

# SCHOOLING AND DELINQUENCY AMONG WHITE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS

KRISTIN E. VOELKL

JOHN W. WELTE

WILLIAM F. WIECZOREK

*Research Institute on Addictions, Buffalo, New York*

---

---

*Adolescent delinquency may be a likely consequence of negative school experiences, including poor academic performance, low class attendance, and dropping out. Given disparate experiences that African American and White students often encounter in school, this investigation examined the link between delinquency and school behaviors separately for White and African American males at risk for delinquency. In addition, it asked whether school experiences are equally related to both minor and more severe forms of criminal behavior. Results indicated that class attendance was related to higher incidence of both minor and serious delinquency. For African American adolescents, poor school grades and dropping out of school were predictive of both types of delinquency. The insignificant relationship between delinquency and school failure for White adolescents may be partially attributed to an economic safety net that provides assistance for White students who fall from the educational system. The importance of succeeding and persisting in school is highlighted for African American adolescents.*

---

---

**School is generally recognized** as a primary institution in which adolescents learn socially appropriate behavior, develop cognitive skills, and establish patterns of early career development. Although educators strive for the success of all students, the school experiences of many students are largely unsuccessful. Some of the

---

AUTHORS' NOTE: Preparation of this article was supported, in part, by the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse Grant AA08157 to John W. Welte. We wish to thank Jeremy D. Finn for conceptual contributions to this study.



URBAN EDUCATION, Vol. 34 No.1, March 1999 69-88  
© 1999 Corwin Press, Inc.

events that occur among students who do not do well in school include emotional (alienation) and physical (dropping out) withdrawal; for still other students, poor school performance may be accompanied by delinquent behavior. Students who are failing in school and have negative experiences with school personnel may be more likely to be involved in antisocial behaviors than students who succeed in school.

Problems of students' disidentification from school have become current educational issues (Steele, 1992; Taylor, 1991; Voelkl, 1997). For these students, school is regarded as having little value, there is no sense of belonging in school, and students become disengaged from academic activities. This comes at a time when crime and delinquency among adolescents remain serious concerns for both educators and American society. For example, results from the 1994 Gallup Poll public opinion survey showed that more than one third of the respondents regarded crime as the most important problem facing the country (Maguire & Pastore, 1994). The number and percentage of youngsters arrested, involved in delinquent acts, or victimized by crime have risen at an alarming rate over the past decade (Maguire & Pastore, 1994). Delinquent activity is quite heterogeneous, however, and ranges from relatively minor acts such as disorderly conduct to more serious criminal acts such as assault and theft.

#### **SCHOOL BEHAVIORS AND DELINQUENCY**

Educational and social psychologists, sociologists, and criminologists have examined the link between educational experiences and delinquency under such names as frustration (Finn, 1989), strain (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Elliott & Voss, 1974), control (Hirschi, 1969; Reiss, 1951), integrated control strain (Elliott, Ageton, & Canter, 1979; Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985), and chaos (Polite, 1994) theories. Strain theory is largely based on the belief that delinquency is a response to the disjunction between one's aspiration to achieve conventional goals and limited opportunities to achieve them. Control theorists propose that delinquency results

from the failure to internalize conventional norms or a breakdown in the bonds between the individual and society.

Students who experience high academic achievement are less likely to be delinquent than students who experience academic failure (Elliott & Voss, 1974; Hawkins & Lam, 1987; Henggeler, 1989; Jensen, 1972; Johnson, 1979; McPartland & McDill, 1977; Polk, Frease, & Richmond, 1974; Robins, 1978; Robins & Ratcliff, 1979; Senna, Rathus, & Siegel, 1974; Silberberg & Silberberg, 1971). According to Gottfredson's (1988) report on American education and delinquency, low school grades are among the least disputed and most reliable predictors of delinquency.

Likely behaviors of failing and disidentified students include low school grades, poor study habits, disruptive behavior in the classroom, and withdrawal from participation in classroom activities (Finn, 1989; Polk & Halferty, 1972). This can result in students' further nonparticipation, frustration, poor academic performance, and even delinquent activity. As outlined in his "participation-identification" model, Finn (1989) maintains that without basic levels of student engagement (i.e., attending classes), students are more likely to withdraw from school, drop out, and perhaps turn to delinquency. Research has long shown that students who frequently attend classes are less likely to be delinquent than students who persistently skip classes and are truant (Finn, 1989; Gottfredson, 1988; Hellman & Beaton, 1986; Tennent, 1971).

Delinquency has also been found to be related to dropping out of school (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Thornberry, Moore, & Christenson, 1985). For some students, school failure begins a process of school rejection, eventual dropping out, and consequently delinquency (Elliott & Voss, 1974). If schools can prevent students from dropping out, the likelihood of delinquency is lessened (Hirschi, 1969). This chain of events has also been applied to students with undiagnosed learning problems (Bernstein & Rulo, 1976). Frustrated and embarrassed by their low grades, these students become disruptive in the classroom and, subsequently, are treated as behavior problems by their teachers. Inappropriate behaviors and feelings of rejection are exacerbated and, eventually,

the student is suspended, thrown out, or drops out of school, and the movement toward delinquent behavior proceeds.

Much of the research on adolescent delinquency has highlighted the disproportionate involvement of African American males in delinquent activity. Many of these studies have also focused on the disparate schooling experiences and degree of school identification among these students (Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994; Polite, 1994; Steele, 1992; Voelkl, 1997). For example, on the average, levels of academic achievement are higher among White than African American students (Mullis, Owen, & Phillips, 1990). In addition, a host of studies have demonstrated that compared to White students, African Americans are disproportionately tracked into lower ability classes (Oakes, 1990; Pink, 1982), suspended from school more frequently and for longer durations (Bennett & Harris, 1982; Reed, 1988; Shaw & Braden, 1990), and punished more severely in school (McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Office for Civil Rights, 1992). Also, the degree to which African American students value and identify with school has been a topic of recent debate (Graham, 1994; Steele, 1992; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992; Taylor, 1991; Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, & Fulmore, 1994; Voelkl, 1997).

In sum, theoretical and empirical studies of delinquency point to the connection between delinquency and school behaviors such as academic achievement, absenteeism, and persistence in school. Studies of crime and delinquency among adolescents remain an important social problem and have routinely been highlighted for African American males. Further, school experiences often have been shown to be dissimilar for White and African American adolescents. To further explore the relationship between school experiences and delinquency, particularly for African American males, we asked, (a) Is the relationship between school experiences and delinquency the same for White and African American students? That is, can delinquency be equivalently "explained" by school performance for the two racial groups? and (b) Is this relationship similar for both serious acts of delinquency as well as for minor delinquent acts?

## METHOD

### SAMPLE

Study participants were composed of male adolescents in a large city in New York State and its surrounding suburbs. These were young men age 16 to 19 who had been selected for participation in a federally funded longitudinal study on the role of drinking and drug use on delinquency. The sample was obtained through a random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone procedure on a computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) network. To ensure that the general population sample contained enough delinquent behavior to be effective for this study, delinquent males were oversampled in the following manner. First, a higher sampling fraction was used for males who lived in urban areas and neighborhoods with high crime rates. Second, all respondents were initially screened for delinquency proneness by answering questions over the telephone that indicated risk status for delinquency. Initially, 1,122 males were screened, reflecting a response rate of 74%. Examples of the 9 screening items included whether the respondent got into many fights when he was between ages 8 and 11, whether either of his parents was absent for 6 months or longer at a time while he was growing up, whether the respondent drank once a month or more before age 15, whether he regularly smoked cigarettes before the age of 15, and whether he attended four or more different schools from kindergarten to Grade 8 or four or more different high schools. Participants who answered at least 3 items in a "risky" direction were invariably recruited into the study. Other nonrisk respondents were recruited one third of the time at random. Of the 625 participants who were accepted into the study, 448 had screen scores that indicated high delinquency proneness, and 177 were considered to be lower risk for delinquency.

Once selected for participation in the study, each adolescent and his parent or guardian (usually the mother) was individually scheduled to participate in a face-to-face interview that lasted about 2 hours. During the interview, information was collected on demographics, school behaviors and performance, personality attributes, alcohol and drug use, personal and family background, and delin-

**TABLE 1**  
**Sample Size by Enrollment Status and Race**

<i>Enrollment Status</i>	N	<i>Percentage</i>
White		
Current student	188	69.9
High school graduate	32	11.9
High school dropout	49	18.2
Total	269	100.0
African American		
Current student	204	76.4
High school graduate	26	9.7
High school dropout	37	13.9
Total	267	100.0

quent activity. The final sample for this present study included 269 White and 267 African American adolescents who had data on the variables included in the study (see Table 1).

#### MEASURES

*Socioeconomic status (SES).* A composite of SES was created to reflect the income and education levels of the respondents' family. Each respondent's family member was asked to estimate the family's total household income and the education level of the respondent's father and mother. Higher numbers indicate higher SES.

*Enrollment status.* Each respondent was asked whether he was a current student in school, never completed high school, or had graduated from high school. Two dummy coded variables were created to represent student enrollment status: being currently enrolled in school (compared with dropping out) and having graduated from high school (compared with dropping out).

*Grades.* Each respondent was asked what grades he usually received in Grade 9. Responses on the 7-point scale ranged from *mostly As* to *mostly Ds and Fs*. Higher scores indicate worse academic grades.

*Absenteeism.* Individuals were asked how often they cut classes in high school. Scale scores ranged from 7 (*more than 3 days per week*) to 1 (*never*). Higher scores indicate more persistent absenteeism from class.

*Delinquency.* Two self-report measures of delinquency, modeled exactly after those used in the National Youth Survey (Elliott et al., 1985), were computed for each respondent to represent two varieties of antisocial behavior: serious acts of delinquency (i.e., index crimes) and minor crimes. Each crime measure reflected the number of times in the past 12 months the respondent had committed a variety of serious crimes or minor crimes. Index crimes included aggravated assault, sexual assault, robbery, burglary, larceny or theft of something worth more than \$100.00, motor vehicle theft, arson, and gang fights. Minor crimes included damaging the property of and/or stealing money or goods from someone you live with, stealing from one's place of work, hitting or threatening to hit someone in your household, disorderly conduct, joyriding, begging from strangers, and unauthorized use of credit cards of someone you live with. Because each measure of delinquency was positively skewed, the logarithmic transformation of each measure was used in the present study. Higher numbers indicate more crimes committed. Mean scores for all measured variables are displayed in Table 2.

#### PROCEDURES

The data were analyzed in two phases using multiple regression procedures. Phase 1 involved an overall test of the association between school behaviors and delinquency. The four main predictor variables included class skipping, school grades, and school enrollment status; the dependent measure was degree of delinquency. In addition, race was included as a dummy variable and was interacted with each of the four predictors to determine if a race by school behavior interaction existed. All variables were "centered" to reduce collinearity between main effects and interaction terms in the model.

Variables were hierarchically entered into the regression equation, so that earlier (chronologically) events were entered first (i.e.,

**TABLE 2**  
**Mean Scores for Variables by Race**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>White</i>		<i>African American</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Socioeconomic status	3.14	1.63	2.48	1.27
Absenteeism	3.54	2.02	3.44	2.18
Poor grades	3.84	1.72	4.11	1.51
Index delinquency	1.84	3.13	2.28	3.43
Minor delinquency	3.25	3.56	2.33	2.68

class skipping and grades), and subsequent behaviors were entered later (enrollment status). Race by school interactions were entered as the last step. Because delinquency is generally regarded as being associated with SES (Henggeler, 1989), SES was held constant in all analyses. Thus, all effects were tested above and beyond SES. Each analysis was tested separately for index and minor crime outcomes.

Phase 2 of the analysis consisted of tests that further probed the race by school interactions, that is, to examine the relationship between school behaviors and delinquency separately for White and African American males. To accomplish this, the statistical models were tested separately for the two racial groups. This may be likened to tests of simple main effects in analysis of variance (Aiken & West, 1991). These analyses were performed in four steps: (a) regression equation tested with White youngsters only, and the dependent measure was index crimes; (b) same analysis as above, but tested with African American adolescents; (c) school predictors tested on White respondents, with minor crimes as the dependent measure; (d) school predictors tested with African American adolescents, with minor crimes as the dependent measure. Again, SES was statistically controlled for in all analyses.

## RESULTS

Correlation coefficients for all respondents are displayed in Table 3 and appear separately for Whites and African Americans in



Table 4. All correlations were in the expected direction. Class absenteeism was significantly related to delinquency for both index and minor crimes; students who frequently skipped classes reported higher levels of delinquency than those who were rarely absent from class. Lower academic grades were also associated with higher rates of delinquency. Males who were high school graduates or currently enrolled in school both reported less delinquent activity than those who dropped out of school; however, this relationship was only statistically significant for currently enrolled students and serious delinquency.

Among White males, school grades and enrollment status were unrelated to delinquency. Unlike Whites, African American males who reported lower academic grades tended to report higher degrees of serious and minor antisocial behavior. Also, being enrolled in school (as opposed to dropping out) was significantly associated with fewer index crimes among African American youngsters; this relationship approached significance for minor crimes.

*Phase 1.* The results of the overall relationship of school behaviors to index delinquency are presented in Table 5 and to minor delinquency in Table 6. SES was significantly related to index crimes but accounted for less than 2% of the variance. The addition of race to the model was not significant. Cutting classes significantly accounted for an additional 8% of explained variance, above and beyond the effect of SES and race. Academic grades was not significantly related to index crimes, and school enrollment status was marginally related ( $p < .051$ ). Finally, race by school interactions were added last in the model and were significant ( $p < .02$ ), demonstrating that the relationship between school behaviors and delinquency is different for White and African American youngsters. Overall, the model significantly explained about 13% of the variance in index crimes,  $F(10, 522) = 7.98, p < .0001$ .

The same model was then tested with minor delinquency as the outcome. SES was not a significant predictor, but race significantly accounted for about 2% of the variance in minor crimes. As with index crimes, students' cutting classes was significantly related to minor delinquency, accounting for an additional 4% of the varia-

**TABLE 3**  
**Correlation Coefficients of All Measures**

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Socioeconomic status	1.00	-.22**	-.13**	-.12**	.03	.17**
2. Race <sup>a</sup>		1.00	-.03	.08	-.04	.07
3. Absent			1.00	.22**	.15**	-.33**
4. Grades				1.00	.02	-.08
5. High school graduate					1.00	-.56**
6. Enrolled						1.00

  

	Index	Minor
Socioeconomic status	-.10*	.03
Race <sup>a</sup>	.07	-.14**
Absent	.28**	.20**
Grades	.12**	.09*
High school graduate	-.07	.02
Enrolled	-.09*	-.05
Index	1.00	.41**

NOTE: Pairwise deletion of cases was used to maximize the number of cases for each correlation.

a. 1 = White, 2 = African American.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 4**  
**Correlation Coefficients of All Measures  
for White and African American Males**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Socioeconomic status		-.21**	-.16**	-.01	.24**	-.15*	.01
2. Absent	-.12*		.21**	.11	-.40**	.19**	.13*
3. Grades	.01	.18**		.03	-.11	.04	-.03
4. High school graduate	.03	.20**	.06		-.56**	-.10	-.01
5. Enrolled	.11	-.24**	-.05	-.59**		-.002	.01
6. Index	-.05	.39**	.20**	-.01	-.15*		.43**
7. Minor	-.04	.29**	.27**	-.03	-.11	.45**	1.00

NOTE: Correlations for White males appear above the diagonal and correlations for African American males appear below the diagonal. Pairwise deletion of cases was used to maximize the number of cases for each correlation.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

tion above and beyond race and SES. Students who skipped classes more frequently tended to have higher reports of minor delinquent

**TABLE 5**  
**Summary of Regression Analysis for All Variables**  
**Predicting Index Crime Delinquency**

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Socioeconomic status (SES) <sup>a</sup>	-.13	.01**
Race <sup>b</sup>	.41	.002
Absenteeism <sup>c</sup>	.44***	.08***
Poor grades <sup>d</sup>	.15	.003
Enrollment status <sup>e</sup>		.01
High school graduate	-1.45**	
Current student	-.45	
Race × School Interactions <sup>f</sup>		.02**
Race × Absenteeism	.24	
Race × Grades	.31	
Race × Graduate	-1.02	
Race × Student	-1.47	

a. Partial regression weight for SES only.

b. Partial regression weight for race, conditional on SES. 1 = White, 2 = African American.

c. Partial regression weight for absenteeism, conditional on SES and race.

d. Partial regression weight for grades, conditional on SES, race, and absenteeism.

e. Partial regression weight for enrollment status, conditional on SES, race, absenteeism, and grades.

f. Partial regression weights for race by school interactions, conditional on all other variables.

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

acts. Academic grades and school enrollment status were not significantly related to minor delinquency. Race by school behavior interactions were significant predictors of delinquency, suggesting that the relationship of minor delinquency to school behaviors is dissimilar for White and African American males. The total model was significant,  $F(10, 522) = 5.35$ ,  $p < .0001$ , and accounted for about 9% of the variance in minor delinquency.

*Phase 2.* Given the significant race by school interactions in Phase 1, the same models were then tested separately for White and African Americans to further explore these effects. The relationships of school predictors and delinquency are illustrated for each racial group separately. Results of the four analyses are presented in Tables 7 and 8.

**TABLE 6**  
**Summary of Regression Analysis for All Variables**  
**Predicting Minor Crime Delinquency**

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Socioeconomic status (SES) <sup>a</sup>	.02	.0004
Race <sup>b</sup>	-.84**	.02**
Absenteeism <sup>c</sup>	.31***	.04***
Poor grades <sup>d</sup>	.14	.002
Enrollment status <sup>e</sup>		.003
High school graduate	-.74	
Current Student	-.18	
Race × School Interactions <sup>f</sup>		.03**
Race × Absenteeism	.005	
Race × Grades	.54**	
Race × Graduate	-2.04	
Race × Student	-1.70*	

a. Partial regression weight for SES only.

b. Partial regression weight for race, conditional on SES. 1 = White, 2 = African American.

c. Partial regression weight for absenteeism, conditional on SES, and race.

d. Partial regression weight for grades, conditional on SES, race, and absenteeism.

e. Partial regression weight for enrollment status, conditional on SES, race, absenteeism, and grades.

f. Partial regression weights for race by school interactions, conditional on all other variables.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Index crime delinquency.* For both racial groups, those who cut classes more frequently had significantly higher rates of serious delinquency than students who rarely or never skipped classes. For White students, school grades and student enrollment status were not significant, demonstrating that serious delinquency among White males was unrelated to grades or to whether he had dropped out of school. In sum, the entire equation was significant,  $F(5, 263) = 3.69$ ,  $p < .01$ , and accounted for approximately 7% of the variation in index crimes among White adolescents.

Among African American students, however, lower grades were significantly associated with higher levels of serious delinquency. Also, student enrollment status was significantly related to delinquency; students who were currently enrolled in school and those who had graduated from high school reported significantly fewer criminal acts than did those who dropped out of school. Overall,

**TABLE 7**  
**Regression Coefficients and  $R^2$  for Index Crimes**

Effect	White		African American	
	Beta	$R^2$	Beta	$R^2$
Socioeconomic status (SES) <sup>a</sup>	-.29*	.02*	-.12	.002
Absenteeism <sup>b</sup>	.26**	.03**	.61***	.15***
Poor grades <sup>c</sup>	-.02	.0001	.29*	.02*
Enrollment status <sup>d</sup>		.02		.02*
High school graduate	-.83		-2.07*	
Current student	.40		-1.28*	

a. Partial regression weight for SES only.

b. Partial regression weight for absenteeism, conditional on SES and race.

c. Partial regression weight for grades, conditional on SES, race, and absenteeism.

d. Partial regression weight for enrollment status, conditional on SES, race, absenteeism, and grades.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 8**  
**Regression Coefficients and  $R^2$  for Minor Crimes**

Effect	White		African American	
	Beta	$R^2$	Beta	$R^2$
Socioeconomic status (SES) <sup>a</sup>	.01	.00002	-.09	.002
Absenteeism <sup>b</sup>	.24*	.02*	.37***	.09***
Poor grades <sup>c</sup>	-.12	.003	.40***	.05***
Enrollment status <sup>d</sup>		.004		.03*
High school graduate	.28		-1.76**	
Current student	.67		-1.03*	

a. Partial regression weight for SES only.

b. Partial regression weight for absenteeism, conditional on SES and race.

c. Partial regression weight for grades, conditional on SES, race, and absenteeism.

d. Partial regression weight for enrollment status, conditional on SES, race, absenteeism, and grades.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

about 19% of the variance in serious delinquency was accounted for by school behaviors among African American students,  $F(5, 258) = 12.03$ ,  $p < .0001$ .  $T$  tests of the regression coefficients showed that African American and White males differed on the current student status coefficient ( $p < .05$ ) but not on the graduate status or grades coefficients.

To test whether overall school experiences equally predicted delinquency for White and African American adolescents, the multiple  $R^2$  statistics (.26 vs. .44) were statistically compared and found to be different (Olkin & Finn, 1995). Thus, the relationship between school factors and index delinquency was significantly greater for African American than for White adolescents ( $p < .05$ ).

*Minor crimes.* The next two regression analyses included the same school predictor variables as in the analyses above but involved minor crimes as the dependent measures. For both racial groups, students who frequently cut classes reported significantly higher rates of minor delinquent acts than students who rarely skipped classes. Academic grades and student enrollment status were significant predictors of minor delinquency among African American students but were not significant among White students. African American students who had higher grades in school and either completed high school or were currently enrolled in school reported lower rates of delinquency than those who had poorer grades in school or had dropped out of school. The total equation significantly accounted for 16% of the variance in minor delinquency for African American and less than 3% for White adolescents, respectively. As with serious delinquency, this difference was statistically significant. To compare the predictors of minor delinquency for African American and White males, tests of the differences between regression coefficients were conducted. For all three coefficients (grades, graduate status, student status), the differences were statistically significant at the 5% level.

In sum, the relationship between delinquency and school behaviors was consistent for both index and minor crimes but differed between African American and White respondents. In general, students who regularly skipped classes were more likely to be involved in delinquent acts than students with good records of class attendance. For African American students, lower academic grades and dropping out of school were associated with higher degrees of both serious and minor delinquency. For White youngsters, both types of delinquency were unrelated to school grades or to dropping out of school. Additionally, the total relationship between de-

linquency and school experiences was significantly stronger for African American than White adolescents.

An important finding of this study is the connection between enrollment status and delinquency. White students who dropped out of school were no more likely to be involved in criminal activity than were White adolescents who were current students. For African American males, however, students who had dropped out of school had higher rates of both minor and serious delinquency compared to those who remained in school. Thus, for African American but not for White adolescents, the decision to drop out of school was connected with involvement in delinquent activity.

To further explore these differences, we focused on those individuals who had dropped out of the school system. African American and White dropouts were compared on their responses to additional survey questions regarding their work patterns and amount of personal spending money. Although it may be well known that many African Americans have more difficulty finding employment and have lower average incomes than do Whites (Gordon et al., 1994), less obvious findings appear when we look within each racial group.

During the interviews, each respondent was asked how many hours per week he was employed and how much weekly spending money he typically had. Among White respondents, dropouts reported working 38 hours per week, graduates 37 hours, and students 22 hours per week. Thus, White dropouts had similar work patterns to White high school graduates but more work than White students. In contrast, African American high school graduates reported the greatest number of work hours (32) as compared to students (19) and dropouts (26). Comparisons of the two racial groups showed that the greatest discrepancy existed between the dropout groups.

Similarly, White dropouts reported having twice (\$106.00) the amount of spending money reported by White students (\$49.00). In contrast, African American graduates reported the greatest amount of spending money (\$67.00) with dropouts (\$55.00) and students (\$45.00) reporting less. Again, the greatest gap between White and

African Americans existed between the dropout groups; White adolescents reported working more hours and having more money.

### DISCUSSION

Along with classic theories of delinquency and current empirical research, this investigation proposed that students who have successful school experiences are less likely to be involved in delinquent acts than students who are relatively unsuccessful in school and/or drop out of school. The results of this investigation confirmed this hypothesis for African American adolescents but failed to wholly support it for Whites.

Three important conclusions are drawn from this investigation. (a) Skipping classes was consistently related to higher rates of both serious and minor delinquent activities for all students. (b) Overall, school behaviors were more strongly related to delinquent behavior for African American than White males. In particular, African Americans who had poorer school grades and/or dropped out of school reported higher levels of delinquent behavior; these factors were not predictive of delinquency among White adolescents. (c) White males who dropped out of school reported more positive economic outcomes than African American dropouts.

Delinquency occurs within a context, and many other factors outside of school such as work experiences, the neighborhood climate, and home support play a role in adolescent behaviors. The co-existence of these contexts with economic needs shape how many African American and White adolescents view schooling, employment, and criminal behavior (Gadsden & Smith, 1994). That school success and persistence were unrelated to delinquency for White males may be partially explained by an economic safety-net hypothesis. That is, many White adolescents have greater access to economic opportunity and have a larger economic "net" that provides support and "catches" those who fall out of the school system. These economic opportunities may be largely nonexistent for many African American dropouts. Indeed, there is much evidence of racial discrimination in employment opportunities and economic



marginalization for African American males (Gordon et al., 1994). Our safety-net hypothesis purports that real life disadvantages (e.g., unemployment, poverty) may be less pronounced for White males, giving them economic advantages that help buffer the consequences of dropping out of school.

Perhaps the most astonishing distinction found between African American and White adolescents was the work patterns of dropouts, high school graduates, and current students. Our examination of their reported work experiences found that among Whites, dropouts reported working the greatest number of hours. In fact, White dropouts worked more than all other White respondents and all African American groups. These findings are supported by similar results reported by the U.S. Department of Education (1996). Based on a national sample of eighth-grade students, the percentage of African American adolescents without a regular high school diploma who were unemployed or out of the labor force and not enrolled in postsecondary education was twice as high as the comparable percentages for White adolescents (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

A likely consequence of working more hours is having a greater income. Indeed, the greatest amount of spending money per week, reported by any of the six groups (race by educational status), was White dropouts. Similarly, the 1994 median income for Grade 8 African American dropouts who reported income was about half of that reported by their White counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). These results may reflect unequal employment practices and opportunities that exist between White and African American males, particularly those who are at risk and leave school.

The importance of success in school and resisting the temptation to drop out is highlighted for African American students in particular. This does not suggest that dropping out of school is not harmful for White adolescents. In fact, studies consistently show that high school dropouts have earnings significantly less than their high school graduate counterparts. Rather, this may suggest that positive school behaviors and preventing school dropout is pivotal for the success of African American males who are at risk for delinquency.

Clearly, more work is needed on the relationship between delinquency and economic opportunities, both actual and perceived. In particular, the relationship between dropping out and subsequent employment among White and African American males needs further investigation. For example, what role does home background play in this relationship? What reasons do adolescents have for working? Because our investigation was based on a high-risk sample of males, it would also be worthwhile to see if these results are consistent for the general population of adolescents. Future studies of delinquency should also consider the influence of peer group attitudes and behaviors, and actions of the school that may inhibit delinquent behavior.

This investigation included only a small portion of a model of delinquency. Although the overall predictability of delinquency as tested in this study was not large, it is noteworthy that even a small portion of delinquency can be explained by school factors. That approximately 18% of the variability in delinquency for African American adolescents could be explained by these factors alone is quite compelling. Future research should focus on methods for decreasing dropping out, especially among African Americans. In addition, researchers need to better understand the factors that influence important school behaviors such as class attendance and the desire to persist in school. School programs that instill the value of education and succeeding in school are liable to decrease the chances that students will turn to antisocial behavior as alternate activities.

## REFERENCES

- Aiken, L. S., & West, S. G. (1991). *Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Bennett, C., & Harris, J. J. (1982). Suspensions and expulsions of male and Black students: A study of the causes of disproportionality. *Urban Education, 16*(4), 399-423.
- Bernstein, S., & Rulo, J. H. (1976, November). Learning disabilities and learning problems: Their implications for the juvenile justice system. *Juvenile Justice, 43-47*.
- Cloward, R., & Ohlin, L. E. (1960). *Delinquency and opportunity: A theory of delinquent gangs*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Ekstrom, R. B., Goertz, M. E., Pollack, J. M., & Rock, D. A. (1986). Who drops out of high school and why? Findings from a national study. *Teachers College Record, 87*, 356-373.

- Elliott, D. S., Ageton, S. S., & Canter, R. J. (1979). An integrated theoretical perspective on delinquent behavior. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 16*, 3-27.
- Elliott, D. S., Huizinga, D., Ageton, S. S. (1985). *Explaining delinquency and drug use*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Elliott, D. S., & Voss, H. L. (1974). *Delinquency and dropout*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.
- Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research, 59*, 117-142.
- Gadsden, V. L., & Smith, R. R. (1994). African American males and fatherhood: Issues in research and practice. *Journal of Negro Education, 63*, 634-648.
- Gordon, E. T., Gordon, E. W., & Nembhard, J.G.G. (1994). Social science literature concerning African American men. *Journal of Negro Education, 63*, 508-530.
- Gottfredson, G. D. (1988). *American education—American delinquency*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools.
- Graham, S. (1994). Motivation in African-Americans. *Review of Educational Research, 64*, 55-117.
- Hawkins, J. D., & Lam, T. (1987). Teacher practices, social development, and delinquency. In J. D. Burchard & S. N. Burchard (Eds.), *Prevention of delinquent behavior* (pp. 241-274). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Hellman, D. A., & Beaton, S. (1986). The pattern of violence in urban public schools: The influence of school and community. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 23*, 102-127.
- Henggeler, S. W. (1989). *Delinquency in adolescence*. Newbury Park: CA: Sage.
- Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jensen, G. F. (1972). Race, achievement, and delinquency: A further look at delinquency association perspective. *American Journal of Sociology, 78*, 562-575.
- Johnson, R. E. (1979). *Juvenile delinquency and its origins: An integrated theoretical approach*. New York: Academic Press.
- Maguire, K., & Pastore, A. L. (Eds.). (1994). *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics 1993*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- McFadden, A. C., Marsh, G. E., II, Price, B. J., & Hwang, Y. (1992). A study of race and gender bias in the punishment of school children. *Education and Treatment of Children, 15*, 140-146.
- McPartland, J. M., & McDill, E. L. (Eds.). (1977). *Violence in schools: Perspectives, programs, and positions*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.
- Mullis, I.V.S., Owen, E. H., & Phillips, G. W. (1990). *Accelerating academic achievement: A summary of findings from 20 years of NAEP* (Report No. 19-OV-01). Princeton, NJ: National Assessment of Educational Progress.
- Oakes, J. (1990). *Multiplying inequalities: The effects of race, social class, and tracking on opportunities to learn mathematics and science*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.
- Office for Civil Rights (1992). *Elementary and secondary civil rights survey, 1990: National summaries*. Arlington, VA: DBS.
- Olkin, I., & Finn, J. D. (1995). Correlations redux. *Psychological Bulletin, 118*, 155-163.
- Pink, W. T. (1982). Academic failure, students social conflict, and delinquent behavior. *The Urban Review, 14*, 141-180.
- Polite, V. C. (1994). The method in the madness: African American males, avoidance schooling, and chaos theory. *Journal of Negro Education, 63*, 588-601.
- Polk, K., Frease, D., & Richmond, F. L. (1974). Social class, school experience and delinquency. *Criminology, 12*, 84-96.

- Polk, K., & Halferty, D. (1972). School cultures, adolescent commitments, and delinquency: A preliminary study. In K. Polk & W. E. Schafer (Eds.), *Schools and delinquency* (pp. 70-90). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Reed, R. J. (1988). Education and achievement of young Black males. In J. T. Gibbs (Ed), *Young, Black, and male in America* (pp. 50-96). Dover, MA: Auburn House.
- Reiss, A. J., Jr. (1951). Delinquency as the failure of personal and social controls. *American Sociological Review*, *16*, 196-207.
- Robins, L. N. (1978). Study childhood predictors of adult antisocial behavior: Replication from longitudinal studies. *Psychological Medicine*, *8*, 611-622.
- Robins, L. N., & Ratcliff, K. S. (1979). Risk factors in the continuation of childhood antisocial behavior into adulthood. *International Journal of Mental Health*, *7*, 96-116.
- Senna, J., Rathus, S. A., & Siegel, L. (1974). Delinquent behavior and academic investment among suburban youth. *Adolescence*, *9*, 481-494.
- Shaw, S. R., & Braden, J. P. (1990). Race and gender bias in the administration of corporal punishment. *School Psychology Review*, *19*, 378-383.
- Silberberg, N. E., & Silberberg, M. C. (1971). School achievement and delinquency. *Review of Educational Research*, *41*, 17-32.
- Steele, C. (1992, April). Race and schooling of Black Americans. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 68-78.
- Steinberg, L., Dornbusch, S. M., & Brown, B. B. (1992). Ethnic differences in adolescent achievement: An ecological perspective. *American Psychologist*, *47*, 723-729.
- Taylor, R. L. (1991). Poverty and adolescent Black males: The subculture of disengagement. In P. B. Edelman & J. Ladner (Eds.), *Adolescence and poverty: Challenge for the 1990's* (pp. 139-162). Washington, DC: Center for National Policy Press.
- Taylor, R. D., Casten, R., Flickinger, S. M., Roberts, D., & Fulmore, C. D. (1994). Explaining the school performance of African-American adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *4*, 21-44.
- Tennent, T. G. (1971). School non-attendance and delinquency. *Educational Research*, *13*, 185-190.
- Thornberry, T. P., Moore, M., & Christenson, R. L. (1985). The effect of dropping out of high school on subsequent criminal behavior. *Criminology*, *23*, 3-18.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (1996). *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1994* (NCES 96-863). Washington, DC: Author.
- Voelkl, K. E. (1997). Identification with school. *American Journal of Education*, *105*, 294-318.