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School Administrators' Perspective on Juvenile Delinquency

Ebonee Thomas
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Walden University

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Ebonee Thomas

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Walden University

2026

Abstract

School Administrators' Perspective on Juvenile Delinquency

by

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MA, Notre Dame of Maryland, 2024

MA, Stevenson University, 2020

BS, Delaware State University, 2016

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of school administrators in Maryland public schools regarding the implementation of discipline policies and their impact on juvenile delinquency. Prompted by rising concerns about delinquent behavior and inconsistent consequences for students, the research investigated how administrators perceive and navigate the challenges of enforcing discipline and the strategies they employ to foster safe, positive school environments. Grounded in defiance theory and social learning theory, the study used open-ended surveys to gather insights from 16 retired and current principals and assistant principals in Maryland public school systems. The findings reveal that while discipline policies provide necessary frameworks and support structures, inconsistencies in application, limited consideration for special needs, and outdated approaches remain significant weaknesses. Based on the findings, recommendations include enhancing consistency in policy implementation, increasing support services, and fostering collaboration among educators, families, and community organizations. The implications underscore the critical role of school administrators in shaping discipline practices that promote equity, safety, and positive social change, ultimately reducing juvenile delinquency and supporting student success.

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Dedication

I dedicate this research to the field of education. I hope this research will open the eyes of school administrators and stakeholders to thoroughly examine delinquent behaviors in schools, so that all students are successful and can contribute positively to society.

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge my chair, faculty members, my work family, and my family, but specifically my parents, Dr. Ramona Thomas and Eric Thomas Sr. Without all of your support, I would not be where I am today. To my parents, you all have played a significant role in my life and education. I am grateful for your support throughout this process. Also, a special acknowledgement to my brother for supporting me throughout this process, whether it was just a simple “good job.” Last, I would like to thank my partner for being so supportive and pushing me through this process. I do this for you all and to make a positive impact on the world.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Many adolescents participate in behaviors at school that can lead to severe issues like juvenile delinquency or problems interacting with adults as they get older (Sutherland et al., 2020). Juvenile delinquency is a crucial concept in criminology and criminal justice (Kim et al., 2023). Many researchers have discussed juvenile delinquency, the risk factors that can determine the causes of juvenile delinquency, and the likelihood of violent behavior. Delinquent behavior is characterized as maladaptive, illegal, or age-inappropriate behaviors such as alcohol abuse, smoking, drug abuse, and school misconduct (Kim et al., 2023). Within the United States public school systems, there have been many cases of students participating in juvenile delinquent behavior as early as elementary school.

Recently, numerous concerns have been raised about school discipline practices and policies (Welsh, 2022). Public schools across the United States have faced numerous issues with excessive school discipline, including suspensions and detention, which can affect a student's grades and, in some cases, their behavior. Many researchers labeled this outcome as the pipeline to prison. As a result, many public school districts have implemented various strategies to discipline students, using suspension and expulsion as a last resort. One of the strategies/practices used is called "restorative justice." Restorative justice is a practice employed in schools to help repair and rebuild relationships among students, teachers, and the school community in the event of conflicts or wrongdoing (Welsh, 2023). Restorative justice is a practice that was adopted in response to high suspension rates. This practice was adopted to help address

consequences and punishments, rather than relying solely on suspension, detention, and expulsion.

Restorative justice is a practice that enables students to share and discuss their feelings with all parties involved in the situation. This type of consequence is often employed to address various behavioral concerns in schools. However, there has been a lack of school consequences to help aid students' behavior, which can bring some resolution to excessive school discipline. School discipline reforms and support within public schools should be evaluated to determine the proper use of school discipline for students (Welsh, 2022).

This study will focus on the policies and strategies for consequences used in the public school system and whether these consequences are effective in helping students avoid delinquent behavior due to poor discipline. Furthermore, this study will gather information from public school administrators to better understand the decision-making process involved in administering consequences to students. School administrators also shared their opinions on the influence they have on juvenile delinquency. Each school system in the United States has different implications for students who display problem behavior in school (Andrew & Gutwein, 2020). School policies regarding problem and delinquent behavior are handled in accordance with the school district's code of conduct. Administrators are required to follow district policies and the code of conduct when students are referred to them for exhibiting problem behavior (Celestino, 2023). The hope is that administrators will properly enforce the code of conduct and consistently impose

appropriate consequences, thereby helping reduce the likelihood of students engaging in delinquent behavior.

Background

In recent years, there has been an upward trend of students participating in inappropriate and problematic behavior in elementary, middle, and high schools (Fabes et al., 2021). In some instances, students received appropriate consequences, while others received inappropriate consequences or none at all. School discipline in grades K-12 education is essential for young students (Welsh, 2022). Beginning in elementary school, students understand that consequences are a part of life. Elementary school is a foundational period that helps students understand appropriate behavior and its consequences. Students apply the lessons learned in elementary school to middle and high school. Students must realize the consequences and discipline in the real world, from elementary school through middle and high school. Some expected consequences seen in schools include loss of privilege, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension. The school system has faced significant challenges with school discipline practices and policies (Welsh, 2022). School policymakers and practitioners need to examine the policies governing school discipline and how they are implemented in public schools (Welsh, 2022).

Juvenile introduction to the legal system is now a public health issue (Campbell, 2023). Many researchers within education have studied the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is described as resulting from school districts' excessive use of suspension, and the negative impact suspension has on graduation rates, the learning

environment, and juvenile crime and delinquency rates (Celestino, 2023). However, the school-to-prison pipeline is described differently in this study. In this study, I examined students who are not receiving appropriate or consistent consequences for engaging in delinquent behavior at school, which can lead to continued delinquent behavior as they age (Celestino, 2023).

Many researchers and policymakers are evaluating school discipline practices and how some policies are being used excessively to target specific populations, races, or ethnicities. A review of school discipline policies should enable administrators to make informed decisions when imposing consequences for student behavior. The goal is to support students who do not fit the traditional prison-to-pipeline stereotype. However, the improper use of school discipline policies can also lead students to the school-to-prison pipeline (Cotman, 2024).

Problem Statement

The social problem that prompted me to search the literature is the increase in delinquent behavior in schools, which is increasing juvenile delinquency. Recently, there have been many concerns with students bringing many inappropriate items to school, such as weapons, alcohol, drugs, and many other items that are inappropriate for school. In addition, there have been issues with students assaulting other students and the school staff. Juvenile delinquency is a social issue that is common within the United States. Because juvenile delinquency is not confined to a single location but is a widespread issue throughout the United States, it can be viewed as a social problem (Walden University Office of Research and Doctoral Services, 2016). In the United States, a

juvenile delinquent is a term used to describe a young person who has violated the law, typically under the age of 18 (Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, 2025). Many states vary the minimum age at which a young person can be considered a juvenile delinquent for committing a law violation. Additionally, some states have rules in place for young children who may inadvertently violate laws. These laws may include no jail time, counseling, therapy, or rehabilitation (Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, 2025).

The rise in delinquent behavior presents a significant challenge for school administrators, who are responsible for maintaining safe and orderly learning environments. In some school districts, students do not face consequences for their actions; instead, they return to school the next day without repercussions. In addition, there has been an increase in the lack of consequences and inconsistencies in schools, and students understand that their actions have consequences. While school discipline policies are intended to address and mitigate these behaviors, their effectiveness and impact on both student behavior and the administrators who implemented them are not fully understood. Students are not making the real-world connections, which leads to juvenile delinquency if the problem behavior persists. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of school administrators regarding school discipline policies and their impact on delinquent behavior, uncovering the nuances, challenges, and unintended consequences of these policies in practice.

Purpose of the Study

The issue that prompted me to search the literature is the increase in public school students engaging in delinquent behavior within schools and not receiving appropriate consequences for their actions. Students often misunderstand the consequences of real-world situations due to a lack of school discipline. Because of this, many young children are being put into the juvenile system. School discipline policies will be evaluated for public schools and how they are used when students are required to receive consequences for their actions. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand school administrators' lived experiences with school discipline policies and their impact on delinquent behavior, using qualitative methods. The literature review was focused on school policies on consequences and how inconsistent consequences can lead to increased delinquent behavior. Additionally, I explored the role of school administrators in school discipline and juvenile delinquency.

Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following central research question: "How do school administrators perceive and navigate the challenge of implementing school discipline policies in addressing juvenile delinquency, and what strategies do they employ to foster a positive and safe school environment?" The research question relates only to the code of conduct/discipline policies of Maryland public schools, as well as to how administrators implement these policies when imposing consequences on students.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The first theory that underpins this study is the defiance theory, as proposed by Lawrence Sherman (Pesta, 2022). Lawrence Sherman's defiance theory explains how punishment can deter criminal sanctions (Pesta, 2022). The defiance theory focuses on the fairness and legitimacy of the punishment experienced. Sherman's defiance theory also explains the importance of consistent punishment in helping the youth. Adolescents should receive fair and consistent punishment to understand the experience of punishment better and change their behavior (Pesta, 2022).

The second theory that underpins this study is the social learning theory, as proposed by Ronald Akers (Flexon & Archer et al., 2021). The social learning theory was frequently reframed to fit into today's world. Research was conducted on the social learning theory and its implications for juvenile delinquency and delinquent behavior. Multiple factors, including school, family, and peers, have been identified as predictors of adolescent offending behaviors (Costello & Laub, 2020). The childhood period is an ideal time to instill specific behavioral changes in children (Yildirim et al., 2020). The social learning theory posits that delinquency is acquired through social interactions, underscoring the importance of schools and their policies.

The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of my study support the idea that young children learn from their environment, as outlined in social learning theory and deviance theory. Social learning theory remains at the core of criminology (Losen et al., 2023). Social learning theory supports some of the causes of delinquency. Social learning theory suggests that crime is learned and that criminal

behavior is acquired through social interactions within any society (Losen et al., 2023). Individuals use modeling from their environments to shape their behaviors. Part of social learning theory for individuals is the school environment. Young children can learn many different behaviors from their peers and staff (Losen et al., 2023). Social learning theory also explains that acts reinforced by reward or avoidance are likely to be repeated (Losen et al., 2023). When students do not face practical consequences for their problem behavior, they are likely to repeat it. The defiance theory further explained how educational policies were created to deter students from criminal behavior by ensuring fair and consistent punishment. Furthermore, the defiant theory posits that when young children are not consistently receiving fair and consistent punishments, it can lead to delinquent behavior (Pesta, 2022).

Nature of the Study

To address the research questions in this qualitative study, the specific research design included a qualitative approach with surveys for data collection. Once the surveys were complete, coding was used to analyze the collected data. The surveys focused on juvenile delinquency and school discipline policies. The public school administration in Maryland will be the target population for this study. School administration includes the school's principals and assistant/vice principals. Participants were recruited strictly from public schools in Maryland. Coding was used to analyze keywords and phrases that staff members encounter regarding school consequences and to address potential delinquent behavior.

Definitions

The following are key terms and definitions used throughout the research:

Defiance theory: Lawrence Sherman's defiance theory suggests that a proper foundation of punishment (fairness and consistency) could increase future crime.

Discipline: Training people to obey rules or a code of behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience (Oxford Language Dictionary, n.d.-a).

Juvenile delinquency: The habitual committing of criminal acts or offenses by a young person, especially one below the age at which ordinary criminal prosecution is possible (Oxford Language Dictionary, n.d.-b).

Social learning theory: According to Ronald Akers's social learning theory, people learn new behaviors by observing and imitating others (Losen et al., 2023).

Assumptions

In conducting this study, the following assumptions were made. School administrators were the target audience for this study, and their input was used to help answer the research question. It was assumed that school administrators would be familiar with the code of conduct, which would help answer the target research question.

Scope and Delimitations

This qualitative study used surveys to collect data. The target population for this study will be school administrators in Maryland public school districts. According to the Maryland Department of Education (2024), Maryland has over 1,400 public schools (Maryland Department of Education, 2024). Due to the variety of public schools in this state, the research question was informed by each school's location. The code of conduct

was used as a reference for administrators when answering the questions. School administrators were expected to answer the survey questions based on their experiences within the school. School administrators elaborated further on the school district's discipline policies (code of conduct) and how they are used when imposing consequences on students.

This study focused on something other than private or charter schools in Maryland. Private and charter schools often have more funding than public schools. This funding is frequently used to help implement programs at these schools to assist students struggling with problem behavior. Charter or private schools are also generally exempt from many regulations that apply to traditional public schools (Fabes et al., 2024). Private schools have more autonomy in determining the policies, practices, and educational philosophies used in their schools (Fabes et al., 2024). Because of this, the focus of this study was on public schools and the discipline policies they must follow, as mandated by the Department of Education and District policies.

Limitations

Due to the variety of school districts, a potential limitation may be the recruitment of school administrators. The school year could be a hectic time for school administrators. This can impact the number of administrators who responded to the survey. Due to the small sample size, this can limit the study's transferability. The sample population was small and was only specific to one state's public school district. Another possible limitation of this study is the variety of codes of conduct administrators use when making disciplinary decisions. Some school districts can be stricter than others. An

additional limitation is that I work for one of Maryland's school districts. This could create biases about what I see daily at my school. To ensure that I keep the researcher role separate from the employee role, qualitative surveys rather than interviews were the best option to eliminate bias from school administrators who are familiar with me. Lastly, for data analysis, instruments such as Google Forms, Microsoft Word, and Microsoft Excel were used to support coding and to create categories and themes. However, I was the primary instrument that was completing the analysis; steps were taken to remain objective, but some bias may be unavoidable.

Significance

This study is significant in that it will fill a gap in understanding juvenile delinquency and the impact of the school environment on a child's behavior. This study addresses the importance of discipline strategies within the school system. Additionally, this study examined the specific discipline strategies employed in schools. If not used properly, this can lead adolescents to engage in delinquent behavior. The findings of this study can be applied across various school districts to help county leaders assess their discipline strategies and identify areas for improvement, thereby enabling students to exhibit more positive behavior. Additionally, school administrators can utilize this study to examine the effects of improper discipline and how, in some cases, this can lead a child to engage in delinquent behavior, ultimately contributing to juvenile delinquency. This study aims to promote positive social change by ensuring that school districts implement and enforce appropriate discipline policies in public schools.

Summary

Overall, this study will help to understand school discipline policies and their implementation in Maryland public schools. Many previous studies have focused on the excessive use of school discipline policies in specific populations, ethnicities, or genders. This study focused on the lack of consistency in the discipline students receive and how this can eventually lead to young students participating in delinquent behavior, which will lead to juvenile delinquency. The results of this study can be applied across many school districts as policymakers and stakeholders evaluate district school discipline policies.

The following chapters will provide further insight into the study's scope and discuss the literature gap regarding public school discipline policies. Chapter 2 will comprehensively review the literature on public school discipline and further define discipline policies and their importance in public school districts. Chapter 3 will discuss the research design and provide details on how the study was conducted. The remaining chapters will focus on the study's results and further discuss the study's findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is substantial research on the influence of school discipline and consequences on students in grade schools. The chapter discusses the use of out-of-school and in-school suspensions and their impact on students. Most findings of the research showed the significance of many populations, like African American boys and non-English speaking students, who received excessive consequences in school, which led to these groups missing classwork and participating in delinquent behavior. A limited amount of knowledge focuses on the recent lack of discipline in public schools, which can lead to delinquent behavior.

However, several states and school districts have prohibited suspensions in elementary grades for certain disciplinary infractions (Welsh, 2021). Many school districts have adopted new approaches to address discipline concerns. Some of these strategies include restorative justice and positive behavioral interventions and supports (Welsh, 2021). Curran and Finch's (2020) research found that many Maryland administrators who responded to a survey on school discipline preferred fewer exclusionary consequences and more in-school suspension. There is an increasing concern about the effectiveness of alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline reforms (Welsh, 2021). Research has shown the pros and cons of exclusionary discipline in public schools, leading to a decrease in suspensions. As mentioned, elementary school sets the tone for students' understanding of consequences and discipline in middle and high school. These new policies could set a precedent for students misbehaving in middle

school. Also, this can lead to increased inappropriate behavior among elementary students.

This literature review summarizes the use of discipline policies and the code of conduct in United States public schools. The literature review will also summarize the roles of school administrators (principals and assistant principals) in the discipline process and in decision-making. This discussion includes some considerations for public school administration when deciding on students' discipline. Finally, this study focuses on school administrators' views of their role in juvenile delinquency.

Literature Search Strategy

The search strategy for this study began with establishing a literature review outline that guided the selection of keywords used in the databases. Keywords included, but were not limited to, *school discipline, school administration and discipline, public school discipline, school administrators, public schools, and consequences*. The EBSCOHOST, ProQuest, and ERIC databases were searched. Google Scholar was also used to search for information. Sources of information included peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, public records, theses, and news articles. The sources used for this research were published within the last 5 years.

Theoretical Foundation

The two theories supporting the study are Akers' social learning theory and Lawrence Sherman's theory of defiance and delinquency. These two theories were used to explain further how a child's environment can influence delinquent behavior. Further, Akers' social learning theory describes how consequences and punishment are part of the

environment and can influence delinquent behavior. Previous research has examined both theories. The research question relates to both theories because they explain delinquent behavior and how the environment can influence it. Akers' social learning theory further explains how consequences and punishment are part of a child's environment that can influence delinquent behavior. Both studies that developed these theories included research on delinquency and delinquent behavior. A further explanation of both theories can be found in the following sections.

Social Learning Theory

Ronald Akers developed the social learning theory in 2015. This theory, which he previously described as "differential association-reinforcement theory," was used to examine criminal behavior (Akers, 2025). The theory was developed from a study on the capacity of humans to both be influenced and to influence their environment through interactions with others. Akers found that social behavior is learned through interaction with one's environment. He employed Sutherland's differential association theory to explain how crime can be learned through the integration of psychological learning principles. Akers used these principles to develop his social learning theory further and explain deviance.

Akers' social learning theory explains the factors influencing crime and delinquency. These factors include differences in social structure, culture, and the locations of individuals and groups within the social system, as well as disparities in crime rates (Archer & Flexon, 2022). The identified factors can influence an individual's differences in associations, reinforcement, imitation, and perceptions of crime as

favorable or unfavorable (Archer & Flexon, 2022). Akers suggests that delinquency is more likely in unstructured environments (Archer & Flexon, 2022). Akers stated in his study in 2017 that, according to social learning theory (1972), individual behavior will be differentially reinforced depending on the degree to which relative frequency, amount, and likelihood of past, present, and expected rewards and punishments are perceptually linked to specific behaviors (Archer & Flexon, 2022). This means that punishments (both negative and positive reinforcement) can contribute to the recurrence of juvenile behavior.

The social learning theory further suggests that criminal behavior can be learned, like any other behavior, from one's environment (Marius & Felix, 2023). The social learning theory explains criminal behavior by identifying variables that either induce or control criminal behavior, as well as those that enable or hinder conformity (Akers, 2024). Research has examined social learning theory and its implications for juvenile delinquency and delinquent behavior. Research indicates that adolescents require friendships, which are often accompanied by pressure to conform to social norms, leading them to adopt peer-group definitions (Miller et al., 2020). The social learning theory further defines how delinquent behavior can be learned from the adolescent setting (Singer & Hensley, 2024).

Four variables in Akers' social learning theory induce or control criminal behavior: differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation (Marius & Felix, 2024). The four variables are fundamental to the development of

delinquent or conformist attitudes and behaviors (Marius & Felix, 2024). Adolescents' environments are essential in understanding delinquency and delinquent behaviors.

Lawrence Sherman's Defiance Theory and Delinquency

Lawrence Sherman defined defiance as the net increase in the prevalence, incidence, or seriousness of future offending against a specific community caused by a proud or shameless reaction to the administration of a criminal sanction (Pesta, 2021). Sherman's theory suggests that defiance can be either specific or general. Individuals can demonstrate direct defiance, which is a direct reaction against the sanctioning agent, or indirect defiance, which is an individual's reaction against other individuals who vicariously represent the sanctioning agent (Pesta, 2021).

Lawrence Sherman's (Pesta, 2022) defiance theory has been used in many educational systems to assess discipline policies and how they can influence students' behavior when applied effectively. Sherman's defiance theory explains how individuals perceive rules and laws, as well as the legitimacy of those rules and laws (Kobie, 2020). The individual views on the legitimacy of those rules and laws stem from fairness and respect within the system (Kobie, 2020). Defiant reactions emerge under certain conditions, including when the offender is poorly bonded, the offender does not accept the shame of wrongdoing, the offender is stigmatized by society, and the offender feels that the offender has/have encountered something unfair (Kobie, 2020). These conditions mentioned can be perceived if the punishment is unjust and inconsistent.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Juvenile Delinquency

Juvenile delinquency is a phenomenon characterized by deviant and criminal behavior (Pantea, 2024). Juvenile delinquent behavior happens when children/adolescents are not able to adjust to the behavioral norms of society or their community. Research has shown that juvenile delinquent behavior is a result of the child/adolescent environment. In her study, Pantea (2024) noted that various factors can contribute to delinquent behavior, including a lack of parental control, generational conflicts, confusion about the boundaries between the virtual and real worlds, and inadequate supervision.

Juvenile introduction to the legal system is a public health issue (Campbell, 2023). Many children are referred to the juvenile justice system each year. Children are considered juveniles at age 12. In 2020 in the United States, overall violent crime rose by 6% from the previous year, and the murder rate rose by almost 30% (Campbell, 2023). Within this time, homicides involving the youth increased (Campbell, 2023). Juvenile delinquency encompasses a range of offenses, including personal offenses, drug law violations, and public order offenses. There has been an increase in the youth participating in violent and nonviolent crimes in their community and schools.

Juvenile delinquent behavior has interfered with society and the education of youth offenders (Fagbonbge, 2020). Juvenile delinquency is a persistent problem that has consequences for students, schools, and the community (Fagbonbge, 2020). Adolescents are vulnerable to delinquent behavior based on their family dynamics, socioeconomic class, and educational experience (Mohideen et al., 2020). Delinquent behavior is now a

concern in public school systems, not just an issue in urban areas. Adolescents' perceptions of delinquent behavior are heavily influenced by adults' perceptions of delinquency and of which behaviors are approved or disapproved (Fagbonbge, 2020). Although public schools are not solely responsible for students' outcomes, they play a vital role in children's healthy development (Leone et al., 2024). Schools can either ameliorate or exacerbate children's vulnerability to adverse outcomes (Leone et al., 2024).

Many school districts have school-based delinquency strategies that allow school personnel to prevent problem behavior (Franjic, 2020). However, school personnel fail to provide students with the appropriate consequences or interventions to help prevent them from engaging in delinquent behavior. As mentioned, students are either not acknowledged for their problem behavior and continue engaging in it, or they receive an extreme consequence that could prompt them to continue engaging in delinquent behavior. For juvenile delinquency to be decreased in schools, there needs to be established norms and expectations for behavior. Delinquency is a community problem that can be prevented if everyone plays their role in the community (Franjic, 2020).

Delinquency in Maryland

Every year, the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services reports data on juvenile delinquency cases in the state. In 2024, the data reported the following three categories: the long-term and recent trends in the number of youths detained, the number of youths arrested under juvenile court jurisdiction, and the number of youths under adult court jurisdiction detained in a Department of Justice Service facility. The data showed a

10-year trend and a 1-year trend, with percentages across all categories decreasing, except for those under adult jurisdiction. In the past year, there has been an upward trend in all three categories. There are 25% more youth detained in 2024 than in 2023 (Department of Juvenile Services, 2024). The average age of the youth brought in for intake was 15 years old (Department of Juvenile Services, 2024).

During the 2023-2024 school year, 1,639 students were arrested (Maryland Public Schools, 2025). This is an increase in student arrests compared to the 2022-2023 school year, with 1,568 student arrests (Maryland Public Schools, 2025). Of those 1,639 arrests in 2024, 1,067 students were referred to the Department of Juvenile Services. 1,132 were high school students, 1,021 were males, 921 were African American, and 538 were in the ninth grade (Maryland Public Schools, 2025). The amounts reported above were the highest in each category. This data showed an upward trend starting from 2019. Each year, the number of student arrests is rising.

Maryland legislation passed a law in 2022 prohibiting children under 13 from being charged in the juvenile legal system unless they commit serious offenses (Campbell, 2023). However, Maryland is looking to repeal this law after a high-profile case involving a 12-year-old who brought a gun and ammunition to school but could not be criminally charged due to the law (Campbell, 2023). There are many different referral sources for juveniles. These referral sources include law enforcement, relatives, probation officers, court personnel, child welfare professionals, and schools (Campbell, 2023). In Maryland, juvenile delinquency is defined as a minor committing a crime (Maryland Courts, 2025). A minor is anyone under the age of 18 in the United States; nearly 2,000

children are arrested each day (Campbell, 2023). Almost 1,500 juvenile detention facilities are awaiting trial and have not yet been found guilty of a crime (Campbell, 2023).

School-to-Prison Pipeline

A growing body of research has examined the relationship between school experiences and various long-term life outcomes. The term “school-to-prison pipeline” refers to the process by which youth experience punitive punishment in schools and subsequently increase their engagement with the criminal justice system (Hemez et al., 2020). In the early 1960s, the term school-to-prison pipeline was developed to refer to the policies and practices within many schools that indirectly and directly push students out of school and into a pathway to prison (Tolley, 2020). Many school discipline policies sent youth into the criminal justice system rather than addressing the behavior. In the 1960s, law enforcement was overused, commonly called to schools for delinquent behavior, which often resulted in the youth being arrested and sometimes charged. This often affects students of color and other underserved populations. The Department of Education revealed that approximately 2.7 million students experienced at least one out-of-school suspension (Hemez et al., 2020). Research has further predicted that at least one-third of all students within the United States will receive at least one suspension by the time they graduate from high school (Hemez et al., 2020). Of those students, 15% were Black, accounting for 39.3% of all out-of-school suspensions (Henry et al., 2021). Research on these exclusionary practices has shown adverse outcomes such as lower attendance, self-esteem, academic performance, victimization, dropout, arrest, and

delinquency. As a result, many politicians and states have called for reform in school discipline.

Over half of prisoners enter without a high school diploma (Lustick, 2022). Many prisoners do not pass high school due to their delinquent behavior. This suggests that school is one of the factors that influences students' likelihood of being incarcerated. Several factors can affect the pipeline to prison, including teachers, administration, persistent problem behavior, improper diagnosis, implicit bias, and school discipline policies (Morgan, 2021). Many schools in the United States follow zero-tolerance policies that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Students who are perceived to experience the school-to-prison pipeline are pushed out of schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Police officers are often dispatched to school buildings to assist with students exhibiting behavioral problems or engaging in delinquent behavior. Teachers and administrators, in an attempt to cooperate with these police officers, became primarily invested in the success of police intervention rather than the educative discipline (Lutisck, 2021). Future efforts to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline should focus on principals, as they make the final decisions on suspensions and expulsions. School administrators are among the most significant influences in preventing the school-to-prison pipeline (Lutisck, 2021).

School Discipline Concerns

School discipline is one of the most significant influences on disciplinary consequences for students (Camacho et al., 2024). There are many different definitions of school discipline. Taylor et al. (2023) researched school discipline and the policies in

place that address it. Schools rely heavily on school personnel to address and prevent problem behavior. School personnel are responsible for taking appropriate actions to prevent or intervene when students engage in problem behavior, focusing on the school code of conduct (Taylor et al., 2023). Discipline is the act of obeying rules and regulations (Taylor et al., 2023). Discipline is supposed to be used in schools as students process information (Kiral, 2025).

Many public schools in the United States follow a zero-tolerance policy regarding school disruptions and problem behavior (Gwathney, 2024). Zero-tolerance policies are school district policies that mandate predetermined consequences for specific behaviors (Henry et al., 2021). Many of these predefined consequences range from severe to punitive and are applied regardless of the behavior's gravity, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (Henry et al., 2021). When students engage in these behaviors, they are often removed from the learning environment, whether through in-school or out-of-school suspension or expulsion, which are considered zero-tolerance consequences or strategies. Gwathney's (2024) study demonstrates that zero-tolerance school suspensions are uncompromising disciplinary practices that obstruct students' access to essential school-based services. The problem with the zero-tolerance policies and practices is not only the students being removed from their environment but also the racial inequalities and the effects on academic and adult outcomes (Welsh, 2024).

Exclusionary discipline includes in-school, out-of-school, and expulsion. Fabes et al. (2024) explain discipline as an adult decision, typically made in response to a child's behavior or perceived behavior, that aims to encourage a child to change unwanted

behavior. Student discipline problems rose before the COVID-19 pandemic (Donnelly & Chakrabarti, 2023). After the pandemic, school discipline problems have continued to rise. There have been many adverse effects of school discipline. However, criminalizing school discipline can expose students to harsher punishment within the legal system (Mowen et al., 2020). Sichon and Guha (2020) explain that previous research findings have consistently shown poor implementation of school discipline. Some school personnel will show leniency with some students or impose harsh consequences on other students, which can trigger violence or lead to corporal punishment (Guha, 2020).

Schools are pivotal socializing agents for adolescents and young children, shaping or reinforcing deviant behavior (Mowen et al., 2020). Fair and consistent school discipline can promote many prosocial outcomes for adolescents and young children (Mowen et al., 2020). At each school level (elementary, middle, and high), concerns about students' behavior and proper discipline have been raised (McMahon et al., 2022). Implementing school discipline has presented challenges to many public school districts (Welsh, 2021). Significant research has been completed on the impacts of school discipline and how school discipline can influence juvenile delinquency. Many researchers worry that the education system's discipline policies are too harsh and can lead to students becoming juvenile delinquents (Arnez & Condry, 2021). Research has shown the racial disparities of African American and Latino students receiving higher rates of expulsion and detention, which can be a risk factor for juvenile delinquency (McMahon et al., 2022). As a result, researchers are evaluating the policies that school leaders must follow in public schools. The problem arises when school leadership issues

too many passes for students who are not receiving discipline, and students learn that they can engage in the same inappropriate or problematic behavior because they know no consequences will be imposed. Addressing students' behavior by adhering to the code of conduct can help school leadership maintain consistency (Tefera et al., 2022).

Teachers often experience different aggressive behaviors from students at all levels (McMahon et al., 2022). When these behaviors appear, teachers are left to rely on the school administration to make the proper decisions and to provide students with appropriate discipline to deter them from continuing problem behavior. What happens when this does not happen? School leadership tries to prevent students from being introduced to the juvenile system by offering alternative strategies (Arnez & Condry, 2021). Although research has shown flaws in student discipline policies, it is problematic when students do not receive discipline. Schools are the primary setting for students to engage in delinquent acts; if handled correctly, schools can be a key setting for delinquency prevention (Sichon & Guhao, 2023). School climate is crucial in deterring students from participating in delinquent behavior.

Another important issue that research has highlighted in the context of school discipline concerns is the transition from elementary school to middle school. A successful transition from elementary school to middle school is an important part of an adolescent's life. Research has shown that this transition often leads to academic and behavioral concerns among students. Additionally, during this transition from elementary to middle school, socially aware children are becoming increasingly self-conscious, and their relationships with their parents are evolving. Middle and high schools now require

students to improve their academic performance. This can cause some behavioral concerns for students. Research has shown that students who participated in delinquent behavior in elementary school are more likely to experience an increase in behavior challenges in middle and high school (Nelson, 2020). Students begin to have more behavior referrals and suspensions in middle and high school. Some of these issues could be prevented in elementary school if students understood the importance of consequences and why their actions matter. This does not mean that all students will continue to exhibit delinquent behavior in middle and high school. However, logical consequences can help students understand that their actions are inappropriate at school.

Teachers' Concerns

Many teachers have expressed concern about increased student behavior and discipline issues. Often, teachers are left thinking, "Why didn't they just suspend him?" Research has shown the adverse effects of out-of-school suspension and exclusionary practices in school. Many teachers are concerned that some of these practices may be necessary because of increased challenging behavior. It is the teacher and staff's role to keep schools safe. Recently, there has been an increase in assaults, fights, and violent crimes in schools. Teachers are in a challenging position daily to combat some of this behavior without the parents' and administration's help and support (Welsh, 2023).

Student behavior has worsened after readjusting to life after the pandemic. Many districts struggle to find teachers willing to work in public schools because students' behavior is increasingly challenging. The teacher shortage resulted from teachers not feeling supported by administrations when dealing with students' problem behavior.

Often, students are sent to the school administration for “discipline,” but they return to class quickly, sometimes with a reward. Welsh (2023) conducted a literature review that examined 81 studies on school discipline. One finding suggested that school discipline needs reform because its policies often do not support educators (Welsh, 2023).

Student Behavior Challenges

Many public schools have experienced behavior challenges with students throughout the years. Within recent years, students’ behavior has become a significant concern for educators in public schools. Recent behaviors, such as backtalk, carelessness about their poor behavior, fighting, cursing, and more, have increased in public schools. Challenging behavior in schools should be addressed critically. Schools should address how challenging behavior is perceived, reinforced, and managed; this remains a systemic problem within the school system (Gregory et al., 2020). There has been an increase in behavioral challenges in the classroom, characterized by both increased frequency and severity (Whalen & Moore, 2024). These behavior challenges include bullying, minor disrespect, major disrespect, tantrums, defiant behavior, self-injury, aggression, and non-compliance. There has been an increase in disrespect and non-compliance in classrooms since 2019 (Prothero, 2023).

Students who participate in these behaviors are subjected to some form of school discipline. Research has shown that school discipline practices can harm students by introducing them to the school-to-prison pipeline (Shi & Zhu, 2022). Often, the school-to-prison pipeline explains how these harsh policies expose students to the criminal justice system at a young age (Shi & Zhu, 2022). The majority of the research discussed

corporal punishment in schools and how students of different races, ethnicities, and genders receive corporal punishment at a higher rate than other students (Oxley & Holden, 2021). In many public schools within the United States, corporal punishment is a consequence for their behavior. Segura (2023) found in her study that African American students are more typically the ones who experience exclusionary discipline at a high frequency.

Discipline Strategies in Schools

Due to the increasing number of disproportional students, such as African Americans, Latinos, and special education students, zero-tolerance policies are often criticized (Morgan, 2021). As a result, many public schools began to adopt Restorative Justice. Morgan (2021) defines restorative justice as a strategy for promoting conflict resolution, allowing parties involved to discuss the possible harm that could have been caused. Restorative justice allows the victim and the offender to express their views. Restorative justice philosophy was incorporated into schools to begin to address the disproportional number of African American, Latino, and special education students getting suspended or expelled. Researchers believed that restorative justice could help prevent juvenile delinquency (Morgan, 2021). As a result, school discipline remains a topic of ongoing discussion regarding its impact on students.

Research has revealed various trends in students' behavior before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Nelson, 2020). As mentioned, school discipline reform was implemented in many states years ago, including the adoption of less harsh punishments for students. With the increase in problem behavior in schools, concerns have arisen

about whether the school discipline policies implemented are adequate to deter students from engaging in future delinquent behavior. Some school districts are reverting to suspension and detention due to an increase in students' problem behavior. School is a crucial environment for students to learn the consequences of their actions, enabling them to function effectively in society.

School discipline is important in helping children and adolescents prevent undesirable behaviors. Schools are tools that help students improve their behavior to live and thrive within society. Because of this, schools need to have order through rules and principles that prevent deviant behavior (Karil, 2025). When these rules and principles are broken, students experience some form of discipline, consequences, or punishment. Discipline is sometimes used synonymously with punishment, so the terms in this section will be used interchangeably to further explain school discipline strategies. Discipline and punishment in schools are intended to serve as a teaching strategy for students.

Anderson (2020) describes punishment as a logical consequence. Punishment should not be harsh. Harsh punishments often lead students to develop low self-esteem and resentment, which in turn can result in more disruptive behavior (Anderson, 2020). Punishment for adolescents is significant in shaping them into adults (Pendidikan, 2022). Punishment should be given so students can fully understand that their actions have consequences. This helps students to understand behavior and learn the outcomes of inappropriate behavior (Pendidikan, 2022). Although punishment is essential throughout life, especially for young students, many researchers have questioned whether it reduces or increases offenses. The primary goal of punishment is to deter problem behavior and

prevent students from engaging in it. When individuals have strong social bonds and perceive the punishment as fair, they tend to respond more positively to it (Kobie, 2020). Defiance theory further explains why individuals can react differently to punishment.

When imposing consequences for students' actions, the school administration considers several factors to determine the appropriate response. The school administration also has individual factors that can influence its decision-making. Some of these factors include how they approach problem behaviors and their personal bias about school discipline and consequences (Anderson, 2020). These factors can make school administrators' approach to student discipline inconsistent. Researcher John A. Williams conducted a study on middle school teachers' views on school administration's consistent enforcement of rules for student conduct (Williams, 2023). The study concluded that the teachers did not see their school leaders as consistent (Williams, 2023).

Implementing school rules is essential to helping students understand that their behavior has consequences. When school rules and consequences are implemented fairly and equally, students clearly understand the behavior expectations and are less likely to participate in delinquent behavior (Bullo et al., 2022). Bullo et al. (2022) concluded that students are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior if school consequences are poorly regulated. This includes students not receiving consequences for something they should have received. When students perceive school rules and discipline as fair and consistent, they are more likely to comply and change their behavior (Anderson & McKenzie, 2023).

Anderson (2020) explains that practical consequences should be directly related to the behavior in question. Practical consequences should be respectful of the student and reasonable for the student to carry out (Anderson, 2020). Additionally, students should be aware of the potential consequences of problem behavior. Schools should provide students with a code of conduct to review at the beginning of the school year, and this code of conduct should be followed when determining consequences for students' behavior. Not following the code of conduct creates room for students to perceive their behavior differently. Practical consequences can help stop misbehavior; choosing the appropriate consequence can enable students to learn from their behavior and deter them from engaging in it in the future (Anderson, 2020).

Maryland Public Schools Discipline Reform

The 2009 case of a ninth grader's year-long expulsion for fighting prompted the Maryland Board of Education to implement zero-tolerance policies (Maryland Public Schools, 2025). The State Board wanted to address the excessive use of zero-tolerance policies in Maryland public schools. During this time, the State Board discussed the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies in schools and whether they help keep schools safe. Maryland State Board also examined whether zero-tolerance policies are worthy for societal purposes. Within this review, the State Board acknowledged that zero-tolerance policies serve several societal needs, including retribution, incapacitation, deterrence, and rehabilitation (Maryland Public Schools, 2022).

The Maryland State Board of Education concluded that in the school setting, suspension for retributive purposes has no place at all. Also, the Board announced that

each Maryland public school district should adopt a rehabilitative approach to school discipline regulations that reflect rehabilitative discipline philosophy, are designed to keep students in school so that they may graduate college, prohibit disciplinary policies that trigger automatic discipline without discretion, and explain why long-term suspensions or expulsions are last resort options (Maryland Public Schools, 2022). In 2012, the Maryland State Board proposed regulations that would reduce the frequency of long-term out-of-school suspensions for non-violent offenses, aiming to keep students in school (Maryland Public Schools, 2022). This directly impacted minorities and the special education population of students, considering that they were the largest majority suspended or expelled from school.

During this reform period, the Maryland State Board of Education established a Workgroup to determine the duration of suspensions and expulsions. Maryland Public Schools (2025) states that the Workgroup believed local administrators should have considerable discretion in school discipline matters. However, disciplinary consequences should serve educational purposes rather than serve as punishment. Another Workgroup was created to update the Guidelines for a State Code of Conduct for Maryland Public Schools (Maryland Public Schools, 2022). In Maryland, public schools are governed by state laws regarding discipline rules, limits on suspension and expulsion, special programs, community arrests, and student resource officers (Maryland State Department of Education, 2024). The discipline rules for the state of Maryland include guidelines for principals and superintendents on suspensions and expulsions, including the duration of each. Additionally, the discipline rules in Maryland outline the preferred disciplinary

actions for disruptive students or damage to school property. These rules assist principals in deciding when to suspend or expel students and enable teachers to provide input on whether a student can return to the classroom.

Maryland follows the zero-tolerance policy in the majority of its public schools. This includes exclusionary and punitive school discipline practices. According to the Maryland State Department (2021), Maryland enacted laws requiring school districts to examine their data and address instances in which student groups were disproportionately represented in disciplinary data. This ruling enabled the State of Maryland to address the disproportionate suspension rates of specific student groups. Now, many school districts in Maryland are moving away from zero-tolerance policies due to the harm they can cause students.

In Maryland public schools, restorative justice practices are used alongside zero-tolerance policies. The Maryland Department of Education has concluded that various laws apply to zero-tolerance policies. First, Maryland law prohibits schools from expelling children in pre-K through second grade unless required by federal law or in the case of an imminent threat or serious harm to staff or students (Maryland Department of Education, 2025). As a result, Maryland required all public schools to adopt some form of restorative justice for disciplinary purposes. Data are now being collected to determine whether there are any trends between restorative justice and juvenile delinquency in Maryland.

Rules, Discipline, and Juvenile Delinquency

Within every community, there is a set of rules that must be followed. Rules are necessary to maintain order and ensure safety within the community. Rules are important for individuals within a community because they maintain the development of individual understanding (Cetinkaya & Kocyigit, 2020). When the rules are broken, individuals experience discipline. Cetinkaya and Kocyigit's (2020) research further explained the importance of discipline for students. School discipline reform has altered how schools discipline students. The concept of discipline is often perceived negatively. Discipline is often perceived as beating and violence (Cetinkaya & Kocyigit, 2020). Discipline does not have a negative connotation; it expresses the ability to comply with rules to maintain order (Cetinkaya & Kocyigit, 2020). Discipline refers to an individual's ability to adapt to their environment and have respect for themselves and others. In general, discipline is an individual's capacity to obey the community's written or unwritten rules. Discipline means more than just following rules; it can also help individuals respect each other's rights and freedoms (Cetinkaya & Kocyigit, 2020).

Discipline within education enables students to follow rules and regulations that foster the desired behavior. School discipline can directly impact student achievement, offending, and inequalities (Cetinkaya & Kocyigit, 2020). Discipline is important at every stage of the education process (Cetinkaya & Kocyigit, 2020). During each step of the education process, students should learn about their behavior and understand that there are consequences for every action, whether good or bad. When students begin to understand discipline in school, they can transform those ideas into the community

outside of school. This helps students to understand the rules and laws outside of school and what can happen if any of those rules or laws are broken. When students have this understanding, it is hoped that they will refrain from committing delinquent acts.

Consequences for Adolescents

Adolescence is the developmental stage spanning ages 12 to 18 (Cetinkaya & Kocyigit, 2020). During this developmental stage, many important physical and psychological changes occur (Cetinkaya & Kocyigit, 2020). Shilpa and Jafsi's (2023) research found that 1 in 5 children has experienced emotional and behavioral problems at some point. This includes children from all backgrounds. As a result, student misbehavior may increase during this stage, leading to disciplinary problems in school.

Consequences are essential aspects of understanding behavior. Practical consequences can be significant for younger children to understand that their actions have consequences, whether that is good or bad. The consequences presented to children must be done correctly, or they will have highly negative results (Poer, 2020). Consequences for children can affect students' views of their behavior expectations. Elementary-age students have a critical need to understand their behavior and its consequences. Elementary school is a foundational level for students to begin understanding the consequences of their behavior and how it can impact them as they age. Children should clearly understand what constitutes appropriate or acceptable behavior in school, and that participating in inappropriate behavior will result in a consequence. Consequences must be consistently implemented whenever the behavior appears (Poer, 2020). The

consequences should be both punitive and effective in teaching children how to behave correctly (Poer, 2020).

Consequences are significant in teaching student behavior (Poer, 2020). Schools are essential for students to understand how to function and live within society. A positive development is strongly promoted to children and families within the school. To aid students in this process, teachers need to ensure they have a safe classroom and school environment and effectively manage students' behavior. Fabes (2021) conducted a study on children's discipline. The findings of this study indicate that positive and non-punitive forms of discipline can promote academic and socio-emotional development, as well as behavioral regulation (Fabes, 2021). Logical consequences are essential practices for helping students with discipline.

The School Environment

The terms "school environment" and "school climate" are often used interchangeably when discussing school discipline. School discipline policies and practices play a crucial role in shaping the school's overall climate (Wriston, 2023). Schools have a criminogenic effect on the surrounding area of the youth (Timmer et al., 2023). Schools are a critical socializing agent that can produce either conforming or deviant behavior (Mowen et al., 2020). Schools are a primary setting for adolescent delinquency and also offer promising opportunities to prevent it (Shilpa & Jafsi, 2023). School climate is crucial for the socialization and social development of young adolescents (Shilpa & Jafsi, 2023). When students begin to learn the order of society, disciplinary problems may arise (Karil, 2025).

The importance of the school climate became more evident after the vicious attack at Columbine High School (Gnintedem, 2023). Following this incident, the Department of Education and the United States Secret Service launched a nationwide school safety initiative (Gnintedem, 2023). This led schools to complete the school climate survey. Each year, the United States Department of Education conducts a climate survey on school crime and safety in elementary, middle, and high schools.

The data collected is from school principals about nonviolent and violent crimes in their schools (Institute of Education Sciences, 2024). The surveys collect data on school security measures, staff, mental health services, parent involvement, community engagement, and staff training on school discipline and safety policies and practices (Institute of Education Sciences, 2024). The surveys are completed at the end of the school year. For the 2021-2022 school year, 857,500 violent incidents and 479,500 nonviolent incidents were reported by the United States public schools (Department of Education, 2024). Of the schools that completed the survey, 65% conducted threat assessments due to school threats or students threatening other students or adults (Department of Education, 2024). Precursors of delinquent behavior are mostly school-related (Shilpa & Jafski, 2023).

In Franjic's research, Franjic (2020) stated the importance of school officials and bonding in forming a child's behavior. Schools can play a crucial role in helping students develop a sense of connection to social norms of behavior, which in turn helps prevent them from engaging in criminal activity (Franjic, 2020). When the bonds to the schools become weak or are lost, students become more marginalized, and schools begin to have

higher levels of violence and crime (Franjic, 2020). Within the school environment, the school administration plays a vital role in setting consistent behavior expectations for students. School administration makes daily decisions about discipline and crime prevention (Franjic, 2020).

Schools provide students with clear rules and consistent reinforcement, which is essential in developing students' behavior. All students must receive equal and fair consequences (Anderson, 2020). School leaders often try to help alienated students by encouraging them to continue attending school. However, this can lead to an increase in students becoming at risk for juvenile detention or complete incarceration (Fonseca et al., 2023). Mohideen et al. (2020) conducted a study on adolescents in Malaysia and their students' educational experience. Mohideen et al. (2020) found that adolescents who had low-level educational experiences experienced juvenile delinquent behavior at a higher rate. Providing students with positive experiences and a supportive school climate can help them avoid involvement in crime and delinquency.

As mentioned, the school climate can play an essential role in influencing youth's behavior (Fonseca et al., 2023). In the school community, students understand norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and Organizational structure (Fonseca et al., 2023). Safety concerns play a crucial role in shaping the school climate and community. This means that the level of order and discipline in the school setting is essential for students to understand (Shilpa & Jafsi, 2023). Improving school discipline involves everyone in the school environment (Sa'diyah et al., 2023).

Role of School Leadership

Students spend a significant amount of time in school. Because of this, educational leadership in schools plays a vital role in shaping students' lives and values (Fagbonbge, 2020). Students who have knowledgeable and effective principals can impact children's learning outcomes (Cunningham et al., 2023). How school leadership reacts to delinquency in their school environment influences how students behave and react to similar situations (Fagbonbge, 2020). School administrators who are inconsistent and erratic in their management approach can increase disciplinary problems (Karil, 2025). In schools where discipline is lax, students often exhibit chaos, disorder, and a lack of safety (Karil, 2025).

Each school should have a team of individuals who assist in school discipline, starting with the teacher. From there, teachers are directed to follow the district's or the school's discipline practices and policies. All school districts in the United States have a code of conduct that the students, staff, and administrators must follow. The code of conduct outlines discipline policies for students, teachers, and administrators to review and adhere to. The majority of school discipline policies in the United States allow the principal or assistant principal to make the final decision on discipline, based on the code of conduct. Additionally, some schools employed the restorative justice approach. Too often, school administrations rely on restorative justice for specific instances of delinquent behavior, but it is not always a practical disciplinary approach in all situations (Morgan, 2021).

Teachers and school administrators play a crucial role in addressing perceived student misbehavior (Welsh, 2024). However, school administration plays a vital role in shaping and implementing school discipline policies. School leadership that clearly states disciplinary procedures and expectations signals to students that their misbehavior will not be tolerated (Fagbongbe, 2020). Prior studies have highlighted substantial variation in principals' disciplinary philosophies within the same school district and have shown that suspension rates are linked to principals' attitudes (Welsh, 2024). Decision-making regarding school discipline has many challenges on its own. School leaders must reflect on the decision to discipline and consider its impact on school safety, student education, equity, behavior modification, and policy adherence (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). Research on the principles of disciplinary decision-making has shown that decisions are based on factors such as upbringing, parental experiences, job requirements, parental expectations, and fear of reprisal (Welsh, 2024).

School leadership must be effective in administering consequences to students for their actions. School leadership should follow the code of conduct provided to help guide them to correctly and consistently provide students with consequences. Principals should use school discipline to develop students into model citizens and deter students from recidivism (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). This will also impact students' behavior by providing appropriate discipline. Often, the administration tries to be lenient when disciplining students because specific student populations are disciplined at higher rates. School administration will use restorative justice for second and third offenses of the same delinquent behavior (Morgan, 2021). As a result, students are not necessarily

learning the impact of their delinquent behavior. The administration should utilize restorative justice when appropriate; however, there are instances when suspension, detention, and expulsion are necessary. Farr et al. (2023) found in their study that many principals in public schools needed to follow the code of conduct appropriately and underreport suspension data.

Summary and Conclusions

Juvenile delinquency is an increasing issue in the world today. Many adolescents engage in delinquent behavior at school and often do not receive the appropriate consequences for their actions. Some adolescents face far more severe consequences, while others do not face consequences from school administrators. Many researchers have investigated school discipline policies and their effects on students and their behavior. Many studies have shown that school discipline has adverse effects on students. Small research has shown that when school discipline is implemented correctly and consistently, it can have a positive impact on students' behavior.

Often, classroom teachers are left to administer consequences to students. However, school leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring the school is a safe environment for everyone. The code of conduct provided to staff, students, and parents is essential to guide disciplined decision-making. Teachers and school administration must follow the code of conduct when deciding on students' behavior. School discipline is pivotal in deterring students from participating in delinquent behavior (Milasiunaite & Gostautaitė, 2023). School climate, the models the society creates for students, and the

quality of school guidance services are effective in promoting student discipline (Cetinkaya & Kocyigit, 2020).

School administrators play a crucial role in decision-making regarding discipline and student behavior. School administrators should make informed decisions about a student's behavior, particularly when the student is a repeat offender, and should use the code of conduct to guide their decisions. All consequences should be fair and consistent. The overall issue of fair and consistent student discipline can harm students, potentially leading them to engage in delinquent acts as they mature, which, in turn, can contribute to juvenile delinquency.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This chapter introduces the research methodology for this qualitative study, examining administrators' perceptions of juvenile delinquency through school discipline practices. A qualitative study was chosen as the research method for this investigation to answer the research question, "What is the perception of school administrators' participation in school discipline policies, and how can these decisions later affect students who engage in delinquent behavior?" Qualitative studies allow researchers to get a deeper understanding of the targeted population. This study aims to gain an understanding of school administrators' perspectives on juvenile delinquency and their role in its possible prevention. Qualitative studies can contribute to societal progress (Akyidiz & Ahmed, 2021). Research has shown that qualitative studies can help with research by providing more descriptive interpretations. This is why a qualitative study was selected for the research. A qualitative approach benefited the research by providing insight into school administrators' perceptions. This enabled a rich and clear understanding of school administrators' perceived role in addressing juvenile delinquency and delinquent behavior—drawing on their experiences with delinquent behavior in schools and their views on juvenile delinquency.

Qualitative research examines how various members of a society perceive a specific social issue. For this study, the social issue is juvenile delinquency, and the specific population is public school administrators. Public school administrators shared their lived experiences of juvenile delinquency through qualitative research. To gain

access to school administrators, this research included open-ended survey questions to elicit their lived experiences and perceptions of how to handle delinquent behavior.

Qualitative research helps researchers to explain the study question from the perspective of a specific group (Akyidiz & Ahmed, 2021). Qualitative research can help to gain an understanding of complex phenomena. This is another reason for choosing a qualitative research design. Juvenile delinquency is a very complex phenomenon due to the numerous risk factors involved. Research has often shown that school administrators can play a significant role in causing students to fall into the system for various reasons. This approach enabled a thorough understanding of school discipline decision-making and of school administrators' roles in addressing juvenile delinquency. In addition, the methodology will emphasize the importance of discipline in schools, ensuring that students do not grow older and engage in delinquent behavior due to inadequate consequences within the school environment. The research design and rationale are discussed next, along with the participants, procedures, analysis method, and ethical concerns.

Research Design and Rationale

The specific research design was narrative. Parks (2023) describes narrative research as a qualitative research design that examines people's experiences from their perspective through stories. This research design gathers information about individuals' experiences with a specific situation. Narrative research design was appropriate for this study because the research question sought to gain insight into school administrators' perceptions and experiences with school discipline and juvenile delinquency. This

approach was beneficial for aligning with the specific decision to collect data. The selected research design enabled me to gain insight into school administrators' individual experiences through open-ended questions and to analyze the data to create themes and categories.

Narrative research involves the researcher gaining insight into the participants' lived experiences. Research design is prepared based on the ideas and themes generated from the participants' stories (Adhikari, 2021). Different themes can emerge from participants' responses, providing insight into a specific phenomenon. The specific phenomenon being researched is juvenile delinquency. Through school administrators' responses to the juvenile delinquency question, I gained insight into their perspectives on juvenile delinquency in schools. Narrative research is not simply storytelling; it is a research design that can uncover different nuances by examining participants' responses (Adhikari, 2021). This chosen research design was beneficial for examining the research question and gaining insight into school administrators' perspectives.

Role of the Researcher

I have worked in education for 8 years and hold a Bachelor of Science in Movement Science, a Master of Science in Crime Scene Investigation, a Master of Arts in Elementary Education, and a Master of Arts in Sociology. I am a third-grade teacher in one of Maryland's public school districts. This can create bias due to personal experience within the county. To prevent any bias, school administrators were contacted throughout all of Maryland, not just the county where I work. Additionally, my work email was not used to recruit participants or complete the research. To address my bias on school

discipline policies, opinions on school and district policies were not included in the study. I also have experience with school administrators who did not follow the school discipline policies with fidelity. However, I ensured that these personal experiences did not bias the study.

Methodology

Qualitative surveys were used to collect data. Qualitative surveys prioritize qualitative research values and techniques (Braun et al., 2021). There are various methods for collecting qualitative data. Some of these methods include interviews, focus groups, and observation. Given the research design, I decided that qualitative surveys are the most efficient way to fully address the research questions by eliciting administrators' experiences and opinions. Qualitative surveys harness the potential of qualitative data to offer a nuanced, in-depth, and sometimes new understanding of a social issue (Braun et al., 2021).

Qualitative surveys should include open-ended questions crafted to address the specific topic of delinquency. Surveys were sent to public school administrators in Maryland, which included 10 open-ended questions to allow them to provide in-depth, descriptive information about their experiences with delinquent behavior and how they address it in their schools. Gathering information through surveys with open-ended questions provided insight into the disciplinary process in Maryland public schools for principals and vice principals. Additionally, this approach helped identify themes and commonalities in administrators' responses regarding their awareness of juvenile delinquency, perceptions of juvenile delinquency, delinquent behavior in schools, and

school discipline policies. Surveys paired with open-ended questions are the most valuable methods for collecting data to gain insight into administrators' perceptions.

Participant Selection Logic

Purposive sampling was used to select participants. Purposive sampling helps ensure sampling integrity, thereby increasing the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings (Friday & Leah, 2024). In selecting participants, I identified the audience that best fit the knowledge sought in the study. Because of this, all Maryland public school administrations were the targeted audience for this study. School administrators were further defined as principals and assistant principals. Additionally, school administrators must have been in their role for at least 3 years. Grissom et al. (2021) conducted a study and found that principals and school administrators are considered "effective" after 3 years in their roles.

There have been multiple research studies completed on juvenile delinquency and how school suspension and detention can lead to students going down the wrong path, which ultimately leads to juvenile delinquency. School administrators set the tone for the school environment. This is why school administrators were selected, enabling the analysis of qualitative data to understand how they perceive their roles and school discipline in relation to juvenile delinquency.

The Department of Maryland Education (2025) reported that there were over 1,400 public schools in Maryland. There is a total of 3,581 public school administrators in Maryland (Department of Maryland Education, 2025). Friday and Leah (2024) stated that sample size is important for achieving data saturation and reaching the research

goals. To achieve the research purpose, a sample size of at least twenty participants will be adequate. A sample size of ten to thirty participants is often adequate for qualitative research (Ahmed, 2024). The participants will be a mixture of assistant principals and principals at all levels (elementary, middle, and high school). If more than 20 participants are willing to participate, the researcher will accept up to 30 responses. The number of participants will enable the researcher to gather thematic data from the detailed perspectives of school administrators.

All participants will be anonymous in this study. Participants will not be required to disclose their identity at any point throughout the study. Participants will be contacted through email. No emails or names were disclosed during the presentation of the findings. A consent form will be provided prior to the study, briefly explaining the study's purpose and emphasizing the importance of providing detailed responses. Additionally, participants were informed that their identities would be kept anonymous throughout the study.

Instrumentation

A variety of tools and methods were utilized throughout the research. First, Canva was used to create the recruitment flyer. Canva, through Adobe, is a software used to create various digital and printable flyers and invitations for sharing with individuals and large crowds. The surveys were created through Google Forms. Google Forms allowed individuals to download a QR code to gain access to the survey. The QR code was attached to the flyer created through Canva.

Google Forms and Microsoft Forms are two platforms that have been frequently used in education today (Prasetya & Sofiani, 2024). Because of this, Google Forms proved almost effective for accessing administrators. Additionally, both platforms enable researchers to create open-ended questions, allowing participants to provide in-depth answers. Google Forms was utilized to create the qualitative survey. The written responses assisted in conducting the thematic analysis. Written responses allowed me to revisit the data as many times as needed to identify themes in participants' responses. Additionally, Google Forms has a feature that identifies the most frequently used words in participants' responses.

The survey consisted of 10 open-ended questions and served as the primary data collection method to address the research topic. The survey was self-administered, with questions presented in a standard order for all participants. Participants will submit their responses in their own words for data collection. Qualitative surveys can allow participants to share their experiences in rich, complex accounts. Using qualitative surveys will help gather the participants' language and terminology, providing insight into their experiences with delinquent behavior and their roles in it.

Procedures for Recruitment

Recruitment is a fundamental component of the research methodology (Negrin et al., 2021). Recruitment plays a crucial role in securing the study's participants. Additionally, recruitment can impact the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Negrin et al., 2021). This research solely focused on public school administrators in Maryland; these individuals were the only recipients of the survey. To ensure this, the school

administration's Facebook group was used to post the recruitment flyer. Additionally, as the researcher is in the education field, specific educational groups and conferences were utilized to recruit participants.

Initial recruitment for this study began with posting and sending information about the study, its potential impact on social change, and the participant criteria. A flyer with a QR code was posted or sent out to the many platforms listed above. Once scanned, the QR code took interested participants to the survey. Before participants began the survey, a brief paragraph was provided to describe the study, its purpose, and the importance of participants' responses. From there, participants could select "yes or no" to continue with the study. Once participants select 'yes,' they are taken directly to the survey questions. If the participant selects 'no', they are directed to a screen thanking them for their consideration in the study.

Participants had one week to complete and submit their survey. Data was tracked and recorded through Google Forms. Once participants complete the study, they are notified that their responses have been submitted and that they are no longer required to submit additional information. Once responses were reviewed, participants were notified that their participation in the study was no longer required. Additionally, participants were informed that their identities would remain confidential.

Data Analysis Plan

Once the surveys were completed, thematic, content, and narrative analyses were utilized to analyze the collected data. Thematic analysis employs coding to identify themes within participants' answers (Majumdar, 2022). Coding reliability is vital when

using thematic analysis. Coding involves researchers characterizing participants' responses by examining their most frequent ideas, concepts, and meanings. From coding, this is how thematic analysis can occur. The thematic analysis also presents data analysis by themes, incorporating concepts and meanings (Majumdar, 2022). The themes created are coherent with the collected data.

Content analysis is a qualitative data collection method used to identify the presence of specific words, themes, or concepts in qualitative data, to explain a phenomenon (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Content analysis further clarified the portion of the research question focused on juvenile delinquency. Content analysis is typically used with text-based data, such as written transcripts of verbal interactions or other written documents (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Content analysis was utilized to further summarize the written answers and transcripts from participant interviews and surveys. From there, thematic analysis was employed to examine the data and identify themes related to school discipline, juvenile delinquency, and school discipline policies.

Both content and thematic analyses aided the research in identifying common findings across participants' responses. Because the data being collected were written responses, content analysis helped identify common themes in the transcripts. From there, the thematic analysis, which involves coding, helps to identify common themes within the written responses. Google Forms has a unique feature that automatically selects common words and phrases found within written responses on both platforms. This feature was enabled to aid analysis. From there, Microsoft Excel was used further to examine the common themes in the written responses and group them into categories.

Also, Microsoft Excel was used to create the figures. Microsoft Word was used to help create tables that better organized the common themes and categories.

The last data analysis strategy to be utilized is narrative analysis. Narrative analysis was employed to examine the participants' responses in light of their perceptions. Since the research design employs a narrative approach, this analysis will focus on participants' overall experience in relation to specific topics. The goal of a narrative analysis is to transform individuals' personal narratives into data (Parks, 2023). This aligns with the research design and the research question being studied. The research question aims to gain the perspective of school administration on juvenile delinquent behavior in schools, how school discipline policies address this behavior, and their experience with students who are juvenile delinquents.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which research findings accurately reflect participants' experiences or viewpoints (Adler, 2022). This research focuses solely on juvenile delinquency in schools and the role of school administrators throughout the disciplinary process. Only school administrators participated in this study to ensure credibility. School administrators had the opportunity to share their experiences and viewpoints accurately through their personal experiences. Open-ended questions will help provide rich accounts of participants' experiences, which will be used in the findings.

Transferability

According to Adler (2022), transferability is defined as the ability to apply study findings to other contexts or populations. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants, thereby addressing transferability. Through purposive sampling, I narrowed the focus to public school administrators who currently or previously worked in Maryland. This selected group of participants enhances the study's trustworthiness by ensuring that the participants represent the relevant population to which the study is focused.

Dependability

Qualitative research often uses the terms "reliability" and "dependability" interchangeably (Adler, 2022). Dependability refers to the consistency of the research findings over time and across different researchers (Adler, 2022). To enhance reliability, I maintained a clear, detailed record of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This gives a clear understanding of the procedures used to complete the study. Additionally, when presenting the study's findings, I will ensure a transparent discussion of the research process.

Confirmability

Due to my role in the education field and my own bias on the research topic, public school administrators were the primary target population. I did not focus specifically on the United States; the research focused on public school administrators in Maryland. This enabled objectivity in the study and helped to collect a wide variety of data based on participants' school climate. The decision to conduct a qualitative survey

also enables personal bias. The data were collected directly from school administrators, who provided comprehensive explanations of their experiences with juvenile delinquency in schools and how it is addressed. The school administrators shared their personal experiences with the decisions they make when administering consequences to students for delinquent behavior and how they perceived these consequences to affect students later in life. To ensure my biases do not influence the research, I did not state my opinion on the research topic.

Ethical Procedures

In qualitative studies, ethical procedures prioritize the well-being of participants and data integrity (Kang & Hwang, 2021). Throughout this research, I adhered to all ethical procedures to ensure participants' comfort and safety. Prior to completing the qualitative survey, participants will be provided with a clear understanding of the study, its purpose, and the importance of the research. Participants could choose to participate in the study or decline. Informed consent was provided prior to accessing the survey questions. This ensured participants did not feel obligated or pressured to complete the study. In addition, participants were well informed about the study's purpose and their role.

Additionally, I disclosed to all participants that their school names will remain anonymous. As the researcher, I enabled the Google Form feature that allowed all participants to remain anonymous. I was unable to identify any distinguishing factors for any participants after the survey was completed. This provides participants with complete transparency regarding the research and how their answers will be utilized. This protects

the participants from any potential harm or discomfort. Once participants have sufficient background knowledge about the research, they can choose to continue or discontinue their participation in the study.

To ensure credibility, I avoided misrepresenting the data and conclusions when providing the data findings. Avoiding misrepresentations ensures the research is conducted with integrity (Kang & Hwang, 2021). Additionally, when presenting the research findings, I acknowledged any study limitations and refrained from overgeneralizing. Because this study focuses solely on Maryland public schools, the findings do not necessarily apply to public schools outside Maryland. Additionally, it should be noted that the findings do not apply to all public schools.

Lastly, all data collected is stored on the researcher's device. The researcher will ensure that the file and folders are encrypted so that I am the only one who has access to all the collected data. The device used was the researcher's personal device; no one else has access to it. To ensure that data is not lost, the collected data is stored on an external drive and kept in a secure location. Once the study is completed and approved, all data will be removed from the researcher's personal device and stored only on the external drive. Upon final approval of the study, the data collection will be disposed of within 5 years of the study's completion.

Summary

Overall, this qualitative study aimed to understand the lived experiences of school administrators and their perceptions of their role in addressing juvenile delinquency. The study addresses concerns about delinquent behavior in schools and how school

administrators address those concerns. The research will help understand delinquent behavior and how school administration can affect juvenile delinquency. This aligns with the research question because gaining school administrators' views on their day-to-day experiences with delinquent behavior can help assess how they perceive their impact on juvenile delinquency.

Qualitative surveys were used to collect data. Qualitative surveys were chosen as the method due to the rich responses and data they can yield. Once the surveys were complete, the data were analyzed through thematic and content analysis. Coding identified themes in the school administrators' responses. These methods were chosen to gather rich, authentic data from school administrators and to gain a deeper understanding of their thought processes regarding delinquency in schools and its impact on juvenile delinquency. This approach ensured that school administrators at all levels (elementary, middle, and high schools) are represented, enabling access to their lived experiences. This also ensures trustworthiness in the study, ensuring that all levels are represented.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, the study's findings will be reviewed. As mentioned in the previous chapters, this study used qualitative methods to explore school administrators' lived experiences with school discipline policies and their impact on delinquent behavior. The research question was "How do school administrators perceive and navigate the challenge of implementing school discipline policies in addressing juvenile delinquency, and what strategies do they employ to foster a positive and safe school environment?" The school district's code of conduct is one of the tools commonly referenced in the survey questions, providing administrators with a standard guide to base their responses on.

To further address the research question, surveys were used as the primary data collection method. Surveys were sent via email. The survey consisted of 10 open-ended questions. The survey questions focused on school discipline policies. In each question, school administrators were able to explain their lived experience with implementing school discipline in their school, share their views on the discipline policies used in the county and district, and discuss any trends in delinquent behavior that they commonly observe in their schools. This chapter will further elaborate on the survey's findings and identify any recurring themes. The following sections will discuss how the data were collected, the analysis of the data, evidence of trustworthiness, and the survey results.

Setting

All participants in this study previously or currently work at a public school in Maryland. The participants share a commonality of being in the public setting. However, the administrators were at different levels of education (elementary, middle, and high school). Some public schools in Maryland may have experienced budget cuts. As a result, some public schools lost funding for services for students with special needs.

Demographics

The participants recruited for this study were all school administrators. This means that the participants were either principals or assistant principals. In addition, all participants served as administrators in a public school for at least 3 years. All school administrators recruited were in Maryland and worked in Maryland public schools. According to the Maryland State Department of Education (2025), there are 1,421 public schools in the state. There is a total of 3,581 public school administrators in Maryland (Maryland Department of Education, 2025). There are 24 school systems in Maryland (Maryland Department of Education, 2025).

Surveys were emailed to 350 public school administrators from school districts across Maryland. A flyer was also posted in the school administrators' Facebook groups for further recruitment. The school administrators contacted for recruitment were from all levels, including elementary, middle, and high schools. However, all administrators were public school administrators only.

Data Collection

A qualitative survey was used to collect data due to the nature of the research question. The aim was to understand school administrators' lived experiences with delinquent behavior and school discipline. Qualitative surveys consist of open-ended questions, allowing participants to fully discuss and elaborate on their experiences with the research content. The survey was created in Google Forms and consisted of 10 open-ended questions.

The IRB approved the survey format and questions prior to data collection. Also, the survey participants were anonymous. No personal information was collected from participants to participate in the study. Prior to answering the survey questions, participants were required to review the study's purpose, their requirements, and provide their consent to participate in the survey. All this information was provided in the Google Forms before the survey questions. If participants selected that they were not interested in participating, they were not provided the survey questions. Surveys were sent via email, and a flyer with the approved IRB recruitment template was used on social media. The study went on for a total of two weeks. I sent surveys individually to 350 school administrators in Maryland during the study period. A total of 16 participants responded to the survey.

Data Analysis

Thematic, content, and narrative data analysis were employed to examine the survey responses further. The tools used for data analysis were Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. The responses were converted into a Microsoft Excel sheet. Each question's responses were coded, and from there, categories and themes were developed. Common themes and categories were identified from the participants' responses.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To ensure reliability, validity, and credibility, many strategies are used. First, all surveys were anonymous. I did not request any form of identification from the survey participants. Additionally, the findings will be shared with the participants to ensure accuracy and resonance. To meet the study's requirements, surveys were sent only to public school administrators in Maryland. I instructed the participants not to share the survey with anyone outside the state of Maryland or with any administrators at a private school. This helped maintain consistency in participant recruitment.

No information about me was shared with the participants. This was important so participants would not form preconceived opinions about the researcher's role or the study's impact. Throughout the week the surveys were sent, I kept track of the number of surveys sent via email. Keeping a detailed log helped me state numerical data accurately. Lastly, the open-ended questions allowed participants to share detailed answers based on their lived experiences.

Results

The survey consisted of 10 open-ended questions. The questions were directly related to the research question, which focuses on school administrators' lived experience of school discipline in public schools and how discipline is addressed. This section will discuss the results of the responses, based on the common themes and categories developed and analyzed.

School Discipline Policies

Participants were asked about their familiarity with their school districts' discipline policies and their opinions on their strengths and weaknesses. All participants explained that they were very familiar with, or at least familiar with, their district's school policies. Four of the participants indicated that they assist the district with reviewing and developing policies. Table 1 presents the common categories developed based on the strengths of the school discipline policies in each participant's school district. Table 2 presents the common categories developed from the weaknesses participants explained in their district's school discipline policies.

One survey question asked participants to share their perspectives on school discipline policies and to suggest ways to improve them. The findings from this question are presented in Table 3 following thematic analysis. Table 3 presents the common themes that emerged from participants' responses to these questions, along with the specifics of their recommendations for each theme. In Table 3, the thematic analysis is presented, along with a sample recommendation derived from the survey participants'

responses. Figure 1 further displays school administrators' perspectives on the ultimate goal of school discipline policies.

Table 1

Strengths of School Discipline Policies

| Category | Strengths |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Inclusivity and Adaptability | The current policy is inclusive and adaptive, which means it can cater to a diverse range of students and situations. |
| Framework and Structure | There is a guide/framework to reference, providing a starting point for administrators. The policies provide structures to address disciplinary behaviors. Clear definitions and progressive discipline with tiered offenses and escalating responses. Legal and policy alignment with district/state codes, due-process steps, and documentation requirements. Clear expectations and consequences. Discipline tiers are clearly communicated and progressive. |
| Supportive Community | The school addresses discipline through a lens that supports the school community. Focus on mental health and progressive discipline. |
| Rights and Responsibilities | Clearly identified rights and responsibilities for all stakeholders, including students, parents, and staff. |
| Safety and Range of Consequences | Ensures safety and offers a range of consequences for misbehavior. |

Table 2

Weaknesses of School Discipline Policies

| Category | Weakness |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Consideration for Special Needs | The policy does not have enough consideration for students with special needs. |
| Inconsistency | Not consistent across the county as it is based on the discretion of administrators. Current discipline policies are inconsistent across schools. Variance in classroom vs. office-managed behaviors, leading to over-referral for classroom-resolvable issues. Inconsistent implementation across classrooms. |
| Subjectivity | Can be subjective on many levels. |
| Severity of Actions | Students are provided lesser infractions for some very severe actions. |
| Support for All Students | Policies do not support all students and are often unclear when it comes to Tier I, 2, and 3 strategies. |

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| | Limited emphasis on restorative and preventive supports that address the root causes of behavior. |
| Teacher-Student Relationships | Teachers are becoming more intolerant of student behaviors and are leaning on admin more to remove students from class instead of building relationships with the student and families. |
| Recidivism and Repeat Offenders | Recidivism and repeat offenders remain a challenge. |
| Outdated Approaches | Current disciplinary policies tend to treat contemporary disciplinary problems with outdated solutions. |

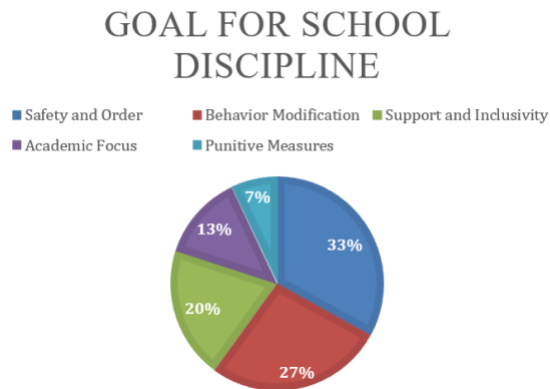
Table 3*Recommendations to Enhance School Discipline Policies*

| Theme | Recommendations |
|--|--|
| Special Needs Consideration | - Make allowances for Special Needs students 1. |
| Parental Accountability | - Continue to hold students accountable and their parents/guardians 1. - Holding parents accountable 1. |
| Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) | - Focus on SEL supports as a school community 1. |
| Policy Design and Input | - Principals need input with creating and designing policies to make sure they are appropriate and effective 1. |
| Consistent Consequences | - There needs to be consistent consequences inside and outside the school to curb certain behaviors 1. |
| Progressive Discipline | - Have a progressive discipline policy in place that focuses on teaching and growth of the students instead of strictly punishing 1. |
| Referral Calibration | - Define classroom-managed vs office-managed with examples and required pre-steps 1. - Require teachers to select the attempted strategies on the referral form 1. - Common Consequence Matrix (student-facing) with instructional responses, ISS with skill practice, and OSS for safety/threats 1. |
| Resource Allocation | - More resources are needed to provide specific supports for students and their families 1. |
| Fairness and Consistency Policy Implementation | - Be fair, be consistent, and understand the needs of the community 1. - Working with school personnel to interpret and implement the policies can prevent delinquency 1. |
| Data Collection and Alternatives | - Consistent discipline policy, data collection for behavior categories, and suspension alternatives 1. |
| Community Partnerships | - Partnering with outside organizations that provide incentive-based resources 1. |
| Alternative Placements | - More alternative placements for students that need smaller settings 1. |
| Restorative Practices | - Restorative circles, trauma-informed training for staff and admin, mentorship programs with impact measures 1. - Adopt Restorative Practices to help students take responsibility, repair harm, and rebuild relationships 1. |
| Preventive Supports | - Strengthen SEL, conflict resolution, and positive behavior interventions 1. |
| Equity and Consistency | - Apply discipline policies fairly, ensuring cultural responsiveness and eliminating disproportionate impact 1. |
| Staff Training | - Provide ongoing professional development in classroom management, trauma-informed practices, and de-escalation strategies 1. |
| Family and Community Engagement | - Engage parents, guardians, and community organizations in discipline and prevention efforts 1. |
| Data-Driven Decision-Making | - Regularly review discipline data to identify trends, root causes, and disproportionalities 1. |

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Mental Health Services | - Increase availability of counselors, psychologists, and social workers to address underlying issues 1. |
|------------------------|--|

Figure 1

Goal of School Discipline Policies



Restorative Justice

Maryland Public School districts have adopted restorative justice as an essential approach to school discipline. As a result, the perspective of school administrators on restorative justice was examined. School administrators shared their perspective on restorative justice practices in relation to school discipline. 53% of participants had mixed views on restorative justice (both positives and negatives), 50% had an opposing view, and 6% had an optimistic view (Figure 2).

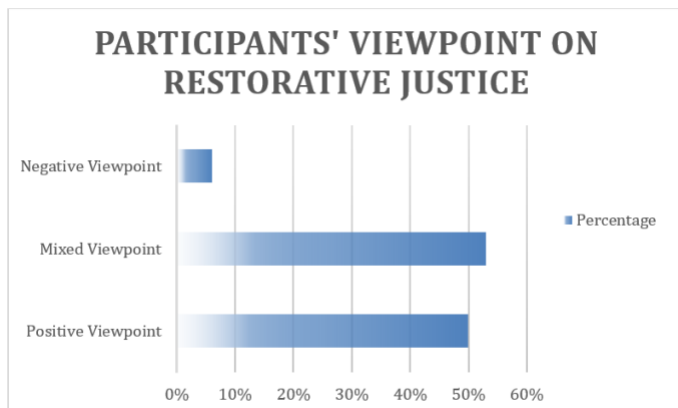
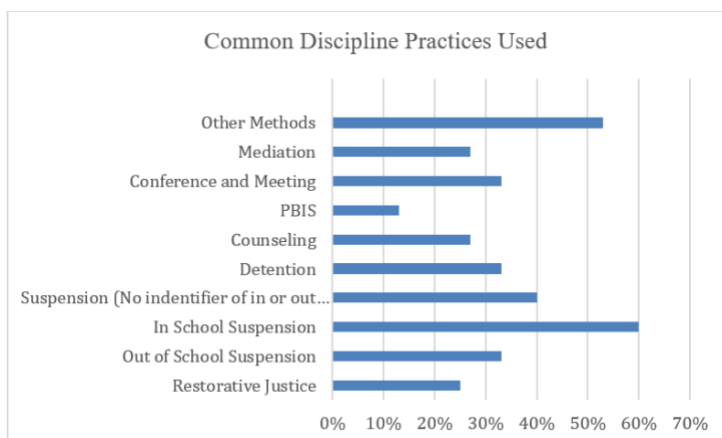
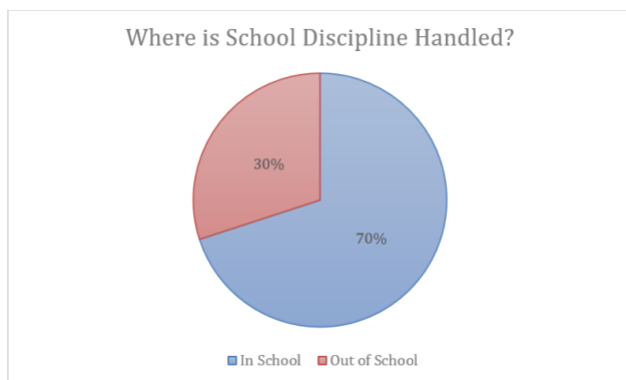
Figure 2*Viewpoint of Restorative Justice***School Discipline Practices**

Figure 1 illustrates the common forms of school discipline practices that school administrators employ across all three levels. Based on the thematic analysis, the majority reported administering some form of in-school discipline or suspension. One participant further explained that their decision on school discipline is completed in steps. While some behaviors are extreme and may warrant immediate consequences, others are not as severe and can be corrected with a warning or a less severe consequence. This data indicates that 70% of the discipline practices used in school are conducted in school, and 30% result in a consequence that involves being out of school. 81% of the participants indicated that they may use one or more of the discipline practices in Figure 1. 13% of the participants indicated they use some other method for discipline, such as zones of regulation, reteaching school expectations, expulsion, individualized behavior plans, reflection sheets, classroom-based intervention, and community support.

Figure 3*Common School Discipline Practices***Figure 4***In or Out of School Discipline***School Discipline and Juvenile Delinquency**

Participants were asked to share their experiences with any trends they have noticed regarding delinquent behavior occurring in schools. Thematic analysis was employed to identify common themes in the participants' responses regarding trends in delinquent behavior. All participants reported at least one behavioral trend they had

observed over the past few years (Table 4). Participants further explained their perspective on how school discipline policies can contribute to or prevent delinquent behavior in schools (Table 5). Last, participants stated their opinion on the school's role in juvenile delinquency. Categories and key findings were developed from participants' responses (Table 6). The participants identified the behaviors and challenges they see at their school and how these behaviors may lead to juvenile delinquency (Table 7). Lastly, school administrators shared their views on the role of the school setting in relation to juvenile delinquency (Table 8).

Table 4

Trends in Delinquent Behavior

| Theme | Trend |
|---|--|
| Trauma and Poverty | Students' trauma as a cry for help due to lack of parenting or follow-up from parents. Poverty and trauma in Title I Middle Schools contributing to juvenile delinquency. |
| Absenteeism and Truancy | Chronic absenteeism. Student truancy. |
| Parental Involvement and Support | Lack of parental involvement. Contradictory mindset of parents regarding support for their children. |
| Special Education and Support Services | Special education students with negative behaviors and roadblocks from Central Office. Lack of rapid services to address student issues, such as special education and social services. |
| Inconsistent Practices and Staff Training | Inconsistent adult practices and different rules by wing or period. Ensuring consistent staff training and cultivating a shared mindset on discipline. |
| Behavioral Issues and Conflicts | Students' struggles with social-emotional regulation and peer conflict. Fighting and bullying. |
| Miscellaneous | Interventions not meeting the needs of students. |

Table 5*School Discipline Policies and Juvenile Delinquency*

| Category | Key Findings |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Preventive Measures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Antibias and inclusive policies can prevent juvenile delinquency. - Accountability for parents and students can lead to positive behavioral changes. - Supportive approaches focusing on applying supports rather than just consequences are essential. - Collaborative conversations are important. - Early intervention to address the root of the problem and providing mental health services to families. |
| Mixed Views | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specific rules can help teach discipline and reduce juvenile delinquency, but effectiveness can vary. - Schools need to teach children life lessons to prevent harsh lessons from the world. |
| Implementation and Effectiveness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delinquency can result from how policies are implemented. - School discipline policies are the first line of defense, with partnerships being vital. - Restorative practices are included in many school codes of conduct, but lack of staff training can render them ineffective. |
| Criticisms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School discipline policies are primarily punitive, and restorative measures are often viewed as inauthentic. - Lack of innovation, with many school discipline policies mimicking those of jails. |
| Balanced Approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Balanced policies that are fair, consistent, and supportive can prevent juvenile delinquency. - Emphasis on restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and positive behavioral interventions. - Balanced policies with preventive supports, family engagement, and access to counseling can serve as protective factors. |

Table 6*School Challenges and Potential Juvenile Delinquency*

| Theme | Challenges |
|---|--|
| Trauma and Poverty | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students' trauma as a cry for help due to lack of parenting or follow-up from parents. - Poverty and trauma in Title I Middle Schools contributing to juvenile delinquency. |
| Absenteeism and Truancy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chronic absenteeism. - Student truancy. |
| Parental Involvement and Support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of parental involvement. - Contradictory mindset of parents regarding support for their children. |
| Special Education and Support Services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Special education students with negative behaviors and roadblocks from Central Office. - Lack of rapid services to address student issues, such as special education and social services. |
| Inconsistent Practices and Staff Training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inconsistent adult practices and different rules by wing or period. - Ensuring consistent staff training and cultivating a shared mindset on discipline. |
| Behavioral Issues and Conflicts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students' struggles with social-emotional regulation and peer conflict. |
| Miscellaneous | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fighting and bullying. - Interventions not meeting the needs of students. - Lack of male mentorship and consistency in teacher tenure. |

Table 7*Role of School in Juvenile Delinquency*

| Category | Response |
|--|--|
| Training and Modeling Expectations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It depends on how you define juvenile delinquency. We are to train and model expectations for students. |
| Accountability and Consequences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are the guide and have to carry out the actual consequences and hold students accountable, as they often do not get this at home. |
| Support and Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "To support the child and the school community." 3 • "The school helps with having behavior or restorative supports to guide students how to be on the right track." 4 • "Schools take a holistic approach to address juvenile delinquency by assembling a team of professionals around a student to make every attempt to steer a student in the right direction before delinquency occurs." 5 • "The school's role is to provide preventative alternatives for students that pose a higher risk with maladaptive behaviors and infractions. Providing multiple interventions at different levels and wraparound services that can quickly identify areas of concern is critical. Schools that have an ideology of partnering with not only families, but community resources have the best results in addressing challenges and concerns." 6 |
| Preventative Measures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The school plays a primary role in addressing juvenile delinquency. School teaches students about restorative justice and gives them the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. It provides them with a safe environment to make mistakes and as long as schools don't have a zero-tolerance policy for all actions, students are given opportunities for success." 7 • "The schools can't solve every root cause of juvenile delinquency, but we're the earliest, most consistent system that can prevent it, interrupt it, and redirect it—without criminalizing kids." 8 • "A big role we have to understand where behaviors are coming from and try to address them early in their education. The more successful a student is in school the less likely they are to become a juvenile delinquent." 9 • "The school should be a preventative measure in addressing delinquency." 10 |
| Educational and Supportive Environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The school plays a critical role in addressing juvenile delinquency by providing a high-quality education, customizing instruction to ensure students reach grade level, and creating a safe, supportive environment that keeps them engaged. Schools also reduce risks by fostering positive relationships, teaching social-emotional skills, and connecting families to resources that address the root causes of misbehavior." 11 |
| Limited Role | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "None." 12 • "Not much at all. We teach morals and values but can't control all that happens in the community." 13 |
| Partial Role | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Partial 40%." 14 • "When students are not engaged in school, they look for other things. One big issue is students' truancy." |

Summary

The data collected helped to address the research question, “How do school administrators perceive and navigate the challenge of implementing school discipline policies in addressing juvenile delinquency, and what strategies do they employ to foster a positive and safe school environment? Based on participants’ responses, the findings indicate mixed views on administrators' perspectives and school discipline. In addition, there were some mixed views about how administrators felt on their role in juvenile delinquency. Chapter five will discuss the research question in more detail and present a conclusion based on the collected and analyzed data.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The social issue that prompted me to search the literature is the increase in public school students engaging in delinquent behavior in schools and not receiving appropriate consequences for their actions. This increase in delinquent behavior, and mild to no consequences for delinquent behavior, can lead to juvenile delinquency and then adult incarceration. The school environment is often the first environment that students experience without their parents. While students are at school, school staff and administrators play a crucial role in ensuring that students meet and adapt to the expectations of the real world. As a result, school discipline influences and deters delinquent behavior. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand school administrators lived experiences with school discipline policies and their impact on delinquent behavior. School discipline policies were evaluated for public schools and how they are used when students are required to receive consequences for their actions.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of the completed study have many mixed views and responses about school discipline and juvenile delinquency. Additionally, some administrators explained that the role of school administrations is either partial or nonexistent in addressing juvenile delinquency. Many school administrators expressed familiarity with restorative justice and its implementation in schools, acknowledging that it can be a practical approach to addressing issues. However, all the participants listed many different weaknesses with using restorative justice as a consequence. One common weakness noted was inconsistency in applying restorative justice across school districts and

classrooms. When restorative justice is not implemented accurately across all schools and districts, it can affect students' behavior.

Another notable finding in the study was the participants' responses to their issues with the school discipline policies within their district. Another common theme that emerged from the participants' responses was inconsistent school discipline. Three participants mentioned the inconsistencies of school discipline across the counties. All the school administrators in the study explained that some school discipline policies are outdated for the behaviors they encounter daily. Participant 12 stated that "Current disciplinary policies tend to treat contemporary disciplinary problems with 20th Century as opposed to 21st century solutions, in that, this is a different generation of school-based offenders."

Additionally, school administrators discussed their perceived roles in addressing school discipline and juvenile delinquency. Two common themes analyzed were support and community, as well as preventive matters. Participants 7 mentioned that school discipline plays a primary role in addressing juvenile delinquency because school discipline policies are the earliest system for preventing, interrupting, and redirecting delinquent behavior. In Chapter 2, the importance of the school environment as a possible risk factor for juvenile delinquency was discussed. According to the participants' responses, a supportive school environment plays a crucial role in reducing delinquent behavior. As mentioned in Chapter 2, school staff and administrators have a significant role in creating a positive school environment (Wriston, 2023). As a result, school administrators were asked about their perceived role in addressing juvenile delinquency.

The key findings of this question showed that while some participants perceived their role as school administrators did not play a significant role in juvenile delinquency, most participants explained that their role as school administrators is important in helping students understand the consequences and recognize delinquent behavior.

Participants also shared recommendations from school administrators on improving school discipline policies to better student behavior and better prevent juvenile delinquency. Participants 6, 10, and 12 noted that consistent implementation of school discipline policies curbs certain behaviors. Participant 7 explained that school discipline policies need to be progressive to address recent trends in school delinquency. From the thematic analysis, it is evident that a variety of perspectives on school discipline improvements exist. However, consistency is mentioned in identifying a theme in addressing delinquent behaviors in Maryland and public schools.

Lawrence Sherman's defiance theory explains how punishment can deter criminal sanctions (Pesta, 2022). The findings of this study support the notion that school administrators agree that school discipline can deter criminal sanctions when it is consistent and fair. Akers's social learning theory explains how the environment can influence behavior. The findings of this study demonstrate that the school environment can both deter and lead to delinquent behaviors. The participants explained that school administrators set the tone for a positive school environment, as the goal of implementing appropriate school discipline is to promote school safety and order. The findings support the research question by showing that school administrators agree that consistently and fairly applied school discipline policies can deter delinquent behavior. However, the

current climate of public schools has demonstrated delinquent behavior, and effective school discipline is crucial for deterring students from consistently engaging in such behavior and helping them function successfully in the real world.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations that affected the generalizability of the findings. First, the sample size was relatively small. Only 17 participants responded to the survey. Because of this, participants' perspectives may not reflect the broader population of school administrators across Maryland or in other states. Next, the surveys were limited to school administrators only in Maryland with 3 years of experience, which narrows the applicability of the results. Finally, this study was qualitative, with the goal of gaining depth in administrators' understanding rather than broad generalizations, so the findings should be interpreted within that context.

Regarding trustworthiness, there were a few limitations to acknowledge. First, the study relied on self-reported data. The participants may have provided socially desirable or personal belief-driven answers rather than their full experiences. Second, because I served as the primary instrument of analysis, my own interpretation and biases may have influenced how the data were coded and themes were constructed despite my efforts to remain objective. Next, the small, localized sample limits the transferability of the findings to other contexts, such as different districts, states, or school environments that may address discipline issues in very different ways. Finally, because the study is context-specific, other researchers conducting the same study may develop different interpretations of the findings, which affects dependability. Overall, while these

limitations do not diminish the value of insight gained, they do help frame the scope of what can be concluded from his study. Transparency about these limitations strengthens the research's credibility and helps guide future studies.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, further research can be conducted at the different school levels (elementary, middle, and high). Different research methods can be conducted with school administrators at each level to identify any common findings across levels. In addition, multiple states could be included in future research rather than focusing solely on Maryland. This can increase generalizability and show the differences by school locations and school type.

Another recommendation for future research would be to examine the perspectives of other school staff members, such as teachers, counselors, students, and family members. In addition, a long-term study could examine how disciplinary practices influence students' behavior over time. A long-term study would help establish causal relationships and not just perceptions. Last, further research can be conducted to explore the principle of restorative justice in greater detail and its application in public schools at all levels.

Implications

The findings of this research can promote social change by helping stakeholders within school systems examine their discipline policies to decrease juvenile delinquency. Additionally, the findings can help stakeholders and school administrators make informed recommendations when reviewing school discipline policies for the counties

and the state of Maryland. This can influence social change by reviewing the past and current school discipline policies and how they can be more adaptive to the current world. Stakeholders, school administrators, and school staff can utilize the findings of this research to enhance the school environment by implementing more effective school discipline policies that can help prevent juvenile delinquency.

Conclusion

The findings of this research were crucial in gaining insight into school administrators' perceptions of their roles in school discipline and juvenile delinquency. The school administrators in this study also explained their perspective on how school discipline policies can better address juvenile delinquency. The findings indicate that the school environment plays a crucial role in modeling appropriate behavior. According to the findings, school discipline policies often serve as students' first experience of the consequences of their actions. When school discipline policies are inconsistently implemented across school districts, it creates opportunities for students to engage in delinquent behavior. As mentioned, all school administrators who participated explained that they were familiar with the school's code of conduct (see Appendix). Additionally, some of the school administrators who responded stated that they helped create the school discipline policies for the county in which they work.

Juvenile delinquency is a social issue that is researched daily. The risk factors of juvenile delinquency are commonly researched to understand the possible onset of juvenile delinquency. With school being a risk factor for juvenile delinquency, it is appropriate to understand the school environment effectively, the school administrators'

perspective on school discipline policies, and the school administrators' perspective on juvenile delinquency. Examining the whole school as a risk factor provides insight into what school administrators observe in their schools regarding delinquent behavior and how it is addressed. The importance of consequences in schools is to deter students from participating in delinquent behavior and to encourage them to be positive citizens in the real world. The findings of this study offer insight into how school administrators evaluate school discipline policies in relation to juvenile delinquency and their role in addressing this issue. School discipline policies, school administrators, and juvenile delinquency were examined as factors that influence or deter it. The findings show that school administrators have a significant impact on their students' lives, both academically and behaviorally.

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Appendix: Participants' Responses to Survey Question 10

How familiar are you with your school's current discipline policies?

16 responses

