



Charter Schools & Crime

Executive Summary

Schools are one of the primary places where children are taught the skills and behaviors needed to operate in society. Additionally, they are places where high proportions of young people congregate. In part because of their developing brains, young people tend to commit crimes at higher rates than other populations. Missouri has seen a rapid increase in the number of charter schools (i.e., schools independently operated but publicly funded). This increase follows national trends and has prompted more research on the effects of charter schools. In particular, the link between school type and crime has been researched, but it is difficult to establish causal relationships between present/future criminality and attending a charter school or traditional public school.

Highlights

- Charter schools in Missouri only operate in St. Louis and Kansas City and their numbers have nearly doubled since 2008.
- The literature on the relationship between new charter school openings/closures and crime is inconclusive; some studies find small associations between openings/closures and crime reductions, but others find that these effects are not significant and may be attributable to other causes.
- Expulsions have been associated more with future incarcerations than other disciplinary techniques. These alternative techniques are used more commonly at schools with proportionally higher White student populations.
 - Exclusionary policies (suspensions and expulsions) tend to disproportionately affect Black students and students with disabilities, with both groups being suspended at much higher rates than other student groups.

Limitations

- Charter schools are not standardized in how they operate. Therefore, generalizing the effects of charter schools is difficult.
- Charter schools close at higher rates than traditional public schools. School closings generally have negative effects on students and this could counteract any positive effect charter schools could potentially have on crime.
- Differences in the compositions of charter school student populations (e.g., if they receive higher performing students) may have more of an effect on crime than the actual practices employed at charter schools.

Research Background

Education and Crime

Schools are responsible for the education of students while their adolescent brains are rapidly developing. During this time, they are more prone to risky behavior, including criminal activities.¹ Additionally, schools are one of the primary ways children are socialized, including being taught appropriate behaviors needed to stay bonded to society (i.e. social bond theory).² Social bond theory proposes that people avoid criminal behavior to remain attached to families, society, and institutions. Early exposure to crime can have long-lasting, detrimental effects on students making them more prone to criminal activities in the future.³ For all of these reasons, researchers have investigated the intersection of schools and crime.

Charter Schools and Crime Research

Missouri Charter schools only operate in St. Louis and Kansas City and their numbers have nearly doubled since 2008 (see our Science Note: [Charter School Expansion](#)).⁴ The increase of charter schools in Missouri follows national trends and has led to research investigating what effects charter schools might have on crime, both within communities and over the lifetime of their pupils.

While there have been various studies on the effects of charter schools on crime, the results have not been definitive in establishing if charter schools lead to less crime than traditional public schools (TPS). There are several difficulties in comparing the two types of schools. One difficulty is that charter schools are not standardized, with some being very high performing while others are not. Furthermore, since charter school enrollment is a parent choice, students that go to charter schools have at least some parental involvement in their child's education, which is linked to better student outcomes.⁵ This makes comparisons between charter schools and TPS difficult because students that go to charter schools might have higher levels of parental involvement than those that go to TPSs.

A study of perceived safety at charter schools and TPSs in Detroit found neighborhood charter schools had higher perceptions of safety by students.⁶ However, for most Detroit schools, few differences were found in perceived safety between charter schools and TPSs when controlling for parental involvement.

Other studies have investigated the effects of transferring to and from charter schools. Switching to a higher quality charter school is shown in one example (a single school in New York) to lower rates of teenage pregnancies and incarceration.⁷ However, the emphasis of this study was the effect of changing school quality on outcomes, and only a single, high-performing charter school was studied because its random lottery for admissions was methodologically easier to study. Another study, this time in North Carolina, compared outcomes for students

who switched to charter schools in 9th grade, students who stayed in TPSs, and students who switched to TPSs from charter schools.⁸ Students who switched to charter schools were found to have lower rates of crime, but no differences were found between those who stayed in TPSs vs. those who switched from charter schools to TPSs. It is unknown if schools reported behavioral problems the same way, which could account for differences in results.

Finally, in a nationwide analysis of charter schools and TPSs, charter schools were associated with lower crime rates.⁹ These differences were correlated with smaller school size, parental involvement, and less use of student removal disciplinary practices (i.e. suspensions and expulsions). Importantly, this analysis showed a *correlation* between charter schools and lower crime but did not analyze experimentally if charter schools *caused* lower crime.

The Effects of Schools Openings and Closures

Within 5 years of starting, 29% of charter schools in the U.S. have closed (using [Common Core data](#).)¹⁰ These closures are attributed to several different factors including academic failure, financial problems, low enrollment, and fraud. Currently, there is not enough research to confidently conclude what effect school closures have on crime levels.

One study in Philadelphia found lower rates of crime in communities after school closures. However, the schools closed were the lowest-performing and had the highest rates of student behavior problems.¹¹ Another study, again in Philadelphia, found that most students displaced by school closures did not have achievement changes, but they did have increased behavior problems (leading to more suspensions) the farther away their new school was.¹² The effects of school closures are not evenly distributed across all ethnic and socioeconomic classes; minority and poor populations are disproportionately subject to school closures.¹¹

Conversely, little research has investigated if school openings lower crime. In a study of urban school openings between 1998 and 2010, crime was reduced in the immediate areas surrounding newly opened TPSs and charter schools.¹³ The results could possibly be explained by the schools replacing what would otherwise have been vacant buildings.

Discipline and Student Outcomes

Higher rates of the use of suspensions and expulsions in schools have been shown to increase local crime levels.¹⁴ Exclusionary policies tend to disproportionately affect Black students and students with disabilities, with both groups being suspended at much higher rates than other student groups.¹⁵ Suspensions from school are the beginning of what is commonly called the “school to prison pipeline,” since schools with higher suspension rates have students that are 15-20% more likely to be incarcerated as adults.¹⁶

Restorative justice methods are alternative disciplinary methods to suspensions and typically focus on reconciliation and community-building rather than isolating students for punishment. Examples include having an offender clean up walls they graffitied and circles where the offender apologizes to a victim with a mediator present. These techniques have been shown to be an effective way to address disciplinary issues.¹⁷ Despite their higher efficacy, restorative

justice techniques are not used evenly at all schools. Schools with proportionally larger Black student populations use restorative justice techniques at lower rates than other schools.¹⁸ This is an example of an [educational opportunity gap](#) between Black and White students.

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