

Article

Suspended Futures: School Discipline, Depressive Symptoms, and College/University Degree Attainment

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Abstract

School discipline disproportionately affects Black students and is associated with diminished academic outcomes. However, the mechanisms through which exclusionary discipline constrains college/university degree attainment—and the role of mental health in this pathway—remain underexplored with longitudinal data from a large urban birth cohort. This study examines whether depressive symptoms mediate the relationship between high school discipline and college/university degree attainment, and whether this mediation pathway varies by race and sex. Using data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study ($N = 1417$), I employed generalized structural equation modeling (GSEM) to test a serial mediation model: school discipline (Year 15) $\rightarrow$ depressive symptoms (Year 15) $\rightarrow$ college-going behaviors (Year 15) $\rightarrow$ college/university degree attainment (Year 22). Bootstrap confidence intervals (1000 replications) tested indirect effects. Moderation analyses examined whether the mediation pathway differed by race, sex, and depressive symptoms' severity. School discipline significantly predicted higher depressive symptoms ($b = 0.46, p = 0.001$), which in turn predicted fewer college-going behaviors ($b = -0.02, p = 0.001$) and lower odds of college/university degree attainment ($OR = 0.89, p = 0.001$). The total indirect effect through depressive symptoms was significant ($b = -0.06, 95\% BC CI [-0.134, -0.017]$). Sex, but not race ($F = 0.24, p = 0.868$), moderated the discipline–depressive pathway: discipline increased depressive symptoms more strongly for females ($b = 0.78, p = 0.001$) than males ($b = 0.21, p = 0.251$). Depressive symptoms amplified discipline's effect on college/university degree attainment (interaction $OR = 0.39, p = 0.037$). Depressive symptoms partially mediate school discipline's negative effect on college attainment, with the strongest effects among females. Higher education institutions must prepare to support students whose K-12 experiences were marked by exclusionary discipline.



Academic Editor: Sean
Darling-Hammond

Received: 11 February 2026

Revised: 17 April 2026

Accepted: 7 May 2026

Published: 24 June 2026

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Keywords: school discipline; depressive symptoms; college going behaviors; college/university degree attainment; mediation; higher education access

1. Introduction

The pathway from high school to college/university degree completion is neither linear nor equitable. While national discourse often frames college access as a matter of individual aspiration and preparation, a growing body of scholarship demonstrates that institutional practices—particularly school discipline—systematically constrain college pathways for students of color (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011). Black students are suspended at rates nearly three times higher than their White peers, even when controlling for behavior

(Losen & Gillespie, 2012; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). These disparities are not merely K-12 concerns; they have downstream consequences for college access, persistence, and college/university degree completion that higher education institutions must understand and address.

This study employs the concept of “suspended futures” to capture how exclusionary discipline in K-12 settings suspends not only students’ immediate educational participation but also their long-term postsecondary trajectories. The metaphor is intentional: when students are suspended from school, their educational futures are simultaneously placed in suspension—held in abeyance, delayed, and potentially foreclosed. Welsh (2025) similarly employs the suspended futures framework to examine how inequitable discipline policies shape the educational trajectories of youth of color, with particular attention to educator-focused reform; the current study extends this conversation by empirically tracing the psychological mechanisms through which suspension constrains college/university degree attainment. I examine whether depressive symptoms serve as a mechanism through which school discipline constrains college/university degree attainment, using longitudinal data that tracks students from adolescence (age 15) through to early adulthood (age 22). By identifying the psychological pathways linking discipline to college/university degree completion, this research provides actionable insights for higher education institutions seeking to support students whose K-12 experiences were marked by exclusionary practices.

The stakes of this inquiry are substantial. College/university degree attainment remains one of the strongest predictors of economic mobility, health outcomes, and civic engagement in the United States (Hout, 2012). Yet college/university degree completion rates vary dramatically by race and socioeconomic status, with Black students completing bachelor’s degrees at approximately half the rate of White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Understanding the institutional mechanisms that produce these disparities—including the long-term consequences of K-12 discipline practices—is essential for higher education institutions committed to equity.

1.1. School Discipline in the Zero-Tolerance Era

The proliferation of zero-tolerance discipline policies beginning in the 1990s fundamentally transformed how schools respond to student behavior (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Originally developed as a response to concerns about school violence, zero-tolerance policies mandate predetermined, severe consequences for specific offenses regardless of context or circumstances (Nance, 2016). What were once reserved for serious safety threats—weapons and violence—became routine responses to minor infractions such as dress code violations, tardiness, and “disrespect” (Simson, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education (1999) defined zero-tolerance policies as “mandated predetermined consequences or punishment for specific offenses,” effectively removing professional discretion from school administrators and teachers.

The consequences of this policy shift have been severe and racially disparate. Approximately 3.5 million students experience suspension annually (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014), with suspension rates for Black students doubling since the 1970s (George, 2015; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; E. W. Morris & Perry, 2016). During the 2013–2014 school year, Black students represented 16% of total enrollment but 34% of students suspended once, 42% of students suspended multiple times, and 31% of students expelled (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). These disparities persist even after adjusting for socioeconomic status, school characteristics, and documented behavioral infractions, suggesting that racial bias in disciplinary decision-making contributes to observed disparities (Skiba et al., 2011).

Accompanying the rise of zero-tolerance discipline has been a dramatic increase in school policing. In the mid-1990s, approximately 54% of schools employed school police; by the 2019–2020 school year, this figure had risen to 65% (Stinson & Watkins, 2014; Welburn Paige & Bushway, 2024). School resource officers (SROs) and security personnel have become embedded in the disciplinary apparatus, transforming what were once administrative responses to student behavior into interactions with law enforcement (Coon & Travis, 2012). For Black students in particular, the presence of police in schools has been associated with increased rates of school-based arrests and referrals to the juvenile legal system (Theriot, 2009), contributing to what scholars have termed the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Advancement Project, 2005; Losen & Gillespie, 2012) and the school-to-prison nexus (Rios, 2011).

1.2. From School-to-Prison Nexus to School-to-College Gap

Scholars have extensively documented the school-to-prison pipeline—the process by which exclusionary discipline funnels students, particularly Black males, from educational institutions into the criminal legal system (Advancement Project, 2005; Rios, 2011). This body of work has been instrumental in raising awareness about the carceral functions of school discipline and advocating for policy reform. However, less attention has been paid to what might be termed the “school-to-college gap”: the mechanisms through which discipline constrains postsecondary access and completion even among students who avoid criminal justice involvement. A growing body of scholarship has begun to document this gap, finding that exclusionary discipline is associated with reduced academic preparation, diminished college aspirations, and constrained postsecondary access—consequences that affect the majority of disciplined students who never come into contact with the criminal legal system (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2016).

The distinction matters because the vast majority of disciplined students do not enter the criminal justice system—yet they may still experience profound consequences for their educational trajectories. Research has documented associations between school discipline and lower test scores (Legewie & Fagan, 2019), reduced high school graduation rates (Weisburst, 2019), and diminished college enrollment (Shollenberger, 2015). However, few studies have examined whether discipline predicts college/university degree completion, and fewer still have investigated the mechanisms through which discipline shapes postsecondary outcomes.

This study addresses these gaps by examining whether depressive symptoms mediate the relationship between high school discipline and college/university degree attainment. In doing so, it extends the school-to-prison nexus framework to consider how discipline constrains not only the most extreme outcomes (incarceration) but also the more common outcome of failing to complete a college/university degree. For the majority of disciplined students, the primary consequence is not prison but rather a “suspended future”—a pathway to higher education that has been disrupted, delayed, or foreclosed by institutional practices that began in K-12 settings.

1.3. Depressive Symptoms as a Mediating Mechanism

Emerging research links school discipline to adverse mental health outcomes, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and psychological distress (Jackson et al., 2019; Perryman, 2025; Perryman et al., 2022; So et al., 2023). Being suspended or expelled communicates a powerful institutional message: you do not belong here. This message may be internalized, contributing to psychological distress that undermines academic engagement and college preparation. Students who have been disciplined report feeling alienated from school, mistrustful of educational institutions, and pessimistic about their futures (M. W. Morris, 2016).

Smith's (2004, 2010) theory of Racial Battle Fatigue provides a framework for understanding these dynamics. Originally developed to explain the cumulative stress experienced by Black faculty and students in predominantly White higher education institutions, Racial Battle Fatigue captures the psychological, physiological, and behavioral consequences of navigating racist educational environments (Smith et al., 2016). The theory posits that chronic exposure to racial microaggressions, institutional discrimination, and hostile climates produces symptoms including anxiety, depressive symptoms, hypervigilance, and exhaustion. While typically applied to higher education contexts, this framework may also illuminate K-12 experiences, particularly for Black students who are disproportionately subjected to surveillance, discipline, and policing in their schools.

Students who are repeatedly disciplined and policed in their own schools may develop symptoms analogous to Racial Battle Fatigue—depressive symptoms, anxiety, and hypervigilance—that persist into adulthood and shape their higher education trajectories. Geronimus and colleagues' (Geronimus et al., 2006) concept of “weathering” provides a complementary framework, capturing how chronic exposure to stressors produces cumulative physiological and psychological deterioration. Both frameworks suggest that the psychological toll of navigating hostile educational environments may have lasting consequences that extend beyond the immediate disciplinary event.

This study observed whether depressive symptoms mediate the relationship between school discipline and college outcomes. Therefore, since school discipline in K-12 educational environments functions as a chronic institutional stressor consistent with Racial Battle Fatigue, I hypothesized that: (1) school discipline would increase depressive symptoms; (2) depressive symptoms would reduce college-going conversations, which in turn would decrease the likelihood of college/university degree attainment. Further, I hypothesized that (3) the mediation pathway would be stronger for females, given gendered patterns in internalized responses to institutional stress. This hypothesis situates mental health as a critical—but often overlooked—pathway through which K-12 institutional practices shape postsecondary outcomes.

1.4. College-Going Behaviors as a Behavioral Pathway

Perna's (2006) widely cited conceptual model of college choice situates students' post-secondary decisions within four nested contextual layers: (1) the individual's habitus, including demographic characteristics, cultural and social capital, and educational expectations; (2) the school and community context, including school resources, climate, and institutional support; (3) the higher education context, including institutional characteristics and proximity; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. This model suggests that college-going is not merely an individual decision but is fundamentally shaped by institutional contexts that either facilitate or impede students' pathways to higher education.

Students preparing for college must engage in specific behaviors: talking to counselors, gathering information, visiting campuses, completing applications. These college-going behaviors require both motivation and opportunity—and both may be compromised by disciplinary experiences. Huerta's (2022, 2025) research with gang-involved and criminalized youth demonstrates that educators often withhold college knowledge from students they perceive as unworthy of support. Teachers and counselors may view disciplined students through a deficit lens, assuming they lack the motivation or capacity for college success and therefore declining to invest time and resources in their college preparation (Huerta et al., 2023).

Disciplined students may receive fewer invitations to college preparation activities, less encouragement from counselors, and fewer opportunities to develop the social capital necessary for successful college transitions. Moreover, the time spent out of school dur-

ing suspensions represents lost opportunities for academic preparation and relationship-building with educators who might otherwise support college aspirations. Depressive symptoms may further reduce students' initiative to seek out these opportunities, creating a compounding effect in which both institutional disinvestment and individual psychological distress constrain college-going behaviors.

Purkey and Novak's (1996) theory of invitational education provides additional theoretical grounding. This framework posits that educational environments communicate messages to students about their worth, potential, and belonging through five domains: people, places, policies, programs, and processes. Schools that are "inviting" intentionally communicate to students that they are capable, valuable, and welcome; schools that are "disinviting" communicate the opposite. Zero-tolerance discipline policies, by design, are exclusionary and punitive rather than inviting and developmental. When students are suspended, expelled, or policed in their own schools, the institution communicates a disinviting message that may extend to students' perceptions of higher education—if they do not belong in high school, do they belong in college?

1.5. The Current Study

This study examines whether depressive symptoms mediate the relationship between high school discipline and college/university degree attainment using longitudinal data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study. I test a serial mediation model in which discipline predicts depressive symptoms, depressive symptoms predict college-going behaviors, and college-going behaviors predict college/university degree attainment—with depressive symptoms also having a direct effect on college/university degree attainment independent of college-going behaviors. Additionally, I examine whether this mediation pathway varies by race and sex, given documented disparities in both discipline exposure and mental health outcomes.

The research questions are: (1) Do depressive symptoms mediate the relationship between school discipline and college/university degree attainment? (2) Does the mediation pathway vary by race and/or sex? (3) Do depressive symptoms amplify discipline's negative effect on college/university degree attainment? By addressing these questions with longitudinal data spanning seven years, this study provides evidence about the long-term consequences of K-12 discipline practices for higher education outcomes—and identifies potential intervention points for supporting students whose futures have been "suspended" by exclusionary discipline.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Population

Data come from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a longitudinal birth cohort study that followed children born in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000 (Reichman et al., 2001). The study sampled births from 75 hospitals in 20 U.S. cities with populations over 200,000, with non-marital births oversampled at a ratio of approximately 3:1. Taken together, this study is well-positioned for studying discipline disparities and their consequences.

Baseline interviews were conducted with 4898 families (mothers and, when available, fathers) shortly after the focal child's birth. Follow-up interviews were conducted when children were approximately 1, 3, 5, 9, 15, and 22 years old. This study uses data from Year 15 (when focal children were approximately 15 years old and in high school) and Year 22 (when focal children were approximately 22 years old and could have completed some postsecondary education). The analytic sample includes $N = 1417$ respondents with complete data on all model variables. GSEM equation-specific sample sizes were $N = 2435$

for the depression equation, $N = 1691$ for college-going behaviors, and $N = 1417$ for college degree attainment. Table 1 descriptive statistics are based on the complete-case analytic sample of $N = 1417$. The larger equation-specific GSEM samples reflect the use of all available observations per equation rather than listwise deletion, which maximizes statistical efficiency. All primary inferential claims are anchored to the complete-case sample of $N = 1417$. Sample attrition analyses indicated that respondents retained in the analytic sample were similar to those lost to attrition on baseline characteristics, though retained respondents had slightly higher maternal education levels.

Table 1. Sample characteristics ($N = 1417$).

Variable	<i>n</i>	% or M (SD)
School Discipline (Year 15)		
Ever suspended/expelled	308	21.74%
Depressive Symptoms (Year 15)		
CES-D 5 score		M = 2.74 (2.87)
Elevated (CES-D 5 score ≥ 4)	443	31.26%
College-Going Behaviors (Year 15)		
CGB count		M = 1.85 (0.81)
College/University Degree by Year 22		
Yes	173	12.21%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	296	20.89%
Black	703	49.61%
Hispanic	294	20.75%
Other/multiracial	124	8.75%
Sex		
Female	766	54.06%
Male	651	45.94%
Maternal Characteristics		
Married	413	29.15%
Education: Less than HS	335	23.64%
Education: HS or equiv	455	32.11%
Education: Greater than HS	627	44.25%
Income: <\$15,000	472	33.31%
Income: \$15,000–\$34,999	434	30.63%
Income: \$35,000+	511	36.06%
Born in United States	1288	90.90%

Note. CES-D 5 = Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale 5; HS = high school. Analytic sample defined by complete data on all model variables. GSEM equation-specific *N*s: depression $N = 2435$; college-going behaviors $N = 1691$; college degree $N = 1417$. Race/ethnicity percentages reflect respondents with non-missing race data. Respondents with missing race data were retained in GSEM models using a missing-category indicator.

Among respondents with non-missing race data, 49.61% identified as Black, 20.75% as Hispanic, 20.89% as White, and 8.75% as Other or Multiracial. Respondents with missing race data (33.4%) were retained in the analytic sample and modeled using a missing category indicator, consistent with recommendations for handling missing categorical covariates in longitudinal studies. Approximately 45.94% were male. The racial composition of the sample, with Black students representing the largest racial group, provides sufficient statistical power to examine racial differences in the mediation pathway—a key contribution given that Black students are disproportionately affected by school discipline.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. School Discipline

School discipline (Year 15) was assessed with the item “Have you ever been suspended or expelled in the past 2 years?” Responses were coded as 0 (no) or 1 (yes). In the analytic sample, 21.74% of students ($n = 308$) reported being suspended or expelled in the two years prior to the Year 15 interview. This rate is consistent with national estimates of suspension prevalence among high school students, particularly in urban schools (Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

2.2.2. Depressive Symptoms

Depressive symptoms (CES-D 5; Year 15) were measured using five items from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) adapted for adolescents (Perreira et al., 2005). Items assessed feelings in the past week: (a) “I feel I cannot shake off the blues, even with help”; (b) “I feel sad”; (c) “I feel happy” (reverse-coded); (d) “I feel life is not worth living”; and (e) “I feel depressed.” Responses ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). Items were summed to create a continuous score ranging from 0 to 15, with higher scores indicating more depressive symptoms ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 2.87$, observed range = 0–14). The abbreviated CES-D 5 has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity in adolescent samples (Fagan, 2022). For moderation analyses examining whether elevated depressive symptoms amplify discipline effects, elevated depressive symptoms were defined as scores ≥ 4 , consistent with established cutoffs for abbreviated CES-D 5 instruments that recommend multiplying the standard cutoff of 16 by 0.25 for 5-item versions (Fagan, 2022). Using this threshold, 31.26% of the sample ($n = 443$) met criteria for elevated depressive symptoms.

2.2.3. College-Going Behaviors

College-going behaviors (Year 15) were measured with four dichotomous items asking whether the respondent had talked to various adults about college: (a) talked to a parent or guardian about college, (b) talked to a guidance counselor about college, (c) talked to a teacher or coach about college, and (d) talked to any adult about applying to college. Items were summed to create a composite score ranging from 0 to 4, with higher scores indicating more college-going behaviors ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.81$). This measure captures the relational dimension of college preparation—the extent to which students are engaging with adults who can provide information, guidance, and support for college transitions.

2.2.4. College/University Degree Attainment

College/university degree attainment (Year 22) was assessed by asking respondents their highest level of education completed. Response options ranged from “no formal schooling” to “professional degree (MD, JD, etc.).” Respondents who had earned an associate’s degree or higher were coded as 1; those with less than an associate’s degree were coded as 0. The associate degree or higher threshold was selected because it represents the minimum postsecondary credential associated with meaningful labor market returns (Hout, 2012). The Year 22 outcome window captures the modal age of on-time completion for students who enroll immediately after high school, though it likely undercounts students on non-traditional timelines—a limitation addressed below. In the analytic sample, 12.21% ($n = 173$) had earned a college degree by approximately age 22. This rate is lower than national averages but consistent with expectations given the socioeconomic composition of the FFCWS sample and the reality that many students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, take longer than four years to complete college/university degrees (Bound et al., 2012).

2.2.5. Covariates

Models adjusted for demographic and family characteristics that prior research has linked to both school discipline and educational attainment. Race/ethnicity was coded as White (reference), Black, Latinx, or Other/Multiracial. Sex was coded as 0 (female) or 1 (male). Maternal education was coded as less than high school (reference), high school or equivalent, or greater than high school. Maternal income at Year 15 was coded as less than \$15,000 (reference), \$15,000–\$34,999, or \$35,000 or more. Maternal marital status was coded as 0 (not married) or 1 (married). Maternal nativity was coded as 0 (foreign-born) or 1 (U.S.-born). School belonging was measured with a single item (“I feel close to people at my school”) to control for students’ subjective connection to their school environment, which may independently predict both depressive symptoms and college-going behaviors.

2.3. Analytic Strategy

I employed generalized structural equation modeling (GSEM) to test the hypothesized serial mediation model. GSEM extends traditional structural equation modeling to accommodate outcomes with different distributional assumptions, making it well-suited for models that include both continuous and binary outcomes (Rabe-Hesketh et al., 2004). In this study, continuous outcomes (depressive symptoms, college-going behaviors) were modeled with Gaussian (normal) distributions and identity link functions, while the binary outcome (college/university degree attainment) was modeled with a Bernoulli distribution and logit link function. The college-going behaviors index ranges from 0 to 4 with a mean of 1.85 and standard deviation of 0.81. Fewer than 10% of respondents scored 0, and the distribution was approximately symmetric, supporting the use of a Gaussian specification. A sensitivity analysis substituting a Poisson specification for the college-going behaviors equation yielded substantively identical results: the path of depressive symptoms to college-going behaviors (Gaussian: $b = -0.023$, $p = 0.001$; Poisson: $b = -0.012$, $p = 0.002$) and the path of discipline to college-going behaviors (Gaussian: $b = -0.082$, $p = 0.090$; Poisson: $b = -0.045$, $p = 0.094$) were in the same direction and of comparable significance, confirming the robustness of the Gaussian specification.

The full model simultaneously estimated three equations: (1) depressive symptoms regressed on discipline and all covariates; (2) college-going behaviors regressed on depressive symptoms, discipline, and all covariates; and (3) college/university degree attainment regressed on college-going behaviors, depressive symptoms, discipline, and all covariates. This specification allows for the estimation of both direct effects (discipline → college/university degree) and indirect effects through the mediators (discipline → depressive symptoms → college/university degree; discipline → depressive symptoms → college-going behaviors → college/university degree).

Indirect effects were calculated as the product of constituent path coefficients using the nlcom command in Stata. To obtain confidence intervals for indirect effects that do not assume normality—an important consideration given that products of coefficients are often non-normally distributed—I used bootstrapping with 1000 replications and reported bias-corrected confidence intervals. Mediation is indicated when the confidence interval for the indirect effect excludes zero (Hayes, 2018).

GSEM uses all available observations per equation rather than listwise deletion, maximizing statistical efficiency. Equation-specific sample sizes were $N = 2435$ for the depressive symptoms equation, $N = 1691$ for college-going behaviors, and $N = 1417$ for college degree attainment.

To examine whether the mediation pathway varied across groups, I conducted moderation analyses testing: (1) discipline × race interactions predicting depressive symptoms, to assess whether the psychological toll of discipline differs by race; (2) discipline × sex

interactions predicting depressive symptoms, to assess whether the psychological toll of discipline differs by sex; and (3) discipline $\times$ depressive symptoms interactions predicting college/university degree attainment, to assess whether depressive symptoms amplify discipline's effect on educational outcomes. I also estimated fully stratified models by race (Black, White, Latinx) and sex (male, female) to examine whether the overall mediation pathway operated differently across groups. All analyses were conducted in Stata 19.5 using robust standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity.

3. Results

3.1. Sample Characteristics and Bivariate Associations

Presented in Table 1, discipline rates varied significantly by race and sex, with Black students (30.87%) and males (26.57%) reporting the highest suspension rates. College/university degree attainment also varied by race and sex, with White students (19.14%) and females (14.70%) completing degrees at the highest rates. Bivariate associations confirmed expected relationships: disciplined students reported higher depressive symptoms ($M = 3.28$ vs. $M = 2.59$, $p < 0.001$), fewer college-going behaviors ($M = 1.75$ vs. $M = 1.88$, $p = 0.014$), and dramatically lower rates of college/university degree attainment (3.25% vs. 14.70%, $p < 0.001$). Disciplined students were more than four times less likely to earn a college/university degree than their non-disciplined peers.

3.2. Main Mediation Model

Presented in Table 2 are the results of the main GSEM model. The hypothesized serial mediation model is presented in Figure 1. Most hypothesized paths were statistically significant in the expected directions, providing initial support for the mediation hypothesis.

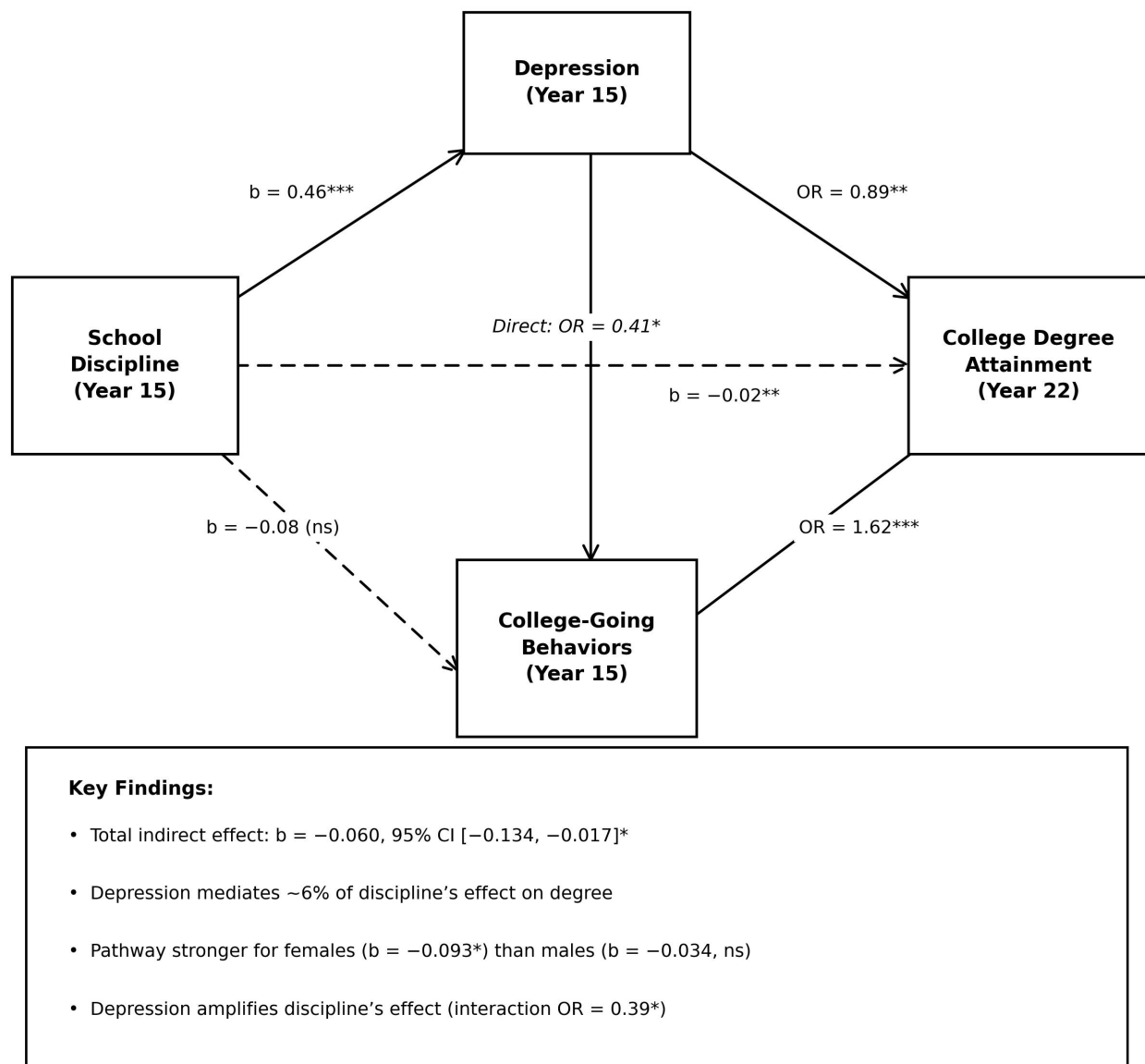
Table 2. Main GSEM results: serial mediation model.

Path	b/OR	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Predicting Depressive Symptoms				
Discipline $\rightarrow$ Depressive Symptoms	0.46	0.14	0.001	[0.18, 0.74]
Black (vs. White)	−0.34	0.17	0.046	[−0.68, −0.01]
Male	−0.59	0.12	<0.001	[−0.82, −0.36]
School Belonging	−1.05	0.09	<0.001	[−1.23, −0.87]
Predicting College-Going Behaviors				
Depressive Symptoms $\rightarrow$ CGB	−0.02	0.01	0.001	[−0.04, −0.01]
Discipline $\rightarrow$ CGB	−0.08	0.05	0.090	[−0.18, 0.01]
Black (vs. White)	0.19	0.05	<0.001	[0.08, 0.29]
Predicting College/University Degree (OR)				
CGB $\rightarrow$ College/University Degree	1.62	0.18	<0.001	[1.31, 2.02]
Depressive Symptoms $\rightarrow$ College/University Degree	0.89	0.03	0.001	[0.82, 0.95]
Discipline $\rightarrow$ College/University Degree (Direct)	0.41	0.14	0.010	[0.21, 0.81]
Mother Education: >HS	2.63	0.83	0.002	[1.41, 4.86]
Mother Married	1.70	0.35	0.009	[1.13, 2.53]

Note. OR = odds ratio; CGB = college-going behavior; HS = high school. Robust standard errors. GSEM equation-specific sample sizes: depression equation $N = 2435$; college-going behaviors equation $N = 1691$; college/university degree equation $N = 1417$. Primary analytic sample $N = 1417$.

School discipline significantly predicted higher depressive symptoms ($b = 0.46$, $p = 0.001$), with a small-to-medium effect. School belonging was the strongest covariate predictor of depressive symptoms. Notably, Black students reported lower depressive symptoms than White students, a finding consistent with documented limitations of the CES-D in Black adolescent samples, including differential item functioning and cultural differences in

somatic versus affective symptom expression (Perreira et al., 2005), rather than necessarily reflecting true group differences in depressive burden.



* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. $N = 2435$. Bootstrap CIs (1000 reps). Controls: race, sex, maternal SES, school belonging.

Figure 1. Serial Mediation Model: school discipline → college/university degree attainment. Note. $N = 2435$. Bootstrap CIs (1000 reps). All paths control for race, sex, maternal education, maternal income, maternal marital status, maternal nativity, and school belonging. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Higher depressive symptoms predicted fewer college-going behaviors ($b = -0.02$, $p = 0.001$). The direct effect of discipline on college-going behaviors was not statistically significant ($b = -0.08$, $p = 0.090$), suggesting that discipline's effect on college-going behaviors operates primarily through depressive symptoms.

More college-going behaviors significantly predicted higher odds of degree attainment ($OR = 1.62$, $p < 0.001$), and higher depressive symptoms independently predicted lower odds of degree attainment ($OR = 0.89$, $p = 0.001$). Discipline retained a significant direct effect on degree attainment ($OR = 0.41$, $p = 0.010$), indicating that mechanisms beyond depressive symptoms also constrain degree completion.

3.3. Indirect Effects with Bootstrap Confidence Intervals

Indirect effects are presented in Table 3. The total indirect effect through depressive symptoms was significant ($b = -0.060$, 95% BC CI $[-0.134, -0.017]$, $p = 0.029$), indicating partial mediation. Depressive symptoms accounted for approximately 6% of discipline's total effect on degree attainment, with the remaining 94% operating through other mechanisms.

Table 3. Bootstrap indirect effects (1000 replications).

Indirect Effect	Estimate	SE	95% BC CI	<i>p</i>
Disc → Dep → CGB → College/University Degree	−0.005	0.003	[−0.012, −0.001]	0.057
Disc → Dep → College/University Degree	−0.055	0.026	[−0.129, −0.015]	0.036
Total Indirect Effect Through Depressive Symptoms	−0.060	0.028	[−0.134, −0.017]	0.029
Direct Effect (Disc → College/University Degree)	−0.895	0.379	[−1.757, −0.311]	0.018

Note. BC = bias-corrected. Significant indirect effects indicate mediation.

3.4. Moderation Analyses

Moderation results are presented in Table 4. Sex significantly moderated the discipline–depressive pathway: discipline increased depressive symptoms more strongly for females ($b = 0.78$, $p = 0.001$) than males ($b = 0.21$, $p = 0.251$). Race did not significantly moderate this pathway ($F = 0.24$, $p = 0.868$). Black students are disciplined at far higher rates than their White peers—that is not in question. But once discipline has occurred, its psychological toll appears comparable across racial groups. The racial disparity lives in who gets disciplined, but not, in this variable-centered analysis, in how discipline affects their mental health. Depressive symptoms significantly amplified discipline's negative effect on degree attainment ($OR = 0.39$, $p = 0.037$), indicating compounded disadvantage for students experiencing both risk factors.

Table 4. Moderation analysis results.

Moderation Test	Coefficient/OR	SE	<i>p</i>	Interpretation
Discipline × Male	Sex × Discipline → Depressive Symptoms			
	−0.57	0.28	0.040	Weaker effect for males
Joint F-test	Race × Discipline → Depressive Symptoms			
	$F = 0.24$	—	0.868	No race moderation
Discipline × Depressive Symptoms (OR)	Depressive Symptoms × Discipline → College/University Degree			
	0.39	0.18	0.037	Depressive symptoms amplify effect

3.5. Stratified Results by Race and Sex

Stratified results are presented in Tables 5 and 6. The mediation pathway was strongest among Black youth (total indirect $b = -0.094$, $p = 0.069$), though marginally significant. For females, the depressive-mediated pathway was statistically significant (total indirect $b = -0.093$, $p = 0.046$); for males it was not ($b = -0.034$, $p = 0.297$). Exploratory subsample analyses examining these pathways within racial/ethnic subgroups by sex are presented in Appendix A.

Table 5. Stratified mediation results by race.

Path	Black (<i>n</i> = 1181)		White (<i>n</i> = 501)		Latinx (<i>n</i> = 547)	
	b/OR	<i>p</i>	b/OR	<i>p</i>	b/OR	<i>p</i>
Disc → Depressive symptoms	0.55	0.002	0.41	0.328	0.29	0.406
Dep → CGB	−0.03	0.003	−0.003	0.824	−0.03	0.083
CGB → degree (OR)	1.66	0.001	1.68	0.016	1.82	0.097
Total indirect effect	−0.094	0.069	−0.043	0.399	−0.049	0.460

Table 6. Stratified mediation results by sex.

Path	Males (<i>n</i> = 1244)		Females (<i>n</i> = 1191)	
	b/OR	<i>p</i>	b/OR	<i>p</i>
Disc → depressive symptoms	0.21	0.251	0.78	0.001
Dep → CGB	−0.02	0.043	−0.02	0.013
CGB → degree (OR)	2.10	<0.001	1.39	0.021
Total indirect effect	−0.034	0.297	−0.093	0.046

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether depressive symptoms mediated the relation between high school discipline and college/university degree attainment using longitudinal data spanning seven years from adolescence to early adulthood. The findings provide evidence that school discipline casts a long shadow over educational attainment, with depressive symptoms serving as one mechanism through which K-12 school discipline constrains postsecondary outcomes. This study was fruitful, such that three key findings surfaced.

4.1. Depressive Symptoms as a Mediator

First, depressive symptoms partially mediate the discipline–degree relationship. Students who experienced suspension or expulsion reported significantly higher depressive symptoms, which in turn predicted fewer college-going behaviors and lower odds of college/university degree attainment. The total indirect effect through depressive symptoms was statistically significant, indicating that the psychological consequences of discipline extend beyond immediate academic outcomes to shape long-term educational trajectories. This finding challenges narratives that frame discipline as a discrete event with time-limited consequences; instead, it suggests that discipline initiates psychological processes that reverberate across the transition to adulthood.

This finding extends Racial Battle Fatigue theory (Smith, 2004, 2010) to K-12 contexts. While Smith’s framework was developed to explain the cumulative stress experienced by Black adults in predominantly White higher education institutions, these results suggest that analogous processes may begin earlier. Students who are repeatedly disciplined and policed in their own schools may internalize messages of exclusion and develop depressive symptoms that persist into adulthood and constrain college completion. The “battle” of Racial Battle Fatigue, it appears, begins well before students reach college—and its psychological toll shapes who arrives at college doors and in what condition.

At the same time, the findings indicate that depressive symptoms account for only approximately 6% of discipline’s total effect on college/university degree attainment, with the remaining 94% operating through other mechanisms. This suggests that addressing mental health alone—while important—will not be sufficient to close the discipline-related gap in college/university degree completion. The direct effect of discipline remained substantial and significant even after accounting for depressive symptoms and college-going behaviors, pointing to additional pathways including missed instructional time, academic skill deficits, institutional stigma, and constrained opportunity structures that independently constrain the educational trajectories of disciplined students.

4.2. Gendered Pathways

Second, the mediation pathway was notably gendered. Discipline increased depressive symptoms more strongly for females than males, and the depressive-mediated pathway to college/university degree attainment was significant only for females. This finding aligns with broader patterns in adolescent mental health research documenting that girls are more

likely than boys to respond to stressors with internalizing symptoms such as depressive symptoms, while boys are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). For female students, the psychological toll of discipline appears to translate more directly into constrained educational outcomes.

For higher education practitioners, this finding suggests that female students with discipline histories may arrive at college with particularly acute mental health needs. Programs designed to support students with K-12 discipline experiences should be attentive to these gendered patterns, providing mental health resources and counseling that acknowledge the unique ways that exclusionary discipline affects young women. At the same time, the non-significant mediation pathway for males should not be interpreted as evidence that discipline is less consequential for male students; rather, discipline's effects on male students' college/university degree attainment appear to operate through mechanisms other than depressive symptoms that were not captured in this study.

4.3. Racial Differences and Differential Exposure

It should be noted that variable-centered moderation analyses may obscure racial heterogeneity that person-centered approaches can detect. Prior latent class analyses using these same data identified distinct mental health profiles among disciplined Black and Latinx adolescents that differed in meaningful ways (Perryman, 2025, *in press*; Perryman et al., 2022), suggesting that the null race moderation finding here reflects a limitation of the analytic approach rather than the absence of racial heterogeneity in disciplinary harm.

4.4. Compounded Disadvantage

Third, depressive symptoms amplified discipline's negative effect on college/university degree attainment, indicating compounded disadvantage for students experiencing both risk factors. Students who were both disciplined and depressive faced the lowest odds of college/university degree completion—a pattern that underscores the importance of addressing mental health alongside discipline reform. Discipline and depressive symptoms are not independent risk factors; they interact synergistically to constrain educational attainment. This compounded disadvantage is consistent with RBF's core proposition that chronic institutional stressors accumulate, producing outcomes worse than any single exposure would predict (Smith, 2004). This finding has implications for intervention: targeting either discipline reform or mental health support in isolation may be less effective than integrated approaches that address both factors simultaneously.

4.5. Implications for Higher Education Policy and Practice

First, admissions practices should be reconsidered. Many institutions ask applicants to disclose disciplinary histories, a practice that systematically disadvantages students already harmed by exclusionary discipline (Weissman, 2015). Discipline predicts lower degree attainment—but not because disciplined students lack potential. They have been subjected to institutional practices that constrain their opportunities. Holistic admissions practices that allow students to contextualize disciplinary histories, or that eliminate discipline questions altogether, may help ensure that K-12 exclusionary practices do not foreclose college or university opportunities.

Second, bridge programs and first-year support services should explicitly identify and recruit students who present with both a discipline history and elevated depressive symptoms. This study found that these two risk factors interact synergistically—students carrying both face compounded disadvantage that neither discipline reform nor mental health support alone can address. Integrated screening protocols that flag students at the intersection of both risk factors, paired with responsive advising and mental health referral, are more likely to be effective than siloed interventions.

Third, campus mental health services should adopt gender-responsive frameworks. Female students with discipline histories arrive at college carrying a particular psychological burden—this study found that the depressive-mediated pathway to degree attainment was significant only for females. Counselors should be trained to recognize that depressive symptoms in this population may be the downstream consequence of K-12 institutional exclusion, not simply individual psychopathology. Treatment that situates students' experiences within broader patterns of institutional racism and gendered harm is more likely to be effective.

Fourth, higher education institutions should use their institutional voice to advocate for K-12 discipline reform. Partnerships with urban K-12 districts can support the implementation of restorative approaches and positive behavioral interventions that keep students engaged in learning rather than pushing them out.

4.6. Limitations and Future Directions

Though this study is novel and moves the literature forward, there are several points that warrant pause. First, the college-going behaviors measure captured only conversations with adults about college; other important behaviors such as campus visits, application completion, and financial aid applications were not assessed. A more comprehensive measure of college-going behaviors might reveal stronger mediation effects. Second, while the FFCWS is nationally representative of urban births, findings may not generalize to suburban or rural populations where discipline practices and college-going cultures may differ. Third, the relatively low rate of college/university degree attainment by age 22 (12.21%) reflects both the socioeconomic composition of the sample and the reality that many students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, take longer than four years to complete college/university degrees. Future research should examine college/university degree completion at later ages to capture students who complete college/university degrees on non-traditional timelines.

Fourth, this study examined suspension and expulsion but did not disaggregate these disciplinary actions or examine other forms of school discipline such as in-school suspension, detention, or referrals to law enforcement. Different types of discipline may have different psychological consequences and different relationships with college/university degree attainment. Future research should examine heterogeneity in discipline types and their differential effects on educational outcomes.

Fifth, the school discipline measure was dichotomous, and therefore, does not present the full picture of the studied issue: frequency, duration, or severity of school discipline. Further, it does not capture whether it was exclusionary or not. A single yes/no indicator cannot distinguish between a student suspended once for a minor infraction and a student suspended multiple times for extended periods. Future research should use data that addresses these limitations. Specifically, future research should employ dose-response measures, such as number of suspensions, total days lost, and type of disciplinary action, to better understand the cumulative effects of exclusionary discipline on mental health and educational trajectories.

Sixth, due to the timing of the two mediators, both depressive symptoms and college-going behaviors were measured at Year 15, which means we cannot definitively establish that depression preceded and caused the reduction in college-going behaviors. However, retaining the serial model is theoretically defensible. Research on adolescent mental health establishes that depression reduces motivation, initiative, and help-seeking behavior (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994)—the same behaviors required to engage in college preparation activities such as talking to counselors and gathering application information (Perna, 2006). The findings should therefore be interpreted as consistent with a serial medi-

ation pathway rather than as definitive causal evidence. Future research should measure depressive symptoms and college-going behaviors at separate time points to establish temporal ordering more rigorously.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that school discipline casts a long shadow over educational attainment. The futures of disciplined students are, in a very real sense, “suspended”—not only in the immediate sense of removal from school, but in the long-term sense of constrained postsecondary trajectories. Depressive symptoms serve as one mechanism through which this discipline operates, particularly for young women, but the direct effects of discipline on college/university degree attainment remain substantial even after accounting for mental health pathways.

Higher education institutions cannot fully address inequities in college completion without attending to the K-12 experiences that shape who arrives at their doors—and in what condition. The students who have been most affected by exclusionary discipline are disproportionately Black and disproportionately low-income—and this study finds that the psychological consequences fall most heavily on young women—the same students whom higher education institutions claim to serve through equity and access initiatives. Supporting these students requires understanding the psychological toll of exclusionary practices and developing intentional supports that address both academic preparation and mental health. Only then can higher education begin to “unsuspend” the futures that K-12 discipline practices have placed on hold.

Funding: The project described was supported by Grant Numbers P30AG059298 and T32AG000247 from the National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health. The project described was supported by Award Numbers [R25HD074544 and R01HD036916] awarded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development or the National Institutes of Health. Further, this research was supported by the National Institutes of Health (.gov) under Award Number T32DK138883. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the NIH.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study involved secondary analysis of publicly available data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). As no human subjects were directly involved and the data were publicly available, IRB review was not required.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study data used in this study are publicly available through the Princeton University data archive at <https://ffcws.princeton.edu/documentation> (accessed on 11 February 2026).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Exploratory Subsample Analyses

This appendix presents exploratory mediation analyses examining sex differences in the discipline–depressive–degree pathway within racial/ethnic subgroups. These analyses extend the primary findings by testing whether the mediation mechanism operates differently for males and females within Black, Latinx, and Other/Multiracial youth populations. Given reduced statistical power in stratified samples, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Table A1. Total indirect effects by race and sex.

Subsample	<i>n</i>	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Black Youth					
All Black	1133	−0.101	0.056	0.071	[−0.210, 0.009]
Black Males	575	−0.060	0.057	0.285	[−0.171, 0.050]
Black Females	558	−0.152	0.099	0.122	[−0.346, 0.041]
Latinx Youth					
All Latinx	523	−0.023	0.054	0.680	[−0.129, 0.084]
Latino Males	274	0.521	1.311	0.691	[−2.05, 3.09]
Latina Females	249	−0.025	0.063	0.696	[−0.148, 0.099]
Other/Multiracial Youth					
All Other/Multiracial	202	0.002	0.021	0.911	[−0.038, 0.043]
Other Males	110	−0.164	0.272	0.545	[−0.697, 0.368]
Other Females	92	0.109	0.148	0.464	[−0.182, 0.400]

Note. Total indirect effect = (Disc → Dep) × (Dep → College/University Degree) + (Disc → Dep) × (Dep → CGB) × (CGB → College/University Degree). Estimates derived from generalized structural equation models with robust standard errors. CIs calculated via delta method.

Table A2. Sex × discipline interaction on depressive symptoms, by race.

Variable	Black	Latinx	Other
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)
Discipline	0.81 (0.29) **	0.83 (0.58)	0.99 (0.75)
Male	−0.26 (0.20)	−0.26 (0.28)	−0.25 (0.45)
Discipline × Male	−0.50 (0.37)	−1.11 (0.70)	−1.76 (0.91) +
<i>n</i>	1133	523	202
R ²	0.074	0.157	0.161

Note. OLS regression with robust standard errors. Outcome = depressive symptoms (CES-D 5, 0–15). Controls: mother's education, income, marital status, nativity; school belonging. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A3. Key path coefficients for black youth by sex.

Path	All Black	Black Males	Black Females
Disc → Depressive Symptoms	0.54 **	0.33	0.79 **
Depressive Symptoms → CGB	−0.032 **	−0.027 +	−0.037 **
CGB → College/University Degree (OR)	1.47 *	1.34	1.50 *
Depressive Symptoms → College/University Degree (OR)	0.84 *	0.84	0.84 +
Disc → College/University Degree (Direct, OR)	0.61	0.66	0.60
<i>n</i>	1133	575	558

Note. Coefficients from GSEM with robust standard errors. CGB = college-going behavior. OR = odds ratio (exponentiated logit coefficient). + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

- Summary of Exploratory Findings

These exploratory analyses reveal several patterns that, while not reaching conventional significance thresholds, merit consideration for future research:

- Black Youth

The total indirect effect through depressive symptoms was largest for Black females ($b = -0.152$) compared to Black males ($b = -0.060$), though neither reached statistical significance in the stratified samples. The discipline-to-depressive path was significant only for Black females ($b = 0.79$, $p = 0.006$), while the corresponding path for Black males was smaller and nonsignificant ($b = 0.33$, $p = 0.156$). This pattern aligns with prior research suggesting that Black girls may experience the psychological toll of school discipline differently than Black boys, potentially internalizing exclusionary experiences through depressive symptoms rather than externalizing behaviors.

- Latinx Youth

The mediation pathway was not significant for Latinx youth overall or in sex-stratified models. Notably, the Latino male subsample produced highly unstable estimates (total indirect effect = 0.521, SE = 1.311), reflecting insufficient sample size for reliable inference. The sex $\times$ discipline interaction on depressive symptoms was negative and moderately sized ($b = -1.11$) but did not reach significance ($p = 0.116$), suggesting a similar gendered pattern may exist but requires larger samples to detect.

- Other/Multiracial Youth

With only 202 youth in the full Other/Multiracial subsample and as few as 92 in sex-stratified models, these analyses are severely underpowered. The sex $\times$ discipline interaction on depressive symptoms approached significance ($b = -1.76$, $p = 0.054$), suggesting discipline may differentially affect depressive symptoms by sex in this group, but stratified mediation models produced estimates too unstable to interpret meaningfully.

- Limitations

Indirect effects for subsample analyses were estimated using the delta method rather than bootstrapped confidence intervals, which may yield imprecise inference for small samples. The sex-stratified models within racial subgroups have limited statistical power, and null findings should not be interpreted as evidence against mediation. Replication in larger, more diverse samples is warranted to examine intersectional patterns in how school discipline shapes mental health and educational attainment.

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