A School-to-Prison Pipeline? Locating the Link Between Exclusionary School Discipline and Juvenile Justice Contact

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2017

Fragile Families Working Paper WP17-14-FF
ABSTRACT

There is growing concern that exclusionary school discipline promotes a “school-to-prison pipeline,” disrupting children’s lives in ways that increase their risk of coming into contact with the justice system. Empirical validations of this argument, however, face a fundamental challenge: both school sanctions and legal sanctions respond to the same behavioral risk factors and concentrate in the same disadvantaged contexts. To address this challenge, the current study combines survey data from the Fragile Families and Childhood Wellbeing Study with administrative data on children’s schools and neighborhoods. Following children from birth through adolescence, I demonstrate that children removed from school at a young age face substantially higher risks of later legal entanglement than their peers. Moreover, the consequences of discipline vary by children’s preexisting propensity for sanction. For every outcome considered, exclusionary discipline is most consequential for those children who were otherwise least likely to come into contact with the justice system.