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Abstract | This study examined associations between out-of-school suspension from primary school and early contact with police (by the age of about 14 years).

Longitudinal data from the New South Wales Child Development Study were used to determine the prevalence, pattern and association of suspension and police contact among 68,121 children.

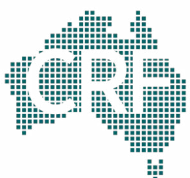
The odds of suspended children experiencing any contact were three times those of non-suspended children (controlling for multiple covariates) and the odds of contact as a person of interest were six times those of non-suspended students. Dose-response relationships were evident with increasing suspension severity. Systemic intersectoral reform to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline by enacting effective alternatives to suspension is required.

Out-of-school suspension from primary school and early contact with police

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Introduction

Many Western education systems use out-of-school suspension as a tool within their behaviour management policies to remove children who exhibit problem behaviour (Mongan & Walker 2012; Welsh & Little 2018). Extensive research, predominantly from the United States, demonstrates that suspension negatively impacts student outcomes by weakening school connection, contributing to school dropout, exacerbating achievement gaps, worsening mental and physical health, and increasing antisocial behaviour and criminal justice system involvement (Hirschfield 2018; Novak & Fagan 2022; Skiba, Arredondo & Williams 2014; Welsh & Little 2018; Wolf & Kupchik 2017). Students from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds and students with disability are disproportionately affected, with evidence suggesting that these children are punished more severely than other students for similar transgressions (Fabelo et al. 2011; Shollenberger 2015) and are more susceptible to experiencing negative outcomes of suspension (Rosenbaum 2020; Vanderhaar, Munoz & Petrosko 2014).



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In Australia, suspension is disproportionately imposed on boys, children of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, children with disability (particularly emotional/behavioural disability), and children who reside in poor or rural areas or in out-of-home care (Graham et al. 2020; Graham et al. 2024; Graham et al. 2023; Hand et al. 2024; Hemphill et al. 2010; Laurens et al. 2021). These groups are also over-represented in the criminal justice system (Nellis 2016; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability 2020; Weatherburn & Holmes 2010), including in early contact with police prior to the age of 13 years as a person of interest (suspected perpetrator of an offence) and as a victim of and/or a witness to crime (Athanassiou et al. 2024; Athanassiou et al. 2021; Dean et al. 2021; Tzoumakis et al. 2024; Whitten et al. 2020). Indeed, suspension is described as ‘pushing’ young people out of school and into the criminal justice system, in a process referred to as the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ (Wald & Losen 2003; Wolf & Kupchik 2017).

The school-to-prison pipeline contextualises the relationship between suspension and increased risk of contact with the justice system (Skiba, Arredondo & Williams 2014; Wald & Losen 2003). It has been proposed that suspension may exacerbate the likelihood of justice system involvement via loss of adult supervision, association with other deviant youth, and increased contact with law enforcement (Hirschfield 2018; Novak 2018; Skiba, Arredondo & Williams 2014). Children who are suspended earlier in life or more frequently may be more likely to engage in offending because they experience an earlier onset of disadvantage, a greater accrual of disadvantage, and hindered prosocial development (Novak & Fagan 2022). This is of particular concern given indications that the use of suspension is increasing in Australian education systems, especially in primary schools and for minor infractions (Graham et al. 2020; NSW Ombudsman 2017).

Most studies demonstrating an association between suspension and later justice system involvement have examined suspensions enacted during secondary (middle/high) school, and criminal convictions and incarceration (Gerlinger et al. 2021; Novak 2018). In Australia, prior work among Victorian secondary school students (Years 7 and 9) evidenced associations over a 12-month period between suspension and later substance use, antisocial behaviour and engagement in criminal acts (Hemphill et al. 2013; Hemphill et al. 2014). Limited research, and none in Australia, has investigated the relationship between early experiences of suspension (namely, suspension from primary school) and early contact with police. Such research focusing on entry points into the justice system is critical to informing prevention and early intervention to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Teasing out the connection between school suspension and police contact—over and above the contribution of individual vulnerability factors—is necessary to impact long-held attitudes which frame adverse outcomes as inevitable given some students’ personal, cultural and socio-economic characteristics. To guide systemic reform of policies governing suspension practice in Australian schools and to inform the design of effective inter-agency strategies to mitigate suspension and police contact, the present study sought to provide local evidence regarding the extent and pattern of early police contact among suspended students.

The current study

This study used linked administrative records from education, justice and child protection agencies, available in a large population-based cohort of children attending public schools in New South Wales. The primary aim of this study was to determine the association between out-of-school suspensions from primary school and early police contact (from birth up to the age of approximately 14 years). An additional aim was to determine whether early contact with police as a person of interest varied according to the nature of the suspension, including age at first suspension, total number of suspensions, total days of suspension, and the reason for suspension. The study is an associational investigation that cannot establish causal relationships.

Methodology

Record linkage procedures

Data for this study were drawn from the second wave of inter-agency record linkage conducted for the New South Wales Child Development Study (NSW-CDS; <https://www.unsw.edu.au/research/nsw-cds>; Green et al. 2018a). The NSW-CDS follows the development of a large population cohort of children by bringing together information on children and their parents held by health, education, justice, welfare and other government agencies. An independent agency, the Centre for Health Record Linkage (<https://www.cherel.org.au/>), linked the administrative records using ChoiceMaker software and probabilistic record linkage methods. Children's and parents' records were linked using names, dates of birth, sex and residential addresses. False positive linkages (matches) were low, with a rate of 0.5 percent (5/1,000 persons) obtained for both the child and parent data linkages (Green et al. 2018a). The linkage process maintained separation of personal identifiers from research content, with the research team receiving only de-identified data.

Ethical approvals

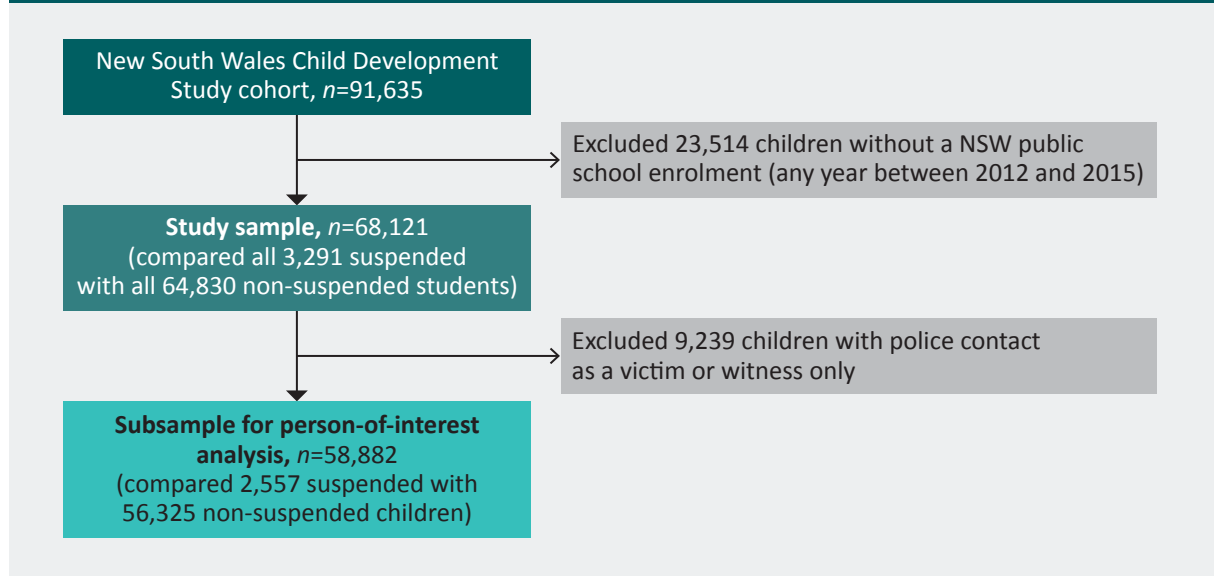
The NSW Population and Health Services Research Ethics Committee (PHSREC AU/1/1AFE112) granted approval for the linkage under the waiver of consent conditions specified in the National Health and Medical Research Council's *National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2018), with Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW approval (1241/16) also obtained. Data custodian approvals were granted by the relevant government departments.

Participants

Participants in this study included a subset of children from the NSW-CDS (Wave 2 Linkage) cohort ($n=68,121$, 74.3%; Figure 1) who had complete data available on suspensions, police contacts and all covariates. Inclusion criteria were children enrolled at a NSW government school in any calendar year between 2012 and 2015 (Years 3 to 6 of primary school), for whom school enrolment records were available from the NSW Department of Education. Records were unavailable for 23,514 children of the NSW-CDS cohort who attended non-government (Catholic or independent) schools during these years.

As most prior research has focused on the justice outcomes of suspension that indicate the perpetration of offences (arrests, convictions, and/or incarcerations), a second subsample of children ($n=58,882$) were selected for analyses examining the association of different levels of suspension with police contact as a person of interest specifically (excluding 9,239 children who had police contact only as a victim and/or witness). All children in this subsample thus had police contact as a person of interest or no police contact.

Figure 1: Flow diagram summarising the derivation of the study sample, and the subsample for analyses of person-of-interest contacts



Measures

Police contact (outcome)

Data on children's contact with police were obtained from the NSW Police Force Computerised Operational Policing System for the years 2000–2018. These data included all criminal and non-criminal events and incidents reported to or detected by the NSW Police Force. Data were available up until 22 May 2018, when most students had commenced Year 9 at school and the mean age of the study sample was 14.6 years ($SD=0.4$; 90% were aged 14.0–15.2 years, with outliers to 12.7 and 17.1 years).

Three types of police contact were recorded:

- a person of interest was defined as a person who was of significance to police during their investigation of an event or incident but who had not necessarily been formally charged or arrested for an offence;
- a victim was a person who suffered harm arising directly from an act committed (or alleged to have been committed) by another person during the course of an offence; and
- a witness was a person who saw, heard or experienced something related to an offence.

Primary analyses in this study used a dichotomous variable that indicated whether or not the child had contact with police for any reason (as a person of interest, victim or witness; for both criminal and non-criminal incidents) versus no contact with police (reference group). Additional analyses of person-of-interest contact used a dichotomous variable that differentiated children with person-of-interest contacts versus children with no police contact (reference group).

Out-of-school suspensions (exposure)

Suspension data for Years 3 to 6 were obtained from the NSW Department of Education Suspension and expulsion records for the years 2012 to 2015. Under the policy in operation during this period (Suspension and Expulsion of School Students—Procedures 2011, Student Discipline in Government Schools [PD 2006 0316]), out-of-school suspensions were issued to students as short suspensions of one to four days duration and long suspensions of one to 20 days. Short suspensions were issued for either of two reasons and long suspensions for any of six reasons.

Primary analyses used a dichotomous exposure variable that coded whether children had received any suspension (ie at least one suspension for any reason) versus no suspension (reference group). Further analyses, of the association of suspension with police contact as a person of interest, were conducted using four variables that each differentiated levels of suspension according to timing of first suspension, total number of suspensions, total days suspended and most serious reason for suspension (Table 1).

Table 1: Levels of suspension examined in association with person-of-interest contact

Exposure	Levels
Timing of first suspension	<p>Three levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no suspension (reference group); • first suspension during Years 3 or 4; and • first suspension during Years 5 or 6.
Total number of suspensions	<p>Five levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no suspension (reference group); • a single suspension only; • 2 suspensions; • 3–4 suspensions; and • 5 or more suspensions.
Total days suspended	<p>Five levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no suspension (reference group); • 1–2 days; • 3–4 days; • 5–15 days; and • 16 or more days.
Reason for suspension	<p>Six levels:</p> <p>Mutually exclusive levels constructed to represent a crude ‘hierarchy’ that considered both the seriousness (long > short suspensions) and prevalence of suspension reasons. To support analyses of less prevalent reasons, children with suspensions for multiple reasons were preferentially assigned to the less prevalent but more serious and/or persistent behaviour, in the following order:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no suspension (reference group); • aggressive behaviour (short suspension); • continued disobedience (short suspension); • physical violence (long suspension); • persistent or serious misbehaviour (long suspension); and • the combination of any of the remaining four reasons (all associated with long suspensions): possession/use of a prohibited weapon; use of an implement as a weapon; possession/supply/use of a suspected illegal or restricted substance; and/or serious criminal behaviour related to the school. <p>Thus, children represented in the aggressive behaviour category (first level) had all received suspensions for this reason only, whereas children represented in the final level (any of the four reasons combined) might have additionally received a suspension for any other reason.</p>

Covariates

Six potentially confounding variables associated with both suspensions (Laurens et al. 2021) and police contact (Whitten et al. 2020) were included as dichotomous covariates in analyses (Table 2).

Table 2: Covariates used in analyses of association between suspension and police contact

Covariate	Levels
Sex	As assigned at birth, derived from all available NSW-CDS records (Green et al. 2018a): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> female (reference group); male.
Indigenous background	Derived from all available NSW-CDS records (Green et al. 2018a): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> not of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background (reference group); Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background.
Area socio-economic disadvantage	Derived from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' <i>Socio-Economic Index for Areas Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage</i> , which indexes disadvantage nationally by postcode, based on the average employment status and income in that area (Pink 2013). Dichotomised from national quintiles, from the child's residential postcode during their first year of full-time school (in the 2009 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC); Brinkman et al. 2014): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> less disadvantaged areas (quintiles 2 to 5; reference group); most disadvantaged areas (quintile 1).
Child maltreatment	Derived from records in the NSW Department of Communities and Justice <i>Case Management System – Key Information Directory System</i> for years 2001–2016. Reports meeting the 'risk of significant harm' (ROSH) threshold were used as an indicator of child maltreatment, including children with at least one placement in out-of-home-care, children with a substantiated ROSH report that indicated actual harm or risk of harm verified by child protection caseworkers, and children with an unsubstantiated ROSH report that met the threshold for further investigation but for whom the risk of harm or actual maltreatment could not be sufficiently determined or the report was not prioritised for investigation owing to resource constraints: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> no report or a report that did not meet the ROSH threshold (reference group); a report that met the ROSH threshold and/or a placement into care.
Emotional and/or behavioural problem	Derived from two questions in the 2009 AEDC completed by teachers of children in their first year of full-time school (child age approximately 5–6 years). Teachers' ratings of problems were based on medical diagnosis or information provided to the teacher by a parent, guardian, or Indigenous Cultural Consultant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> no emotional or behavioural problem (reference group); any emotional and/or behavioural problem.
Early developmental vulnerability related to behaviour	Derived from the 2009 AEDC assessment, in which children falling below the score equivalent to the 10th percentile in the 2009 AEDC data collection were categorised as 'developmentally vulnerable', children falling between the score equivalent to the 10th and 25th percentile in the 2009 AEDC data collection were categorised as 'developmentally at risk', and all other children were categorised as 'developmentally on track' on a particular domain or subdomain. Informed by prior analyses of AEDC data (Green et al. 2018b), a composite indicator of early developmental vulnerability relating to behaviour was created for this study according to developmental vulnerability on any one or more of three AEDC subdomains—Responsibility and respect (follows rules and instructions; respects adults, other children, property; demonstrates self-control; accepts responsibility for actions; tolerates others' mistakes), Aggressive behaviour (disobedient; kicks, bites, hits, fights, bullies or is mean to others; steals; has tantrums) and Hyperactive and inattentive behaviour (distractible, inattentive, restless, impulsive, difficulty settling to task, difficulty awaiting turn): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developmentally on track or at risk on all three subdomains (reference group) developmentally vulnerable on any of the three subdomains.

Statistical analyses

Analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28 (IBM 2021). Primary analyses in the study sample ($n=68,121$) determined the odds of police contact for any reason among children who had been suspended relative to children who had not, adjusted for the six covariates. Additional analyses (in $n=58,882$) determined the odds of person-of-interest contact according to different levels of suspension (timing, total number, total days, and reason), each relative to non-suspended children, and adjusted for the six covariates. Odds ratios were regarded as statistically significant if the 95 percent confidence intervals (95% CIs) did not cross 1.00.

Results

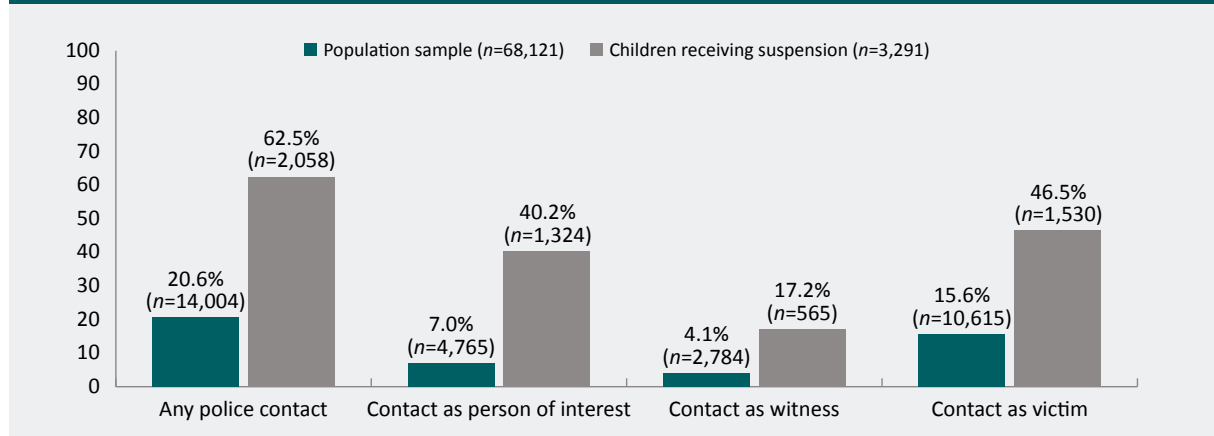
Prevalence of suspension, police contact and covariates

In the study sample, almost one in 20 children (4.8%, $n=3,291$) received an out-of-school suspension during primary school (Years 3 to 6). Among children with suspensions, almost nine in 10 received at least one short suspension of up to four days (88.5%, $n=2,911$), and almost two in five received at least one long suspension of up to 20 days (38.5%, $n=1,266$). Greater than half of these children received multiple suspensions (53.2%, $n=1,752$), among whom short suspensions for continued disobedience (relatively minor infractions) represented a third of all incidents (32.1%).

One in five children in the sample (20.6%) had contact with police for any reason up to 14 years of age, on average (Figure 2). Among suspended children, almost two-thirds (62.5%) had police contact (vs 18.4% among non-suspended children, $n=11,946$).

Rates of police contact by type are detailed in Figure 2, with the rates among suspended children all notably higher than in the study sample. Two in five suspended children had a contact as a person of interest, more than one in six as a witness, and nearly half as a victim.

Figure 2: Prevalence of police contact by type and experience of suspension

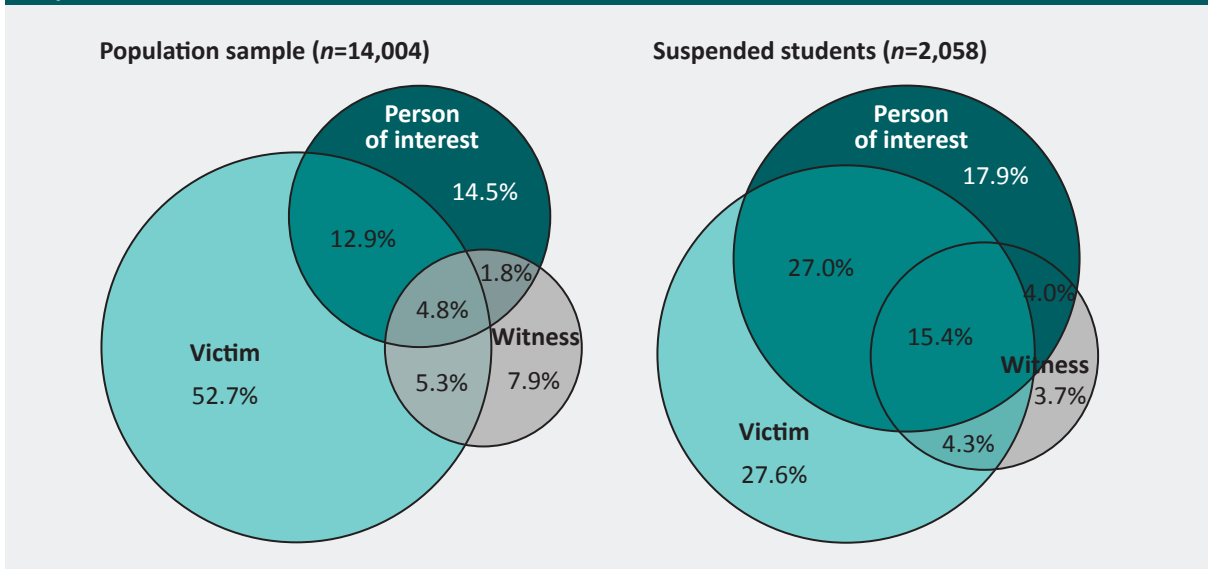


The overlap between contact types in the study sample and among suspended children is illustrated in Figure 3. Most children in the study had contact solely as a victim (52.7%), and one-quarter (24.8%) had contacts of multiple types.

Among suspended children, half (50.7%) had contacts of multiple types, and more than one in seven (15.4%) had contacts of all three types. Almost two-thirds (64.3%) had a person-of-interest contact. Though contact with police solely as a victim was common among suspended children (27.6%), a larger proportion of suspended children had contact as a victim in conjunction with contact of at least one other type (46.7%).

More than half of suspended children with police contact (54.1%, $n=1,114$) had their first contact with police prior to receiving their first suspension—due primarily to a large number of suspended children who had police contact as a victim, among whom 56.7 percent ($n=867$ of 1,530) had police contact that preceded their first suspension from school. In contrast, most children who had contact with police as a person of interest had their first contact subsequent to their first suspension (73.1%, $n=968$ of 1,324 children), as did most children with witness contact (63.4%, $n=358$ of 565 children).

Figure 3: Overlap between police contact types in the study sample and among children receiving suspension



Associations between suspension and police contact

As detailed in Table 3, a strong and significant association in the study sample ($n=68,121$) was apparent between receiving a suspension during primary school and having any contact with police by the age of approximately 14 years, over and above the significant individual contributions of each of the covariates to police contact. The adjusted odds of police contact for any reason (controlling for all six covariates) were more than three times those of non-suspended students.

In fully adjusted analyses conducted on the subsample who had contact with police as a person of interest versus no police contact (excluding children with only victim and/or witness contacts), the odds of person-of-interest contact among suspended children were sixfold those of non-suspended children (Table 3).

Table 3: Odds ratios for any police contact, and for contact as a person of interest specifically, for suspended relative to non-suspended children

	Any police contact OR (95% CI)	Person-of-interest contact OR (95% CI)
Unadjusted (bivariate) association	7.39 (6.87, 7.95)	16.50 (15.16, 17.97)
Adjusted association ^a	3.46 (3.18, 3.77)	6.06 (5.48, 6.71)

a: Adjusted for the effects of male sex, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, area socio-economic disadvantage, child maltreatment, emotional and/or behaviour problems, and early developmental vulnerability related to behaviour

Note: OR (95% CI)=odds ratio and 95% confidence interval, all $p < 0.001$

Association between level of suspension and person-of-interest contact

A further aim of this study was to determine whether the odds of early contact as person of interest varied according to the level of suspension. Table 4 reports the prevalence of suspensions according to different levels of suspension among the subsample of 58,882 for the person-of-interest analysis. The majority of suspended children with person-of-interest contact had received an early first suspension (during Years 3 or 4; 59.1%), multiple suspensions (70.4%), and suspensions totalling five or more days during primary school (68.5%). One in eight children (12.4%) with person-of-interest contact received a suspension for any of the combination of four most serious behaviours

Table 4 also summarises the odds (adjusted for the six covariates) of person-of-interest contact by each level of suspension relative to non-suspended students. Dosage effects were evident, with the adjusted odds being greatest among children suspended early, children suspended a total of five or more times, children receiving suspensions totalling greater than 16 days, and children suspended for any of the four most serious reasons. However, strong and significant associations with person-of-interest contact were present also at the lowest levels of all suspension variables even after adjustment for covariates, namely: children receiving a first suspension during Years 5 or 6; a single suspension only; for a total of 1–2 days during primary school; and for aggressive behaviour.

Table 4: Prevalence of children with suspensions in the subsample used for the person-of-interest analysis, according to levels of suspension, and the adjusted odds of person-of-interest contact at each level of suspension relative to non-suspended children

Suspension characteristics	No police contact (<i>n</i> =1,233)		Person-of-interest contact (<i>n</i> =4,765)		aOR (95% CI)
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	
Timing of first suspension					
Years 3 or 4	577	(46.8)	782	(59.1)	6.80 (5.95, 7.77)
Years 5 or 6	656	(53.2)	542	(40.9)	5.36 (4.67, 6.15)
Total number of suspensions					
1 suspension only	763	(61.9)	392	(29.6)	3.51 (3.04, 4.06)
2	218	(17.7)	213	(16.1)	5.60 (4.49, 6.98)
3–4	137	(11.1)	280	(21.1)	10.72 (8.48, 13.56)
5 or more	115	(9.3)	439	(33.2)	15.51 (12.31, 19.55)
Total days suspended					
1–2	417	(33.8)	187	(14.1)	3.18 (2.60, 3.88)
3–4	372	(30.2)	230	(17.4)	3.83 (3.17, 4.64)
5–15	317	(25.7)	422	(31.9)	7.55 (6.36, 8.97)
16 or more	127	(10.3)	485	(36.6)	15.99 (12.80, 19.95)
Reason for suspension hierarchy					
Aggressive behaviour (short)	517	(41.9)	268	(20.2)	3.32 (2.79, 3.95)
Continued disobedience (short)	341	(27.7)	401	(30.3)	6.73 (5.67, 7.98)
Physical violence (long)	203	(16.5)	221	(16.7)	5.72 (4.59, 7.14)
Persistent or serious misbehaviour (long)	103	(8.4)	270	(20.4)	12.33 (9.50, 16.00)
Possession/use of a weapon; use of an implement as a weapon; possession/supply/use of an illegal or restricted substance; and/or serious criminal behaviour related to the school (long)	69	(5.6)	164	(12.4)	13.75 (9.93, 19.06)

Note: This analysis excluded 9,239 children with police contact as a victim and/or witness only (including 1,967 suspended children). Among the 56,325 children without a suspension (reference group), 3,441 had contact with police as a person of interest. aOR (95% CI)=odds ratio and 95% confidence interval, adjusted for all six covariates; all associations are significant at $p<0.001$

Discussion

This investigation, conducted using a large, population-based sample of NSW public primary school children, demonstrated strong associations between out-of-school suspension and early contact with police. Contact with police by approximately 14 years of age was prevalent in this sample, being experienced by one in five children, most commonly as a victim of crime. Rates of police contact among suspended children were notably high—two-thirds of suspended children had police contact, with most having contacts of multiple types (as a person of interest, victim and/or witness). The odds of suspended children experiencing any type of police contact were more than three times those of non-suspended children (controlling for multiple covariates), and their odds of contact as a person of interest specifically were six times those of non-suspended children. Importantly, these associations were present after accounting for the contribution of other vulnerability factors (male sex, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, socio-economic disadvantage, child maltreatment, emotional/behavioural problems, and early developmental vulnerability related to behaviour).

Fewer than a quarter of suspensions issued annually in NSW public schools under the behaviour policy in effect during the study period were to primary school students (NSW Department of Education 2023), yet the longitudinal design of this investigation determined that experiences of primary school suspension for individuals followed over time were not uncommon. Approximately one in 20 children in the study sample experienced at least one suspension from primary school, with suspension used repeatedly for a substantial minority of young children for relatively minor behavioural infractions (ie short suspensions for continued disobedience). Suspension does not teach children the skills they need to comply with behavioural expectations, and removal from the teaching environment can also reinforce the behaviour (Graham 2018). ‘Continued disobedience’ particularly has been criticised as too broad and non-specific a term that can serve as a ‘catch-all’ in some schools for minor disengaged and disruptive behaviours which could instead be addressed proactively (Dharan & Mincher 2022). Managing these infractions through alternative means within the school setting would help to maintain children’s connection to school and access to prosocial role models.

The study provides novel evidence that suspension from primary school is associated with early police contact for Australian children. Children who received earlier suspensions, multiple suspensions, suspensions for a greater number of total days and suspensions for more serious infractions had especially pronounced odds of person-of-interest contact. Prior research has highlighted the relationship between suspension and increased opportunities for police contact due to lack of adult supervision and association with deviant peers (Hemphill, Broderick & Heerde 2017). Importantly, the present study distinguishes between types of contact. Suspended children were most often victims of crime themselves, highlighting the vulnerability of those being suspended from NSW government schools. These findings underscore the need for early intervention and wraparound supports, which could be delivered through systemwide implementation of an Integrated Multi-Tiered Systems of Support model incorporating social-emotional learning (de Bruin, Killingly & Graham 2024) and full-service schools in disadvantaged communities where evidence-based interventions are provided through inter-agency collaboration (Dryfoos 1994).

Recent research on the impact of discipline reforms in Chicago Public Schools suggests that there is an opportunity cost to the use of suspension which, if addressed, could break the school-to-prison pipeline (Adukia, Feigenberg & Momeni 2023). This research found that the implementation of restorative practices in schools substantially changed student behaviour, with a flow-on effect for police arrests. Alongside improvements in school climate—which included measures of student perceptions of trust, safety, behaviour, and connectedness—the study found no declines in student achievement, indicating that retaining instead of excluding students did not have an adverse effect on their peers. Drawing on person-level arrest data from the Chicago Police Department to ascertain the broader impact of Chicago Public Schools’ discipline reforms, the study identified an 18 percent reduction in the number of out-of-school suspension days, together with a 19 percent decrease in overall arrests. Improvements were found both during school hours and on school grounds (–35%), and outside of school (–15%) and in both violent (–18%) and non-violent (–20%) offences. These findings underscore the importance of matching policy change to reduce the use of suspension with resourcing for and intensive training in alternatives, such as restorative practices and social-emotional learning, so that alternatives can be implemented effectively (Mielke & Farrington 2021).

There are both strengths and limitations associated with the use of administrative data in the current study. Major strengths include the large sample size and availability of multi-agency linked records, which afforded consideration of potential confounders of the relationship between suspension and police contact. Use of administrative records also reduced the risk of information (recall and observer) and attrition (sampling) biases that are typical of studies that measure sensitive information such as suspension and police contact. However, using administrative data that was not collected for the purpose of this study also presented limitations; for example, data were missing in systematic ways, most notably due to the unavailability of suspension data for children educated outside the NSW public school system (approximately one-quarter of primary school students in New South Wales), for whom different disciplinary policies and practices are enacted. The study was also insensitive to informal exclusions of children from school, or movements between the government and non-government sectors for reasons related to student behaviour. Available data on suspensions were limited to those issued during Years 3 to 6, as data on suspensions occurring prior to 2012 (Kindergarten to Year 2) were not available in linkable format. There was no information on school-level factors that influence suspension and that might interact with individual-level factors, such as how individual schools implement behaviour management and suspension policies, including alternative discipline methods. Data were from a single Australian state only, where changes to suspension policy have been enacted subsequent to the data represented here (NSW Department of Education 2022). The new policy specifies maximum consecutive and annual days of suspension, which are different for students in Kindergarten to Year 2 and students in Years 3 to 12, and increases oversight of principals’ use of suspension. The policy also integrates multi-tiered systems of support for all students along a continuum of care, including a focus on prevention, and targeted and indicated interventions. Accordingly, results may not be directly generalisable to other states and territories in Australia (and internationally), where different policy and practice contexts operate, nor over time in New South Wales.

This study offers novel Australian evidence demonstrating a strong association between suspension from primary school and early contact with police. These primary school years represent a critical period in which to foster connections between vulnerable children and supportive adults and prosocial peers at school, with the prospect of preventing contact with police. While schools constitute an important context in which systemic reform should be enacted to implement evidence-based alternatives to suspension, accessible wraparound supports for students and schools could be provided through more effective intersectoral partnerships between education, youth justice, child protection and health systems to prevent vulnerable children becoming enmeshed in the justice system.

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