

RESEARCH BRIEF

Students' Risks for Out-of-school Suspensions: Indigenous Heritage and Child Protection System Involvement

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In this study, we examined factors predicting the likelihood of and number of out-of-school suspensions (OSS), focusing on ethnicity/indigeneity and Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement. We investigated whether the association between CPS involvement and out-of-school suspension varied by ethnicity.

BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Disproportionality in out-of-school suspensions (OSS) is a persistent social and racial justice issue. Many public schools use OSS as a standard response to students' misbehaviors (Losen, 2011) even though it is largely ineffective in changing behavior (Morgan et al., 2014), and is negatively associated with physical and emotional health (Denby & Curtis, 2013; Sullivan et al., 2013).

Not all students are equally likely to be suspended. Indigenous students are suspended nearly five times more often than white students (Gibson et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2011). Despite this disproportionate representation in OSS, only limited studies have investigated OSS in Indigenous students.

Indigenous children are also disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and in out-of-home placements (Bussey & Lucero, 2013). Given the history of the U.S. and Canadian governments forcing Indigenous children from their families and tribes into carceral boarding schools, the relationships between Indigenous communities and public child welfare (Horejsi et al., 1992) and education (Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2017) systems continues to be fraught.

In this study we examine the relationship between students' CPS involvement, as measured by involvement in CPS investigations/assessments, ethnicity/indigeneity, and OSS experiences following a cohort of children from 3rd through 8th grades. Our research questions are:

- 1. What child and school factors predict out-of-school suspension (OSS)?**
- 2. Does a child's ethnicity/indigeneity predict OSS when controlling for other factors?**
- 3. Is there a relationship between the number of CPS investigations/assessments in which a child is involved and their OSS?**
- 4. Does this relationship vary across groups?**



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METHODS

Educational data from 3rd graders in 2007-2008 were linked to child protection data to understand the effects of ethnicity/indigeneity and CPS involvement on out-of-school suspensions. Additional child- and school-level factors were also examined, as were the interactions between ethnicity/indigeneity and CPS involvement.

FINDINGS

Students who were Black, Indigenous, male, low income, had certain disabilities, or were involved with CPS were at a higher risk for OSS. Being Indigenous moderated the relation between CPS involvement and OSS, such that while OSS increased exponentially for white students in relation to CPS involvement, there was no association between CPS involvement and OSS for Indigenous students.

Through Minn-LInK, Minnesota Department of Education data from 3rd graders enrolled in the 2007-2008 academic year (n=60,025) were linked to Minnesota Department of Human Services data prior to 2008. Given the high level of variance in out-of-school suspensions (OSS) and the high percentage of students who never experienced OSS between 2008 and 2014, we utilized zero-inflated negative binomial (ZINB) regression to identify factors predicting the number of OSS incidents (as measured by the number of suspensions students experienced over a six-year period). In Model 1, we investigated child-level factors (gender, socioeconomic status, special education status, emotional/behavioral disabilities, reading and math scores, out-of-home care, and attendance rates) and school level variables (school size, student/teacher ratio, percentage of minority students, percentage of minority staff, and percentage of school personnel) predicting OSS. Given that we were especially interested in the effects of ethnicity/indigeneity and CPS involvement on OSS, we then added ethnicity/indigeneity and CPS involvement (number of CPS investigations/assessments) as predictors in Model 2. The interaction effects of ethnicity/indigeneity and number of CPS investigations/assessments on OSS were examined in Model 3.

NUMBER OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS BY ETHNICITY/INDIGENEITY

As indicated in Table 1, roughly 11% of study participants had one or more OSS incidents between 2008 and 2014. While nearly 75% of the third graders in 2008 were white, white children constituted only 60% of children involved

in an out-of-school suspension between 2008 and 2014; and only 9% of white children experienced any out-of-school suspension during this time period. In contrast, although only 10% of the total sample were Black children, 21% of the children experiencing an out-of-school suspension were Black, translating to nearly 25% of Black children experiencing OSS during the study period. For

Indigenous children, the differences are even starker; while only 2% of the children in the sample were Indigenous, nearly 7% of the children who were involved in an out-of-school suspension were Indigenous, and of the Indigenous children in the sample, 31% were involved in an out-of-school suspension between 2008 and 2014. (See Supplemental Table A for additional information on the demographic characteristics of the sample by ethnic group.)

PREDICTORS OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION

Model 1 (See Supplemental Table B) regression analyses included all covariates excluding ethnicity and maltreatment, in order to provide a comparison point for the models that include those variables. This analysis indicated that boys, low income students (those students receiving free and reduced price lunch; FRL), children with emotional/behavioral disabilities, children who have lower rates of attendance, students who have lower reading scores, and those children in schools with a higher percentage of BIPOC students were

Table 1. Out-of-School Suspension by Ethnicity

	All Students		Students with any Out-of-School Suspension Incident (2008-2014)		
	n	% of sample	n	% of students with any OSS incident (n=6,718)	% of students within ethnicity with any OSS incident
All 3rd graders in 2008	60,025	100%	6,718	100%	11.2%
White Children	44,782	74.6%	4,019	59.8%	9.0%
Black Children	5,908	9.8%	1,428	21.3%	24.2%
Hispanic Children	4,326	7.2%	592	8.8%	13.7%
Asian Children	3,611	6.0%	241	3.6%	6.7%
Indigenous Children	1,398	2.3%	438	6.5%	31.3%

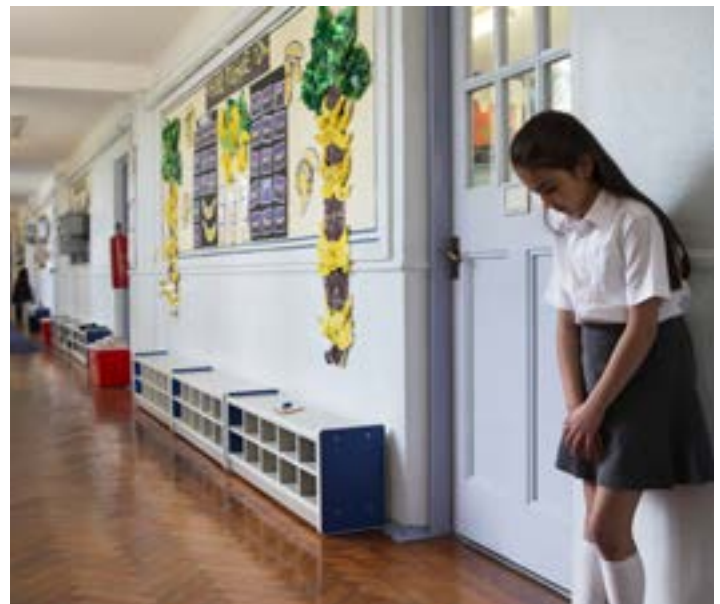
more likely to experience out-of-school suspension. Boys were 1.5 times more likely to experience OSS as girls, holding other variables constant. Students who were eligible for FRL (lower SES) were 1.4 times more likely to experience OSS compared to students not eligible for FRL. Students who had emotional/behavioral disabilities were 2.3 times more likely to experience OSS compared to students who did not have those disabilities. These variables continued to predict similarly to out-of-school suspension in Models 2 and 3.

ETHNICITY/INDIGENITY, CPS INVOLVEMENT, AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION

In Model 2 (see Supplemental Table B) we examined ethnicity/indigeneity (comparing each group to white children) and CPS involvement. Black students were 1.6 times, and Indigenous students were 1.8 times, more likely to experience OSS compared to white students. Asian students were less likely to experience OSS than white students. Hispanic children did not differ from white children on OSS experiences after controlling for the other variables in the models. For every CPS investigation/assessment, children were 1.2 times more likely to experience OSS compared to those who were not involved with CPS, regardless of ethnicity.

ETHNICITY AND CPS INVOLVEMENT INTERACTIONS

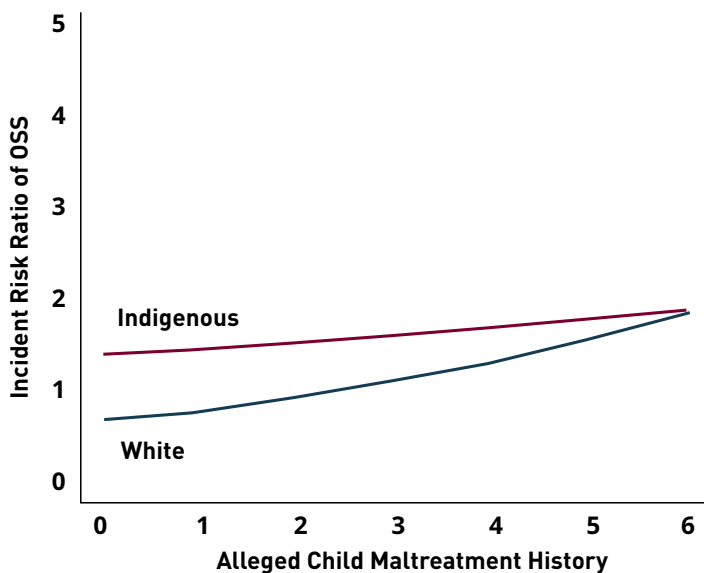
In Model 3 (see Supplemental Table B), the interactions between ethnicity/indigeneity and CPS involvement were examined. All previous significant findings remained



with similar results. The only significant interaction found between ethnicity/indigeneity and CPS involvement, however, was that of indigeneity and involvement with CPS. The relationship between number of CPS investigations/assessments and OSS incidents was different for Indigenous students compared to white students.

Figure 1 shows the interaction effect of being Indigenous (or white) and the number of CPS investigations/assessments on the number of OSS experiences. Being Indigenous and being involved with Child Protective Services continued to predict experiencing OSS at a higher rate compared to no CPS involvement or being white; additionally, as number of CPS investigations/assessments increased, the number of out-of-school suspensions increased at a steeper rate for white students compared to Indigenous students. Indigenous children were more likely to have a greater number of out-of-school suspensions compared to white students if they had no or low rates of involvement with Child Protective Services. As involvement with CPS increased, however, the rate of change in the number of OSS events for white children was greater than the rate of change for Indigenous children such that Indigenous and white children who had high rates of involvement with CPS looked similar in terms of number of OSS incidents. This moderating effect was not found for other BIPOC children; for example, Black students experienced higher levels of OSS at all levels of child protection involvement, indicating that the rate of increase in OSS due to CPS involvement was the same for Black and white students. Indigenous children's involvement with CPS, however, had no discernable effect on their out-of-school suspension experiences. Given that Indigenous students had the highest mean rate of CPS investigations/assessments of any ethnic group ($M = .76$ compared to $M = .18$ for white students), this moderating effect is noteworthy.

Figure 1.
Relationship of CPS Investigations/Assessments and Incidents of Out-Of-School Suspension by Indigenous and White Students



Conclusion

Perhaps the most compelling finding of the current study is the moderating effect of Indigeneity on the relationship between the number of CPS investigations/assessments and incidents of OSS. Indigenous students are more likely to be suspended than their white peers overall, but at high levels of CPS involvement, this difference vanishes. This moderating effect was not significant for other BIPOC children; for example, Black students experience higher levels of OSS at all levels of child protection involvement. Indigenous children may experience relatively high levels of both CPS involvement and OSS, not because Indigenous families are more likely to maltreat their children (previous findings show the opposite; Bussey & Lucero, 2013), or that Indigenous children are more likely to misbehave in school, but due to systematic racism within the U.S. That is, neither involvement of Child Protective Services nor incidents of out-of-school suspension may be valid indicators of children's experiences of maltreatment or misbehavior in school for Indigenous children. This interpretation is consistent with existing research on disproportionality in child protection system involvement of Indigenous families (Bussey & Lucero, 2013), as well as findings of harsher discipline, including OSS, of BIPOC children (Gibson et al., 2019).

Given the relationship between problematic student outcomes and OSS (Denby & Curtis, 2013; Losen, 2011; Sullivan et al., 2013), discipline in education must move away from the overuse of exclusionary discipline like OSS for BIPOC children, and towards increased support of such children who are involved in the child protection system. The interaction of indigeneity and CPS involvement on OSS suggests that some of the well-documented disproportionality in school discipline and child protection involvement could potentially be addressed through strong partnerships between child protection, school systems, and Indigenous communities to improve outcomes for children and families involved in both systems.

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LIMITATIONS

We followed one cohort of children who attended public educational settings in Minnesota during the 2007-2008 school year; historical, geographical, or social factors may influence the sample representativeness. Furthermore, replicating this study with multilevel modeling would support consideration of the nested nature of the data. Results related to school-level variables should be interpreted with caution, due to school mobility during the six years of data collection.

The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is a resource for child welfare professionals, students, faculty, policy-makers, and other key stakeholders concerned about child welfare in Minnesota. **Minn-LInK** is a unique collaborative, university-based research environment with the express purpose of studying child and family well being in Minnesota using state administrative data from multiple agencies.

For more information, contact **Kristine Piescher (Editor)** at **612-624-4231** or email at casw@umn.edu