

REVIEWER REJOINDER PART I

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The authors of “Out of School Suspensions” assert that the prior research is not as “robust” as we claim. We disagree. The authors fail to engage the strong body of research that suggests a causal and negative long-term impact of suspensions on grade retention, dropping out, and juvenile justice involvement. Similarly, they do not fully address the research on chronic absenteeism which shows that missed instruction has a harmful impact on test scores. Instead, they claim that their analysis is better because they controlled for more variables. However, our main concern was that they ignored research on effects other than test scores, as well as the impact of lost instruction on test scores from the same year.

They defend their singular focus on the long-term impact on test-scores a year or more after the suspension on the grounds that this lagged impact is more important than the short-term impact. This begs several questions: why didn’t they also look at long-term impacts on grade retention, dropping out, and juvenile justice involvement?

The study would have been of some value if they looked at *both* the immediate and long-term impacts. By choosing to *only* analyze the lagged impact, the authors ignored the likelihood that suspension caused some in their sample to dropout before getting tested in year two. These dropouts are a vital yet missing part of the tested cohort. Limiting their analysis only to test-scores of “survivors” raises serious validity questions. Likewise, why not control for the impact of grade retention if looking at test scores in year two? This oversight seems especially odd given that some of the authors wrote another paper using the same data set suggesting that suspensions predict an increase in grade retention.

Perhaps the answer is found in this quote from an earlier posted version of this paper that is not found in the currently available online version:

“While these impacts are null or small, it is important to reiterate what these results represent: the effect of OSS days on test scores in the following year. While this is important for arguing that the shocks to a student’s life affecting receipt of OSS are less likely to affect the outcome measure, it is also a relatively stringent test, and we may expect that the true impact on test scores in the same year of OSS is different, and perhaps even negative.”[Emphasis added]

While controlling for a temporary but non-specified “exogenous shock” is arguably justified, the authors offer no rationale for ignoring the most obvious impact – the effect of lost instruction time on test scores in the same year that the suspension occurred.

Importantly, the claimed temporary “shocks” that are controlled remain unnamed and unjustified. Surely neither divorce nor exposure to domestic violence would be temporary in

nature. Moreover, the authors acknowledge (p.10) that the method they employ, “is only valid under the assumption that these time varying shocks are temporary and not correlated across time periods.”

In their rebuttal, the researchers dismiss the same year test-score impact as strictly short-term, despite the clear connections to grade repeating and dropping out. No explanation is given as to why neither grade retention nor suspension in the second year was considered.

Although we disagree on the strength and relevance of their evidence, we agree that discipline reform is important and the need for it is supported by evidence. While we criticize them for asking the wrong question, we also critique them for failing to answer the most obvious questions. Their rebuttal failed to fill in these blanks. We encourage the authors to use their data-base to analyze the impact of out of school suspensions on test scores from the same year, and on drop-outs. The lagged timeline and the failure to include important other measures tend to wash-out meaningful effects. A broader and more inclusive view would more likely advance our knowledge.