



# CRIME VICTIMS' INSTITUTE

COLLEGE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY

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## School Discipline and Victimization in Adulthood: An Examination of Mediating Mechanisms

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Over the past several decades, educational institutions in the United States have increasingly relied on a “crime control” approach to address student misconduct (Hirschfield, 2008). Although rates of in-school delinquency have declined alongside community crime rates more generally (Irwin et al., 2021), schools continue to enforce strict zero-tolerance disciplinary responses to misbehavior, which include out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and justice system referrals (Hirschfield, 2018; Kupchik, 2010). Given these trends, a vast body of scholarship has examined the myriad negative outcomes for students associated with exposure to exclusionary school punishments, including the existence of a metaphorical “school-to-prison pipeline.” Recently, however, some research attention has focused on an important but overlooked long-term consequence of school discipline: criminal victimization.

### Theory and Prior Research

A growing body of empirical literature on the collateral consequences of punitive school discipline focuses on these effects over the life course, and the evidence indicates that suspension and expulsion early in life are attended by a variety of harmful outcomes that can extend into adulthood (Gerlinger et al., 2021; Kupchik, 2016). These outcomes include not only a heightened risk of subsequent offending (Mowen et al., 2020; Pesta, 2018) and justice system contact (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Jackson et al., 2022; Welch et al., 2022) but also a greater likelihood of dropping out of school (Peguero & Bracy, 2015), associating with deviant peers (Novak & Krohn, 2021), and becoming involved in a gang (Widdowson et al., 2021).

Further, exposure to exclusionary forms of discipline has been found to reduce academic performance (Duxbury & Haynie, 2020; Perry & Morris, 2014), school attachment (McNeely et al., 2002), and civic engagement in adulthood (Kupchik & Catlaw, 2015). In fact, students’ enrollment in schools that enforce punitive disciplinary policies also has been linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes among youth (Eyllon et al., 2022).

Beyond these various consequences, however, a recent study using data on a nationally representative sample of youth and adults reported that suspension from school early in life is associated with an increased risk of being the victim of a serious crime as an adult (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). In so doing, this research has opened a promising line of inquiry, expanding the already-extensive list of deleterious school punishment effects that scholarship should explore. However, several key issues regarding this association have yet to be examined. First, only out-of-school suspension was assessed, and no consideration has been given to the effects of expulsion from school on adulthood victimization. Second, and more importantly, it is unclear which of several theoretical mechanisms might explain the relationship between school discipline and adulthood victimization.

## **Explanation # 1 : Low Self-Control**

Among the ways in which the school discipline-victimization link may be understood includes the possibility that individuals who are suspended or expelled might be characterized by latent traits that increase the likelihood of school punishment as well as victimization later in life. The “victim-offender overlap” is a long-established pattern in criminological research (e.g., Lauritsen et al., 1991; Reiss, 1981), and some prominent theories of crime causation highlight the shared attributes of perpetrators and victims (Berg & Schreck, 2022). One such perspective is self-control theory, which posits that crime is the product of low self-control—a relatively stable trait comprised of several underlying dimensions, including impulsivity, high-risk tolerance, action orientation, a quick temper, and self-centeredness (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Not only has low self-control been identified as a robust predictor of difficulties in school (Li et al., 2021) as well as offending over the life course (Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Vazsonyi et al., 2017), but it also is a key correlate of victimization (Schreck, 1999; Turanovic & Pratt, 2019). Accordingly, it is possible that both school discipline and victimization represent artifacts of the same latent factor of low self-control.

## **Explanation #2: Labeling**

The vast literature on the “school-to-prison pipeline” has consistently observed that exposure to school punishment has a deviance amplification effect, increasing the likelihood of offending behavior into adulthood even after potential sources of selection bias are accounted for (e.g., Jackson et al., 2022; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Pesta, 2018; Welch et al., 2022). This pattern often is interpreted in light of labeling theory, which anticipates that individuals’ experiences with formal and informal types of punishment can increase the likelihood of secondary deviance, as these sanctions create structural barriers, facilitate contact with delinquent peers, and lead to the adoption of a deviant identity (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Matsueda, 1992; Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). Moreover, the disadvantages associated with early punishment exposure can accumulate over the life course (Kurlychek & Johnson, 2019; Sampson & Laub, 1997), entrenching individuals within criminal lifestyles that carry a heightened risk of victimization (Berg & Schreck, 2022). Thus, adulthood victimization might be understood to be, at least in part, a byproduct of cumulative disadvantage initiated by the imposition of a school-based deviant label.

## **Explanation #3: Economic Disadvantage**

A third possible mechanism which might provide a theoretical connection between school discipline and victimization in adulthood is economic disadvantage. A well-established consequence of exclusionary forms of school discipline is academic failure (e.g., Bell & Puckett, 2020; Duxbury & Haynie, 2020; Peguero & Bracy, 2015; Perry & Morris, 2014), which can disrupt access to opportunities regarding post-secondary education, stable employment, and secure income (Andrew & Blake, 2021; Davison et al., 2022). As with involvement in criminal behavior, such barriers can facilitate a process of cumulative disadvantage and marginalization that extends beyond adolescence, exposing these individuals to environments where attitudes favorable to offending can persist and criminal victimization is more likely to occur (Berg et al., 2012; Singer, 1986; Stewart et al., 2006). Consequently, it is theoretically plausible that the effects of school suspension and expulsion on victimization in adulthood might be indirect through intersecting economic disadvantages that accumulate over the life course following an experience with exclusionary discipline.

## **Data and Measures**

To test these three direct and indirect pathways, this study makes use of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). Add Health is a multi-wave nationally representative survey of youth in the U.S. conducted by the University of North Carolina Population Center. Wave I of the survey was collected during the 1994-1995 school year among a sample of students in grades 7-12 enrolled in 145 middle and high schools. An in-school questionnaire was administered within these schools, and from this sample a subsample of 20,745 students was randomly selected to receive a more extensive in-home questionnaire. Additionally, a questionnaire was given to the primary caregiver of each youth who received the Wave I in-home survey. A second wave of in-home survey data was collected in 1995-1996 among 14,738 of the same youth who were interviewed at Wave I, though graduating seniors at Wave I were not included at Wave II. Additional waves of in-home survey data were collected in 2001-2002 (Wave III), 2007-2008 (Wave IV), and 2016-2018 (Wave V).

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For the current study, we draw on the restricted-use data from the in-home questionnaires from Waves I, II, and III and the parent questionnaire from Wave I. The analyses only include cases which (1) responded to the survey at Wave III, (2) were in school at Wave I, and (3) were not missing data on the survey weight. These exclusion restrictions produced a sample of 14,309 individuals. The missing cases were imputed through multiple imputation by chained equations (MICE) and five imputations (White et al., 2011). The descriptive statistics of the unweighted, non-imputed study variables of interest are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Study Variables**

Variables	Mean / %	SD	Range	N
<i>Dependent Variable</i>				
Victimization in adulthood ("yes" = 1)	6.30%	—	0-1	10,904
<i>Independent Variables</i>				
Low self-control	2.67	1.24	0-4	14,309
Suspension from school ("yes" = 1)	22.20%	—	0-1	10,444
Expulsion from school ("yes" = 1)	3.40%	—	0-1	10,440
<i>Mediating Variables</i>				
Criminal behavior in adulthood	0.47	1.06	0-8	10,790
Economic disadvantage in adulthood	0.53	1.06	0-7	10,845

Note. N = 14,309. SD = standard deviation. N = non-missing sample size before multiple imputation.

**Victimization in Adulthood.** To assess victimization in adulthood, we created an index using six items from the Wave III interview. The items ask respondents if in the past 12 months (1) someone pulled a gun on them, (2) someone pulled a knife on them, (3) someone shot them, (4) someone stabbed them, (5) they were beaten up but nothing was stolen from them, and (6) they were beaten up and something was stolen from them. The index was dichotomized such that participants who responded affirmatively to any one of these six items were coded as 1.

**Suspension and Expulsion from School.** To capture school discipline experiences, respondents were asked at Wave I whether they had ever received an out-of-school suspension from school. Then, respondents who were recontacted at Wave II were asked if they had received an out-of-school suspension in the past year. Youth who responded "yes" to either of these questions were coded as 1. Similarly, respondents who indicated that they had ever received an expulsion from school at Wave I or reported having been expelled in the past year at Wave II were coded as 1 on this measure.

**Low Self-Control.** Using items identified in prior research as reasonable proxies for this construct (e.g., Beaver, 2008; Perrone et al., 2004), we created a weighted index ( $\alpha = 0.56$ ) of low self-control. This measure includes items from Wave I that capture the extent to which youth reported having (1) problems keeping their mind on what they were doing, (2) trouble getting their homework done, (3) difficulty paying attention in school, and (4) trouble getting along with teachers. The factor loadings for all of these items were greater than 0.50.

**Criminal Behavior in Adulthood.** A weighted index was constructed using eight items from Wave III to capture criminal behavior in adulthood. The questions ask how often respondents engaged in a range of criminal activities, including (1) damaging property, (2) stealing something worth more than \$50, (3) going into a house or building to steal something, (4) threatening to use a weapon to get something, (5) selling drugs, (6) stealing something worth less than \$50, (7) taking part in a physical fight with a group against another group, and (8) buying, selling, or holding stolen property. All eight items loaded onto a single factor ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ).

**Economic Disadvantage in Adulthood.** Participants' economic disadvantage in adulthood was measured using the sum of affirmative responses ("yes" = 1) to eight dichotomous items from the Wave III interview. These questions ask whether in the past 12 months respondents (1) did not pay the full amount of the rent or mortgage, (2) were evicted from their house or apartment, (3) did not pay the full amount of a gas, electricity, or oil bill, (4) had service turned off by the gas, electric, or oil company due to lapsed payment, (5) did not visit a doctor or hospital because they could not afford it, and (6) did not visit a dentist because they could not afford it. Two additional items asked whether respondents (7) are currently getting AFDC, public assistance, or welfare and (8) are currently receiving food stamps.

**Control Variables.** The analyses consider several control variables, all of which are measured at Wave I. These items include key demographic characteristics, such as respondents' race/ethnicity (Black, Hispanic, White, and Other), gender (male = 1), age, and a two-item average of youths' parents' education. Items from the Wave I parent survey are used to construct measures of parents' income (logged) and whether the family received public assistance ("yes" = 1). Other controls from the Wave I in-home youth interview include whether each respondent had a non-resident mother and a non-resident father as well as a four-item measure of grades in school ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ). To capture antisocial behavior in adolescence, we control for a nine-item index of delinquency ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ) as well as dichotomous indicators of marijuana use in the past 30 days ("yes" = 1) and other substance use in the past 30 days ("yes" = 1).

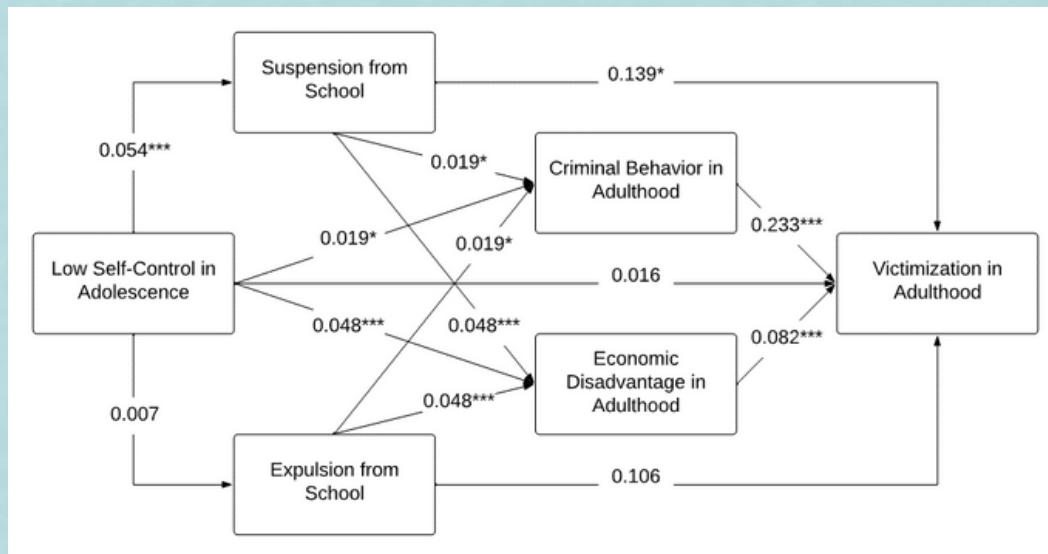
## Analytic Strategy

We conduct path analysis in Mplus version 8.5 to examine the direct and indirect effects of the variables of interest, net of the control variables. First, we estimate the direct effects of all independent variables and the two mediators (i.e., criminal behavior and economic disadvantage) on victimization while holding all control variables constant in the model. Next, models were estimated that assessed the direct effects of the independent variables on the mediating variables, holding all else constant.

The direct effects of low self-control on suspension and expulsion were also assessed, holding all else constant. Last, indirect paths between each independent variable and mediating variable were estimated using the model constraint command in Mplus. New parameters were created by multiplying the A paths (i.e., independent variables to mediators) with the C paths (i.e., independent variables to dependent variables; see Kenny, 2011). The new parameters that were created by multiplying the A and C paths reflect the relationship of the mediators with both the independent and dependent variables. In other words, these new parameters direct Mplus to test the significance of all potential indirect paths identified. As noted previously, given the complex design of the Add Health data, all analyses took into consideration the appropriate sampling weights and clustering to ensure that path coefficients and standard errors are unbiased.

## Results

As shown in Figure 1, the results from the direct effects test show that suspension from school significantly increases the probability of experiencing victimization in adulthood ( $b = 0.139$ ,  $S.D. = 0.062$ ). In contrast, however, low self-control and expulsion do not exert statistically significant direct effects on victimization. The independent variables of interest also have significant direct effects on the mediators. Specifically, low self-control ( $b = 0.019$ ,  $S.D. = 0.009$ ), suspension ( $b = 0.019$ ,  $S.D. = 0.009$ ), and expulsion ( $b = 0.019$ ,  $S.D. = 0.009$ ) increase the probability of criminal behavior in adulthood, and low self-control ( $b = 0.048$ ,  $S.D. = 0.011$ ), suspension ( $b = 0.048$ ,  $S.D. = 0.011$ ), and expulsion ( $b = 0.048$ ,  $S.D. = 0.011$ ) likewise increase the probability of economic disadvantage in adulthood.



**Figure 1. Path Model of School Discipline and Victimization in Adulthood**

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Tests for the direct effects of low self-control on expulsion and suspension show that this variable is significantly related to suspension only ( $b = 0.054$ ,  $S.D. = 0.015$ ). Regarding the indirect effects (not shown), two specific pathways were identified in the analysis. First, criminal behavior partially mediates the effect of school suspension on victimization in adulthood ( $b = 0.032$ ,  $S.D. = 0.013$ ). Second, economic disadvantage in adulthood also partially mediates the relationship between school suspension and adulthood victimization ( $b = 0.011$ ,  $S.D. = 0.006$ ).

### Discussion and Implications

The widespread adoption of restrictive forms of discipline in schools across the U.S. has given rise to a vast body of work on the various short- and long-term negative outcomes associated with students' exposure to out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and other such sanctions. In addition to providing evidence of a "school-to-prison pipeline" (e.g., Kupchik, 2016; Mowen et al., 2020; Welch et al., 2022), prior research recently identified criminal victimization in adulthood as another downstream consequence of school punishment that previously had not been uncovered (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). However, this latter study did not examine the factors which might mediate this association, and thus the aim of the present research was to test several theoretically salient direct and indirect pathways surrounding this relationship.

Specifically, this study explored whether (1) both school punishment and adulthood victimization represent artifacts of low self-control, (2) suspension and expulsion increase the likelihood of criminal behavior, which is itself associated with victimization, and (3) punitive school discipline experiences contribute to economic disadvantage in adulthood, which, in turn, increases victimization risk.

Our analyses of data collected on a nationally representative, longitudinal sample of individuals provided mixed support for the hypothesized direct and indirect effects. First, contrary to our expectations, we observed that low self-control was neither directly nor indirectly associated with victimization in adulthood. However, it should be noted that this variable exerted a direct effect on several of our mediating variables, including suspension from school, criminal behavior in adulthood, and economic disadvantage in adulthood. Though these results might be interpreted as offering limited support for the self-control framework, it should be noted that the extent to which the items available in Wave I of the Add Health survey are valid proxies for low self-control remains a subject of controversy (see, e.g., Beaver et al., 2009; Wolfe & Hoffmann, 2016). Thus, a priority for future research on these issues should be to analyze data which contain alternative measures of this important construct.

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A second key finding from this study is that school suspension—but not expulsion—was directly associated with victimization in adulthood. Additionally, corresponding with theoretical developments which emphasize the importance of labeling processes, the adoption of a deviant identity, and accumulating disadvantages over the life course (e.g., Matsueda, 1992; Sampson & Laub, 1997), our results showed that both suspension and expulsion from school were positively associated with criminal behavior in adulthood. More importantly, this increased involvement in criminal activity partially mediated the linkage between school suspension and victimization. Similarly, while we also found economic disadvantage in adulthood to be a strong independent predictor of victimization, financial difficulties as an adult emerged as a noteworthy direct effect of both suspension and expulsion from school in adolescence as well. Moreover, mirroring prior research which demonstrates the wide-ranging consequences of economic marginalization (Berg et al., 2012; Stewart et al., 2006), our results showed that this variable mediated the effect of school suspension on victimization.

The present study has several noteworthy implications for educational and criminal justice policy in Texas and elsewhere. First, our findings emphasize the broad negative outcomes stemming from exposure to certain punitive forms of school punishment, with an increased risk of victimization as an adult representing one such effect. Consequently, these results underscore the need for schools to decrease reliance on out-of-school suspension in favor of alternative responses that are more effective as well as less stigmatizing, including restorative sanctions and positive behavioral interventions (see Chmelynski, 2005; McCluskey et al., 2008; Welsh & Little, 2018). Second, while expulsion itself has limited effects on victimization, our findings nonetheless indicate that this form of punishment appears to instigate a process of “cumulative disadvantage” surrounding criminal behavior and economic marginalization that extends into adulthood (Kurlychek & Johnson, 2019; Sampson & Laub, 1997). Thus, school policy initiatives which aim to employ alternatives to suspension and expulsion might represent a long-term crime control strategy that holds immense promise for improving public safety.

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Director of Victim Services,  
Crime Stoppers Houston

**Matthew L. Ferrara, Ph.D.,  
Austin**

Forensic Psychologist

**Brandi Reed, Amarillo**  
Director of Education, Family  
Support Services of Amarillo,  
Inc.

**Melissa Carter, Bryan**  
Victim Assistance Coordinator,  
Brazos County

**Chief Emmitt Jackson, Jr.,  
Argyle**  
Chief of Police, Argyle Police  
Department

**Hillary England,  
Pflugerville**  
Director of Trafficking and  
Sexual Violence Prevention  
Programs, Office of the  
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