

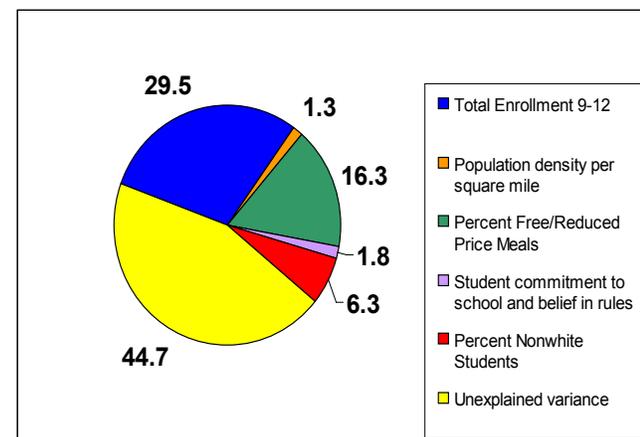
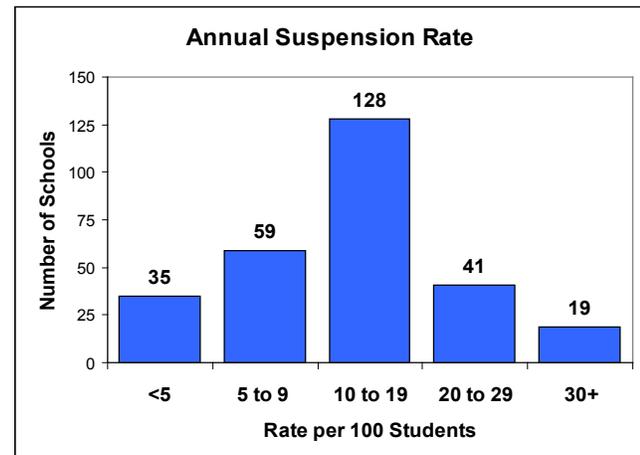
Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study Issue 6

Why do suspension rates vary so much from school to school?

In 2006-07, the typical Virginia high school issued 10-19 suspensions per 100 students, but there was a wide range, from 35 schools that had fewer than 5 suspensions per 100 students to 19 schools that had 30 or more suspensions per 100 students. Three high schools had rates that exceeded 50 per 100 students. Why do suspension rates vary so much from school to school? (These figures combine short and long-term suspensions and count suspensions rather than students, so that one student could be suspended multiple times and increase the school's suspension rate).

We used hierarchical multiple regression to assess how much variance in suspensions was associated with population characteristics, starting with (1) Size of the student body, and then adding (2) Urbanicity (census population density per square mile); (3) Poverty rate (% of students eligible for free/reduced price meals); (4) Student commitment to school and belief in school rules (survey of 9th grade students); and (5) Minority composition (% nonwhite students).

As the pie chart shows, a total of 55.3% of the variance can be explained by school population characteristics – most notably student body size (29.5%; as would be expected, larger schools have more suspensions), poverty rate (16.3%), and minority composition (6.3%). Relatively little of the variance is associated with the urban-rural location of the school (1.3%) or student commitment to school and belief in school rules (1.8%). After considering all these factors, there is still a great deal of unexplained variance across schools (44.7%).



Practical Suggestions. Schools with high suspension rates should carefully consider why so many students are being suspended (including some students who are suspended multiple times). *Schools with comparable student demographics are not suspending at similar rates.* Much of the variance among schools cannot be explained by the student demographics we measured. There is a body of educational research suggesting that school suspension is not an effective way to improve student behavior and often leads to declining behavioral and academic outcomes for students. This suggests that schools with high suspension rates may be engaging in a counterproductive practice.

Study Overview. The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. Safety conditions were measured using school discipline records and surveys of approximately 7,400 9th grade students in 294 schools. This is a correlational study that can support, but not prove, causal relationships. The VHSSS was conducted by Dewey Cornell, Anne Gregory, Xitao Fan, and Peter Sheras of the Curry School of Education in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Center for School Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Study conclusions do not necessarily reflect policies or recommendations of these state and federal agencies. For more information, see the website for the Virginia Youth Violence Project: <http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>.