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From Retributive to Restorative

An Alternative Approach to Justice

THE CHALLENGE

Over the last few decades, schools across the nation have increased the use of exclusionary discipline—or suspensions—to address perceived disruptive classroom behavior. However, research suggests that punitive systems disproportionately harm students of color and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the potential for devastating impacts later in life. Punitive disciplinary policies are linked with an increased likelihood of future academic difficulties, increased misconduct, and eventual involvement in the criminal legal system.

Despite the harms, there is limited research into suspension alternatives. School districts often lack understanding about the impacts of a more-or-less punitive approach, and therefore don't have a way to achieve less student disruption without the potential harms of exclusion.

Concerns over classroom management are real and growing. Discipline is among the most difficult problems teachers face, and 80% of public schools record one or more incidents of violence or theft annually. How can we better manage disruptive classroom behavior—and keep students safe and learning—while reducing the harms of punitive policies?



Zero-tolerance policies led to over 3.5 million U.S. public school students suspended in SY 2012—more than the entire population of Chicago.

THE SOLUTION

Restorative discipline practices are a promising solution. Based on the philosophy of Restorative Justice, an approach used in the criminal legal system that emphasizes the reparation of harm between victims and offenders, restorative practices (RP) promote the development of socio-emotional learning by encouraging self-reflection, empathetic listening, and the creation of non-judgmental spaces for conflict resolution.

While RP is a fairly new concept in public schools, it is quickly increasing in use across the nation. To measure its effects on student behavior, the University of Chicago Education Lab evaluated student-level, short-run educational and behavioral outcomes across 239 high schools within the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system. The study analyzed data from the start of the 2008-2009 school year through the end of the 2018-2019 school year—both before and after CPS began the implementation of RP programs in 2013-2014. By comparing student behavior before and after exposure to RP and across multiple school environments (difference-in-differences style research design), the study provides first-of-its-kind insights into the causal effects of restorative practices programming.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The Education Lab's study, *From Retributive to Restorative: An Alternative Approach to Justice*, finds that the restorative practices reduce student arrests in and outside of school and for violent and non-violent offenses, and may generate positive, genuine changes in student behavior. Schools that implemented RP policies saw a staggering 35 percent reduction in student arrests in school and a 15 percent reduction in out-of-school student arrests. The study saw declines in arrests for both violent and non-violent offenses.

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In addition to significant decreases in student arrests, RP decreased out-of-school suspensions by 18 percent and improved students' perceptions of school climate. This improvement in perception is driven by large increases in students' perceptions that their peers' classroom behavior improved, their increased feeling that they belong at school, and that school is a safe place to be.

Programmatic benefits were particularly large for Black students, although the authors also found evidence that Latino male students' test scores may have declined in response to RP adoption. Future research is needed to understand why students might have been affected in different ways.

THE OPPORTUNITY

While RP policies have previously shown promising results regarding the relationship between RP and positive outcomes, this study fills a critical gap in the research by providing the first causal evidence of the effectiveness of RP in schools. Administrators can now take into consideration this extended analysis when implementing their own programs, particularly as schools continue to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic dramatically reduced in-classroom instruction and corresponded with an uptick in student arrests. As schools now work to accelerate student learning, boost in-classroom instruction, and address students' socio-emotional needs, RP programs may help to generate tangible, positive results.

LEARN MORE

For more information on the Restorative Practices study, [visit our website](#) or contact Dr. Anjali Adukia (adukia@uchicago.edu), Dr. Benjamin Feigenberg (bfeigenb@uic.edu), and Dr. Fatemeh Momeni (fmomeni@uchicago.edu).

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