



## Do school disciplinary policies have positive social impacts? Examining the attenuating effects of school policies on the relationship between personal and peer delinquency



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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Empirical research has yet to demonstrate that strict school disciplinary policies deter student misconduct. However, underlying the null and negative effects observed in prior research may be competing social impacts. What is missing from prior research is an acknowledgement that the deviance amplification effects of criminogenic risk factors may be partially offset by the general deterrence effects of strict school sanctions.

**Methods:** Using data from the school administrator questionnaire, the in-school interview, and the in-home interview from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, this study employs logistic hierarchical models to investigate whether strict school sanctions condition the relationship between personal and peer smoking, drinking, and fighting.

**Results:** Results indicate that the effects of peer smoking, drinking, and fighting on corresponding respondent delinquency are attenuated in schools with strict sanction policies for these behaviors.

**Conclusions:** Results suggest that school policies can aid in preventing crime in unanticipated ways, for example, by reducing the crime-inducing effects of having delinquent peers. Prior research may therefore be unintentionally discounting the general deterrence effects of school disciplinary policies by neglecting the moderating mechanisms through which these policies operate.

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### Introduction

In 1994, Congress adopted the Gun-Free Schools Act, mandating a one year out-of-school suspension for gun possession and the referral of students carrying weapons to the juvenile justice system. This policy, largely a response to the epidemic of youth violence in the late 1980s and the highly publicized school shootings in the 1990s (Cook, Gottfredson, & Na, 2010; Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006; Hirschfield, 2008), was aimed at deterring gun possession and preventing gun-related deaths. After the passage of this federal mandate, schools across the country swiftly extended harsh disciplinary sanctions to less serious rule violations such as cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug use, and fighting (see Gorman & Pauken, 2003; Hirschfield, 2008; Maimon, Antonaccio, & French, 2012; Payne & Welch, 2010; Simon, 2006). Behaviors considered relatively normative during adolescence (Arnett, 1992; Baumrind, 1987; Dryfoos, 1991; Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1991; Moffitt, 1993) are

now met with punitive sanctions such as home suspension and expulsion (APA, 2008, p. 852). Unfortunately, research has not demonstrated that these punitive sanctions deter future misconduct, and there is evidence that harsh punitive policies have unanticipated negative consequences (for an overview, see Cook et al., 2010).

However, prior research may obscure the particular contexts and individuals for whom school disciplinary policies are relatively effective. What is missing from the research base on harsh school sanctions is an acknowledgement that harsh school sanction policies may deter student deviant behavior indirectly by moderating the effects of salient individual risk factors on delinquency. That is, the deviance amplification effects of criminogenic risk factors may be partially offset by the general deterrence effects of strict school sanctions. For example, emerging evidence (e.g., Maimon et al., 2012; Matjasko, 2011; Novak & Clayton, 2001) suggests that, rather than restraining individuals directly through the threat of punishment, strong deterrent cues such as harsh sanction policies may work by overriding the motivational forces that encourage individuals to engage in deviance (Wikström, 2006, 2010). It is such moderating mechanisms through which sanctions operate in which we are interested.

Specifically, this is the first study to investigate whether strict school sanctions deter delinquent behavior by attenuating the relationship

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between personal and peer smoking, drinking, and fighting. We focus on peer influence because the delinquent behavior of one's friends is one of the most consistently recognized motivational forces in the etiology of delinquency during adolescence (e.g., Akers, 1998; Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985; Jaccard, Blanton, & Dodge, 2005; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998; Thornberry & Krohn, 1997; Warr, 1996, 2002; Warr & Stafford, 1991). In addition, the inter-relationships among sanctions, peers, and delinquency is "one of the most important (yet) understudied" areas of deterrence research (see Nagin & Pogarsky, 2003, p. 185). We hypothesize that harsh disciplinary policies will reduce the social influence of delinquent peers. That is, harsh school disciplinary policies (e.g., expulsion and home suspension) may have "moral or educative effects" which are critical for the development of prosocial beliefs that counteract the influence of delinquent peers (Andenaes, 1971, p. 17). This reasoning suggests that positive social processes may underlie the null and negative effects observed in prior research. Ultimately, we argue that to fully understand the impact of strict sanction policies, research must take into account the direct and moderating processes through which sanctions operate. This research is critical to the future of deterrence theory, which depends on an examination of the ways in which formal sanctions are likely to influence individual behavior (see Pratt, Cullen, Blevins, Daigle, & Madsen, 2006, p. 386). We examine the moderating mechanisms through which formal school sanctions operate using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a dataset particularly well suited for studying adolescents and their peers in the school context.

## Conceptual background

### *Deterrence and school disciplinary policies*

The moral and social utilitarian philosophies of Beccaria (1986) and Bentham (1948) provided a set of natural assumptions that lie at the heart of modern deterrence theory (Paternoster, 2010). Deterrence theory assumes that human beings are rational and exercise free will in making choices that maximize pleasure and minimize pain. As a result, individuals weigh the risks of formal punishment against the immediately gratifying rewards of crime in order to determine whether they will engage in or refrain from criminal behavior (Andenaes, 1974; Gibbs, 1975; Zimring & Hawkins, 1973). Deterrence theory has shaped the U.S. criminal justice system and is the primary justification of crime-control policies such as three strikes laws, mandatory minimum sentences, juvenile waivers to adult criminal courts, increased police presence, and the increased use of incarceration (Cullen & Agnew, 2003).

Deterrence theory has also been used to justify the design and implementation of strict school disciplinary policies for student delinquent and criminal conduct (see Cook et al., 2010). As a result, the majority of research on the effectiveness of school disciplinary policies has focused on the ability of these policies to deter student delinquent and criminal conduct directly (e.g., Apel, Pogarsky, & Bates, 2009; Cook et al., 2010; Dodge et al., 2006; Gottfredson, 2001; Novak & Clayton, 2001; Reis, Trockel, & Mulhall, 2007; Welsh, 2001). Unfortunately, existing research has demonstrated that strict school disciplinary policies do not have crime-detering effects (see Cook et al., 2010). Moreover, school disciplinary policies are based on the premise that potential offenders will be deterred by punishment, but some research has shown that strict sanction policies may actually increase the risk for subsequent offending through school drop-out, poor academic success, and isolation from prosocial peers (e.g., Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000; Sander, Patail, Amoscatto, Fisher, & Funk, 2012; Thornberry, Moore, & Christenson, 1985). Other empirically documented negative consequences of strict school disciplinary policies include racial bias, both in design and in implementation (Gregory, 1995; McFadden & Marsh, 1992; Portillos, González, & Peguero, 2012; Rocque, 2010; Rocque & Paternoster,

2011). Overall, the documented null effects and negative consequences of strict sanction policies seem to outweigh favorable evidence.

Although research on the direct deterrent effects of strict school sanction policies is not encouraging, the null and negative effects observed in prior research may be partially offset by general deterrence effects, as observed through statistical interactions. Accordingly, some studies have investigated whether school sanction policies deter student deviant behavior by conditioning the effects of criminogenic risk factors on delinquency (see Cook et al., 2010). For example, a rich literature in sociology has examined whether formal sanctions condition the effects of informal types of control (e.g., emotional self-regulation, self-control, moral inhibitions, social bonds) on delinquency (see Novak & Clayton, 2001; Sherman, Smith, Schmidt, & Rogan, 1992). In addition, using data from The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Matjasko (2011) found that the association between inattention/impulsivity and offending patterns in adolescence varied as a function of the severity of disciplinary policies; and Maimon et al. (2012) found that severe school sanctions against violence (i.e., suspension and expulsion) attenuated the effect of low "thoughtfully reflective decision-making" (see Paternoster & Pogarsky, 2009) on adolescent involvement in violent offending. Thus, there is evidence that severe sanction policies reduce criminal behavior by disarming the cognitive processes that encourage antisocial behavior. We build upon these studies by examining whether harsh school sanction policies reflect a strong deterrent environment that counteracts the influence of delinquent peers. Before exploring the premise that harsh sanction policies deter delinquency by tempering the positive association between personal and peer delinquency, we briefly discuss prior research on moderators of the peer delinquency/delinquency relationship.

### *Conditioning effects on the relationship between peer and personal delinquency*

The relationship between having delinquent friends and engaging in delinquent behavior has been widely supported in the empirical literature (e.g., Akers, 1998; Elliott et al., 1985; Jaccard et al., 2005; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998; Thornberry & Krohn, 1997; Warr, 1996, 2002; Warr & Stafford, 1991). Yet, evidence indicates that the peer delinquency/delinquency relationship is conditioned by a number of theoretically relevant individual-level correlates of crime and delinquency (e.g., Agnew, 1991; Bauman, Faris, Ennett, Hussong, & Foshee, 2007; Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Boman, Krohn, Gibson, & Stogner, 2012; Dishion, Capaldi, Spracklen, & Li, 1995; Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004; Elliott et al., 1989; Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Kaufmann, Wyman, Forbes-Jones, & Barry, 2007; Kung & Farrell, 2000; Marshal & Chassin, 2000; McCarthy, Felmlee, & Hagan, 2004; Meldrum, Young, & Weerman, 2012; Musher-Eizenman, Holub, & Arnett, 2003; Poole & Regoli, 1979; Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, 1999; Vásquez, 2010; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000; Vitulano, Fite, & Rathert, 2010; Warr & Stafford, 1991; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010). Recent research has also demonstrated that the association between peer and personal delinquency may be conditional on aspects of the social context (see Cleveland & Wiebe, 2003; Haynie, 2001; Leatherdale, Brown, Cameron, & McDonald, 2005; Leatherdale & Manske, 2005; Zimmerman & Messner, 2011).

However, previous research has yet to explore whether a school environment with strong deterrent cues moderates the association between being delinquent and having delinquent peers (see Gottfredson, 2001; Stewart, 2003; Welsh, 2000). This is despite a wealth of research on the relationships between school-level factors (e.g., school resources, normative behavior, student bonding, school attachment, and school organization) and offending/victimization (see Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011; Felson, Liska, South, & McNulty, 1994; Gottfredson, 2001; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Henry & Slater, 2007; Kirk, 2009; Kumar,

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