Examining School Discipline Patterns in Dallas ISD

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Abstract

During the Get-Tough Era, zero tolerance policies and school resource officers were implemented in schools all over the country (Beger, 2002). This led to lots of students being expelled, suspended, and/or arrested on campus (Fisher & Hennessey, 2016; Devlin & Gottfredson, 2016). More specifically, the students affected tend to be youth of color and those from low-income communities (Mendez et al., 2002; Mendez & Knoff, 2003). While there is a great deal of research confirming the disproportionate discipline and how it affects youth of color, there are few efforts to understand the concentration of hotspots in certain areas. This study attempts to fill that gap. Based on the findings presented, two conclusions are warranted: there are hotspots in school discipline within the Dallas Independent School district and there were no differences in demographic information collected from the U.S. Census Bureau when comparing hotspot and non-hotspot areas.

Keywords: hotspots; school discipline, school to prison pipeline

Introduction

The Get-Tough Era of juvenile justice emerged in the 1990s after an increase in crime rates, drugs, and gang activity amongst the youth (Stahl, 2016). This Era was characterized by harsher punishment for juvenile crime including expanded use of incarceration, longer sentences for youth, and increased use of waivers to the adult court system (Feld, 2017). The United States Education system followed suit by implementing “zero tolerance” policies (ZTP)—policies that allowed schools to automatically suspend or expel students whose behavior was seen as a threat to other students and staff (Chittom & Walter, 2024). These behaviors included possession of weapons or drugs and fighting. Disciplinary policies, created under the ZTP, were also used to punish students who violated a school or institution’s code of conduct. These policies ensured students were acting in acceptable ways and held accountable when they failed to do so (Chittom & Walter, 2024). This was not the only thing implemented under the ZTP; schools introduced school resource officers (SROs)—sworn law enforcement with the power to arrest—to enforce these disciplinary policies (Beger, 2002).

SROs coupled with the use of disciplinary actions in schools, particularly arrests, have created the phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline (STTP). The STPP is a process in which the use of disciplinary action in schools exposes youth to the juvenile justice system (JJS). School discipline includes suspension, expulsion, in school- suspension (ISS), being written up, conferences with the principal of the school, and most directly related to the STPP: arrests. The STTP has raised concerns given the numerous adverse effects of being involved in the JJS. The outcomes associated with juvenile justice system involvement include but are not limited to substance use, risky sexual behavior, exposure to community violence (Voisin et al., 2016). JJS involvement can also be a predictor of how likely or unlikely someone is to be involved in the criminal justice system in the future (Gerling, 2020). The effects of the STPP might be justified if school discipline made schools safer—but evidence is mixed on whether that is true. Some studies find that the presence of SROs has been associated with higher reported crimes relative to schools without them (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2016). Furthermore, there is a great deal of research noting that SROs are more likely in schools with higher percentages of youth of color, particularly Black students (Crosse et al., 2021), and that rates of arrest and exclusionary policies (i.e., suspensions and expulsions) are also much higher in these schools (Fix et al., 2021). The result: more black and brown youth are being funneled into the STPP.

While there is a great deal of research highlighting the disparities in the school to prison pipeline, there have been few efforts to understand whether school disciplinary actions are concentrated in certain neighborhoods. Efforts to understand the STTP have focused mainly on individuals or schools without considering whether the STTP is also occurring on a neighborhood level. There are reasons to believe that school discipline might be concentrated in certain neighborhoods with certain areas of a city having "hotspots" of school discipline. For one, it is well documented that other adverse outcomes–like arrest and incarceration–are clustered in space; and that hotspots emerge in lower income and predominantly minority communities (Amin et al., 2024). Second, communities–particularly in larger cities– tend to be segregated or clustered along income lines, racial lines, or both. And we know that SROs and ZTP are used to a greater extent in schools with more youth of color and in schools that serve a larger proportion of lower income students (Crosse et al., 2021; Mendez et al., 2002). As a result, we should expect school disciplinary patterns to be clustered as well. Yet, with no work testing this assertion, this remains an open empirical question.

Accordingly, the goal of this study is to determine whether disciplinary actions in schools are clustered. More specifically, using publicly available data provided by the Texas Education Agency, hotspot analyses are used to determine whether certain areas of Dallas Independent School District (DISD; Dallas, Texas) have higher rates of disciplinary policies (i.e., suspensions, expulsions) than others. DISD is well suited to a study like this given that both economic resources and race/ethnicity are clustered within the city limits (Connolley, 2022; Kahlenberg, 2022); and both of those factors can predict SRO involvement and school discipline. In addition, prior work has also demonstrated the utility of heat mapping in Dallas. Indeed, Wheeler and Reuter (2020) found hotspots of crime in Dallas. In carrying out this study, I hope to provide a better understanding of the school-to-prison pipeline– information that can be used to pin-point the schools and areas that are more susceptible to contributing to the STPP. With this knowledge, policy makers can intercept this harmful pipeline which could decrease criminal justice system involvement for adolescents in Dallas ISD.

Literature Review

School to Prison Pipeline

Each year in the United States, approximately 5% of students will be suspended, .25% will be expelled, and nearly 50,000 will be arrested on school campuses (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2017-2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013-2014). Though arrests and exclusionary policies (suspensions and expulsions) were always available in schools to handle rule violations—their use grew substantially in the 1990s with the creation of zero tolerance policies and the use of school resource officers as enforcement (Beger, 2002). Zero tolerance policies and the placement of school resource officers in schools were designed to ensure that schools were a safe space for students (Skiba, 2004). The problem, however, is that school resource officers coupled with zero tolerance policies have contributed to a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). The STPP is a process in which the use of school disciplinary techniques leads to the youth's participation in the juvenile justice system.

While school arrests create a direct pipeline to the justice system, research highlights a strong link between suspensions and expulsions and criminal behavior too. Indeed, studies find that being suspended increases the probability of juvenile justice system involvement and incarceration in adulthood (Novak, 2019; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016; Hemez, Brent & Mowen, 2019). Mowen and Brent (2016), for example, found that youth who were suspended have an increased likelihood of being arrested and that this effect amplifies with each additional suspension (Mowen & Brent, 2016). Even short periods of time out of school can contribute to this problem. In a qualitative study assessing 30 black students and parents and the effects of out of school suspension. It was found the negative impact of school discipline begins after missing one day of school or receiving a suspension (Bell & Puckett, 2020). Research also finds that contact with the juvenile justice system is related to an increase in a multitude of behavioral and health problems such as, delinquency, substance use, early sexual behavior, risky sexual behavior, and exposure to community violence (Voisin et al., 2016).

The link between suspensions, expulsions, and the justice system is complex, though, with scholars noting that student suspensions and expulsions might lead to justice system involvement through academic performance. The ways in which suspension affects academic performance varies across various socioeconomic status' but there remain three common themes: missing valuable assignments and the complications with catching up, missing crucial information and an educator's reluctance to provide the student with make-up work because they were suspended (Bell & Puckett, 2020). All these factors can decrease a student's academic performance and perhaps their school motivation and academic performance can be related to delinquency. In particular, some studies find that the poorer the academic performance, the higher probability an adolescent would participate in delinquent behaviors (Maguin & Loeber, 1996).

Some studies note that the effects of these disciplinary policies are felt at the neighborhood level, too. Gerlinger (2020) found that disciplinary policies increased neighborhood level aggravated assaults. To specify, this study found that neighborhood crime increases as the number of local suspensions increases. Perhaps being excluded from school simply gives youth more free time by which to engage in criminal behavior. This idea is consistent with propositions laid out in several criminological theories including social bonding and routine activities theories (Krohn & Massey, 1980).

Disproportionate Use of School Discipline

The use of school discipline, however, is not equal. In a study done with 22,000 elementary kids over 45 different schools, Rocque (2010) found that African American students were over 2x as likely to receive disciplinary infractions (i.e., being referred to the office). Similar results have been found in other studies (see Pesta, 2018). Interestingly, research has confirmed that despite student body composition, Black students were overrepresented in those who were suspended and that as the number of Black students increased, as did the number of Black students who were suspended (Fix et al., 2021). And Black students can already feel the pressure of school discipline as early as elementary school (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Research has confirmed that these findings of disproportionate discipline are not grade level specific and can begin quite early (Mendez & Knoff, 2003).

One explanation for the disproportionate use of discipline among youth of color is the disproportionate use of SROs in their schools. Research finds that school resources officers are more prevalent in schools with a high percentage of Black and Brown students (Kidane & Rauscher, 2023). In fact, it was found that Black students are more likely to be exposed to SRO bias than any other racial group and that the exposure depends on what schools the student attends (Hammond, 2023). Likewise, studies find that the use of SROs increases the number of disciplinary infractions. Devlin and Gottfredson (2016) used longitudinal data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety and found that the reporting and recording of crime increased with the presence of SROs (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2016). Others have taken it a step further and evaluated the effects of SRO by student race and ethnicity using monthly school administration data (Crosse et al., 2021). Crosse and colleagues (2021) found that at schools with SRO intervention, the mean number of offenses increased for Black and Hispanic students (Crosse et al., 2021). This shows how the presence of SROs affects youth of color.

Neighborhoods and School Discipline

Though a great deal of research has noted the disproportionate use of SROs and school discipline among youth of color—and have even documented that disciplinary policies have affected neighborhoods—little effort has been made to understand whether school discipline itself is greater in certain neighborhoods than others. Yet, there are reasons to think school discipline might be clustered.

Crime, arrests, and incarceration all tend to be clustered in communities—particularly those that are predominately black or low-income areas (Amin et al., 2024). Amin and his research team used disease surveillance software SaTScanTM to identify and test spatial and spatiotemporal variations in jail incarceration. These researchers found that higher incarceration rates in areas with a larger percentage of Black residents, a greater percentage of Republican voters, and areas experiencing higher poverty rates. This research also shows where hotspots of crime and where SROs tend to be, low income and predominantly Black areas (Amin et al., 2024; Crosse et al., 2021).

Research has found that juvenile crime has hotspots too (Weisburd, Morris & Groff, 2009). Weisburd and colleagues (2009) found a strong relationship between the places in which juveniles hang out and high crime street segments in Seattle, Washington. This means it can be predicted that places where juveniles choose to spend their time the most have some sort of crime. Given that public schools tend to represent their communities in terms of demographics, we would expect disciplinary policies to also be clustered.

Current Focus

This study aims to investigate if disciplinary action in Dallas ISD is patterned. More specifically, whether suspensions, expulsions and arrests, as a means of disciplinary action, are more prominent in certain zip codes within Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) than others.

Data and Methods

Data

The data for conduction of this study is from two sources: Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the United States Census Bureau. Information on disciplinary action comes from the TEA, an organization created by the state to manage primary and secondary education in Texas. They acquire records of discipline, student attendance, population, courses, academia, finances, and qualifications of educators. This public information will be used to support the research question. More specifically, the disciplinary data is from all public, charter and alternative schools for the most recent available school year (2023-2024). This data includes the school's name, school ID number, school classification (elementary, middle, high or alternative school), school population and number of disciplinary infractions — which will be assessed adequately for this study. Using the school's name, provided by the TEA, each school's zip code and geographic coordinates (latitude and longitude) were found via an Internet search. The second data source for this study is the U.S. Census Bureau, which provides demographic information like income, education attainment, and race on a community level.

Variables

To conduct hotspot analysis (described below), two major pieces of information are needed: the location of the phenomenon and the prevalence of the phenomenon. For the purposes of this study, the location is the school's geographic coordinates (latitude and longitude), and the prevalence of the phenomenon is the rate of disciplinary action per school. The latter was calculated using information obtained from TEA on the number of school disciplinary actions in a given DISD school and the cumulative number of students that attended that school during the 2023-2024 school year. To calculate the rate of disciplinary action for each school, I divided the number of disciplinary reports by the school and the cumulative number of students at the school then multiplied that figure by 1,000. From this, you get the rate of disciplinary action incidents per every 1,000 students.

Several other variables will be considered in order to better understand if and why certain areas are hotspots of school discipline. These variables will be collected from the U.S. Census Bureau and include poverty rates, percent of native/foreign born, education, residential mobility, and single-parent household.

Analytic Strategy

The analytic strategy of this study occurred in three stages. First, I provided descriptive information about Dallas ISD generally, including how many schools there are and the racial and income make-up of this district. In addition, I provided descriptive information about school discipline including the number of schools that had disciplinary infractions listed and the average rate of disciplinary infractions across DISD.

Second, using ArcGIS and their mapping tool, I determined whether disciplinary action is clustered. To understand whether disciplinary action is patterned, a heatmap must be created utilizing data from step 1 (schools' geographic coordinates and disciplinary rates). A heatmap is a data visualization tool that takes the geographic location of an area (i.e., Dallas County) and denotes using one of several techniques (color gradient, size and color dots) areas where a phenomenon is higher. Areas that have higher levels of a phenomenon, for example, might be represented by a darker color or by a darker, larger plot point. To conduct this analysis, I uploaded into ArcGIS an excel sheet containing several key data points: the school, the schools calculated disciplinary infraction rate and the school's geographic coordinates (latitude and longitude). ArcGIS then took the school's coordinates and visually indicated using set criteria (i.e., color and size) the rates of disciplinary infractions over the city of Dallas. Then, using the standard deviations and means, I figured out which datapoints represented a "hotspot" of school discipline (this procedure is described in greater detail below). Finally, using US Census information and descriptive analyses, I determined whether there are shared characteristics in the places where the hotspots are located.

Results

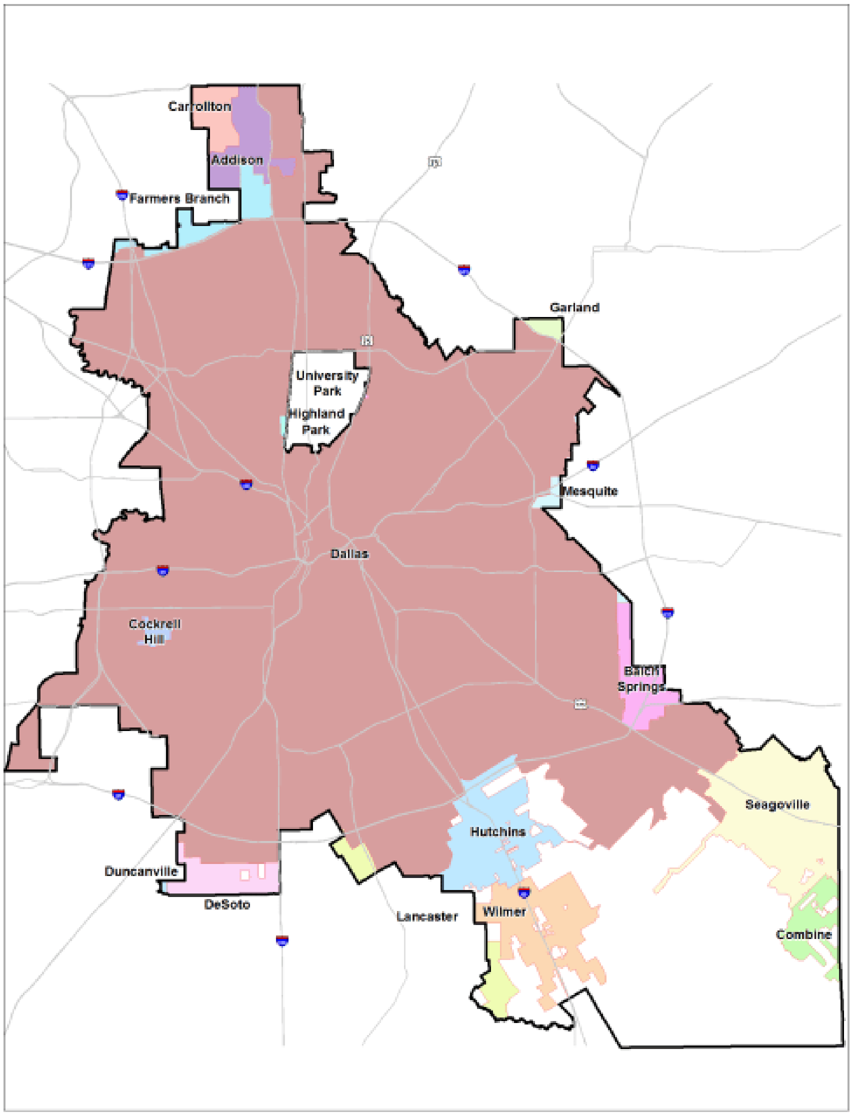
Descriptive information

First, I began with the descriptive information for DISD, which can be found in Table 1. In total, DISD has 234 campuses that serve 138,440 students. Of the 138,440 students, 20% are Black, over 70% are Hispanic and roughly 5% are White. Out of all the students in Dallas ISD, over 60% are at-risk, about 83% are economically disadvantaged, almost 50% have limited English proficiency, over 10% receive special education and 20% are talented and gifted. A visual representation of the boundaries of DISD can be found in Figure 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Information on Dallas Independent School District (DISD; 2023-2024)

	Total	Percent
Total number of campuses in DISD	234	-
Total student enrollment (PK-12)	138,440	-
Black student enrollment	27,624	20.0%
Hispanic student enrollment	98,727	71.3%
White student enrollment	7,546	5.5%
At-risk students	87,032	62.9%
Economically disadvantaged	116,703	83.4%
Limited English proficiency	68,777	49.7%
Special education	16,332	11.8%
Talented and gifted	27,866	20.1%

Figure 1. Dallas ISD boundary



Of the 234 schools in DISD, only 23.9% had usable school discipline data. Unusable data were those that were coded as –999 on disciplinary infractions. According to the TEA, –999 indicates unavailable percentages or counts (i.e., masked) in compliance with Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Masked counts or percentages are typically small although larger numbers may be masked to prevent insinuation. After eliminating schools with no data or those using masked numbers, there were 56 schools with usable data. Though only a quarter of all schools had usable information, these 56 schools did house 45% of all students in DISD—meaning nearly half of all students are still accounted for in these data.

Information for these 56 schools is presented in Table 2. Within these schools, the total number of disciplinary infractions of those reported was 8,246. The average number of disciplinary infractions per school was about 147. Using the cumulative student enrollment and total number of disciplinary infractions, we calculated the of disciplinary infractions per 1,000 students for each school. The average rate for disciplinary infraction per 1,000 students was138.96.

Table 2. Disciplinary Infractions in DISD (N = 56)

	Total
Cumulative student enrollment	62,383 students
Average student enrollment	1,113.98 students
Total number of disciplinary infractions	8,246 infractions
Average number of disciplinary infractions	147.25 infractions
Rate of disciplinary infractions per 1,000 students	138.96 infractions/1,000 students

Hotspot Analysis

Next, using the data on each schools' disciplinary infractions and coordinates (longitude and latitude), I used ArcGIS to map which areas of DISD have the highest disciplinary infraction rates. Instead of a traditional "heatmap," the results were displayed using size and color, with larger, darker red spots indicating higher rates of disciplinary infractions and smaller, lighter colored spots indicating lower rates of disciplinary infractions. The results of these analyses appear in Figure 2. A zoomed in version of this map is in Figure 3.

Figure 2. Heat Map of Rates of Disciplinary Infractions in DISD

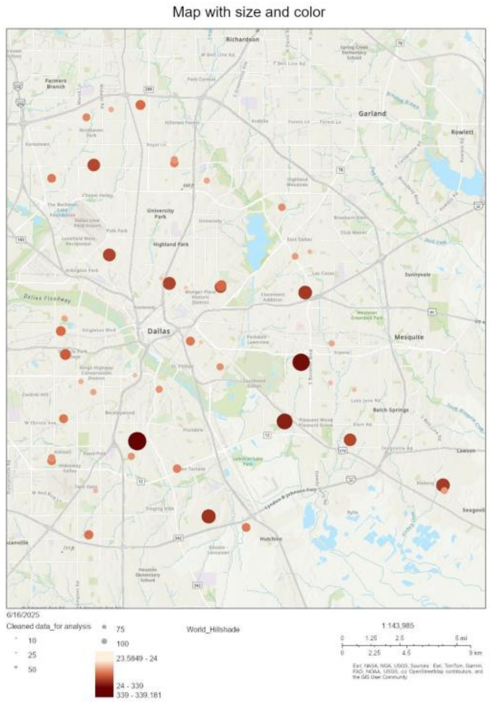
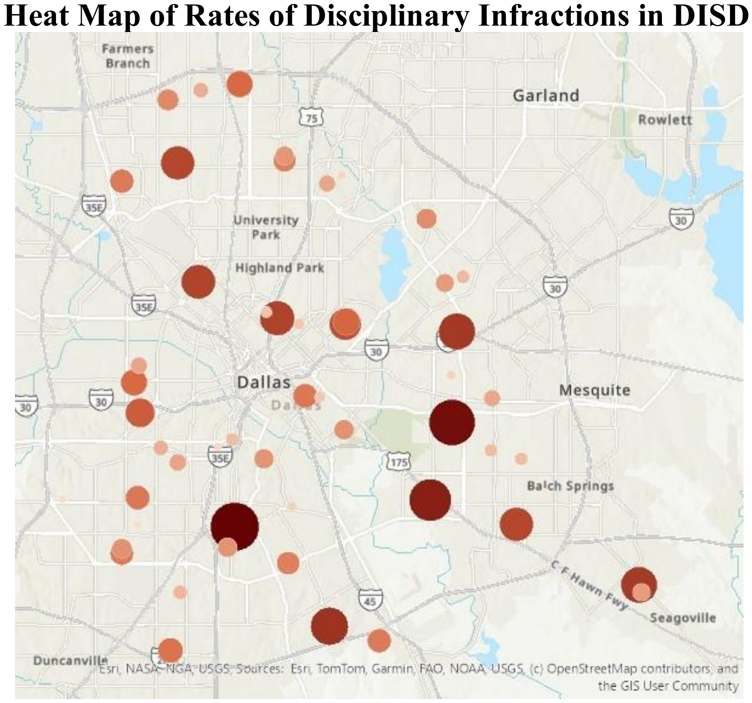
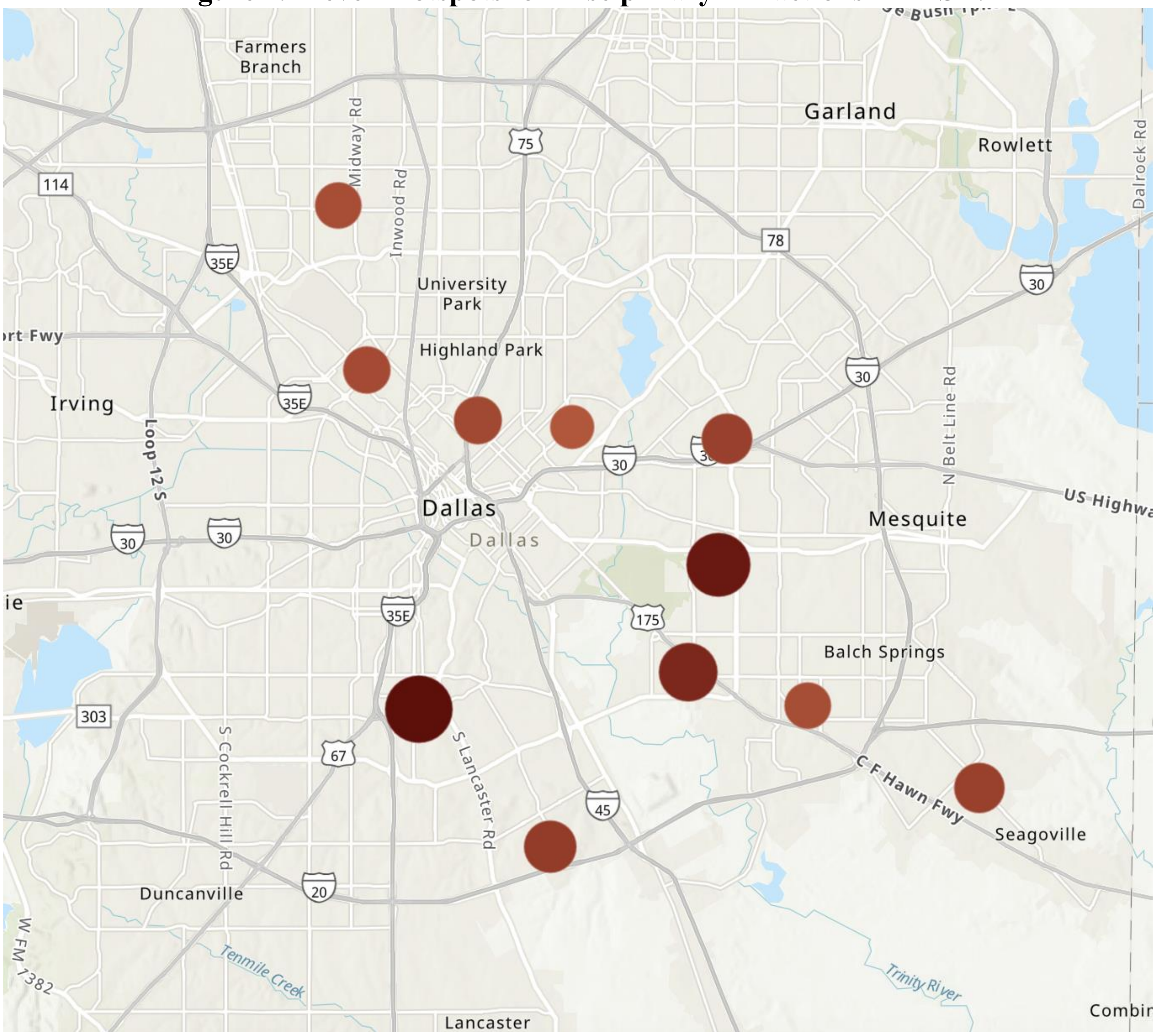


Figure 3. Heat Map of Rates of Disciplinary Infractions in DISD Zoomed



Identifying hotspots was done using two methods. First, I visually identified which areas had the highest rates based on which dots were the largest and darkest. Next, these hotspots were confirmed by identifying which areas were at least one standard deviation above the mean on rates of disciplinary infractions. Recall that the mean number of disciplinary infractions was 138.96 per 1,000. One standard deviation above the mean was 215.7 disciplinary infractions per 1,000. These strategies resulted in a total of 11 hotspots, which are labeled in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Eleven Hotspots for Disciplinary Infractions in DISD.



The final stage of the analysis was to determine what is unique about the hotspot areas and whether they are different than non-hotspot areas. To do so, I identified each of these 11 schools' zip codes and used US Census information to create a profile of these areas. The same procedure was done for the other 45 schools as well.

Table 3. Descriptive Information for Hotspots versus Non-Hotspots

	Percent Poverty	Percent Native/Foreign Born	Percent Residential Mobility	Percent with Bachelor's degree	Percent Single Parent Household
Hotspot areas	18.00%	23.39%	1.71%	28.38%	53.38%
Non-hotspot areas	20.06%	22.34%	1.48%	28.90%	56.92%

Note: sample size for hotspot areas is 11 and non-hotspot areas is 45.

As shown in Figure 4, there were 11 hotspots identified after assessing disciplinary action in Dallas ISD. The sample for non-hotspot areas is 45. These hotspot areas were then compared to non-hotspot areas to highlight similarities and differences between the two. Of all 11 hotspot areas, the average poverty percentage was slightly under 20% while this number was a little over 20% for non-hotspot areas. Both areas reported over 20% of residents who were Native or Foreign Born. Although, for hotspot areas, the percentage was 1.05 more than non-hotspot areas. In addition, hotspot areas average of residential mobility remained .23% higher than that of non-hotspot areas despite both being over 1%. Both hotspot and non-hotspot areas averaged 28% for residents with a bachelor's degree or higher. However, non-hotspot areas reported an average percentage that was .52% higher. 50% of residents living in either hotspot or non-hotspot areas come from single parent households. Yet, non-hotspot areas are almost 7% over this percentage and hotspot areas only exceed 3% over the 50%.

Conclusion

During the Get-Tough Era, zero tolerance policies and school resource officers were implemented in schools all over the country (Beger, 2002). This led to lots of students being expelled, suspended, and/or arrested on campus (Fisher & Hennessey, 2016; Devlin &

Gottfredson, 2016). More specifically, the students affected tend to be youth of color and those from low-income communities (Mendez et al., 2002; Mendez & Knoff, 2003). While there is a great deal of research confirming the disproportionate discipline and how it affects youth of color, there are few efforts to understand the concentration of hotspots in certain areas. This study attempts to fill that gap. Based on the findings presented, two conclusions are warranted.

First, the findings suggest there are some hotspots in school discipline. Out of 56 schools with available data, 11 of them met the threshold to be identified as a hotspot. This means that some schools are using discipline more than other schools. It should be noted that these 11 hotspots were not concentrated in one area. The more dramatic hotspots existed in South Dallas and East Dallas but there are hotspots all over the city of Dallas. There were, however, a few hotspot schools in the same zip code.

Second, using the Census metrics collected, the results indicate that there was no difference between hotspot and non-hotspot areas. These areas were relatively similar in terms of poverty rate, single-parent households, residence mobility, foreign population, and education attainment after high school. There could be no difference between the two areas because these areas were not statistically compared but were analyzed by averages. If these areas were compared statistically, it is possible that differences would exist. Another explanation that no differences are evident could be due to the limited number of metrics used from the Census. There could be more variables that highlight and explain differences between hotspot and non-hotspot areas. It should be noted that a few of these zip codes are those with some of the highest incarceration rates in the city (Shinneman, 2019).

These findings suggest implications for policy. This study identifies schools that are above average in their use of discipline which allows a clearer understanding of what schools to target for intervention. One potential intervention could be re-entry services for students who were previously suspended, arrested and or expelled from another school. This program would help those students feel acclimated to the campus again and reduce the possibility of future suspension (Henderson & Guy, 2016). This would include mandatory counseling sessions during the school day. In addition, some programs need to be implemented across the United States that educates teachers and administrators about the school to prison pipeline and the effects. These initiatives would protect youth of color from being criminalized in schools. These findings also suggest that administrators closely examine their use of disciplinary policies to ensure they are not disproportionately affecting certain youth groups and to discover ways in which the use of exclusionary policies can be reduced.

The study's findings should be viewed, however, in the context of the study's limitations. First, the data for this study came from a single school district during a single school year. Future research should aim to include more school districts in the data to ensure a larger sample size, include more years of data and be able to distribute each disciplinary infraction by the type of discipline the students received (i.e., suspensions, expulsions and arrests). Second, TEA only provides summary information on school disciplinary infractions (i.e., a composite measure of arrests, expulsions, suspensions, etc.). It is possible that disciplinary infraction patterns might differ by type of disciplinary action and should be the focus of future research. Finally, these data suffered from missing data that ultimately resulted in the loss of a large portion of data. Recall that TEA coded many schools as –999 on disciplinary infractions and cited FERPA and student privacy as reasons for the decision. While it is possible that many of the censored schools had very few data points to contribute (i.e., low rates of discipline—as suggested by TEA), their exclusion could still have profound effects on the findings presented here. Future research should seek other mechanisms through which to capture more complete school disciplinary data.

These limitations notwithstanding, this research offers an important look into how school discipline is clustered. Because this is only one study, however, future research should continue to study school discipline in this way. Doing so would help to understand the STPP, which areas are contributing to it the most and offer resources for its resolution. Without this research, adolescents of color will continue to fall through the cracks and their education will be jeopardized.

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