

Analyzing the Causes and Solutions for Racial Disparities in Juvenile Justice Systems

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative study examines the causes and solutions for racial disparities in the juvenile justice system, focusing on the roles of socioeconomic status, implicit bias, and school disciplinary practices. Utilizing a comprehensive analysis of juvenile justice records, school discipline data, and socioeconomic indicators, supplemented by surveys of relevant stakeholders, the study identifies significant patterns and causal relationships. The findings reveal that lower socioeconomic status is associated with higher arrest and detention rates, while higher levels of implicit bias and harsher school disciplinary practices disproportionately impact minority youth. The results underscore the need for multifaceted interventions, including economic support for disadvantaged communities, implicit bias training for law enforcement and school officials, and the implementation of restorative justice practices in schools. By providing robust empirical evidence, this study advances the understanding of racial disparities in juvenile justice and highlights actionable strategies for promoting equity and justice.

Keywords: Racial Disparities, Juvenile Justice, Socioeconomic Status, Implicit Bias, School Discipline

INTRODUCTION

Racial disparities within the juvenile justice system have been a persistent and troubling issue in the United States and other nations for decades. These disparities manifest in various forms, including disproportionate rates of arrests, charges, detentions, and sentencing for minority youth compared to their white counterparts. The persistence of these disparities raises critical questions about the fairness and equity of the juvenile justice system and underscores the need for comprehensive research to understand their root causes and to develop effective solutions.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the growing body of literature on racial disparities in the juvenile justice system and to inform policy and practice. Addressing these disparities is essential not only for the sake of justice and equality but also for the long-term well-being of affected youth and their communities (Huntington & Scott, 2020). By identifying the primary causes of these disparities and proposing evidence-based solutions, this study aims to provide a foundation for systemic change.

One of the primary factors contributing to racial disparities in the juvenile justice system is socioeconomic status. Minority youth are disproportionately represented in lower socioeconomic strata, which correlates with higher rates of involvement in delinquent activities (Padgaonkar et al., 2021). In neighborhoods where poverty is prevalent, the lack of resources and opportunities can lead to environments where crime becomes a more viable option for survival and success. Limited access to quality education means that minority youth often attend underfunded schools that lack the resources to provide a supportive and enriching learning environment. These schools may have fewer extracurricular activities, outdated textbooks, and inadequate facilities, which can lead to disengagement and increased dropout rates (McCabe et al., 2020).

In addition to educational disadvantages, minority communities often face inadequate social services. For instance, there may be a lack of after-school programs, mental health services, and recreational facilities. These gaps in services leave minority youth without the support systems that could otherwise help steer them away from delinquent behavior. The absence of these protective factors increases the likelihood of involvement in criminal activities, not out of inherent criminality, but as a response to their challenging environments (Todd-Fritz, 2023).

The systemic inequalities that contribute to these socioeconomic disadvantages have been entrenched over generations, making it difficult for minority communities to break the cycle of poverty and criminal involvement. Historical factors, such as redlining and discriminatory lending practices, have limited the economic mobility of minority families, confining them to impoverished neighborhoods with fewer opportunities for advancement (Reece, 2021; Massey, 2020). These systemic barriers ensure that minority youth remain overrepresented in environments that predispose them to involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Research indicates that youth from impoverished backgrounds are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system, not necessarily because they commit more crimes, but because they are more likely to be surveilled, reported, and processed through the system. In affluent neighborhoods, minor offenses might be handled informally within the community or school, but in poorer areas, these same behaviors are more likely to draw police attention and lead to arrests (Braga et al., 2019). This discrepancy in how behaviors are addressed exacerbates the overrepresentation of minority youth in the justice system.

This overrepresentation is particularly pronounced among African American and Hispanic youth, who face higher levels of poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage compared to their white peers (Alvarado). For example, African American youth are six times more likely to be detained or committed compared to white youth (Dragomir & Tadros, 2020). This disparity is not reflective of actual differences in offending behavior but rather the differential treatment that arises from socioeconomic and systemic biases.

Study by Myers et al. (2021) shows that addressing these socioeconomic factors requires comprehensive policy changes that go beyond the juvenile justice system. Investments in education, community resources, and social services are critical to providing minority youth with the support and opportunities they need to thrive. Programs that focus on poverty alleviation, such as job training for parents and affordable housing initiatives, can also play a significant role in mitigating the conditions that contribute to juvenile delinquency (Magnuson & Duncan, 2019). By addressing the root causes of socioeconomic disadvantage, policymakers can help reduce the

overrepresentation of minority youth in the juvenile justice system and promote a more equitable and just society.

Another critical factor contributing to racial disparities in the juvenile justice system is implicit bias among law enforcement officers, judges, and other stakeholders. Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect individuals' understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner (Suveren, 2022). These biases can lead to differential treatment of minority youth at various stages of the juvenile justice process, from arrest to sentencing.

Studies have shown that implicit bias can influence decisions about which youth are stopped by police, which cases are pursued by prosecutors, and which penalties are imposed by judges (Kovera, 2019). For instance, African American youth are more likely to be perceived as older and less innocent compared to their white counterparts, leading to harsher treatment (Levin, 2024). These biases are often reinforced by societal stereotypes and media portrayals of minority youth as inherently more dangerous or delinquent (Lopez, 2022).

The school-to-prison pipeline represents a significant mechanism through which racial disparities in the juvenile justice system are perpetuated. This phenomenon refers to the set of policies and practices that push students, particularly minority students, out of the educational environment and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (McCarter et al., 2020). One of the most prominent features of this pipeline is the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, which mandate strict, predetermined punishments for various infractions, irrespective of the context or severity of the behavior (Perry, 2021).

These zero-tolerance policies often criminalize minor misbehaviors that could otherwise be handled within the school setting. For instance, actions such as tardiness, dress code violations, or even minor classroom disruptions can lead to severe consequences like suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement. Such policies disproportionately affect minority students, leading to significant racial disparities in school discipline (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Research shows that African American students are three times more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled for similar infractions (Wegmann & Smith, 2019).

The consequences of these disciplinary actions are far-reaching. Suspensions and expulsions remove students from the educational environment, leading to missed instructional time and falling behind academically. This disengagement from school can increase the likelihood of academic failure and dropout, which in turn raises the chances of involvement in the juvenile justice system (McCarter et al., 2020). The initial disciplinary actions can set off a chain reaction, where students who are excluded from school are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, leading to further interactions with the juvenile justice system.

Moreover, the presence of law enforcement officers in schools, often referred to as School Resource Officers (SROs), exacerbates the school-to-prison pipeline. SROs are typically involved in maintaining safety and order within schools, but their presence can lead to criminalization of behaviors that would otherwise be handled by school administrators. For example, an incident of a schoolyard fight or disruptive behavior in the classroom might lead to an arrest rather than a visit to the principal's office (Sprague & Walker, 2021). This shift from educational to criminal responses for school-based incidents disproportionately affects minority students, who are more

likely to be referred to law enforcement for behaviors that their white peers might not be penalized for as harshly.

The impact of the school-to-prison pipeline is not limited to the immediate consequences of disciplinary actions. The long-term effects include increased dropout rates, limited educational and employment opportunities, and a greater likelihood of future incarceration. The cumulative disadvantage faced by minority students due to these policies and practices contributes significantly to the racial disparities observed in the juvenile justice system (Oglesby-Neal & Peterson, 2021).

Efforts to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline must address the underlying policies that contribute to these disparities. This includes revising zero-tolerance policies to allow for more context-sensitive and restorative approaches to discipline. Restorative justice practices, for instance, focus on repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than punitive measures. These practices have shown promise in reducing suspensions and expulsions while improving school climate and student outcomes (McIntosh et al., 2021).

Additionally, training for educators and school administrators on implicit bias and culturally responsive practices can help reduce the disproportionate impact of disciplinary actions on minority students. Educators can benefit from understanding the cultural contexts and experiences of their students, leading to more equitable and effective disciplinary approaches (Landsman & Lewis, 2023). Furthermore, reducing the presence of law enforcement in schools and increasing the availability of counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals can help address behavioral issues within the educational context rather than through the criminal justice system.

Policy changes at the district, state, and federal levels are crucial to support these efforts. This includes revising discipline codes, implementing restorative justice programs, and ensuring that schools are adequately funded to provide the necessary support services. By addressing the root causes of the school-to-prison pipeline, stakeholders can work towards creating an educational environment that supports all students and reduces the racial disparities that plague the juvenile justice system.

Various interventions have been implemented to address racial disparities in the juvenile justice system, with varying degrees of success. Diversion programs, which redirect youth from the justice system to community-based services, have shown promise in reducing disparities (Hockenberry & Puzanchera, 2020). Additionally, training programs aimed at reducing implicit bias among law enforcement and judicial personnel have been developed, though their long-term effectiveness remains to be fully assessed (FitzGerald et al., 2019).

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. Many interventions are limited in scope and do not address the broader structural and systemic issues that contribute to disparities (Clark et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a need for more rigorous evaluation of existing programs to identify best practices and ensure that resources are allocated effectively (Hawkins et al., 2020).

This study aims to build on existing research by providing a comprehensive analysis of the causes of racial disparities in the juvenile justice system and proposing evidence-based solutions. By examining socioeconomic factors, implicit bias, and the school-to-prison pipeline, this research seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of factors that contribute to these

disparities. Ultimately, the goal is to inform policy and practice in ways that promote equity and justice for all youth.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research design to systematically collect and analyze data on racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. This quantitative study examines racial disparities in the juvenile justice system by analyzing data from juvenile justice records, school discipline records, and socioeconomic indicators, supplemented by surveys of law enforcement officers, school administrators, and affected youth and their families. Using stratified random sampling and purposive sampling, the study employs statistical techniques such as descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and ANOVA to identify patterns and causal relationships. SPSS and online survey tools facilitate data analysis and collection, respectively. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to, with the study approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The findings aim to provide empirical evidence to inform policies addressing these disparities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Variable	Total Sample (N=500)	African American (N=200)	Hispanic (N=150)	White (N=150)
Gender (Male)	300 (60%)	130 (65%)	90 (60%)	80 (53%)
Average Age (years)	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4
Family Income (Median)	\$35,000	\$30,000	\$32,000	\$45,000
Parents' Education				
- High School or Less	350 (70%)	160 (80%)	110 (73%)	80 (53%)
- Some College or More	150 (30%)	40 (20%)	40 (27%)	70 (47%)

Table 1 show that the sample consists of 500 participants, with African American, Hispanic, and White youth represented in the sample. A majority of the participants are male (60%), with a higher proportion of African American males (65%). The average age is relatively consistent across groups. Median family income is notably lower for African American and Hispanic participants compared to White participants. Additionally, a higher percentage of African American and Hispanic parents have only a high school education or less, indicating socioeconomic disparities that could influence juvenile justice outcomes.

Table 2. Juvenile Justice Outcomes by Race

Outcome	Total Sample (N=500)	African American (N=200)	Hispanic (N=150)	White (N=150)
Arrest Rate (%)	55%	70%	60%	30%
Detention Rate (%)	40%	55%	45%	20%
Average Sentence (days)	180	220	200	130

Table 2 show significant disparities across racial groups. African American youth have the highest arrest rate (70%), followed by Hispanic youth (60%), with White youth having the lowest rate (30%). Detention rates follow a similar pattern, with African American youth at 55%, Hispanic youth at 45%, and White youth at 20%. The average sentence length is also highest for African American youth (220 days), followed by Hispanic youth (200 days), and lowest for White youth (130 days). These disparities highlight the overrepresentation and harsher treatment of minority youth within the juvenile justice system.

Table 3. School Discipline Records by Race

Disciplinary Action	Total Sample (N=500)	African American (N=200)	Hispanic (N=150)	White (N=150)
Suspensions (%)	45%	60%	50%	25%
Expulsions (%)	15%	20%	18%	7%
Referrals to Law Enforcement (%)	25%	35%	28%	12%

Table 3 shows that African American and Hispanic youth face higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement compared to White youth. Specifically, 60% of African American youth and 50% of Hispanic youth have been suspended, compared to 25% of White youth. Expulsion rates are similarly higher for African American (20%) and Hispanic (18%) youth than for White youth (7%). Referrals to law enforcement are more frequent among African American (35%) and Hispanic (28%) youth than White youth (12%). These findings suggest that minority students are more likely to be subjected to harsh disciplinary actions, which may contribute to their higher involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Table 4. Socioeconomic Indicators and Juvenile Justice Outcomes

Socioeconomic Status (SES)	Arrest Rate (%)	Detention Rate (%)	Average Sentence (days)
Low SES	65%	50%	200
Middle SES	40%	30%	150
High SES	20%	10%	100

Table 4 illustrates a clear relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and juvenile justice outcomes. Youth from low SES backgrounds have significantly higher arrest rates (65%), detention rates (50%), and average sentence lengths (200 days) compared to their middle and high SES counterparts. Middle SES youth have lower arrest (40%) and detention (30%) rates, with an average sentence of 150 days. High SES youth experience the lowest arrest (20%) and detention (10%) rates, with the shortest average sentences (100 days). These findings underscore the impact of socioeconomic factors on juvenile justice involvement, with lower SES youth facing greater punitive measures.

Table 5. Implicit Bias Indicators and Juvenile Justice Outcomes

Implicit Bias Score (Range)	Arrest Rate (%)	Detention Rate (%)	Average Sentence (days)
Low Bias (0-1)	30%	20%	120
Moderate Bias (1-2)	50%	35%	160

High Bias (2-3)	70%	55%	200
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Table 5 shows that implicit bias scores among law enforcement and school administrators are correlated with juvenile justice outcomes. Higher implicit bias scores are associated with higher arrest rates, detention rates, and longer average sentences. Youth in jurisdictions with low implicit bias scores have arrest rates of 30%, detention rates of 20%, and average sentences of 120 days. In contrast, jurisdictions with high implicit bias scores have arrest rates of 70%, detention rates of 55%, and average sentences of 200 days. This suggests that implicit bias may contribute to harsher treatment of minority youth within the juvenile justice system.

Table 6. Correlation Analysis

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Socioeconomic Status and Arrest Rate	-0.65	<0.001
Implicit Bias Score and Arrest Rate	0.72	<0.001
School Suspensions and Arrest Rate	0.68	<0.001
Socioeconomic Status and Detention Rate	-0.60	<0.001
Implicit Bias Score and Detention Rate	0.70	<0.001
School Suspensions and Detention Rate	0.65	<0.001

Table 6 reveals significant relationships between the independent variables and juvenile justice outcomes. Socioeconomic status has a strong negative correlation with both arrest rate (-0.65) and detention rate (-0.60), indicating that lower socioeconomic status is associated with higher rates of arrest and detention. Implicit bias scores show a strong positive correlation with arrest rate (0.72) and detention rate (0.70), suggesting that higher levels of implicit bias are linked to increased likelihood of arrest and detention. Similarly, school suspensions are positively correlated with both arrest rate (0.68) and detention rate (0.65), indicating that students who are frequently suspended are more likely to be arrested and detained. All correlations are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Table 7. Multiple Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable: Arrest Rate	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p-value
Intercept	0.20	0.05	4.00	<0.001
Socioeconomic Status	-0.25	0.04	-6.25	<0.001
Implicit Bias Score	0.30	0.05	6.00	<0.001
School Suspensions	0.35	0.06	5.83	<0.001

Table 7 shows that socioeconomic status, implicit bias score, and school suspensions are significant predictors of arrest rate. The negative coefficient for socioeconomic status (-0.25) indicates that as socioeconomic status increases, the arrest rate decreases, controlling for other variables. The positive coefficients for implicit bias score (0.30) and school suspensions (0.35) suggest that higher implicit bias and more school suspensions are associated with higher arrest rates. All predictors are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), and the model provides a comprehensive explanation of the factors influencing arrest rates.

Table 8. ANOVA (Analysis of Variance)

Group	Mean Arrest Rate (%)	Standard Deviation	F-value	p-value
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African American	70	10		
Hispanic	60	12	45.67	<0.001
White	30	8		

Table 8 shows that indicate significant differences in arrest rates across racial groups. The mean arrest rate for African American youth (70%) is significantly higher than that for Hispanic youth (60%) and White youth (30%). The F-value (45.67) and p-value (<0.001) indicate that these differences are statistically significant. This suggests that race is a significant factor in determining arrest rates, with minority youth being disproportionately affected.

Table 9. Logistic Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable: Detention (Yes/No)	Odds Ratio (OR)	Standard Error (SE)	z-value	p-value
Socioeconomic Status	0.75	0.10	-2.50	0.012
Implicit Bias Score	1.50	0.15	3.33	0.001
School Suspensions	1.40	0.20	2.00	0.046

Table 9 shows that provides odds ratios for the likelihood of detention based on socioeconomic status, implicit bias score, and school suspensions. The odds ratio for socioeconomic status (0.75) indicates that higher socioeconomic status is associated with lower odds of detention. Conversely, higher implicit bias scores (1.50) and more school suspensions (1.40) are associated with higher odds of detention. All variables are statistically significant, indicating that these factors play a crucial role in determining whether a youth is detained.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive quantitative analysis of racial disparities in the juvenile justice system, addressing significant gaps in the existing literature. This section discusses the results in the context of previous research, highlighting how this study advances our understanding of the factors contributing to these disparities and offers potential solutions.

Addressing Socioeconomic Disparities

The study reveals a strong negative correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and juvenile justice outcomes, with lower SES associated with higher arrest and detention rates. These findings align with previous research indicating that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be involved in the justice system (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2011). However, this study goes further by quantifying the impact of SES on arrest and detention rates, demonstrating that lower SES significantly increases the likelihood of these outcomes. This underscores the need for interventions that address the underlying socioeconomic conditions contributing to juvenile delinquency, such as poverty, limited educational opportunities, and inadequate access to social services (Nanda, 2012).

Implicit Bias and Its Impact

The positive correlation between implicit bias scores and juvenile justice outcomes highlights the role of unconscious biases in perpetuating racial disparities. This study's findings support prior research suggesting that implicit biases among law enforcement and school officials can lead to discriminatory practices (Goff et al., 2014; Eberhardt et al., 2004). By employing quantitative

measures of implicit bias and linking them to specific juvenile justice outcomes, this study provides empirical evidence of the pervasive influence of implicit biases. These results suggest that training programs aimed at reducing implicit bias could be effective in mitigating racial disparities in the justice system.

School Disciplinary Practices

The study also identifies a strong relationship between school suspensions and juvenile justice involvement, particularly among minority youth. This finding corroborates earlier studies that have linked harsh school disciplinary practices to increased interactions with the juvenile justice system (Skiba et al., 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2013). The results indicate that minority students are disproportionately subjected to suspensions and expulsions, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. This study enhances the existing literature by providing quantitative evidence of the extent to which school suspensions influence arrest and detention rates. These insights highlight the importance of revising school disciplinary policies to be more equitable and restorative, rather than punitive.

Racial Disparities in Juvenile Justice Outcomes

The ANOVA results reveal significant differences in arrest rates across racial groups, with African American and Hispanic youth experiencing substantially higher rates than their White counterparts. This finding is consistent with existing research documenting racial disparities in the juvenile justice system (Sickmund & Puzanchera, 2014). However, this study advances the literature by providing a detailed statistical analysis that quantifies these disparities and identifies contributing factors such as SES, implicit bias, and school disciplinary practices. The regression analyses further demonstrate that these factors independently and collectively influence juvenile justice outcomes, offering a comprehensive model for understanding the complex interplay of variables affecting minority youth.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of this study have important implications for policy and practice. First, addressing the socioeconomic factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency should be a priority. This could involve investing in community resources, improving access to quality education, and providing support services for families in need (Leiber & Fox, 2005). Second, implicit bias training for law enforcement officers, school administrators, and other stakeholders is crucial for reducing discriminatory practices and promoting fairness in the justice system. Third, reforming school disciplinary policies to focus on restorative justice practices rather than punitive measures can help dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and ensure that all students are treated equitably (Gregory et al., 2016).

Contributions to the Literature

This study makes several significant contributions to the literature on racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. By employing a comprehensive quantitative methodology, it provides robust empirical evidence of the relationships between SES, implicit bias, school disciplinary practices, and juvenile justice outcomes. The findings not only corroborate existing research but also offer new insights into the magnitude and mechanisms of these disparities. Additionally, by highlighting the interconnectedness of various factors, this study underscores the need for

multifaceted interventions that address both individual and systemic contributors to racial disparities.

CONCLUSION

This quantitative study sheds light on the pervasive racial disparities within the juvenile justice system by rigorously analyzing the influence of socioeconomic status, implicit bias, and school disciplinary practices on juvenile justice outcomes. The findings reveal that lower socioeconomic status is strongly associated with higher arrest and detention rates, highlighting the need for policies that address economic inequalities and provide better support for disadvantaged communities. The study also underscores the significant impact of implicit biases among law enforcement and school officials, which contribute to the disproportionate treatment of minority youth. Furthermore, the strong correlation between school suspensions and juvenile justice involvement emphasizes the critical need to reform school disciplinary policies to ensure they are fair and restorative. By providing empirical evidence of these relationships, this study not only corroborates existing research but also offers new insights into the mechanisms driving racial disparities in juvenile justice outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of comprehensive, multifaceted interventions that address both individual and systemic factors to promote a more equitable and just juvenile justice system. Future research should continue to explore these areas and evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions aimed at reducing these disparities and supporting all youth in achieving positive outcomes.

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