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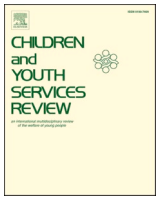

Students' accumulation of disciplinary school exclusion experiences over time: Prevalence, patterns, and correlates in an Australian population cohort

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ABSTRACT

Schools often manage problem behaviours by enacting exclusionary school discipline policies that remove students via suspension (fixed-term exclusion) or expulsion (permanent exclusion). Evidence has linked these practices to a range of adverse educational, social, mental health, and criminal consequences. However, cross-sectional studies from the United States dominate the field, with knowledge of the extent of the problem currently limited by a lack of longitudinal investigations of the prevalence, patterns, and correlates of exclusionary experiences accumulated by individual students over time. This study characterises exclusionary school discipline practices in a representative, longitudinal, population-based cohort of 71,955 students attending New South Wales public schools in Australia. By Year 12 (age ~ 18 years; 2021), almost one in five (19.5 %) students had been suspended or expelled from school, most (61.1 %) on more than one occasion. The accumulation of exclusionary experiences started early, during primary school, for almost one in 20 students (4.6 %), and accelerated in junior secondary school. The most common categories of exclusion used were 'aggressive behaviour' and 'continued disobedience'. The greatest risk of exclusion was observed among male students, those from the most socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and those living in remote/very remote areas. These associations strengthened with the number of exclusion experiences, as these groups became increasingly overrepresented at higher cumulative exclusion frequencies. These findings indicate that suspending and expelling children does not address problem behaviour, highlighting a need for more effective behaviour management approaches and socio-emotional behavioural skills promotion through the primary and secondary school years.

1. Introduction

Many school systems implement exclusionary discipline policies that either temporarily (using out-of-school suspension) or permanently (via expulsion) remove children who exhibit problem behaviour (Mongan & Walker, 2012; NSW Department of Education, 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018). Yet extensive evidence, predominantly from the United States (US), indicates that disciplinary exclusion is disproportionately imposed on certain vulnerable groups (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Vanderhaar et al., 2014), is associated with increased antisocial behaviour and criminal justice system contacts (Hemphill et al., 2012; Mallett, 2016; Novak, 2018), and negatively impacts school connectedness, safety and retention (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019; McCluskey et al., 2016; Muscott et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2014, Steinberg et al., 2013), achievement (Morris & Perry, 2016; Noltemeyer et al., 2015), and mental health (Eyllon et al., 2022; Ford et al., 2018; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Welsh &

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Little, 2018). However, there has been limited longitudinal research that examines students' accumulation of exclusionary discipline over time, obscuring knowledge of the proportion and characteristics of students affected by different forms of exclusionary discipline. Characterising the lifetime experience of exclusion at a student level, according to type, timing, frequency, length, and reason for its use, and examining how these characteristics associate with various sociodemographic vulnerability factors, may motivate systemic reform to limit the use of these practices, particularly among vulnerable groups, and replace them with effective, evidence-based alternatives that foster improved student behaviour, engagement, and wellbeing.

Only a few studies provide longitudinal data on the accumulation of exclusionary discipline experiences by individual students over time, and these typically draw on self-reported information from relatively small samples (<9,000) of US students (e.g., Mowen & Brent, 2016; Novak, 2022; Shollenberger, 2015). Based on annual self-reports within the representative US National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), 35 % of children received at least one suspension between Kindergarten and Year 12, and 13 % received out-of-school suspensions totalling 10 days or more throughout this period (Shollenberger, 2015). Data from the first four annual waves of the NLSY97 (1997–2000; following youth through ages ~ 14–18 years) demonstrated that 74 % of the sample never received a suspension, while 14 % of students were suspended at least once per year, 7 % at least once in each of two years, 4 % at least once in each of three years, and ~ 1 % at least once in all of the four years (Mowen & Brent, 2016). Other longitudinal research has provided information regarding the timing of first suspension, but within specific groups of vulnerable students. For instance, among 763 children in the US Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN) who were followed biannually from 4 through 18 years of age, a third (35 %) were suspended for the first time in childhood (aged < 12 years) and another third (29 %) were suspended for the first time in adolescence (aged 13–16 years), with the remaining third (36 %) never suspended (Novak, 2022).

As most research operationalises school exclusion as a binary variable (ever excluded vs. not), limited evidence is available to identify different patterns of exclusionary experience according to type, timing, frequency, length of, and reason for exclusion, and the sociodemographic correlates of these patterns. In one of the few studies that accessed school district records to examine frequency of suspension (among ~ 8,200 students in Pinellas County, Florida, US), almost half of students (47.7 %) who received a suspension were suspended only once in a single school year, while a fifth (18.2 %) were suspended twice, 9.0 % thrice, 4.2 % four times, and 15.3 % were suspended five or more times (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). The number of suspensions received by a 6th-grade student (aged ~ 11–12 years) was moderate-to-strongly positively correlated with the number of suspensions subsequently received in the 7th and 8th grades (ages ~ 12–13 and ~ 13–14 years, respectively), and moderately negatively correlated with on-time graduation. Repeated suspension also related significantly with socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and enrolment in special education, with greatest risk of multiple suspensions experienced by disadvantaged Black boys receiving special education (Raffaele Mendez, 2003).

Many US public school systems — including Philadelphia, California, and Chicago Public Schools — have acted over the past decade to restrict the use of exclusionary discipline and implement nonpunitive discipline strategies (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017), particularly for young children and for minor infractions (Anderson, 2020; Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018). These reforms have achieved significant reductions in the use of exclusionary discipline, while also improving safety, school connectedness, attendance, and academic outcomes (Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018). Despite these outcomes in the US, commensurate reform largely has not ensued in education systems in England, Australia, and New Zealand, even though research has highlighted similar inequities (Black, 2023; Dharan & Mincher, 2022; Duffy et al., 2021; Great Britain Department of Education, 2019). Since 2013, the Department of Education in England has witnessed a significant increase in the use of exclusionary discipline in schools (Duffy et al., 2021) that has not been observed in neighbouring systems in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, highlighting the potential impact of differences in policy and practice across these regions (McCluskey et al., 2019). Such disparities highlight the need for further examination of exclusionary discipline policies and practices internationally (Billingham & Gillin, 2024; Losen & Martin, 2018).

Increased use of these disciplinary practices has also been noted with concern in various Australian states, with research consistently highlighting the overrepresentation of school exclusions among children from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially if they are male, Indigenous, living in out-of-home care, and/or with disability (Hemphill et al., 2014; O'Brien & Trudgett, 2020). Recent inquiries in multiple jurisdictions have called for systemic reform of exclusionary discipline practices (Graham et al., 2020; NSW Ombudsman, 2017; NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Children and Young People with Disability in New South Wales Educational Settings, 2023; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation against People with Disability, 2020; Victorian Ombudsman, 2017). Yet, a common assumption stymieing such policy and practice reform is that suspension is an effective and relatively benign consequence, and that the negative outcomes of exclusionary discipline reported in the literature are a product of children's social background and individual characteristics (Graham et al., 2020). A more comprehensive understanding of the way in which these practices are used, particularly in jurisdictions outside of the US, require longitudinal data that track the experiences of all students within a population over time. Such data afford the opportunity to characterise the lifetime prevalence of disciplinary exclusion, the pattern of these experiences in the population (according to type, timing, frequency, length, and reason), and the sociodemographic correlates of these patterns, providing a solid foundation for further research on the consequences of exclusionary school discipline.

1.1. The current study

This study characterised individual students' experiences of disciplinary school exclusion using representative, population-based, longitudinal data provided by the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education, which educates students in Australia's most populous state (almost one third of all Australian students [30.9 % in 2021] attend school within NSW, among whom approximately two-thirds [64.5 % in 2021] attend a government school; ACARA, 2024). These de-identified student-level data on out-of-school suspensions and expulsions enrolled in the NSW public school system were provided to the NSW Child Development Study (NSW-CDS, Carr et al., 2016; Green et al., 2018; Green et al., 2024), which follows the development of a population cohort of NSW children via record linkage of administrative records from state and federal education, health, justice, child protection, and other agencies. The current study determined the prevalence (by children and incidents) and sociodemographic correlates of suspensions and expulsions, with consideration of the type, timing, length, reason, and frequency of these experiences. Available sociodemographic factors included the child's sex, parental occupation (as a proxy for family socio-economic status), area socio-economic disadvantage, and geographic remoteness. It was hypothesised, based on patterns apparent in aggregated annual statistics published by various Australian jurisdictions (Graham et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2023; NSW Education, 2022), that the prevalence of exclusion would vary according to sociodemographic factors, including in dose–response relationship with frequency of exclusion, such that male students, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, and who resided outside of major cities, would be disproportionately represented in these experiences.

2. Method

2.1. Study context and record linkage

Study participants were drawn from the third wave of record linkage of intergenerational data, conducted in 2021, for the NSW-CDS (https://www.unsw.edu.au/research/nsw-cds). At Wave 3, children in the cohort were aged ~ 18 years, and representative of the NSW population of children this age (Green et al., 2024). Approval for the Wave 3 Linkage was provided by the NSW Population and Health Services and ACT Health Human Research Ethics Committees (HREC/18/CIPHS/49), with relevant data custodian approvals. Linkage was conducted under waiver of consent arrangements within the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council's (2023) National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research, according to strict data access and reporting criteria. A third-party data integration authority (https://chrel.org.au/) conducted the linkage using probabilistic linkage methods. Children's and parents' records were linked using names, sex, residential suburb/postcode, and dates of birth. False positive linkage rates were low (0.5 %) in both child and parent cohorts (Green et al., 2024). Only de-identified data were supplied to researchers. To prevent incidental identification of individuals within the cohort, reporting of data is prohibited for cell sizes of < 15 (accordingly, some numbers are reported as rounded approximations [designated by ~] to prevent extrapolation of numbers < 15 from totals).

2.2. Participants

Eligible participants for this study were the sub-cohort of children from the NSW Wave 3 Linkage cohort (n = 71,955; 78.6 %) who had at least one annual enrolment recorded at a NSW government school between 2012 and 2021 in the NSW Department of Education *School Enrolment* records (incorporating ages 8–9 through 17–18 years). Among these 71,955 study participants, 67,720 (94.1 %) had at least one enrolment record during primary school (2012–2015; Years 3 through 6), and 54,794 (76.2 %) during secondary school (2016–2021; Years 7 through 12). The remaining (n = 19,642) children in the NSW-CDS cohort attended non-government schools (Catholic or Independent), for whom enrolment and exclusion records were unavailable. Australian children can be enrolled in either government or non-government schools, and children and their families can elect to transfer between these sectors. The public school system educates most Australian children – for example, during 2021 (the final year of data represented in our study), 64.5 % of children enrolled at a school in NSW attended a public school, with non-government (private) schools educating the remainder (ACARA, 2024).

Disciplinary exclusion data for the 71,955 study children were available from NSW Department of Education *Suspension and Expulsion* records for the calendar years 2012 through 2021. Individual student records on exclusions issued during the children's initial three years of school — Kindergarten through Year 2 — were not available for linkage.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions

Records provided information on disciplinary exclusion *incidents* and on *children* experiencing exclusion; these were exclusions issued under the policy in place throughout 2012–2021 in NSW government schools, which has since been superseded. Records for each incident detailed the date of exclusion (month, year), type of exclusion (short suspension, long suspension, expulsion), length of suspension (number of days suspended), and reason category for each exclusion incident (detailed in Supplementary Table S1). Age at each exclusion incident was computed from dates (month, year) of exclusion and birth, while school Year level at each incident was estimated from enrolment records.

Under that policy, fixed-term suspensions were differentiated as 'short' suspensions, of between 1 and 4 days duration, issued for either of two reason categories reflecting less serious behaviours (*continued disobedience; aggressive behaviour*), and 'long' suspensions, of between 1 and 20 days duration, issued for any of six reason categories reflecting more serious behaviours (*persistent or serious misbehaviour; physical violence; use or possession of a prohibited weapon, firearm or knife; use of an implement as a weapon; possession, supply or use of a suspected illegal substance;* and *serious criminal behaviour related to the school*). Expulsions (permanent exclusions) were issued according to two reason categories: *misbehaviour* (for which each record of expulsion was related to a preceding long suspension for one of the six reasons), and *unsatisfactory participation in learning* (used only for students over 17 years of age [i.e., from their 17th birthday]).

The frequency of exclusion was determined for each child according to the total sum of each type, of each reason category, and of 'any' type. For focal analyses of the association between frequency of exclusion and sociodemographic factors, six frequency categories were derived (*single exclusion, 2 exclusions, 3–4 exclusions, 5–8 exclusions, 9–15 exclusions, >16 exclusions*). Associations with sociodemographic factors were also determined for four dichotomous indicators (0 = no; 1 = yes) that coded children's experience of any exclusion, any short suspension, any long suspension, and any expulsion.

2.3.2. Sociodemographic factors

Four individual-level sociodemographic factors commonly linked with school exclusion were investigated. The child's *sex* (coded 1 = male, 0 = female) was determined across all available linked record sets (Green et al., 2024). *Parental occupation* (as a proxy for family socioeconomic status [SES]) was coded based on the highest parental occupation level of either parent in school enrolment records using five levels (further detail is provided in the Note to Table 1): Not in paid work (coded 1); labourers (2); tradespeople and service staff (reference; coded 0); other managers and associate professionals (3); senior management and qualified professionals (4). *Area socio-economic disadvantage* was derived in quintiles according to the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage, which reflects the average employment status, social conditions, and income for each residential postcode in Australia (a lower quintile represents greater disadvantage; Pink, 2013). The SEIFA was determined on the child's residential postcode at age ~ 5–6 years [obtained from the 2009 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC; Brinkman et al., 2014)], with the third (middle) quintile serving as the reference group for analyses. *Geographic remoteness* was also derived from the AEDC postcode according to the five classes of relative geographic remoteness defined in the Australian Statistical Geography Standard Remoteness Structure based on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA). The ARIA indexes service accessibility and remoteness level of geographical areas according to distance via road to a service centre and the level of that service centre (ABS, 2021b). The two most remote classes were combined for analyses, yielding four levels: major cites (reference group; coded 0); inner regional (1); outer regional (2); remote and very remote (3).

2.4. Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 29 (IBM Corp, 2023) and missing data were addressed through listwise deletion. Descriptive statistics were compiled on the numbers and proportions of *children* excluded from school, and on *incidents,* by timing, type, length, frequency, and reason category. Multinomial and binomial logistic regression analyses, respectively, were conducted to determine associations between sociodemographic factors and frequency of exclusion, and the dichotomous indicators of any exclusion, any short suspension, any long suspension, and any expulsion (with each level of frequency and type of exclusion compared to children who were not suspended). Regression models were reported using odds ratios (ORs) and 95 %

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the New South Wales Child Development Study (NSW-CDS) cohort, the sub-cohort of NSW government school students, and children who received at least one exclusion.

	NSW-CDS cohort (n = 91,597)		NSW government school students (n = 71,955)		Children with any exclusion (n = 13,925)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sex						
Male	47,381	51.7	37,216	51.7	9,630	69.2
Female	44,216	48.3	34,739	48.3	4,295	30.8
Parental occupation[a]						
Not in paid work	4,042	4.4	3,830	5.3	1,842	13.2
Labourers	9,528	10.4	8,767	12.2	2,972	21.3
Tradespeople and service staff	18,247	19.9	15,911	22.1	3,913	28.1
Other managers and associate professionals	22,238	24.3	17,428	24.2	2,717	19.5
Senior management and qualified professionals	30,967	33.8	23,188	32.2	2,344	16.8
Missing	6,575	7.2	2,831	3.9	137	1.0
Area socio-economic disadvantage						
Quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	20,457	22.3	16,904	23.5	4,690	33.7
Quintile 2	17,018	18.6	13,698	19.0	3,123	22.4
Quintile 3	15,286	16.7	12,094	16.8	2,300	16.5
Quintile 4	14,077	15.4	10,713	14.9	1,600	11.5
Quintile 5 (least disadvantaged)	19,921	21.7	14,648	20.4	1,433	10.3
Missing	4,838	5.3	3,898	5.4	779	5.6
Geographic remoteness						
Major city	64,060	69.9	49,242	68.4	8,322	59.8
Inner regional	16,925	18.5	13,758	19.1	3,378	24.3
Outer regional	5,473	6.0	4,756	6.6	1,289	9.2
Remote/very remote	556	0.6	493	0.7	188	1.3
Missing	4,583	5.0	3,706	5.2	748	5.4

Note. [a] Parental occupation used as a proxy for family socio-economic status and based on highest parental occupation recorded for either parent: Not in paid work in the last 12 months; Machine operators, hospitality staff, assistants, labourers and related workers; Tradespeople, clerks and skilled office, sales and service staff; Other business managers, arts/media/sportspersons and associate professionals; Senior management in large business organisation, government administration and defence, and qualified professionals.

confidence intervals (95 % CIs) as measures of effect size and the accuracy of the association between predictor and outcome variables respectively. Statistically significant results were indicated where the 95 % CI did not cross 1.00. ORs of about 1.50 (or 0.67), 2.50 (0.40), 4.00 (0.25), and 10.00 (0.10) denoted small, medium, large, and very large effects, respectively (Rosenthal, 1996).

3. Results

3.1. Sample characteristics

One-fifth of children (n = 13,925; 19.4 %) received at least one exclusion from a NSW government school during the 10-year period spanning Years 3 through 12; these children accounted for 56,540 exclusion incidents (exclusions per child: Mdn = 2.0; M = 4.1; SD = 4.9; range 1–54). Close to one in 20 children (4.6 %) received an exclusion during primary school (Years 3–6), comprising almost a quarter of excluded children (n = 3,335, 23.9 %) and accounting for 11,015 incidents (19.5 % of all exclusion incidents). Almost one in five children (18.3 %) received an exclusion during secondary school (n = 13,133, 94.3 % of excluded children), accounting for 45,525 incidents (80.5 %).

Table 1 demonstrates the representativeness of the sociodemographic factors in the total study sample (n = 71,955) relative to the state-wide NSW-CDS population cohort (n = 91,597), with half of the study sample being boys (51.7 %), residing in professional households (56.4 % classified within the 'other managers and associate professionals' or 'senior management and qualified professionals' levels), non-disadvantaged areas (52.1 %), and in major cities (68.4 %). Table 1 also indicates a disparate distribution of these sociodemographic factors among children subject to exclusion. More than two-thirds of these excluded children were boys (69.2 %). Most resided in non-professional households (62.6 %), in disadvantaged areas (56.1 %), and in major cities (59.8 %). This pattern was similar when excluded children were further differentiated (Supplementary Table S2) into those receiving at least one short suspension, at least one long suspension, and at least one expulsion; and also by exclusion frequency level (Supplementary Table S3). The children most frequently excluded (>16 exclusions) were predominantly boys (88.0 %), resided in non-professional households (80.0 %), in the most disadvantaged quintile of areas (47.4 %), and in major cities (42.1 %).

3.2. Frequency of exclusion

Among the children subjected to exclusion, it was more common for children to be excluded multiple times (n = 8,505 children; 61.1 %) than on a single occasion (n = 5,419 children; 38.9 %), typically in at least two separate school Years (Mdn = 2.0; M = 2.2; SD = 1.6; range 1–10). Most children received multiple short suspensions (Mdn = 2.0; M = 3.3; SD = 3.6; range 1–54) and at least one long suspension (Mdn = 1.0; M = 2.2; SD = 2.1; range 1–24). Multiple exclusions were typical of primary school (Years 3–6; n = 1,799; 53.9 % of excluded children) and common also in secondary school (n = 5,268; 40.1 %). Fig. 1 illustrates the increasing proportion of exclusion incidents accounted for by the decreasing proportion of excluded children represented at the highest

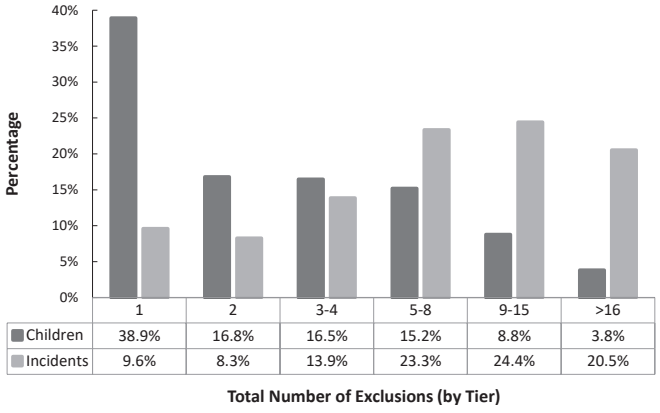


Fig. 1. Percentage of excluded children and exclusion incidents according to tiers of the total number of exclusions received (Years 3 through 12 inclusive).

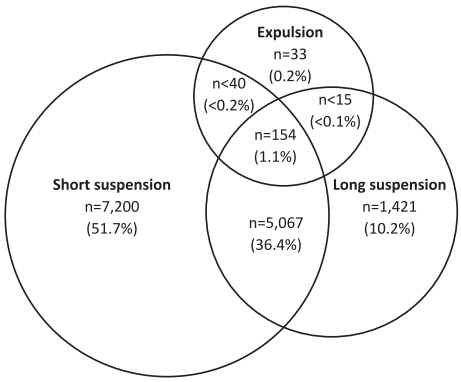


Fig. 2. Number of children who experienced each type of exclusion, including multiple types of exclusion, during school years 3 through 12.

levels of exclusion frequency. For example, children who received nine or more exclusions (12.6 %) accounted for almost half of all exclusion incidents (44.9 %).

3.3. Types of exclusion

Most excluded children received suspensions (n = 13,892, 99.8 %; comprising 19.3 % of all children), with few children expelled (n = 237, 1.7 %; 0.3 % of all children; <15 children experienced more than one expulsion). Short suspensions (of 1–4 days) were the most common type of exclusion; almost nine in ten excluded children (n = 12,457, 89.5 %; 13.6 % of all children) received at least one, accounting for almost three-quarters of incidents (73.1 %; n=~41,360). Almost half of excluded children (n = 6,656, 47.8 %; 9.3 % of all children) received at least one long suspension (of 1–20 days), accounting for 26.5 % of incidents (n=~14,940).

Fig. 2 illustrates the intersection of children who ever received a short suspension, a long suspension, and/or an expulsion. Approximately half of excluded children only ever received short suspension (n = 7,200; 51.7 %), and few children exclusively received an expulsion (n = 33; 0.2 %; all for unsatisfactory participation). Of children experiencing multiple types of suspension, this was most commonly the combination of short and long suspensions (n = 5,067 children; 36.4 %). Few children (n = 154; 1.1 %) experienced all three types of exclusion.

3.4. Timing of first exclusion incident

Fig. 3 displays the cumulative number of *first* exclusion *incidents* by type, according to calendar year between 2012–2021 (~Years 3 [age 8–9 years] through 12 [age 17–18 years]; see Supplementary Materials for the mean age of students at first exclusion, by type). First exclusion incidents (any, short suspensions, and long suspensions) inclined steeply

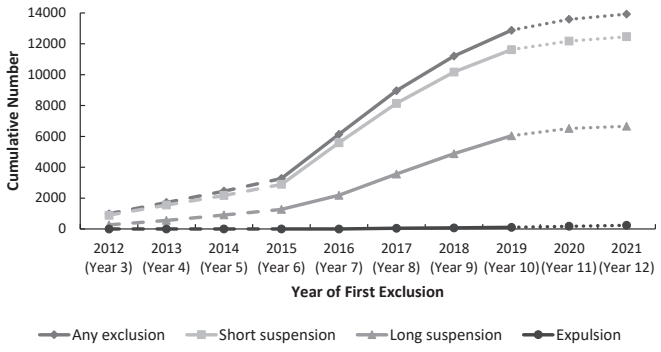


Fig. 3. Cumulative number of first exclusion incidents by type, according to calendar year (and estimated school year level) between 2012 and 2021.

from 2016 (Year 7; commencement of secondary schooling) through 2019 (Year 10; end of compulsory schooling in NSW), subsequently plateauing into 2021 (Year 12).

3.5. Prevalence of children excluded by school year and age

Among the sample of 13,925 children excluded at any time between Years 3 and 12, Fig. 4 differentiates the proportions excluded, not excluded, and not enrolled at a NSW government school in each calendar year (2012 through 2021). The proportion of children with an exclusion increased gradually in each successive year from 2012 to 2015 (primary school), then steeply to 2016 and 2017 (junior secondary school), remained consistently high through 2018 and 2019, before declining in the two non-compulsory schooling years (2020 and 2021). This late drop-off in exclusions coincided with an increase in non-enrolments (e.g., 48 % of children with at least one exclusion were not enrolled during 2021/Year 12).

The majority (86.7 %) of children received at least one exclusion between 2016 and 2019. This pattern was characteristic of both short and long suspensions, whereas children receiving expulsions peaked when schooling was no longer compulsory in NSW, at age 17 years (n = 102), albeit comparatively few children were expelled at any age (see Supplementary Fig. S1). Detail on the percentage of children excluded at each year of age is provided in Supplementary Table S4 (with similar patterns according to number of first exclusion *incidents* illustrated in Supplementary Fig. S2).

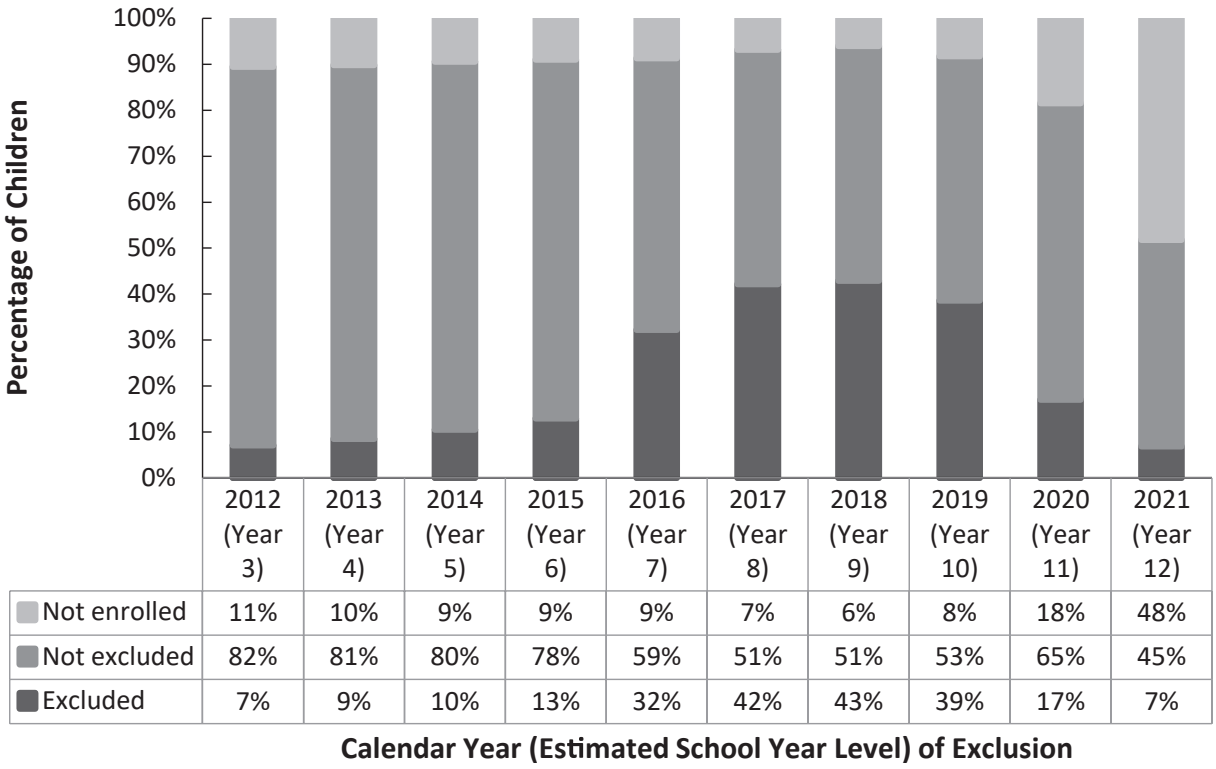
3.6. Duration of exclusion

For each suspended child, the median total number of days suspended within a single calendar year was 5 (range 1–118; M = 8.3; SD = 7.8; Mdn = 4.0 during primary and 5.0 during secondary). The median duration of suspensions across the total schooling period was 4 days (M = 5.4; SD = 5.3); short suspensions, 3 days (M = 3.0; SD = 1.0); and long suspensions, 10 days (M = 12.1; SD = 6.5). Median primary school suspension length was 3 days (short suspensions: 2 days; long: 6 days) and 4 days in secondary school (short: 4 days [equivalent to the maximum period for a short suspension]; long: 11 days).

3.7. Reasons for suspensions

Supplementary Table S5 summarises the number of children and incidents by reason for suspension (total, and by each year of age), according to the eight suspension categories used in NSW (two reasons for short suspension; six for long suspension). Most children received a short suspension for *aggressive behaviour* (n = 9,830, 70.6 % of excluded children; 13.7 % of all children), and/or a short suspension for *continued disobedience* (n = 7,359, 52.8 %; 10.2 % of all children). A quarter of excluded children experienced long suspensions for *persistent or serious misbehaviour* (n = 3,528, 25.3 %; 4.9 % of all children) and *physical violence* (n = 3,466, 24.9 %; 4.8 % of all children). Approximately one in 20 excluded children received long suspensions for *serious criminal behaviour related to the school* (n = 921, 6.6 %; 1.3 % of all children), for *possession, supply or use of a suspected illegal substance* (n = 750, 5.4 %; 1.0 % of all children), and for *use or possession of a prohibited weapon, firearm, or knife* (n = 598, 4.3 %; 0.8 % of all children). Long suspensions for *use of an implement as a weapon* were least frequent (n = 174, 1.2 %; 0.2 % of all children).

This pattern prevailed also in terms of the total number of exclusion incidents by reason. The most common incident was *aggressive behaviour* (42.1 % of 56,540 incidents), followed by *continued disobedience* (31.1 %), *persistent or serious misbehaviour* (11.8 %), *physical violence* (10.1 %), *serious criminal behaviour in relation to the school* (1.8 %), *possession, supply or use of a suspected illegal substance* (1.5 %), *use or possession of a prohibited weapon, firearm, or knife* (1.1 %), and *use of an implement as a weapon* (0.3 %).



	2012 (Year 3)	2013 (Year 4)	2014 (Year 5)	2015 (Year 6)	2016 (Year 7)	2017 (Year 8)	2018 (Year 9)	2019 (Year 10)	2020 (Year 11)	2021 (Year 12)
Not enrolled	11%	10%	9%	9%	9%	7%	6%	8%	18%	48%
Not excluded	82%	81%	80%	78%	59%	51%	51%	53%	65%	45%
Excluded	7%	9%	10%	13%	32%	42%	43%	39%	17%	7%

Fig. 4. Percentage of children excluded, not excluded, and not enrolled in each calendar year (and school year level) during the period 2012 through 2021 (~years 3 through 12 inclusive).

With respect to age, the prevalence of each suspension reason (by number of children and incidents) was greatest between 13–15 years. *Aggressive behaviour* was the most common reason for short suspension at every age, except 7 and 17 years. *Physical violence* was the most common reason for long suspension during primary school (ages 7–8 through 11–12 years), with *persistent and serious misbehaviour* the most common reason during secondary school (ages 12–13 through 17–18 years).

Expulsions (for *misbehaviour*) were most commonly associated with a preceding long suspension for *persistent and serious misbehaviour*, followed by *physical violence*. *Misbehaviour* was the only available (and therefore most common) reason for expulsion during primary and junior secondary school (ages 7–16 years, collectively), until children reached senior secondary (ages 17–18 years; non-compulsory schooling) and could be expelled for *unsatisfactory participation in learning*.

3.8. Sociodemographic factors associated with exclusion

Table 2 presents the adjusted associations of sociodemographic factors with any exclusion (comparing the 13,925 excluded children with their 58,030 non-excluded peers), and according to frequency of exclusion (unadjusted associations are detailed in Supplementary Table S6).

In fully adjusted analyses that controlled the effect of all other sociodemographic covariates, boys were more than two and a half times as likely as girls to experience exclusion. Odds of any exclusion were likewise significantly elevated for children in each of the lower two levels of parental occupation (relative to children whose parents were tradespeople, clerks and skilled office, sales, and service staff [middle level]) and for children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas at school entry (i.e., each of the bottom two quintiles; relative to children living in the middle [third] quintile). The strength of this association was notable, with the odds almost tripling among children of parents not in paid work in the past 12 months. By contrast, children in each of the upper two levels of parental occupation and area socio-economic disadvantage (i.e., less disadvantaged) experienced reduced odds of exclusion relative to the respective reference groups. The most pronounced protective effect (odds more than halved) was observed for children of senior managers and professionals. Children living in inner and outer regional and remote areas experienced greater odds of exclusion than their peers residing in major cities. These patterns held similarly for short suspension and long suspension (Supplementary Table S2). For expulsion specifically, the associations of sex and parental occupation were significant, whereas area socioeconomic disadvantage and geographic remoteness were not.

Table 2 also demonstrates a dose–response pattern in the adjusted associations between sociodemographic factors and the frequency of exclusion, with effects progressively increasing in magnitude as the total number of exclusions experienced increased. Boys were twice as likely as girls to experience a single exclusion, and over 10 times as likely to experience 16 exclusions or more. The largest effects for socioeconomic status according to parental occupation were observed for children of parents not in paid work in the past 12 months, who were ten times more likely to be excluded 16 times or more, relative to the reference [middle] group). Conversely, the odds of being excluded 16 times or more were more than halved for children of senior managers and professionals. Children living in inner and outer regional areas had consistently greater odds of exclusion at all frequency levels, relative to those residing in major cities, and the largest effects were found for children living in remote/very remote areas.

Table 2
Adjusted odds ratios (with 95% confidence intervals) of any exclusion and the total number of exclusion received according to sociodemographic factors.

		Total Number of Exclusions Received					
	Any exclusion (n = 13,925) aOR (95 % CI)	1 exclusion (n = 5,419) aOR (95 % CI)	2 exclusions (n = 2,340) aOR (95 % CI)	3–4 exclusions (n = 2,295) aOR (95 % CI)	5–8 exclusions (n = 2,116) aOR (95 % CI)	9–15 exclusions (n = 1,223) aOR (95 % CI)	>16 exclusions (n = 532) aOR (95 % CI)
Sociodemographic characteristics							
Male sex	2.64 (2.53–2.76)	2.12 (2.00–2.26)	2.37 (2.16–2.60)	2.73 (2.48–3.00)	3.30 (2.98–3.66)	4.45 (3.87–5.13)	10.37 (7.86–13.68)
Parental occupation[a]							
Not in paid work	2.79 (2.58–3.02)	1.68 (1.49–1.90)	2.22 (1.90–2.60)	2.87 (2.48–3.33)	3.49 (3.01–4.05)	6.97 (5.85–8.32)	10.07 (7.72–13.14)
Labourers	1.49 (1.41–1.59)	1.24 (1.13–1.36)	1.36 (1.20–1.54)	1.52 (1.34–1.72)	1.71 (1.50–1.94)	2.23 (1.88–2.65)	3.15 (2.43–4.08)
Trades and services staff*							
Managers and associate professionals	0.60 (0.57–0.64)	0.66 (0.61–0.71)	0.61 (0.54–0.69)	0.52 (0.46–0.60)	0.57 (0.50–0.65)	0.55 (0.46–0.68)	0.45 (0.32–0.64)
Senior managers and qualified professionals	0.39 (0.37–0.42)	0.46 (0.43–0.50)	0.36 (0.31–0.41)	0.37 (0.32–0.42)	0.31 (0.27–0.36)	0.32 (0.25–0.40)	0.34 (0.23–0.49)
Area socio-economic disadvantage							
Quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	1.26 (1.18–1.33)	1.15 (1.05–1.25)	1.19 (1.05–1.35)	1.42 (1.25–1.61)	1.37 (1.19–1.57)	1.29 (1.08–1.53)	1.62 (1.23–2.12)
Quintile 2	1.14 (1.06–1.21)	1.12 (1.02–1.23)	1.06 (0.93–1.21)	1.11 (0.96–1.27)	1.30 (1.13–1.50)	1.14 (0.95–1.37)	1.22 (0.91–1.65)
Quintile 3*							
Quintile 4	0.84 (0.78–0.91)	0.88 (0.79–0.97)	0.86 (0.74–1.01)	0.77 (0.65–0.91)	0.89 (0.75–1.06)	0.69 (0.54–0.87)	0.84 (0.58–1.22)
Quintile 5 (least disadvantaged)	0.66 (0.61–0.71)	0.80 (0.72–0.88)	0.56 (0.47–0.66)	0.62 (0.52–0.74)	0.55 (0.45–0.67)	0.32 (0.23–0.44)	0.38 (0.23–0.65)
Geographic remoteness							
Major city*							
Inner regional	1.38 (1.32–1.45)	1.23 (1.14–1.32)	1.31 (1.18–1.45)	1.34 (1.21–1.49)	1.53 (1.37–1.70)	1.91 (1.67–2.18)	2.73 (2.23–3.34)
Outer regional	1.38 (1.28–1.49)	1.23 (1.10–1.38)	1.35 (1.15–1.57)	1.22 (1.04–1.44)	1.61 (1.38–1.88)	1.74 (1.43–2.11)	2.96 (2.28–3.86)
Remote/very remote	2.13 (1.74–2.61)	1.56 (1.14–2.13)	1.66 (1.08–2.56)	2.13 (1.44–3.14)	2.91 (2.03–4.18)	3.48 (2.25–5.37)	6.66 (3.91–11.33)

Note. aOR = adjusted odds ratio; (95 % CI) = 95 % confidence interval; [a] Parental occupation used as a proxy for family socio-economic status and based on highest parental occupation recorded for either parent: Not in paid work last 12 months; Machine operators, hospitality staff, assistants, labourers and related workers; Tradespeople, clerks and skilled office, sales and service staff; Other business managers, arts/media/sportspersons and associate professionals; Senior management in large business organisation, government administration and defence, and qualified professionals; grey text = non-significant result ($p > 0.05$); * Reference group.

4. Discussion

This longitudinal study examined the pattern of exclusionary discipline experiences over 10 years of schooling (Years 3 through 12, from 2012 to 2021) for a large cohort of Australian students enrolled in NSW government schools. One in five (19.4 %) children experienced at least one exclusion during the 10 years of schooling, which is almost five times the number of NSW public school students excluded annually (~4% in each calendar year during this period; NSW Education, 2024). Most excluded students (61.1 %) accumulated multiple suspensions over time (a median of 2 incidents per child, an average of 4.1, and range of 1–54), indicating that annual figures understate the true scale of student exclusion experiences, particularly the extent of repeat exclusion. The accumulation of exclusion started early for one in 20 children (4.6 %) who were excluded during primary school (Years 3 to 6), and—mirroring patterns in cross-sectional data from other Australian states (Graham, 2018; Graham et al., 2020)—rapidly accelerated in junior secondary school. One in five children (18.4 %; including 94.3 % of excluded children) were excluded at least once during the secondary school Years 7–12. Half of children (53.9 %) who were first excluded during primary school received multiple exclusions across the 10 years, compared to two in five (40.1 %) of those who were first excluded during secondary school. As has been documented in the US and other Australian states, including South Australia and Queensland (Graham et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2023), exclusionary school discipline was used predominantly to manage relatively minor behaviours. Dominant reasons for exclusion were suspensions for incidents coded into the short suspension categories of *aggressive behaviour* (issued to seven in ten excluded children) or *continued disobedience* (issued to over half of excluded children), as opposed to the more "serious" categories reserved for behaviours involving weapons, crime, and illicit substances, which were rare (<5% of incidents). The highest risk of exclusion was apparent for boys, children from the most socio-economically disadvantaged families and communities, and those residing in remote/very remote areas, with the overrepresentation of these children increasing as the frequency of exclusion at an individual level increased.

Although lower than the prevalence of suspension (35 %) described in the US National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 from Kindergarten through 12th grade (Shollenberger, 2015), the prevalence of disciplinary school exclusion revealed in this longitudinal study of NSW public school students (19.4 %) represents a substantial proportion of children experiencing educational disruption and an increased risk of adverse educational, social, and justice outcomes (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018). Consistent with the pattern reported for a single calendar year among students in Pinellas County, Florida (Raffaele Mendez, 2003), most children (61.1 %) accumulated multiple exclusions rather than a single exclusion over the 10-year period of this study. Indeed, some children experienced very frequent exclusion, with almost half (44.9 %) of exclusion incidents accumulated by the 12.6 % of students who were most frequently excluded (≥9 times). This implies that exclusionary discipline was ineffective in curbing problem behaviour in this Australian cohort, aligning with international evidence that suspensions do not reduce school misbehaviour, often fail to improve student conduct, and exacerbate rather than mitigate behavioural issues

(Duffy et al., 2025; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Skiba & Rausch, 2013; Wiley et al., 2020). Failure to address the root causes of exclusion may initiate repeat exclusions that significantly impact children's academic instruction and learning time (Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022) and contribute to deterioration in the quality of student–teacher relationships (Okonofua et al., 2016).

Alternatives to exclusion were perhaps not perceived to be available or were not favoured by school leaders (particularly in schools located outside of major cities), raising the issue of how schools utilise the period of suspension. In this study, short suspensions were typically issued for a duration of 3 days (out of a maximum 4), and long suspensions were typically for 10 days (of a maximum 20). The policy in effect during this period endorsed suspension as allowing *'time for the student to reflect on their behaviour, to acknowledge and accept responsibility for the behaviours which led to the suspension, and to accept responsibility for changing their behaviour to meet the school's expectations in the future'* (Policy Statement 5.2). The recent revision of NSW Department of Education policy governing suspensions and expulsions (NSW Department of Education, 2024) places increased emphasis on the use of suspension to provide time for the school to put appropriate supports in place to facilitate the development and learning of the excluded student. New procedures govern the maximum consecutive and annual days of suspension, which are lower for students in Kindergarten through Year 2, and the differentiation of 'short' and 'long' suspension periods has been removed. Future investigation is required to evaluate the impact of this policy update, but the present data suggest that particular attention be given to monitoring the frequency of repeat exclusions, not limited to within a single calendar year.

The most common reason categories used for suspension in this study—*aggressive behaviour* and *continued disobedience*—were non-specific and could encompass a range of behaviours perceived to be unacceptable, rather than being illegal (exclusions involving crime, weapons, and drugs contributed < 5 % of incidents). *Persistent or serious misbehaviour* was the most common reason category associated with expulsion. Recent cross-sectional data from Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom indicate that suspensions are often used for minor infractions (Dharan & Mincher, 2022; Graham et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2023; Shaw & Audley, 2024), as they are in the US (particularly among minority and disadvantaged groups, including those with disability) for reasons such as tardiness, uniform infractions, and "refusal" to work/follow instructions (Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022). Continued disobedience in particular has been criticised as too broad and non-specific a term that can serve as a 'catch-all' in some schools for minor disengaged and disruptive behaviours which could instead be addressed by proactively teaching children the skills they need to comply with behavioural expectations (Dharan & Mincher, 2022) or, in the case of disability, through the use of inclusive practice and provision of reasonable adjustments (Graham et al., 2023). Students who struggle to self-regulate their emotions and behaviours according to classroom expectations often face suspension (Quin, 2019), including in primary school (Laurens et al., 2021) when children are being socialised to school norms and are less likely than adolescents to engage in more serious misbehaviour (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Yet, suspension during these years may particularly jeopardise students' academic development, as this is when the foundations of literacy, numeracy, and relationships with and trust in teachers are laid (Graham, 2020; Graham et al., 2020). School exclusion arguably fails to address the contextual and developmental factors contributing to aggression, disobedience, and misbehaviour (e.g., mental health difficulties, emotional regulation problems, social skills deficits, family dynamics, socio-economic disadvantage, peer influences including bullying, unsupportive learning environments that lead to poor student–teacher relationships and frustration due to unmet learning or behaviour support needs), ultimately reinforcing the behaviour rather than resolving the underlying issues (Quin & Hemphill, 2014; Wiley et al., 2020).

The use of exclusion for behaviour management in secondary school was particularly evident in junior secondary (Years 7–10; estimated 2016–2019), which was marked by a noticeable increase in the number of first-time exclusions, consistent with aggregated annual incident data from Queensland and South Australian public schools (Graham, 2020; Graham et al., 2020). This suggests that the junior secondary environment must change to be more inclusive and responsive to students' needs during early adolescence when pronounced physical and mental development and new academic and social demands occur (Jacobs, 2019). Doing so may also help to alleviate the apparent loss of excluded children from the non-compulsory senior secondary years. The present longitudinal analyses reveal that nearly half of the children who experienced at least one exclusion under the prior policy were not enrolled in a NSW public school during Years 11–12 (2020–2021). Consequently, the observed reduction in exclusion during the senior secondary years may be due to a significant number of previously excluded children no longer being enrolled. Interestingly, the highest proportion of excluded students were enrolled at public schools during junior secondary schooling (with only 6–9 % of excluded students in the sample not enrolled at a public school in these years), despite a trend in Australia for more students to attend private schools during secondary school compared to primary school (ABS, 2021a). This suggests that the public school system might receive excluded children from the Catholic and Independent sectors, primarily because non-government schools have greater flexibility to select students for enrolment. Greater resourcing to the public school sector, especially in schools serving socio-educationally disadvantaged and rural/remote communities, is needed to help provide teachers with time to plan inclusive lessons, engage in quality evidence-based professional development, and to implement effective, evidenced-based alternatives to exclusionary discipline (Ritter, 2018).

The present findings extend those of prior investigations (Graham et al., 2023; Hemphill et al., 2010; Hemphill et al., 2014; Laurens et al., 2021; O'Brien & Trudgett, 2020) by indicating that certain groups of Australian children are at higher risk of school exclusion measured over the course of their schooling experience. Children at higher risk in this study include those who are male, reside in outer regional and remote/very remote areas and in households located in disadvantaged areas, and have unemployed parents. However, being at higher risk of exclusion does not necessarily mean that these children always display more problematic behaviours than other children. Across jurisdictions, research into overrepresentation, intersectionality, and disproportionate risk has consistently found an association between particular groups of children and personal and contextual factors that create or exacerbate their risk of being excluded. For example, children from socio-educationally disadvantaged backgrounds may not have caregivers with the skills to identify when they or their child need additional support to improve self-regulation and responsible decision making. Or there may be problems in the home, such as domestic violence, that in turn affect how well the child interacts with peers and teachers at school (Combs-Ronto et al., 2009). A key point, however, is that a child's risk of exclusion increases when their teachers *also* lack these important skills or when the teacher's own perceptions, manner, and approach exacerbates the problem, creating distrust, resentment, and retaliatory behaviours (Doumen et al., 2008; Graham, 2018). This recursive cycle of negative interactions between child and teacher is more likely in the 'hardest-to-staff schools' – those serving socio-educationally disadvantaged and rural/remote communities (McPherson et al., 2025). These schools are characterised by high staff turnover, unfilled vacancies, and little opportunity for quality ongoing professional development, leading to a whole range of effects including low staff morale, emotional burnout, difficulty feeling and showing empathy, poor-quality teaching and classroom management, and punitive disciplinary responses (Carroll et al., 2022; Okonafua et al., 2022).

School exclusion may exacerbate feelings of marginalisation among students already struggling with disadvantage, and create a self-

reinforcing cycle where exclusion increases the likelihood of future exclusions. This occurs when initial exclusion heightens feelings of rejection and disconnection, while time away from school leads to missed learning opportunities and weakened relationships with teachers and peers (Pyne, 2019). Upon returning to school, students may feel more frustrated and disengaged, making them more vulnerable to behavioural incidents that may trigger subsequent exclusions (Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022). This was demonstrated in the current study by the dose–response pattern relating to exclusion frequency, whereby children from disadvantaged groups were progressively more overrepresented at the highest levels of exclusion frequency. The medium sized effects found between male gender and school exclusion might reflect boys being more likely than girls to show externalising behaviours, such as destructiveness and aggression, where girls show greater likelihood of internalising difficulties such as depression and anxiety (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2008). These visible, disruptive behaviours more readily trigger disciplinary responses than internal distress, with research consistently showing that teacher-reported externalising behaviours predict later suspensions (Raffaele Mendez, 2003; Yang et al., 2018). This gender disparity may also reflect documented teacher gender bias that has lasting effects on students' education experiences (Lavy & Megalokonomou, 2019), where teachers are more likely to believe boys are harder to control and more frequently exhibit unacceptable behaviours (Finn & Servoss, 2012). The strongest observed association, between exclusion and children whose parents were not in paid employment, may suggest that parental exclusion from social systems, such as the workforce, can create a feedback loop that similarly perpetuates disadvantage from parent to child. The effects of economic hardship also increase family stress and hinder positive parenting practices, potentially leading to the development of behavioural problems and reduced social competence that manifest as disruptive behaviours in school settings (Hosokawa et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2015). The overrepresentation of vulnerable groups in exclusionary practices creates a cascading cycle of disadvantage where children experience deteriorating academic performance and increased dropout rates (Morris & Perry, 2016), reduced access to further education and vocational opportunities (Balfanz & Fox, 2014), and heightened risk of criminal justice involvement (Hemphill et al., 2012), while simultaneously undermining their sense of belonging and mental wellbeing (Welsh & Little, 2018). This pattern perpetuates social marginalisation by systematically removing vulnerable children from the educational environments that could provide pathways to social mobility and integration.

School discipline policies could explicitly address sociodemographic inequalities through the creation of more inclusive environments, including provision of full-service schools in disadvantaged communities where evidence-based interventions are provided through interagency collaboration (Dryfoos, 1994), and via implementation of Integrated Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (I-MTSS) to enhance all children's social-emotional, academic, and behavioural skills (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021; Burns et al., 2016; Gage et al., 2018).

I-MTSS integrates positive behavioural interventions and supports and social-emotional learning programs within a broader program of support addressing academic skills alongside behavioural and social skills development. It involves the provision of high-quality inclusive practice at the universal (Tier 1) level across all three developmental domains: academic, social-emotional, and behavioural (de Bruin et al., 2024). Evidence-based supports and interventions of increasing intensity, frequency and/or duration are provided to small groups (Tier 2) and individuals (Tier 3) identified through the use of validated screening and progress measures to inform data-based decision making (Adamson et al., 2019; Pullen et al., 2018). A core aim is to improve Tier 1 provision to prevent children from needlessly requiring Tier 2 and 3 supports, which are more costly for students and schools alike (Graham et al., 2025). The present Australian data reinforce the need for such tiered support, with high-quality universal provision at Tier 1 likely to be most effective at averting exclusion for the minority of excluded students (38.9 %) who experienced just a single exclusion. Universal provision could be supplemented by targeted support for the two thirds who experienced multiple exclusions, most particularly for the quarter of students (27.8 %) excluded five times or more who accounted for over two-thirds of exclusion incidents (68.2 %). Under the revised NSW Student Behaviour Policy (NSW Department of Education, 2022), all NSW public schools are required to develop a 'school behaviour support management plan' by 2025, outlining a strategic, integrated whole-school approach that incorporates multi-tiered systems of support for all students along a continuum of care, including a focus on prevention, early intervention, targeted and individual interventions. This shift towards preventative and supportive approaches represents a move away from punitive exclusionary practices towards evidence-based interventions that are more likely to improve student outcomes.

The use of administrative data in this study conferred both strengths and limitations. Notable strengths included the availability of linked records from multiple government agencies, which yielded a large cohort of children with information on a comprehensive range of risk factors who were followed over a decade. These longitudinal data provided new information regarding the accumulation of disciplinary exclusion over time, and the disproportionate imposition of these experiences among vulnerable groups. However, the use of administrative data not initially intended for the purposes of this study brought certain limitations. Suspension and expulsion data were not available prior to Year 3 nor from non-government schools, and the study could not account for informal exclusions of children from school, nor movements interstate or between government and non-government schools for reasons related to student behaviour. The format of exclusion data, provided by calendar month and year of exclusion (rather than by Grade/Year level), also meant that the student's school Year level at the time of exclusion had to be inferred based on other linked education records (e.g., from national standardised tests of literacy and numeracy completed in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9) and based on the standard progression of the NSW-CDS cohort from Kindergarten in 2009 to Year 12 in 2021. This may have contributed error to the differentiation of primary and secondary school exclusions for a small number of children who did not progress in the standard pattern and did not participate in the nationwide tests. For a limited number of children who received a first exclusion in the same calendar month as their second exclusion, it was not possible to confirm which exclusion was the "first". In these few instances, a hierarchical order, informed by the overall prevalence of exclusion reasons across the entire sample, was used to allocate the "first" exclusion for these children (with exclusions for aggressive behaviour preferenced over those for continued disobedience, and so on, according to decreasing prevalence of these incidents in the total sample). In terms of covariates, this study was limited by its inability to specifically examine the experiences of children from minority ethnic backgrounds, children with disability, and with other known correlates of exclusion. We were also unable to consider school-level factors that substantively impact the use of exclusion, including implementation of behaviour management policies and the provision of effective alternative discipline methods. These are topics for exploration in future research.

5. Conclusion

This study provides the first longitudinal evidence of the cumulative prevalence, pattern, and correlates of exclusionary school discipline in a representative population of children in Australia across a decade of students' schooling. The lifetime prevalence of exclusionary discipline from Year 3 – 12 was well in excess of the aggregated yearly rates published by some Australian state education departments. The common occurrence of repeated exclusions implies that suspending and expelling children from school may not decrease problem behaviour. The prevalent use of exclusionary discipline in the junior years of secondary school indicates a particularly critical window for policy and

procedural reforms aimed at restricting use of exclusions, including the adoption of more effective behaviour management approaches. Social-emotional and behavioural skills promotion in the years prior to school (to support successful transition to formal learning) and during the primary school years may also serve to strongly establish children's engagement in learning at school, and mitigate against the accumulation of multiple exclusions over time. Future research should additionally consider the interplay of individual- and school-level factors to determine the effect of the different strategies that individual schools employ to administer behaviour management and disciplinary exclusion. These findings highlight important equity considerations, as exclusionary discipline practices disproportionately affect already vulnerable populations. This pattern compounds existing disadvantages and limits equal access to educational opportunities. Addressing these disparities in disciplinary practices is therefore critical not only for educational effectiveness, but to ensure schools serve as institutions of inclusion rather than exclusion. The present data on the prevalence, pattern, and correlates of disciplinary exclusion in NSW public schools can help guide education systems to revise education policies, practices, and procedures to support children to remain in school and achieve stronger educational and other life outcomes, and motivate school leaders and teachers to implement effective, evidence-based alternatives to exclusion in their schools and classrooms.

Ethics Approval Statement

Approval for the study was provided by the NSW Population and Health Services and ACT Health Human Research Ethics Committees (HREC/18/CIPHS/49), with relevant data custodian approvals. Record linkage was conducted under waiver of consent arrangements within the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council's (2023) National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research, according to strict data access and reporting criteria.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108608.

Data availability

Data used in this project has been provided by government custodians for research purposes to the NSW Child Development Study. The data is unable to be shared with third parties or deposited into data repositories. Collaborative research activities may be possible depending on scope and resources; alternatively, researchers wishing to access these datasets can apply directly to the relevant data custodians.

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