Interrupted School Attendance and Suspension

The purpose of this document is to collate published research, the findings of government reports and inquiries, and academic commentary in relation to interrupted school attendance, premature school leaving and suspension, and the effects this may have on a person’s behaviour; development; physical, mental and social well-being; and links to contact with the criminal justice system.

Introduction

1 Published research suggesting links between interrupted schooling and entry into the criminal justice system has a long history. In 2013, the Tasmanian Commissioner for Children cited the Children’s Defence Fund, a US organisation that in 1974 found:

[S]uspension and other forms of exclusionary discipline were associated with decreased student academic success and an increased risk of juvenile delinquency, and that exclusionary discipline was used disproportionately against poor, minority and special education students.1

2 The vast majority of children and young people interviewed in the 2019 report of the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) self-identified that long and multiple suspensions were a reason for their conflict with the law.2 A key recommendation of that report was that alternatives to long suspension should be introduced.3

3 The Victorian Ombudsman’s 2017 investigation into school expulsions found:

The positive link between education and better results in a person’s life is well established. Similarly, a negative correlation exists between disengagement from education and difficulties for young people, including contact with the criminal justice system.4

4 A recent Victorian study identified that ‘[s]uspension has an intuitive appeal for the maintenance of school discipline by providing prompt relief to teachers, school leadership, and students engaged in academic learning’.5 The author concluded, however, that

[it]he current practice of school suspension may not be recognising that a minority of students lack the social and emotional skills to consistently regulate their behaviour to the level expected in the classroom. These students who have the most to gain from being

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3 Ibid, 14.
engaged in school are being exposed to known risk factors for antisocial behaviour and academic failure via the application of suspension.\(^6\)

5 Research reveals that incomplete schooling, including premature school leaving (year 9 or below), and interrupted attendance has potential negative impacts.\(^7\) Interrupting a student’s schooling can lead to lowered educational and employment outcomes.\(^8\) Exclusion from the supervisory context of a school can reinforce existing feelings of marginalisation, particularly in students who are already experiencing challenges at school due to other underlying issues.\(^9\)

Young people reported to the ACYP that ‘the cycle of back-to-back suspensions often repeats until a student is expelled or drops out.’\(^10\)

6 Absence of supervision can also be a catalyst for an increase in antisocial behaviour\(^11\) and offending\(^12\) due to increased contact with antisocial peers\(^13\) and the vulnerability of young people to contact with police while unsupervised in public spaces.\(^14\)

7 Diminished educational outcomes are a predictor for future contact with the criminal justice system,\(^15\) and low educational engagement (both a symptom and a cause of suspension) has been studied as resulting in poor health and wellbeing outcomes.\(^16\) Suspension may indicate the student is facing other underlying issues.\(^17\)

Suspension may be indicative of other underlying issues

8 As stated by Youth Affairs Council Victoria:

‘[T]he risk of being excluded from school is significantly higher amongst young people who are already facing disadvantage. These include young people in out-of-home care, young people with disabilities, Aboriginal young people, and young people living in some (although not all) suburbs with high rates of socio-economic disadvantage… In turn, being

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\(^6\) Ibid.


\(^8\) Youth Affairs Council Victoria (n 7) 4; Department of Education (NT), *Every Day Counts: Northern Territory Government School Attendance and Engagement Strategy 2016–2018.*


\(^10\) Advocate for Children and Young People (n 2) 23.

\(^11\) Daniel Quin (n 5) 1; Youth Affairs Council Victoria (n 7) 7.


\(^13\) Sheryl A Hemphill, David J Broderick and Jessica A Heerde (n 9) 9.

\(^14\) Rob White, ‘Young People, Community Space and Social Control’ (Conference Paper, National Conference on Juvenile Justice, 22–24 September 1992); Advocate for Children and Young People (n 2) 23.


excluded from school increases the risk that these young people will become even more vulnerable and marginalised.\textsuperscript{18}

9 In 2017, the NSW Ombudsman’s \textit{Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools} noted that many students subject to behaviour management processes (including suspension and/or expulsion) had complex needs associated with a range of factors, such as disability; mental health concerns; exposure to abuse, neglect or other trauma; and difficult personal or family circumstances (including socio-economic factors, drug/alcohol abuse, and family breakdown).\textsuperscript{19} The Ombudsman provided data to support these indicators of disadvantage.\textsuperscript{20}

10 A young person suggested to the ACYP in 2019 that schools should provide greater support to students who are experiencing serious issues at home:

\begin{quote}
Instead of focusing on education they should also focus on what’s happening outside of school. Like what the kids are getting up to, if they have drug problems, … family problems, domestic violence and stuff like that. They should try to solve it within school cos that’s where boys spend most of their time.
\end{quote}

11 The NSW Ombudsman’s \textit{2011 review} of the circumstances of 48 ‘at risk’ primary school aged Aboriginal children from two high-need communities in Western NSW identified that ‘children’s failure to regularly attend school is also often an indicator of broader abuse and neglect.’\textsuperscript{22} The Ombudsman has noted that a significant number of the children in its 2011 study ‘who had failed to attend school for more than 50 days in a year had substantial child protection histories of abuse and neglect and were living in homes where reports of family violence were prevalent.’\textsuperscript{23}

12 A number of studies show higher rates of suspensions for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.\textsuperscript{24}

13 In 2013, the \textit{Tasmanian Commissioner for Children} cited a large-scale study covering 30 communities across three Australian states with surveys of primary and high schools with nearly 10,000 respondents, Hemphill et al have demonstrated a clear association between students living in lower SES level communities and high suspension rates. This association was independent of gender, age, antisocial behaviour, family owning or buying their own home, academic failure and interaction with antisocial peers.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Youth Affairs Council Victoria} (n 7) 7.
\textsuperscript{19} NSW Ombudsman, \textit{Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools} 4.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid 50.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Advocate for Children and Young People} (n 2) 22.
\textsuperscript{22} NSW Ombudsman, \textit{Addressing Aboriginal Disadvantage} 35.
\textsuperscript{23} NSW Ombudsman, \textit{Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools} 50.
14 Suspensions are also experienced at a higher rate by students with cognitive or learning impairments, particularly where there are associated behavioural issues.26 The Tasmanian Commissioner for Children, citing Eileen Baldry, noted:

The consequences of the needs of these [cognitively impaired] students not being identified and addressed earlier by agencies of care and support leads to them being funnelled into agencies of control, i.e., police, juvenile justice, courts, corrections agencies.27 In other words, the care and support agencies/systems, including the education system, simply fail to identify and address their needs.28

15 The NSW Ombudsman’s 2017 Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools observed that key points in the suspension process – including consideration as to whether to suspend a student, and the suspension resolution meeting – do not appear to adequately trigger actions to examine the underlying cause of the student’s behaviour; to review what has been done to date; and to identify and implement further actions.29

Potential Impacts

Poor long-term health and wellbeing outcomes

16 Education is recognised by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare as playing a critical role in a child’s health and wellbeing, with ‘low levels of education associated with a range of adverse psychological and health outcomes.’30

17 The Victorian Department of Education and Training similarly identifies that a ‘quality education has lifelong positive effects on individual prosperity, health and wellbeing’.31

18 Researchers from the University of Tasmania conducted a longitudinal study of data from 5,665 children surveyed in 1985, and from 3,374 adults with comparative data from a cohort surveyed 20 years later. The study found that greater school engagement was associated with better childhood self-rated health and lower odds of smoking and consuming alcohol.32 A significant association was also found between school engagement and self-rated health in adulthood.33


28 Commissioner for Children (Tas), Student Suspensions: A Research Review (November 2013) 22.

29 NSW Ombudsman, Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools 42.


33 Ibid 22. The study found that the ‘association between stronger school engagement and greater avoidance of health risk behaviours such as smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol was only marginally attenuated by socio-economic status and school attainment’: 24.
Educational outcomes and employment

19 The Australian Law Reform Commission has stated that the ‘links between lack of employment opportunity, lack of educational attainment, and subsequent entry into the criminal justice system are well established.’

20 The Youth Affairs Council Victoria recognises that

[high quality education is fundamental to the development of a young person’s talents, skills, social connections, identity, dignity and wellbeing. It provides a pathway into employment and financial stability, to enable a young person to overcome disadvantage, contribute to their communities and make their aspirations a reality.]

21 As similarly noted by the 2004 Review of Aboriginal Education in New South Wales, ‘higher levels of education make a person less likely to be involved in risk-taking behaviours such as crime (partially by increasing income and reducing the incentive to commit crime).’

22 Regular school attendance is recognised by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare as an ‘important factor in educational and life success,’ and helps children ‘develop the basic building blocks for learning, educational attainment and social skills.’ In 2011, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs found that ‘children who have access to a good quality education and who are supported and directed by their parents to attend school are likely to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and social norms for a productive and rewarding adult life.’

23 A study by the Northern Territory Department of Education demonstrated the correlation between school attendance and school achievement: where Indigenous students attended school over four days per week, over 60 per cent of these students achieved or exceeded minimum standard across NAPLAN testing.

24 In relation to participation in further education, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare states that:

Qualifications are an important indicator of an individual’s capacity to compete in demanding labour markets. While tertiary qualifications are often used as a proxy for income and employment prospects, obtaining a qualification at any level is likely to improve young people’s employment opportunities.


35 *Youth Affairs Council Victoria* (n 7) 4.


37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.


The same report goes on to state that ‘[s]ecure and satisfactory employment offers young people not only financial independence but also a sense of control, self-confidence and social contact.’ This was confirmed by juvenile interviewees in the 2019 report of the ACYP.

**Reinforcement of negative behaviours**

The evidence for the use of suspension is described as ‘mixed’ by the ACT Expert Panel on Children with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviour.

The Youth Affairs Council Victoria suggests that positive outcomes from suspension are ‘usually contingent upon the student having reasonably good mental health, no major trauma, a safe and supportive home environment, adequate access to in-school supports, and few outside factors impacting negatively on their education.’

In a recent Queensland study, Linda Graham considers international research and concludes that schools continue to use suspension against disadvantaged students for whom suspension has previously proven ineffective. Graham concludes that ‘the bulk of the research evidence indicates that suspension does not help to address the reasons for student disengagement and may in fact accelerate vulnerable students’ disconnection from school.’

The Civil Rights Project (US) recognises the importance of positive role models, stating:

> Ultimately, to succeed, at-risk youth need to develop strong bonds with caring and compassionate adults whom they can trust. They require individualised discipline that takes into account their unique circumstances. As a consequence, their chances for developing essential resiliency skills and positive attitudes about adult authority, justice, and fairness are greatly enhanced.

Similarly, juvenile detainees interviewed by the ACYP in 2019 said they wanted ‘connection to trusted adults in the community such as mentoring by community members, Elders, and other respected people with similar lived experiences to themselves.’

A series of cross-national studies by Hemphill et al indicate that the use of suspensions can in fact cause further behavioural and emotional problems, particularly for students with complex needs. One of these studies found that students who were suspended were more

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42 Ibid 132.
43 Advocate for Children and Young People (n 2) 7.
45 Youth Affairs Council Victoria (n 7) 20.
47 Ibid.
49 Advocate for Children and Young People (n 2) 5.
likely to subsequently engage in antisocial behaviour, even when other relevant risk factors were accounted for.\textsuperscript{51}

32 The ACT Expert Panel on Children with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviour found that ‘students who feel a sense of belonging at school may experience suspension as a negative consequence, and it may assist them to think and act differently.’\textsuperscript{32} The Panel submitted that some students with cognitive disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder or trauma background have limited capacity to understand and change their behaviour after being admonished. Suspension may cause them confusion, or further undermine their capacity for developing positive relationships. For students experiencing anxiety about school, suspension may reinforce negative behaviour by teaching them that violent or disobedient behaviour allows them to avoid the demands of the school environment.\textsuperscript{53}

33 The NSW Ombudsman’s 2017 Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools also identified that any method of suspension that involves a young person being excluded from their usual place of education can backfire because not having to attend school can be regarded by young people as a ‘bonus’ – leading to further poor behaviour aimed at incurring additional suspensions.\textsuperscript{54}

34 Hemphill et al posit that suspended students may develop an ‘outsider’ mentality, ‘internalising their identity as a disruptive or ‘bad’ student, and become alienated or detached from the school community’.\textsuperscript{55} Other Australian research found that on the day/s of suspension suspended students lacked adult supervision and rarely completed schoolwork. Upon their return to school, suspended students reported that their teachers were less supportive and that suspension hadn’t addressed underlying issues.\textsuperscript{56}

35 Daniel Quin’s 2019 study of risk and protective factors in suspended and non-suspended students concluded that the demonstrated association between suspension and problem behaviours and negative emotions … gives rise to two potential explanations. First, that students with pre-existing problem behaviours commensurate with emotional and behavioural disorders are more likely to be suspended. Second, that suspension increases the likelihood of problem behaviours and emotional problems.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{52} Expert Panel on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviour (ACT), Schools for All Young People (Final Report, November 2015) 167.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} NSW Ombudsman, Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools 51.
\textsuperscript{55} Sheryl A Hemphill, David J Broderick and Jessica A Heerde, (n 9) 9. See also Daniel Quin and Sheryl A Hemphill, ‘Students’ Experiences of School Suspension’ (2014) 25 Health Promotion Journal of Australia 52.
\textsuperscript{56} Daniel Quin and Sheryl A Hemphill, ‘Students’ Experiences of School Suspension’ (2014) 25 Health Promotion Journal of Australia 52.
\textsuperscript{57} Daniel Quin, (n 5) 6.
Greater risk of negative behaviour and contact with the criminal justice system

36 In *Arresting Incarceration – Pathways out of Indigenous Imprisonment*, Don Weatherburn surveyed research that indicated school performance was a stronger indicator of ‘delinquent behaviour’ than other factors such as physical abuse and neglect. Zingraff et al found that neglected and physically abused children were much more likely to commit delinquent acts than their general school counterparts. This difference was attenuated and, in the case of physical abuse, disappeared altogether when they controlled for school performance. In other words, students who were physically abused but who did well at school were no more likely to become involved in crime than children who were not known to have suffered any maltreatment.

37 Weatherburn points to similar results obtained in Australia by Joanne Baker, who found:

> The odds of self-reported involvement in assault and property crime were 1.4 and 1.5 times higher (respectively) for juveniles who reported a below average school performance than for juveniles who reported average or above average performance.

38 *Doing Time – Time for Doing*, the 2011 report of the House of Representatives inquiry into the high level of involvement of Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the criminal justice system, identifies educational attainment as an indicator for future contact with the criminal justice system: ‘The difference in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is a powerful determinant of the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in the justice system.’

39 Being suspended ‘often means a student spends more time away from adult supervision, bored and disengaged from positive school influences.’ Exclusion from school ‘also increases a student’s likelihood of becoming involved in antisocial behaviour.’ Daniel Quin cites Australian and international research indicating that a ‘strong association is consistently found between low school engagement and antisocial behaviour, academic failure, and reduced mental health.’

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63 Youth Affairs Council Victoria (n 7) 6–7.
Research by Beatton et al in 2016 uncovered a ‘sizeable causal impact of education on youth crime.’\(^{65}\) The study found that raising the school age in Queensland from 15 to 17 in 2006 led to a reduction in crime rates among young people. The law change ‘forces youth to be in a supervised environment rather than roaming the streets, so there is an incapacitation effect that reduces crime.’\(^{66}\) The effects of this change are ‘sizeable, and emerge for participation in all offending behaviour, and also within the distinct domains of violent, property and drug crime.’\(^{67}\)

Hemphill et al concluded in their 2017 study that the lack of supervision entailed in suspension affords young people greater opportunity to associate with antisocial peers, which is a documented risk factor for engaging in antisocial behaviours.\(^{68}\) After controlling for a variety of established risk and protective factors, Hemphill et al found that school suspension was associated with a 1.5 times greater risk of antisocial behaviour.\(^{69}\) Young people interviewed by the ACYP confirmed that ‘when they and their peers are not engaged in meaningful activities they were more likely to commit crime.’\(^{70}\)

Various bodies, including the Victorian Ombudsman,\(^{71}\) the Department of Education Western Australia,\(^{72}\) the NSW Department of Education and Training\(^{73}\) and the Law Council of Australia\(^{74}\) have identified that poor school attendance and low educational outcomes are factors that increase the risk of contact with the criminal justice system later in life. This is evidenced by the high proportion of youth in detention who have been suspended:

- 93.8 per cent of participants in the 2015 NSW Young People in Custody Health Survey had been suspended from school on at least one occasion.\(^{75}\)
- 78.1 per cent of NSW participants had been suspended three or more times.\(^{76}\)
- 53.0% of young people reported their highest level of educational attainment as Year 9 or below.\(^{77}\)
- The median age of leaving school for NSW participants was 15 years.\(^{78}\)


\(^{66}\) Ibid 6.

\(^{67}\) Ibid 18.


\(^{69}\) Ibid 5.

\(^{70}\) Advocate for Children and Young People (n 2) 6.


\(^{72}\) Evidence to House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Parliament of Australia, Sydney, 28 January 2011, 77 (Robert Somerville, Department of Education Western Australia), cited in Doing Time – Time for Doing: Indigenous Youth in the Criminal Justice System 121 [5.2]. See also NSW Ombudsman, Inquiry into Behaviour Management in Schools for further evidence of the recognition by community leaders that disengagement from school impacts negatively on educational achievement and future employment (and related) prospects: 50.

\(^{73}\) Doing Time – Time for Doing: Indigenous Youth in the Criminal Justice System 18 [2.43].

\(^{74}\) Law Council of Australia, Submission No 97 to Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, Inquiry into the Value of a Justice Reinvestment Approach to Criminal Justice in Australia (22 March 2013) 15.


\(^{76}\) Ibid. In New South Wales, there were no differences found in the prevalence of frequency of suspension according to gender or Aboriginality.

\(^{77}\) Ibid 14. In contrast, across the entire population of people aged 15-74 years living in NSW, only 8.6% reported that their highest level of educational attainment was Year 9 or below.
• 65 per cent of 1,094 young people surveyed in custody in Victoria had previously been expelled or suspended.79

The increased likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system according to school engagement is disproportionately experienced by certain groups. The highest proportion of children receiving short and long suspensions is found in regional and remote areas.80 Data also show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are significantly overrepresented in suspensions from school. In 2017, while Aboriginal students comprised 7 per cent of full-time enrolments in NSW public schools, they comprised 24 per cent of short suspensions, and 28 per cent of long suspensions.81

The Australian Law Reform Commission has identified that ‘contact with the child protection system and the youth justice system are both risk factors for adult incarceration.’82

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78 Ibid. The median age at which young females left school was significantly earlier than that of young males (14 years vs. 15 years): 14.
82 Australian Law Reform Commission, Pathways to Justice – An Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ALRC Report No 133, December 2017) 73.