

# African American youth and disproportionality in school discipline

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Annual Conference of the  
American Psychological Association  
Saturday, August 6th

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## Today's symposium

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- The relationship of school structure and support to suspension rates for Black and White high school students (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan)
- The distribution and relative contributions to school suspension and expulsion: An HLM analysis (Skiba, Hughes, Chung, & Baker)
- African American youth responding to racism in the classroom (Curtis)
- Discussant: Sandra Graham

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## The relationship of school structure and support to suspension rates for Black and White high school students

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## Disproportionality in National Suspension Rates

| Race/Ethnicity | Percent of students |
|----------------|---------------------|
| AA             | 15%                 |
| His.           | 6.8%                |
| WH             | 4.8%                |
| AS             | 3%                  |
| AI             | 8%                  |

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2002, 2004, and 2006.

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## Variability in short term suspensions across 199 Virginia high schools

| Suspension Rate Category | Number of Schools |
|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 0-10%                    | 70                |
| 11%-20%                  | 81                |
| 21%-30%                  | 35                |
| 30%-60%                  | 13                |

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## *Authoritative Discipline Theory*

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- Baumrind (1968) typology of parenting
- Authoritative style
  - 1) structure—consistency in supervision and rules as reflected in adult monitoring and limit-setting
  - 2) support—the warmth, acceptance, and involvement of adults

(Herman, Dombusch, Hen-on, & Herting, 1997; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, & Mounts, 1994; Steinberg et al., 1992)

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### *Virginia High School Safety Study*



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Conducted by a research team at the Curry School of Education

In collaboration with:

- Virginia Department of Education
- Department of Criminal Justice Services and Center for School Safety

Funded by U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

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### *Authoritative Discipline in Schools*

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#### Conceptual model for study

Two strategies underlie school safety efforts:

- 1. Structure** — Degree to which schools have explicit rules and consistency/fairness in enforcement of rules.
- 2. Student support** — Efforts to establish positive student-teacher relationships, and help students with nonacademic problems.

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### *Who participated in the study?*

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From each of Virginia's 314 high schools:

25 ninth grade students (approx.)

Random samples selected by formula from alphabetical lists of students

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### *Who participated in the study?*

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#### Final sample of participants

- 199 schools
- 5,035 ninth grade students

Dropped schools with < 10 White or Black students, or 1-9 suspensions. Various forms of imputation did not alter basic findings.

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### Demographics of the sample

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- Enrollment of 1,449 students (range 214 to 2,881)
- 59% White, 30% Black, and 11% other minority groups (primarily Hispanic/Latino, 6%)
- Approximately 28% of students were enrolled in the Free or Reduced Price Meal (FRPM) program.

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### Support Measure

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*Supportive School Climate scale (Austin & Duerr, 2005)*

- Sample items: the adults in their school “really care about all students,” “treat all students fairly” and show respect and support for students in other ways.
- Cronbach's alpha of .96.

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### Structure Measures

The *Academic Press* scale (Midgley et al., 2000)

- Sample items: "My teachers don't let me do just easy work, but make me think"; "My teachers accept nothing less than my full effort."
- Cronbach's alpha of .84.

*Experience of School Rules* (NCES, 2005).

- Sample items: "The school rules are fair" and "The school rules are strictly enforced."
- Cronbach's alpha of .74.

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### Short-term Suspensions

- Defined as removal from school for 1 to 10 days
- A suspended student was counted only once, regardless of how many times the student was suspended.
- The racial suspension gap = White suspension rate subtracted from the Black suspension rate

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### Account for school sociodemographics

- Virginia Department of Education records from the 2006-2007 year determined:
  - School size,
  - Percentage of White and Black students,
  - Percentage of students receiving free or reduced price meals (FRPM),
  - Urbanicity (defined as population density (residents per square mile) based on the 2000 Census of the U.S. Census Bureau).

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### Disparity in Suspension Rates

| Race  | Suspension Rate |
|-------|-----------------|
| Black | 24%             |
| White | 11%             |

Black and White suspension rates were highly correlated ( $r = .76, p < .001$ ).

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### Three-step nested regression analysis

- Three dependent variables:
  - Black suspension rate, White suspension rate, and Suspension Gap
- Step 1: sociodemographic risk
- Step 2: school environment (structure, support)
- Step 3: two interaction terms (structure X support)

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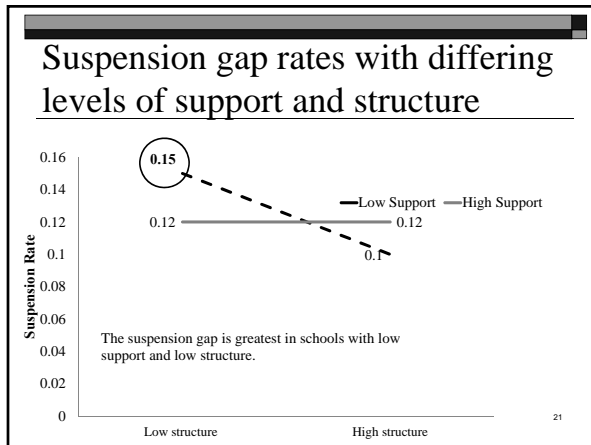
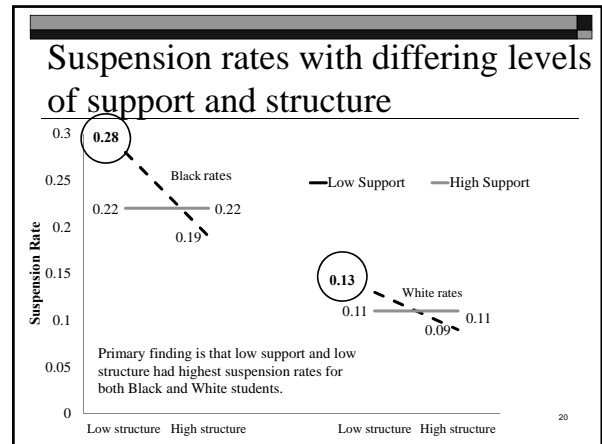
### *Why does the interaction matter?*

Strict discipline may have a different impact on students depending on the level of support they experience:

High structure without support may be perceived as authoritarian and induce resistance and defiance, whereas high structure in combination with support may be accepted by students as an authoritative approach.

### Unique Variance Explained in Regression Models

|  | Black Rate       | White Rate       | Suspension Gap   |
|--|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|  | R <sup>2</sup> Δ | R <sup>2</sup> Δ | R <sup>2</sup> Δ |
| Sociodemographic Risk                                    | .24***           | .42***           | .05*             |
| Supportive Climate, Exp. of School Rules, Academic Press | .07**            | .04**            | .04*             |
| Support X Academic Press                                 | .07***           | .05***           | .04*             |



- ### Findings
- Consistent relationships between schoolwide suspension rates and a measure of structure and support:
    - Academic press- the degree to which students perceive their teachers as having high academic press/expectations
    - Supportiveness- as reflected in student perceptions of teachers as caring and respectful.

- ### Findings
- In schools where 9<sup>th</sup> grade students perceived low academic press (low structure) and low support, greater proportions of Black and White students were suspended.
  - They also had larger suspension “gaps” across groups.
  - Schools that can be characterized as “indifferent” to students (Baumrind, 1969) were most likely to suspend their students.
  - Indifferent schools are opposite from authoritative schools.

- ### Implications
- Application of a parenting framework was especially useful in identifying at-risk (*indifferent*) schools
  - Highlights the importance of an academic dimension of structure for discipline outcomes
    - students may internalize the academic mission of school and become more invested in upholding school rules.
    - staff may react less punitively to misbehavior and successfully re-engage rule-breakers in the learning process

### Implications for narrowing the discipline gap

- Indifferent schools had a 15% gap between Black and White suspension rates, whereas authoritative schools had a 12% gap.
- Black students may be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of school climates lacking in academic press and support. Without the push to stay engaged in coursework and emotional support from teachers, they may be more likely to reject school rules and be sanctioned for rule infractions via suspension.
- In a climate of distrust, teachers may be more vulnerable to negative stereotyping of Black students as amotivated, disengaged, and defiant (Ferguson, 2000).

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### Summary

- Efforts to improve student behavior and lower suspension rates should consider the potential role of school climate.
- Schools in which the students experience neither a strong sense of support by teachers or high expectations of academic achievement appear to be most vulnerable.
- Gregory, A., Cornell, D., & Fan, X. (2011). The relationship of school structure and support to suspension rates for Black and White high school students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48, 904-934.

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#### The Relationship of School Structure and Support to Suspension Rates for Black and White High School Students

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*This study examined the relationship between structure and support in the high school climate and suspension rates in a statewide sample of 109 schools. School climate surveys completed by 3,035 ninth grade students measured characteristics of authoritative schools, defined as high-press, high-structure, and high-support schools. Multivariate analyses showed that schools low on characteristics of an authoritative school had the highest schoolwide suspension rates for Black and White students after statistically controlling for school demographics. Furthermore, schools low on both structure and support had the largest racial discipline gaps. These findings highlight the characteristics of risky settings that may not meet the developmental needs of adolescents and may contribute to disproportionate disciplinary outcomes for Black students.*

**Keywords:** high school, school climate, race, suspension, support

Scholars have found the framework of authoritative parenting to be fruitful in understanding effective teaching style in the classroom (Walker, 2008; Wentzel, 2002). A substantial body of research indicates that teachers who are firm, supportive and demanding, characteristics of authoritative parenting, have students who are more engaged in learning and cooperative in the classroom (e.g., Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wentzel, 2002). An authoritative climate in the classroom appears to have a protective effect on student attitudes and behavior. However, high school students typically have limited contact with individual teachers because they change classes throughout the school day and many disciplinary violations occur outside of the classroom. The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether the authoritative parenting framework can be applied to schoolwide conditions and used to identify high schools with low rates of disciplinary problems (Gregory et al., 2010).

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