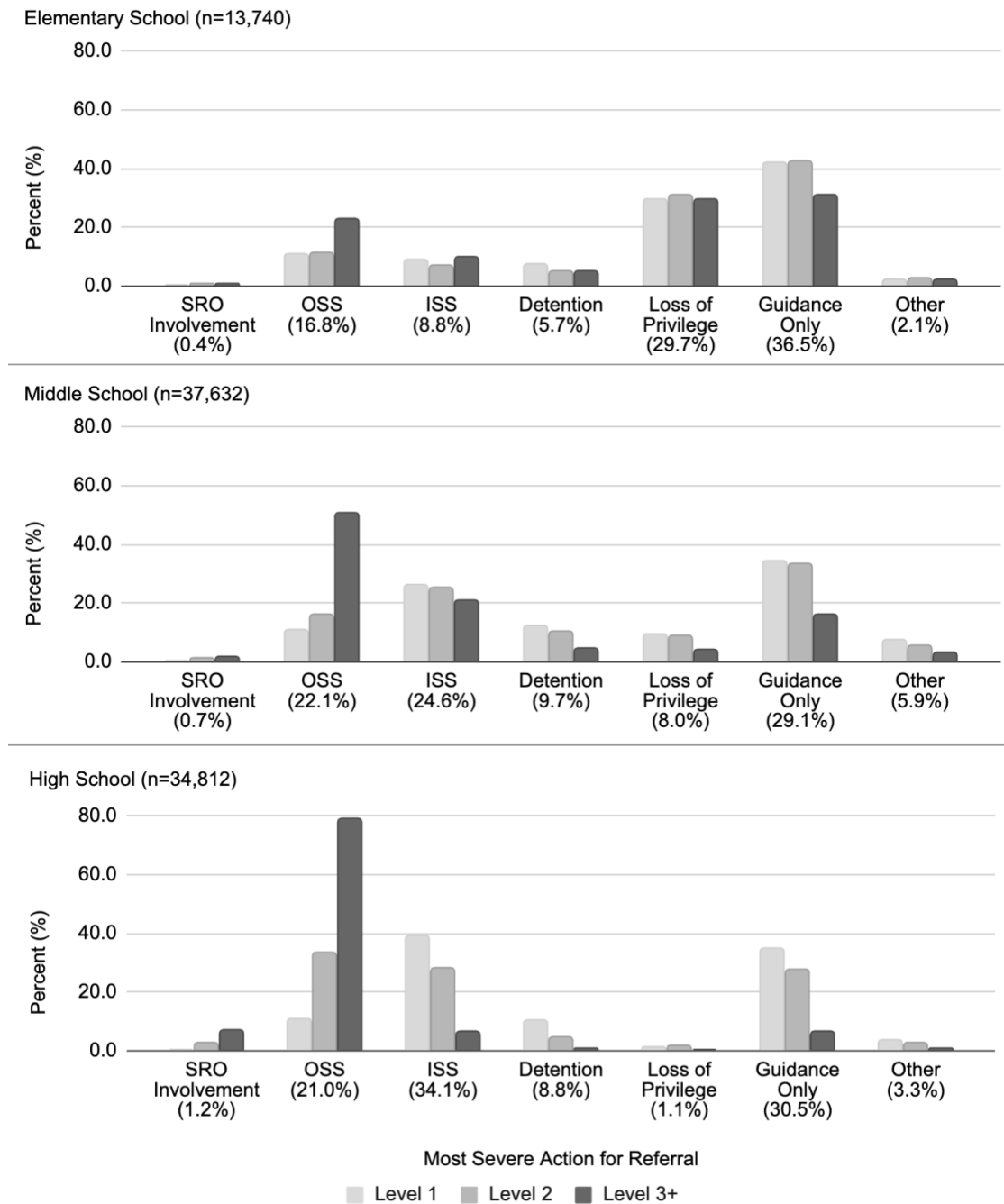


FIGURE A1: Type of Actions by Severity Level by School Level

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the referral level (student-by-incident). Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. For each severity level of the referrals, the figure shows the percentages of specific administrative actions; among all Level 3+ referrals in elementary schools, 23.0% result in OSS. Elementary school referrals ($n = 13,740$) include Level 1 ($n = 4,209$), Level 2 ($n = 2,754$), and Level 3+ ($n = 6,777$) infractions. Middle school referrals ($n = 37,632$) include Level 1 ($n = 21,128$), Level 2 ($n = 6,492$), and Level 3+ ($n = 10,012$) infractions. High school referrals ($n = 34,812$) include Level 1 ($n = 27,419$), Level 2 ($n = 3,348$), and Level 3+ ($n = 4,045$) infractions.

TABLE A1: Punitive Disciplinary Actions

Punitive Actions	N	Percent (%)
Total	57,940	52.9
SRO Involvement	751	
Report to Law Enforcement	747	0.7
School Related Arrest	4	0.0
Out-of-School Suspension	18,583	
Out-of-School Suspension and Informal Conference	18,582	17.0
Expulsion	1	0.0
In-School Suspension	22,967	
In-School Suspension	22,282	20.3
In-School Suspension via Remote Learning	685	0.6
Detention	7,596	
Detention, Lunch	4,016	3.7
Detention, In School	2,838	2.6
Detention, After School	721	0.7
Detention, Before School	21	0.0
Loss of Privilege	8,043	
Loss of Class or School Privilege	2,519	2.3
Time Out in Office	2,244	2.0
Bus Suspension	1,225	1.1
Time Out in Another Class	1,131	1.0
Silent Lunch	625	0.6
Device Confiscation	169	0.2
Time Owed	130	0.1

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the action-by-referral level (action-by-student-by-incident), counting multiple actions per incident independently. Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. The total distribution sums to 100%, comprising punitive actions (52.9%), guidance actions (43.1%), and “other” actions (4.0%).

TABLE A2: Guidance Disciplinary Actions

Guidance Actions	N	Percent (%)
Total	47,234	43.1
Administrator Conference with Student	22,305	20.4
Administrator Conference with Parent/Guardian	12,098	11.0
Administrator Student Oral Warning	1,914	1.7
Administrator Informal Suspension Conference	495	0.5
Parent/Guardian Contact by Teacher - Phone	1,752	1.6
Parent/Guardian Contact by Teacher - Conference	325	0.3
Parent/Guardian Contact by Teacher - Note or Email	237	0.2
Refer/Consult w Counselor	1,505	1.4
Refer/Consult with Other Staff	368	0.3
Refer/Consult with Social Worker	202	0.2
Refer/Consult w School Psychologist	30	0.0
Restitution/Restorative Discipline	775	0.7
Redirect Misbehavior	1,340	1.2
Referral Tobacco Education Program	745	0.7
Reteach Appropriate Behavior/Social Skill	688	0.6
Refer to Support Program for Suspended Students	515	0.5
Teacher Conference with Student	375	0.3
Behavior Reflection Form	290	0.3
Guided Self-Correction	260	0.2
Positive Practice	153	0.1
Change in Seat	149	0.1
Student Written Warning	137	0.1
Refer for Supplemental Support	153	0.1
Supervised Activities	108	0.1
Referral to Substance Abuse Program	99	0.1
Referral to Community Agency	73	0.1
Take a Break Space in Classroom	71	0.1
Community Service	67	0.1
EC Only - Hearing Held, Change in Placement	4	0.0
EC Only - Hearing Held, No Change in Placement	1	0.0

Notes: The unit of analysis is at the action-by-referral level (action-by-student-by-incident), counting multiple actions per incident independently. Data are from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. The total distribution sums to 100%, comprising punitive actions (52.9%), guidance actions (43.1%), and “other” actions (4.0%).