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PRE-PRINT VERSION

Racial Threat, Intergroup Contact, and School Punishment

Cresean Hughes¹

Patricia Y. Warren²

Eric A. Stewart³

Donald Tomaskovic-Devey⁴

Daniel P. Mears⁵

College of Criminology and Criminal Justice^{1, 2, 3, 5}
Florida State University
112 South Copeland Street
Eppes Hall
Tallahassee, FL 32306

Department of Sociology⁴
University Massachusetts Amherst
Thompson Hall, 200 Hicks Way
Amherst, MA 01003-92

ABSTRACT

Objectives: Scholars have argued that higher levels of school punishment found among schools with larger minority populations results in part from racial threat processes. A largely unaddressed question, however, is whether this association holds for White and minority students. A second is whether racial and ethnic contact among school district leaders affects the administration of school punishment. A third is whether threat effects are conditioned by racial and ethnic contact among school district leaders.

Methods: Using multilevel modeling and data from a representative sample of middle and high schools, combined with data on school districts, from the Florida Department of Education, the current study draws on Blalock's (1967) group threat perspective and Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis to answer these questions.

Results: The findings suggest that as a school's racial and ethnic student population increases, the likelihood of suspension increases for minority students, while the likelihood of suspension for White students decreases. Second, greater levels of intergroup contact between Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics are associated with lower probabilities of suspension among both Whites and minorities. Finally, intergroup contact conditions the effect of minority threat on rates of school discipline.

Conclusions: Overall, the results demonstrate that threat and intergroup contact among school district leaders are associated with the application of school punishment among different racial and ethnic groups. Our findings also highlight the potential benefit of racially diverse and integrated spaces and their consequences for school discipline.

Over the last forty years, U.S. “get tough” crime control policies increased correctional populations by more than 200 percent (Mauer 2006). This punitive shift did not just occur in the criminal justice system. It occurred in schools as well (Irwin et al. 2013) and is reflected most prominently in the adoption of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, which result in the automatic suspension or expulsion of students for specified misconduct (Devoe et al. 2005; Gottfredson and Gottfredson 2001; Kupchik and Ellis 2008; Payne and Welch 2010). Indeed, Hirschfield (2008) notes that American schools have become institutions where students are patrolled and sanctioned in a similar manner to that observed in the criminal justice system. For example, it increasingly has become common for schools to use metal detectors, surveillance cameras, locker searches, and drug-sniffing dogs as a means of maintaining safety and order (Giroux 2003, Beger 2002; Watts and Erevelles 2004; Kupchik and Ellis 2008; Devoe et al. 2005; Brooks et al. 1999; Gottfredson 2001).

There is little evidence that these policies have achieved their intended goals (Skiba and Peterson 1999; Hoffman 2014). There is, however, considerable evidence that they have greatly increased punitive measures toward minorities. Black and Hispanic students typically are suspended at two to three times the rate of Whites, even when school misconduct is similar across racial and ethnic groups (McCarthy and Hoge 1987; Brown and Beckett 2006; Noguera 2003a; Nichols 2004; Gregory and Weinstein 2008; Losen and Gillespie 2012; U.S. Department of Education 2014). In addition to concerns about potential disparities in punishment, concerns exist, too, about the consequences of exclusionary punishments, such as school failure, dropout and delinquency (Felice 1981; Arum and Beattie 1999; Skiba et al. 2002; Wald and Losen 2003; Petit and Western 2004; Sum et al. 2009; Perry and Morris 2014).

Scholars have identified several explanations that may account for the observed disparities in school punishment. It is possible that minority students violate zero-tolerance school policies more often and that observed differences in punishment simply reflect differences in misconduct (Ferguson 2000; Vavrus and Cole 2002). An alternative view is that teachers and administrators perceive minority students to be more deviant, guilty, and deserving of

punishment than White students (Noguera 2008; Townsend 2000; Skiba et al. 2011). Drawing on these and related lines of work, we argue that two theoretical perspectives—racial threat and the contact hypothesis—can help to shed light on racial and ethnic disparities in school punishment.

Blalock's (1967) racial threat hypothesis suggests that large or growing minority populations may elicit racialized fears and perceptions of crime. In response, majority groups mobilize social control efforts with the intention of neutralizing these perceived threats and protecting the interests of the majority group. Recent scholarship has extended this perspective to the school setting (Payne and Welch 2010 2013; Welch and Payne 2010, 2012; Rocque and Paternoster 2011). Schools with larger minority student populations may be viewed as more threatening; to address this threat, students in these schools may be punished more severely through suspension and expulsion (Payne and Welch 2010; Rocque and Paternoster 2011).

Allport's (1954) work—and, in particular, the contact hypothesis—provides a different platform from which to anticipate how racial and ethnic differences in school punishment may arise. The contact hypothesis posits that as contact between different racial and ethnic groups increases, racial animus and hostility, prejudices, and stereotypes decline. In the context of school punishment, it implies that greater contact between Whites and minorities may reduce the likelihood of severe disciplinary sanctions for minority students.

Building on these observations, the current study explores three specific questions. First, does the size of the Black and Hispanic student populations increase the likelihood of school suspension for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics? Second, does intergroup contact among White and minority school district leaders reduce the use of school suspensions? Third, does such contact moderate the effect of racial and ethnic threat on school discipline? Answers to these questions extend prior work by incorporating two prominent theoretical perspectives, racial threat and intergroup contact, to account for potential racial and ethnic disparities in school sanctioning.

BACKGROUND

In recent decades, school punishment has become more centralized and rigid (Hirschfield 2008). Enactment of “get tough” school policies has led to increased office referrals (Skiba et al. 1997, Fenning et al. 2013), detentions (Skiba et al. 2011; Gottfredson and Gottfredson 2001), and suspensions and expulsions (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 2001). Concomitantly, schools have invested intensively in surveillance and security measures (Devoe et al. 2005; Watts and Erevelles 2004; Beger 2002; Na and Gottfredson 2013; Brooks et al. 1999).

This policy shift has impacted all students. However, minority students have been disproportionately affected (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 2001; Skiba 2000; Raffaele-Mendez et al. 2002; Losen and Gillespie 2012; Losen and Martinez 2013). Evidence of this impact can be seen in part by the greater use of punishment in schools with larger minority student populations (Beger 2002; Skiba and Peterson 1999; Noguera 2003a; Kupchik and Ward 2013; Finn and Servoss 2013). For example, Payne and Welch (2010, 2013) find that schools characterized by larger minority student populations are not only more likely to suspend and expel students, but also less likely to utilize less-restrictive sanctions, such as referrals to the school guidance counselor to resolve problem behavior. Such patterns typically hold even after controlling for potential racial and ethnic differences in rates of misconduct (Skiba 2001; Skiba and Peterson 1999; Kupchik and Monahan 2006).

Here, we draw on several related lines of work to highlight these patterns and what may account for them. In particular, we draw on racial threat and intergroup contact research to develop a series of hypotheses about the salience of threat and contact processes for understanding school punishment practices.

Racial Threat and School Punishment

The racial threat perspective posits that an increase in minority presence within a particular context is viewed as threatening to the social interests of the majority. In particular, Blalock (1967) argues that, in response to this perceived threat, there will be an increase in social

control measures targeted at preserving a social hierarchy that privileges the majority. Support for the racial threat arguments across a range of social control outcomes is mixed. Scholars have reported that threat does influence the imposition of social control while other scholars find either no relationship or an inverse relationship (see, e.g., Chamlin 1989; Steffensmeier and Demuth 2000 2001; Keen and Jacobs 2009; Johnson et al. 2011; Welch et al. 2011; Ousey and Unnever 2012; Parker et al. 2005; Stewart et al. 2015).

Even so, a considerable body of research nonetheless has lent support to the racial threat hypothesis. In areas with a larger minority presence, there typically are more punitive attitudes and higher levels of social control (Liska 1992; Taylor 1998; Chiricos et al. 1997; Steffensmeier and Demuth 2000, 2001; Johnson et al. 2011; Ousey and Unnever 2012; Feldmeyer et al. 2015). For example, Kent and Jacobs (2005) find that police presence is strengthened in neighborhoods with larger minority populations. Similarly, Keen and Jacobs (2009) report that as the state's Black population increases, the ratio of Black-to-White prison admissions also increases. Furthermore, a greater presence of minority populations has also been associated with higher rates of arrest (Eitle and Monahan 2009), conviction and incarceration (Wang and Mears 2010; Feldmeyer and Ulmer 2011; Feldmeyer et al. 2015), police stops (Petrocelli et al. 2003), and the expanded allocation of police and correctional resources (Barkan and Cohn 2005; Stults and Baumer 2007; Holmes et al. 2008). Research also suggests that a Hispanic threat effect may exist as well, one in which a greater presence of Hispanics is associated with greater punitive attitudes and tougher criminal justice responses (Bontager et al. 2005; Johnson et al. 2011; Welch et al. 2011; Wang 2012; Stewart et al. 2015; Pickett 2016). For example, Johnson et al. (2011) find that as Hispanic populations increase, support for the use of ethnicity in sentencing decisions increases. Similarly, Wang (2012) concludes that the perceived size of the undocumented illegal immigrant population increases criminal threat sentiments.

A corollary to such findings is the possibility that threat effects extend to other settings in which social control is exerted. One such setting is the school, and, more broadly, school districts. Schools are institutions of socialization and control where teachers and administrators

work to ensure that the learning environment is safe and secure. Notwithstanding the mandate to emphasize education, schools also must be cognizant of the need to maintain safety and order. In that respect, they share a similar mandate to that of the police and even the courts.

That schools, too, may reflect societal conditions and dynamics can be seen in research on views that school personnel may hold toward minorities. For example, similar to scholarship on citizens', law enforcement officers', and court actors' views that finds that these groups tend to view minorities as more likely to be antisocial or criminal, research finds that teachers and administrators are more likely to view minority students negatively in comparison with White students (Bates and Glick 2013; Downey and Pribesh 2004). To illustrate, Bates and Glick (2013) report that Black students receive more negative behavioral assessments than White students, which in turn may lead Black students to receive harsher school punishment (Welch 2007). Similarly, Van den Bergh et al. (2010) conclude that teachers display more prejudicial attitudes towards minority students. The desire of teachers and administrators to keep schools safe and secure, combined with parental concerns about their own children, may foster an environment where more punitive disciplinary policies occur in response to large Black and Hispanic student populations; the end result would be racial disparities in punishment. Consistent with this idea, research suggests that schools with larger minority student populations are more likely to employ exclusionary punishments and administer more severe disciplinary sanctions (Payne and Welch 2010; 2013; Welch and Payne 2010; 2011; Rocque and Paternoster 2011).

Such work has advanced understanding about school punishment. However, it remains unclear whether the effects of racial and ethnic threat in schools are invariant across race and ethnicity in the application of punishment. Exploring ethnic threat and its potential effect on punishment for Hispanic students is timely and relevant, given the current public and political discourse on immigration in the United States (Wang 2012; Pickett 2016). Notably, however, the role of minority threat has focused almost exclusively on Black student populations, which has left largely ignored the question of whether ethnic threat effects also exist. Indeed, few studies have specifically explored the relationship between ethnic threat and school discipline. Those

that have done so have produced mixed results (Payne and Welch 2010; 2013; Welch and Payne 2010; 2011). For example, Payne and Welch (2010) found that the percentage of Hispanic students was associated with the likelihood of zero-tolerance school sanctions while both Welch and Payne (2010) and Rocque and Paternoster (2011) did not find any significant relationship between Hispanic representation among students and school discipline.

In short, it remains unclear whether racial and ethnic threat operate similarly in schools and whether the implications of minority threat for school punishment are the same for Black, White, and Hispanic students. Clearly, however, threat may be consequential for not only Black students but also Hispanic students. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H₁: Suspensions for White, Black, and Hispanic students will be higher in schools with larger minority student populations.

Intergroup Contact and School Punishment

The assumption of the racial and ethnic threat perspective is that increased interaction between Whites and minorities in an area is expected to have adverse consequences for minorities. The contact hypothesis, however, suggests a different possibility. That is, as Whites and minorities come into greater contact with one another, racial animosity, racial stereotypes, and racial prejudices may decline (Allport 1954). For example, through increased contact between racial and ethnic groups, perceived threat or fear of those groups should diminish.

Research has found that greater racial and ethnic contact can reduce prejudicial attitudes (Sigelman and Welch 1993; McLaren 2003; Dixon 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Ellison and Powers 1994; Ellison et al. 2011; Mears et al. 2013; Mancini et al. 2012). Specifically, interracial contact via social interactions, such as friendship ties, dating partners, and workplace relationships provides first-hand insight into other groups (Powers and Ellison 1995; Mancini et al. 2012). As racial and ethnic minorities interact with Whites on a more frequent and intimate basis, fear and anxiety may be replaced by more tolerant and less stereotypical attitudes (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). This line of work suggests that more racially

diverse environments are beneficial, particularly for people of color. Increased racial integration has been associated with reduced incarceration risk, reduced homicide and burglary risk, and increased academic achievement (LaFree and Arum 2006; Peterson and Krivo 1993; Rountree et al. 1994; Caldas and Bankston III 1998).

Although existing research suggests that racial and ethnic integration may be consequential across various contexts, limited attention has been given to the potential role of interracial contact in schools (Slavin 1985; Braddock 1980). For example, Slavin (1985), using mixed learning groups as a measure of intergroup contact, found that students who participated in racially- and ethnically-diverse cooperative learning groups in school are more likely to develop long-lasting interracial friendships. Similarly, Braddock (1980), who operationalizes intergroup contact as attending an integrated high school, concluded that Black students who attended an integrated high school were more likely to attend diverse colleges and universities. To date, however, we are aware of no studies that have utilized intergroup contact to predict school punishment. Here, drawing on the logic of the contact hypothesis, we expect that higher levels of intergroup contact within school districts, particularly among school board members, will be associated with a reduction in the use of exclusionary school punishment. Why? When Whites and minorities on school boards come into greater contact with each other, Whites' perceptions of the threat posed by minorities may diminish and reduce the impetus to implement and enforce "get tough" school disciplinary policies.

H₂: Suspensions for White, Black, and Hispanic students will be lower in school districts where there is greater intergroup contact among district school board members.

The Conditional Effects of Intergroup Contact and School Punishment

While intergroup contact may have a direct effect on school punishment; however, it may also moderate the effect of racial and ethnic threat. Specifically, intergroup contact may not only lower a school's use of suspensions targeted at minority students, it also may decrease the salience of perceived racial or ethnic threat, thereby lowering school punishment directed at

minorities. Put differently, we anticipate an interaction between school racial and ethnic populations and intergroup contact.

Threat effects arise primarily through perceptual processes that result in minorities being viewed as more criminal or delinquent. In settings where interracial contact is low, this effect may essentially be free to arise. Conversely, in settings where contact is high, the effects of threat may be inhibited or constrained. Research on the contact hypothesis has found that strong and positive intergroup interactions derived from intergroup contact in fact can generate cross-group empathy and understanding, including awareness about the existence and harm of prejudice (Cook 1994; Pettigrew 1997; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). In a school context, it follows that greater intergroup contact among those responsible for setting school district policy may result in less reliance on punitive policies and that use of such policies may be more tempered even when minority populations are large.

H₃: Suspensions will be lower for White, Black and Hispanic students in predominantly minority-populated schools that are located in school districts where intergroup contact is higher.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

The data for the current analysis combines school data from the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) with school district data from FDOE for the 2011-2012, the 2010 American Community Survey, and the Uniform Crime Report. Throughout each academic year, the FDOE collects comprehensive information from each school district and each school within those districts. Across 66 of the 67 school districts in the state of Florida, 335 public middle schools and 313 public high schools are included in this sample. Osceola County was excluded from the analyses because this school district did not submit data to FDOE. We focus exclusively on high schools and middle schools because throughout Florida, suspensions are primarily used when punishing middle and high school students. The resulting data is arrayed on two levels—that is, schools embedded within school districts.

These data are well-suited for the current research because of the inclusion of race-specific suspension counts. To date, prior studies assessing the relationship between both race and ethnicity on school punishment have focused on all students, irrespective of their race or ethnicity. As a result, the conclusions drawn from prior research have been limited to the effects of threat and contact on the likelihood of punishment for *all* students. School data from the FDOE, however, captures the number of suspensions experienced by each of three groups—Black students, White students, and Hispanic students—which allows us to examine race-specific punishment effects of minority threat and interracial contact.

Measures

Dependent Variables. The current study utilizes race-specific counts of out-of-school suspensions for Black, Hispanic, and White students. We explore out-of-school suspensions for two reasons. First, in comparison to school disciplinary sanctions, such as office referrals and detention, out-of-school suspensions are a more severe form of school discipline that mirrors the broader punitive culture that exists in the criminal justice system (Hirschfield 2008). Second, out-of-school suspension removes students from school for a period of time, which has the potential to lower academic performance and increase the likelihood that students will engage in deviant or criminal activity (Perry and Morris 2014; Arum and Beattie 1999; Wald and Losen 2003). Thus, out-of-school suspension is an appropriate outcome to capture school punitiveness.

Independent Variables. At the school-level, the key independent variables of interest are racial and ethnic threat. *Racial threat* is operationalized as the percentage of Black students in each school. Similarly, *ethnic threat* is captured by using the percentage of Hispanic students in each school. These objective measures of threat are consistent with existing literature that has explored the influence of minority threat on a variety of social control outcomes. (Smith and Holmes 2003; Demuth and Steffensmeier 2004; Mosher 2001; Jacobs and Kleban 2003).

At the school district level, the key independent variables of interest are *Black-White contact* and *Hispanic-White contact*. In the current research context, the exposure index is

intended to capture the level of contact between both Blacks and Whites and Hispanics and Whites who are members of the school boards for each of the 66 Florida school-districts included in our sample. We argue that district school boards are microcosms of the broader community and that school board members reflect the general sentiment of those who elect them.

Over the past 50 years, the locus of control over school punishment has shifted considerably from the school to the school district where school board members, who are likely to reflect the sentiments of the constituents who elect them and are involved in the shaping of disciplinary policies (Kafka 2008, 2011). This centralization of disciplinary authority at the district level has taken away much of the discretion that was previously afforded to teachers and administrators in punishment decisions. As a result, school punishment decisions are now increasingly governed by uniform procedural codes established by the district school board (Hirschfield 2008). Although student punishment itself is an outcome that occurs at the school level, the guidelines used in dispensing punishment often originate at the district-level. As a result, we argue that it is useful to explore the potential role that racial and ethnic contact among school board members at the school-district level may play in student disciplinary decisions. It follows logically that as the individuals who are involved in crafting school disciplinary policies at the district-level come into greater contact with racial and ethnic minorities, the perceived threat of larger minority student populations may be reduced; and as a result, the severity of school sanctions levied against minority students may be reduced as well.

We operationalize our two measures of interracial contact using the exposure index (P^*), which is a dimension of segregation that has been widely used in prior research as an indicator of intergroup contact at the aggregate-level (Lieberson and Carter 1982; Farley 1984; Massey and Denton 1987, 1988, 1989; Dixon and Durrheim 2003; Logan 2001; Fitzpatrick and Hwang 1992). Massey and Denton (1987) describe the P^* index as a measure of the extent to which minority and majority group members are likely to come into contact with one another (p. 806). Farley (1984) notes in his study of housing segregation that one advantage of using the exposure index is that it captures minority and majority groups' potential for interacting with one another

within a spatial unit. The index ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 representing no intergroup contact and 1 representing high intergroup contact. P^* is calculated using the following formula:

$$P^* = \Sigma [(X_i / X) * (Y_i / t_i)]$$

X_i denotes the number of Black school board members in a particular school district. X represents the total number of Black school board members across the state of Florida. Y_i refers to the number of White school board members and t_i represents the total number of school board members in a school district. Similarly, Hispanic-White contact is calculated using the same formula. Here, though, X_i denotes the number of Hispanic school board members in a particular school district. X represents the total number of Hispanic school board members across the state. Y_i refers to the number of White school board members. And t_i represents the total number of school board members in a school district. Across school districts, the average *Black-White contact* is 17% and the average *Hispanic-White contact* is 12% among school board members.

Control Variables. Consistent with prior research, we control for a number of school- and district-level factors (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 2001; Gottfredson et al. 2005; Payne et al. 2003). At the school-level, these factors include: school size, percent school poverty, student-teacher ratio, school crime rate, and middle school. *School size* reflects the enrollment size of the school. *Percent school poverty* is operationalized as the percentage of students in each school who receive free and/or reduced lunch. *Student-teacher ratio* is the proportion of students per every one teacher. *School crime rate* captures instances of school misconduct, including assaults, theft, weapon possession, and drug offenses. A composite measure of school crime was created and reflects the rate of school misconduct per 100 students. Higher scores on the *school crime rate* scale indicate higher levels of school-related misbehavior. The alpha coefficient for the scale is .82.¹ *Middle school* is a dichotomous measure in which middle schools are coded as 1 and high schools are coded as 0. Approximately 52% of schools in the sample are middle schools and the other 48% are high schools.

At the school district-level, we control for high school dropout rate, percent male, crime rate, concentrated disadvantage, and teacher experience. *High school dropout rate* represents the

percentage of students who dropped out of school across each school district. *Percent male* is the percentage of male residents in each school district. The *crime rate* represents the number of index crimes per 100,000 people in each school district. *Concentrated disadvantage* is a 3-item index indicating the level of disadvantage that is characteristic of the school district. The three items comprising the *concentrated disadvantage* scale are: the percentage of residents living below the poverty line, the percentage of residents receiving public assistance, and the percentage of residents who are unemployed; the alpha coefficient for this scale is .85. *Teacher experience* is the average experience (in years) of the teachers in each school district.

Analytic Strategy

We used multilevel modeling techniques to examine the effects of school and district-level factors on school punishment. Multilevel modeling is customary for estimating contextual effects when one unit of analysis is clustered within a second unit of analysis (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). The 648 schools in our sample are nested within 66 school districts. Multilevel models explicitly recognize that schools within a particular school district may be more similar to one another than to schools in another school district and, therefore, may not constitute independent observations. Consequently, failure to account for non-independence of observations can result in standard errors that are biased downward, which increases the chance of reaching biased conclusions (Kreft and De Leeuw 1999; Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). Furthermore, multilevel modeling allows for simultaneous investigations of school- and district-level variance components on the outcome variable of interest, while maintaining the appropriate level of analysis for the independent variables. Using multi-level techniques available in Stata version 13, we are also able to estimate the amount of variance in school suspensions that exists across school districts.

In addition, two of our dependent variables, Black out-of-school suspension and Hispanic out-of-school suspension, have highly skewed distributions and show evidence of overdispersion. Our approach to modeling such data is to estimate a negative binomial model. To

ensure that negative binomial regression is the most appropriate statistical tool for our study, we tested for overdispersion, which tests the hypothesis that the mean dispersion parameter is equal to zero ($H_0: K = 0$) against the alternative hypothesis that the mean dispersion is greater than zero ($H_a: K > 0$). In both the Black and Hispanic suspension models, we can reject the null hypothesis, which assumes that the variance and the mean are equal ($K = 0$). Negative binomial regression, therefore, is the most appropriate approach. In the White suspension models evidence of overdispersion was not found therefore multilevel Poisson regression was utilized.²

RESULTS

Direct Effects of *Racial Threat*

Table 2 presents the results of the negative binomial and Poisson regression analysis of the direct and interactive effects of racial threat and contact on Black and White suspensions. Model 1 demonstrates that the effect of racial threat at the school-level on Black suspensions is positive and statistically significant ($b = .26$), suggesting that Black suspensions are greater in schools with larger percentages of Black students. In contrast, in Model 3, the effect of racial threat on White suspensions is negative ($b = -.13$). For every one-unit increase in the size of the Black student population, Black suspensions increase by 30%, while the number of suspensions among White students decreases by 12%.³ These relationships hold even after controlling for the influence of school and district-level factors such as school size, school poverty, school crime, high school dropout rate, crime rate and concentrated disadvantage.

The Direct Effects of *Racial Contact*

The direct effects of interracial contact presented in Model 1 demonstrate that greater contact between Black and White school board members has a negative and statistically significant effect on Black suspensions ($b = -.34$). This finding indicates that in school districts where Black and White school board members have greater contact with one another, Black student suspensions are significantly lower. Similarly, as demonstrated in Model 3, greater contact between Blacks and Whites at the district-level also has a negative effect on White

suspensions ($b = -.46$). Greater interracial contact among school board members thus appears to benefit both Black and White students in disciplinary decision-making by school administrators, but the effect is more pronounced for White students.

[Insert Table 2]

Interaction Effects of *Racial Contact* and *Racial Threat*

Models 2 and 4 in Table 2 illustrate the cross-level interaction effects of racial contact between school board members and racial threat at the school-level on Black and White suspensions. In Model 2, the interaction effect between racial contact and percent Black on Black suspensions is negative and statistically significant ($b = -.50$), indicating that in school districts characterized by increased interracial contact among school board members, Black suspensions are lower in schools with larger Black student populations. Conversely, in Model 4, the effect of the cross-level interaction between racial contact and percent Black on White suspensions is positive and statistically significant ($b = .37$). Interestingly, this effect indicates that in school districts where Blacks and Whites have greater contact, White suspensions increase in schools with larger percentages of Black students. Although this result might suggest that White students are more disadvantaged in schools with larger Black student populations, we maintain that there is an alternative explanation. That is, in school districts where Blacks and Whites come into greater contact, the punishment gap between Black and White students is reduced and suspensions may be administered more equitably in schools with larger Black student populations. This finding has important implications for schools because it demonstrates that interracial contact among school policymakers may affect how threatening Black student populations are perceived to be as well as the way that punishment is administered.

The cross-level interaction effects are illustrated further in Figures 1 and 2. At lower levels of percent Black at the school-level (measured as -1SD below the mean), the chance of Black and White suspensions is essentially unchanged by the amount of racial contact at the district-level. However, at higher levels of percent Black at the school-level (measured at 1SD

above the mean), the disparity in the likelihood of suspension for Black (Figure 1) and White students (Figure 2) declines in school districts with greater interracial contact.

[Insert Figures 1 and 2 here]

Direct Effects of *Ethnic Threat*

Table 3 presents the results for Hispanic and White suspensions. Model 1 demonstrates that Hispanic students are suspended more frequently in schools with a higher percentage of Hispanic students ($b = .24$). In contrast, in Model 3, the effect of ethnic threat on the likelihood of White suspensions is negative and statistically significant ($b = -.08$). In schools with larger Hispanic student population, the number of Hispanic suspensions increases by 27%, while the number of suspensions among White students decreases by approximately 8%. Similar to the models included in Table 2, these effects are statistically significant and arise net of inclusion of school-level and district-level control variables.

Direct Effects of *Ethnic Contact*

Shifting to the effects of ethnic contact on school suspension, Models 1 and 3 identify similar punitive outcomes for Hispanic and White students in school-districts characterized by greater ethnic contact. That is, where there is greater contact between White and Hispanic school board members, the number of suspensions decreases for both Hispanic students ($b = -.31$) and White students ($b = -.21$). Similar to the results presented in Table 2, greater levels of ethnic integration appear to benefit not only Hispanic students but also White students.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Interaction Effects of *Ethnic Threat* and *Ethnic Contact*

Models 2 and 4 in Table 3 illustrate the cross-level interaction effects of ethnic contact at the district-level and ethnic threat at the school-level on Hispanic and White suspensions. In

Model 2, the effect of the cross-level interaction between ethnic contact and percent Hispanic is negative and statistically significant ($b = -.37$). In districts characterized by greater contact between Whites and Hispanics, the number of Hispanic suspensions decreases in schools with larger Hispanic student populations. Model 4, in contrast, reveals that the effect of the cross-level interaction between ethnic contact and ethnic threat on White suspensions is positive and statistically significant ($b = .17$), suggesting that in districts typified by greater contact between White and Hispanic school board members, White suspensions are higher in schools with larger Hispanic student populations. Similar to the interaction effects observed in Table 2, greater ethnic integration reduces the disparity in the likelihood of White and Hispanic suspensions, resulting in what might be viewed as a more equitable punishment.

Figures 3 and 4 further illustrate the nature of the cross-level interaction between ethnic contact and ethnic threat. At lower levels of percent Hispanic at the school-level (measured at -1SD below the mean), the prospect of Hispanic and White suspensions is unchanged by the extent of ethnic contact at the district-level. However, at higher levels of percent Hispanic at the school-level (measured at 1SD above the mean), the disparity in the likelihood of Hispanic and White suspensions is reduced as ethnic contact increases within the school district.

[Insert Figures 3 and 4 here]

Sensitivity Analyses

To assess if our findings are sensitive to alternative specifications, we created a broader county-level measure of intergroup contact among county residents. Here, rather than focus on school board members, we focused on intergroup contact within the broader county context. The results revealed a similar pattern to those presented above. More specifically, we replicated the four models presented in Tables 2 and 3 with this alternative measure. In Model 1, the effect of Black-White contact on black suspensions was $-.35$ ($p < .05$) and statistically significant. Further, the interaction between percent Black students and Black-White contact in Model 2 was $-.43$ ($p < .05$) and statistically significant. In Model 3, the effect of Black-White contact on white

suspensions was $-.46$ ($p < .05$) and statistically significant. The interaction between percent Black students and Black-White contact on white suspensions in Model 4 was $.36$ ($p < .05$) and statistically significant. In Model 1 of Table 3, Hispanic and White contact on Hispanic suspensions was $-.31$ ($p < .05$) and statistically significant. The interaction between percent Hispanic students and Hispanic-White contact on Hispanic suspensions in Model 2 was $-.35$ ($p < .05$) and statistically significant. In Model 3 of Table 3, Hispanic and White contact on white suspensions was $-.20$ ($p < .05$) and statistically significant. And the interaction between percent Hispanic students and Hispanic-White contact on White suspensions in Model 4 was $.18$ ($p < .05$) and significant. In short, the results parallel and reinforce those shown above.

DISCUSSION

In recent decades, there has been an intensification of punishment across schools in the U.S. These “get tough” policies have led to a significant increase in total suspensions, especially among racial and ethnic minorities, who are two to three times more likely to be suspended or expelled (Skiba 2000; Gregory and Weinstein 2008). Notably, these effects are most pronounced in schools with larger minority student populations (Payne and Welch 2010, 2013; Welch and Payne 2010, 2011; Rocque and Paternoster 2011).

Although these trends have been well-established by prior research, several research gaps have persisted. First, limited attention has been devoted to understanding whether the effect of racial and ethnic threat on punishment varies across racial and ethnic groups. Second, few studies to date have explored the potential effect of intergroup contact on the likelihood of school punishment. Third, and by extension, research has not examined whether intergroup contact moderates racial threat effects. Using a sample of Florida middle schools and high schools embedded within Florida school districts, the current study addresses these research gaps and, in particular, tested three hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that the effect of racial and ethnic threat would increase the likelihood of punishment for all students. Second, we hypothesized that greater racial and ethnic contact would reduce rates of punishment for all students. Finally, we

posited that the effects of racial and ethnic threat in schools would be conditioned by the level of intergroup contact among school board members in the school district.

The study found the following. First, racial and ethnic minorities were more likely to be punished in schools with larger minority student populations. This finding extends prior work by showing that the negative consequences of racial and ethnic threat may be primarily shouldered by Black and Hispanic students. At the same time, White students in schools with larger Black and Hispanic student populations were less likely to be punished.

Second, greater contact between minorities and Whites on school boards, where school policies are crafted, reduced the likelihood of punishment for both minority and White students. Consistent with work that has identified beneficial effects of intergroup contact, this finding suggests that greater racial and ethnic contact at the district level has the potential to reduce the imposition of formal social control in schools across racial and ethnic groups.

Finally, intergroup contact buffered the negative effect of racial and ethnic threat on school punishment. In school districts with higher levels of interracial contact, racial and ethnic threat effects were substantially reduced. In addition, greater racial and ethnic contact among school board members at the district-level appeared to result in a more equitable distribution of punishment in schools that had larger concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities.

Several implications emerge from this study's findings. First, consistent with the premise of the threat perspective, our results illustrate that increases in minority populations are associated with the intensification of social control measures. However, we find that threat is consequential for student discipline differently across race and ethnicity. Although existing research has concluded that a larger percentage of minority students in schools creates a more punitive atmosphere for all students, our findings suggest that it is the Black and the Hispanic students who bear the brunt of any resulting punishment.

Second, interracial contact among school board members is consequential for school-level disciplinary decisions. Specifically, greater contact between Whites and minorities on district school boards is associated with a lower likelihood of punishing students more severely.

Moreover, interracial contact at the district level is associated with a lower likelihood of punishment across *all* racial groups. The implication here is that in school districts where there is greater racial and ethnic contact among school board members, the imposition of more severe forms of punishment is diminished. It follows logically that reductions in prejudicial and stereotypical beliefs, which are expected to result from greater interracial contact, may explain the lesser reliance on social control measures by school boards and district administrators.

Finally, this study endeavored to reconcile the conflicting perspectives concerning race and ethnicity put forth by the threat hypothesis and the contact hypothesis. Although we find that threat increases the likelihood of punishment for minorities while decreasing suspensions for Whites, our results demonstrate that school punishment is administered more equitably in schools located in districts with more diverse school boards. Perhaps greater interracial or interethnic contact among district administrators reduces stereotypes which, in turn, decreases the impetus to impose harsher discipline on minority students. On the other hand, greater racial and ethnic contact among district school board members closed the punishment gap between White and minority students. In schools with lower percentages of minority students, racial and ethnic contact in the school district had no effect across race and ethnicity on the likelihood of being punished. That is, school disciplinary decisions may be more evenhanded in areas of greater racial and ethnic integration, especially in schools where minority threat is higher.

Future Research

The results of this study suggest several critical lines of inquiry for future research. First, future scholarship should explore whether different conceptualizations of racial and ethnic threat and contact yield similar results to those found here. For instance, Chiricos et al. (2001) suggest that perceptual indicators of racial threat may better capture feelings of fear and danger in comparison to objective measures such as the size of the minority population in an area. Self-report indicators of contact have been used to capture the extent to which different groups interact (Pettigrew 1998; Mears et al. 2013). In addition, scholars often have employed dynamic

indicators of racial and ethnic threat, which consider the change or growth in minority populations in a given area (Caravelis et al. 2011; Johnson et al. 2011; King and Wheelock 2007; Wang and Mears 2010). It is possible that the patterns identified in this study may vary depending on the use of these or other such measures of threat or contact.

Second, scholars should endeavor to analyze data from other states and across the U.S. Doing so will facilitate greater understanding about how the school and district processes discussed here may operate across different geographic contexts.

Third, in the current study, we focus primarily on out-of-school suspensions as the punishment of interest because it is the most consistent disciplinary outcome across middle schools and high schools. Future research should explore whether the racial and ethnic context of schools is consequential for other punishment outcomes, such as expulsions, in-school suspension, and office referrals.

Fourth, the cross-sectional nature of the data used here precludes an assessment of causal order. To address this issue in part, we included controls for school- and district-level crime rates. Crime rates not only may be the result of the rate of criminal activity but also reflect the degree to which law enforcement is mobilized to control certain populations (Black 2010). In addition, longitudinal analyses have provided support for threat and contact effects. For example, using time-series data, Kent and Jacobs (2004) found that racial threat precedes increases in the severity of crime policy. Even so, future research should continue to investigate the effect of minority threat and contact on school punishment using longitudinal data.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study merit further investigation into the combined effects of threat and contact on school punishment among different racial and ethnic groups. They also highlight the potential benefits of racially diverse and integrated spaces. Prior research has typically explored the role of racial and ethnic integration in terms of school achievement (Bankston and Caldas 1996 2000; Caldas and Bankston 1998; Lee and Klugman 2012; Ryabov

and Van Hook 2007). The results here suggest that racial and ethnic contact also may influence the administration of school punishment. Specifically, greater racial and ethnic contact may not only reduce the negative effects of minority threat on school discipline but also diminish the punishment gap between White and minority students. As school districts nationally seek to improve school safety and fairness in punishment, a greater focus on racial and ethnic relations may be in order.

Notes:

1. Including school crime rate in the multivariate analyses is endogenous to school disciplinary policy. As a result, our models are conservative estimates of race specific school suspensions.
2. Before beginning with our primary analyses, we estimated three null multilevel models which contained no predictors. The results of the null multilevel models revealed that the district-level variance in the dependent variables was 0.545 for Black suspensions, 0.839 for Hispanic suspensions, and 0.277 for White suspensions. The null hypothesis of no variation in the average level of the outcomes across districts is rejected (Black suspensions $\chi^2_{(6)} = 110.43$, $p < .05$; Hispanic suspensions $\chi^2_{(6)} = 337.81$, $p < .05$; White suspensions $\chi^2_{(6)} = 159.48$, $p < .05$). These findings suggest that our race and ethnic suspension outcomes vary significantly across districts and can be modeled. They also confirm the suspicion that Black and Hispanic suspensions are more strongly tied to district level processes than are White suspensions.
3. According to Long (1997), one way to interpret the results of a negative binomial model is by exponentiating the coefficients, subtracting one, and multiplying the result by 100 or $\{100 \times [\exp(\beta) - 1]\}$. This provides the estimated percentage change in suspensions associated with a one-unit change in a given independent variable (see also Hilbe 2011).

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TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum	N
<i>Dependent variables</i>					
Black suspension	51.23	58.03	0	345	648
Hispanic suspension	29.23	37.61	0	313	648
White suspension	57.38	47.33	0	287	648
<i>Independent variables</i>					
<u>School-level threat</u>					
Percent Black students	.20	.19	0	.98	648
Percent Hispanic students	.20	.19	0	.98	648
<u>District-level contact</u>					
Black-White contact	.17	.12	.0	.80	66
Hispanic-White contact	.12	.09	.0	.41	66
<i>Control Variables</i>					
<u>School-level Controls</u>					
School size	1278.34	679	76	4192	648
Percent school poverty	.52	.20	0	1	648
Student-teacher ratio	17.74	13.83	2.82	45	648
School crime rate	.002	.17	0	3.67	648
Middle school	.52	.50	0	1	648
<u>District-level Controls</u>					
High school dropout rate	.02	.01	.002	.06	66
Percent male	.49	.02	.48	.63	66
Crime rate	3464.3	1089.01	821.7	5656.22	66
Concentrated disadvantage	.08	.02	.05	.14	66
Teacher experience	12.13	1.6	6.92	15.06	66

TABLE 2. Multi-Level Regression of Direct and Interaction Effects of Racial Threat and Exposure on Black and White Suspension

	<i>BLACK SUSPENSION</i>				<i>WHITE SUSPENSION</i>			
	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4	
	<i>B</i>	S.E.	<i>B</i>	S.E.	<i>B</i>	S.E.	<i>B</i>	S.E.
<u>School-level threat</u>								
Percent Black students	.26*	.02	.30*	.02	-.13*	.02	-.16*	.02
<u>District-level contact</u>								
Black-White contact	-.34*	.07	-.39*	.07	-.46*	.06	-.47*	.07
<u>School-level controls</u>								
School size	.70*	.05	.70*	.05	.62*	.05	.64*	.05
Percent school poverty	.11*	.02	.10*	.02	.08*	.02	.09*	.02
Student-teacher ratio	-.12	.20	-.12	.20	.04	.27	-.02	.28
School crime rate	.32	.79	.39	.70	.03	.70	.22	.72
Middle school	.24*	.07	.25*	.07	.02	.06	.03	.06
<u>District-level controls</u>								
High school dropout rate	.12*	.05	.12*	.05	.03	.04	.03	.04
Percent male	.12	.27	.11	.27	.03	.24	.02	.24
Crime rate	.17*	.06	.16*	.06	.18*	.05	.20*	.05
Concentrated disadvantage	-.11	.08	-.11	.08	-.02	.07	-.02	.07
Teacher experience	.31	.32	.32	.33	.45	.30	.44	.30
<u>Cross-level Interactions</u>								
Percent Black students * Black-White contact	--	--	-.50*	.10	--	--	.37*	.13
Log likelihood	-2897.9563		-2888.6389		-3025.7314		-3021.8766	
Chi²	749.07*		825.22*		367.65*		389.21*	
† p ≤ .10; * p ≤ .05, N = 66 counties, 642 schools								

TABLE 3. Multi-Level Regression of Direct and Interaction Effects of Ethnic Threat and Exposure on Hispanic and White Suspension

	<i>HISPANIC SUSPENSION</i>				<i>WHITE SUSPENSION</i>			
	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4	
	<i>B</i>	S.E.	<i>B</i>	S.E.	<i>B</i>	S.E.	<i>B</i>	S.E.
<u>School-level threat</u>								
Percent Hispanic students	.24*	.02	.29*	.02	-.08*	.02	-.11*	.03
<u>District-level contact</u>								
Hispanic-White contact	-.31*	.05	-.23*	.05	-.21*	.05	-.23*	.05
<u>School-level controls</u>								
School size	.60*	.05	.58*	.04	.75*	.05	.77*	.05
Percent school poverty	.13*	.01	.12*	.01	.05*	.01	.06*	.01
Student-teacher ratio	-.09	.24	-.06	.21	.02	.22	.02	.23
School crime rate	.24	.83	.14	.83	-.28	.76	-.16	.76
Middle school	.04	.06	.04	.06	.16*	.06	.16*	.06
<u>District-level controls</u>								
High school dropout rate	.20*	.06	.18*	.05	.04	.04	.05	.04
Percent male	.01	.31	.02	.30	.04	.22	-.02	.23
Crime rate	.19*	.06	.22*	.06	-.08†	.05	-.10*	.05
Concentrated disadvantage	-.34*	.10	-.24*	.10	-.06	.07	-.08	.07
Teacher experience	.77*	.38	.68†	.36	.42	.29	.47	.29
<u>Cross-level Interactions</u>								
Percent Hispanic students * Hispanic-White contact	--	--	-.37*	.07	--	--	.17*	.08
Log likelihood	-2454.2361		-2440.3652		-3050.914		-3048.4912	
Chi²	654.56*		809.12*		349.36*		352.59*	

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$, N = 66 counties, 642 schools

FIGURE 1. Interaction Effects of Racial Contact and Percent Black on Black Suspensions

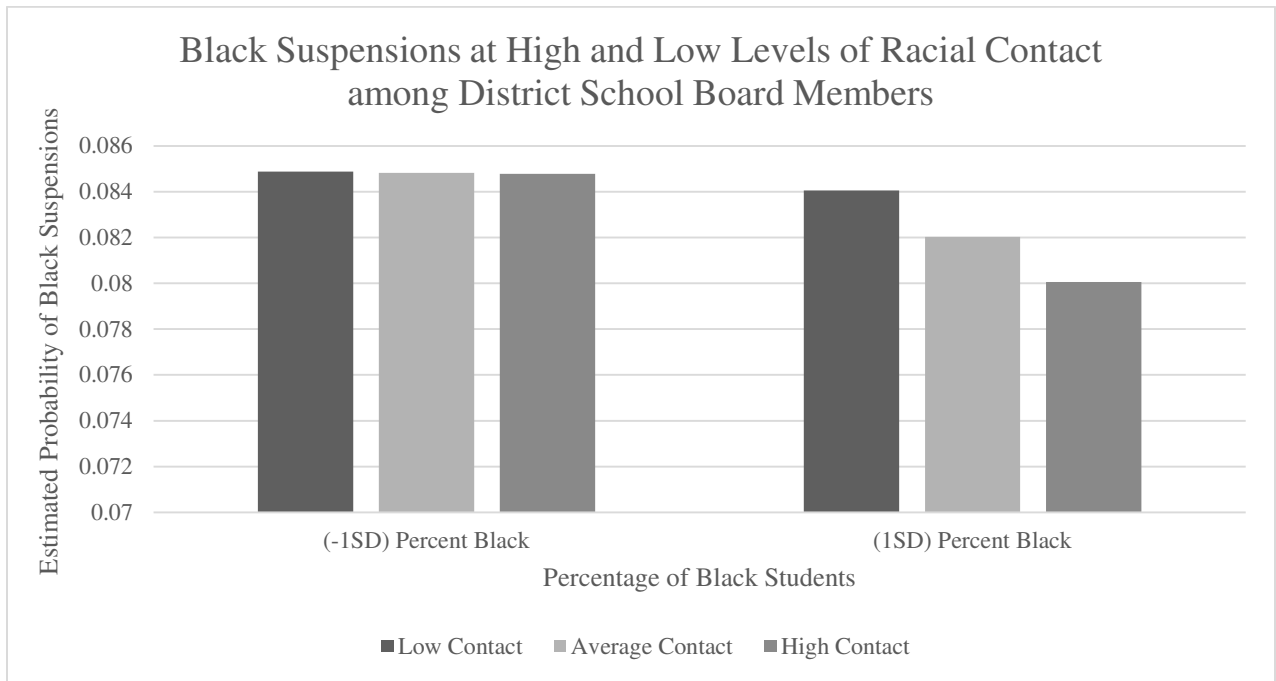


FIGURE 2. Interaction Effects of Racial Contact and Percent Black on White Suspensions

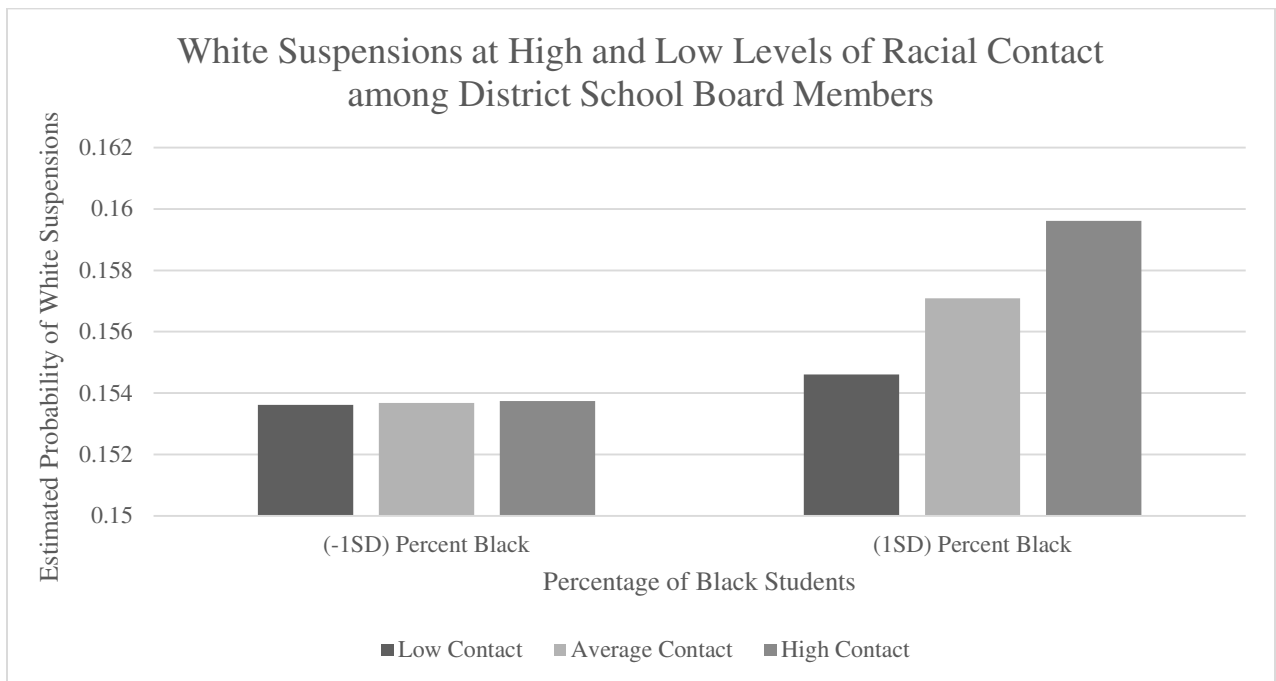


FIGURE 3. Interaction Effects of Ethnic Contact and Percent Hispanic on Hispanic Suspensions

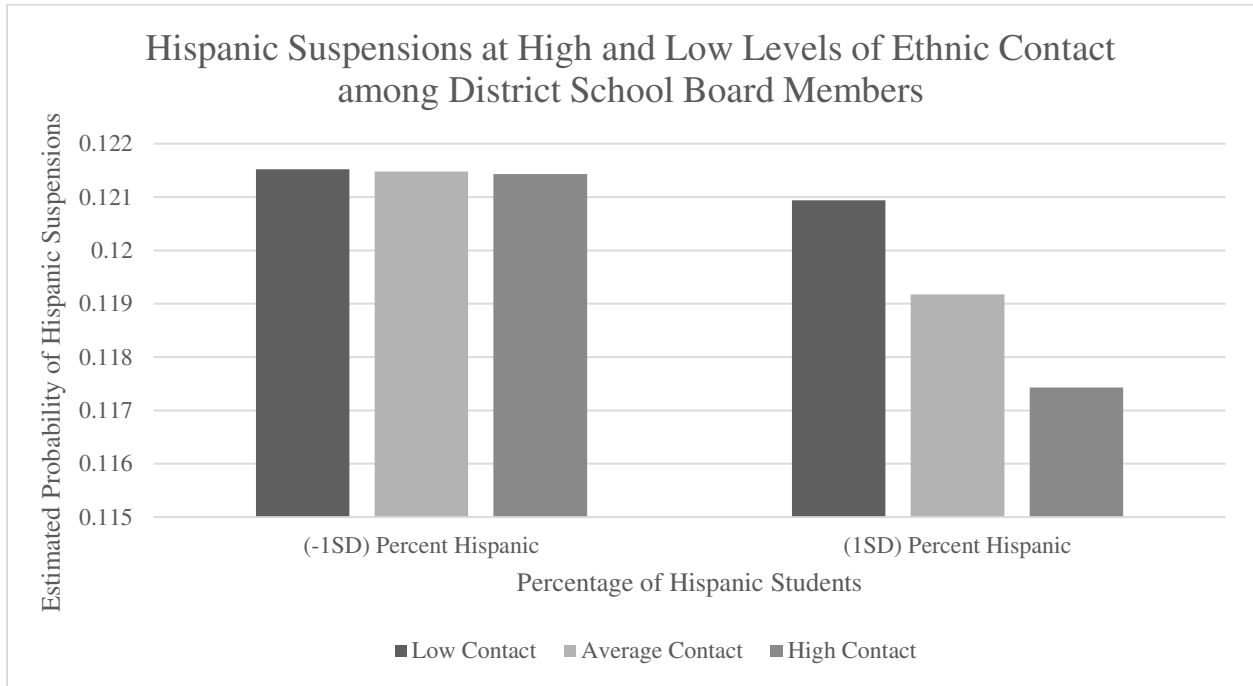


FIGURE 4. Interaction Effects of Ethnic Contact and Percent Hispanic on White Suspensions

