
Race Gaps in School Trust: Where They Come from and How to Resolve Them

David S. Yeager, Valerie Purdie-Vaughns, Sophia Yang Hooper, and Geoffrey L. Cohen

INTRODUCTION

Trust in American institutions varies widely among adults from different racial-ethnic backgrounds. For example, 43% of Whites reported low levels of trust in the police compared to 70% of African Americans. This brief describes findings from a study that demonstrates the developmental psychological processes for the emergence of racial and ethnic gaps in institutional trust during adolescence as well as the ways these gaps affect long-term developmental outcomes. The authors show that these gaps and their consequences are not inevitable.

A key developmental challenge for adolescents in the contemporary U.S. is learning to assess the trustworthiness of an institution, such as a school, and to make judgments about whether to comply with its rules and policies. African American and Latino youth make these assessments in a context in which they are disproportionately subjected to mistreatment by authorities compared to White youth. This mistreatment takes the form of low expectations from teachers, disparities in disciplinary action, and suspensions for minor misbehavior.

When racial and ethnic minority youth experience and perceive biased mistreatment, they may generalize from specific interactions within the school environment to a mental representation that the institution is biased against them. As a consequence, youth may then be less likely to comply with school policies, which in turn leads to a self-reinforcing cycle of punishment by authorities and further loss of trust by minority students.

Students who have lost trust are deprived of the benefits of engaging with an institution. In schools, these benefits include forming positive relationships with teachers and other mentors and accessing resources and opportunities for advancement.

But trust can be improved through timely interventions, such as those that provide “wise feedback.” These strategies communicate to students that they will be respected as valuable individuals rather than treated or judged through the prism of a negative stereotype. These signals, offered during critical periods of trust formation, have the opportunity to create positive consequences that can lead to a virtuous cycle with positive outcomes.

The authors use data from an eight-year longitudinal study that tracked African American and White students across two cohorts from sixth grade until one year after high school (Study 1). They test whether disciplinary incidents in school, and the sense of injustice they engender, predict a loss of institutional trust among African American youth as well as a greater awareness of procedural injustice. They focus on “judgment call” incidents such as excessive noise or talking out of turn. The authors chose this approach because previous research has demonstrated that no racial-ethnic disparities exist in discipline for objective infractions—such as bringing a weapon to school—but African American students are much more likely than White students to be disciplined for subjective infractions, such as disobedience and loitering. The authors then test whether trust among middle schoolers predicts their discipline incidents in eighth grade and their eventual enrollment in a four-year college in the year after high school.

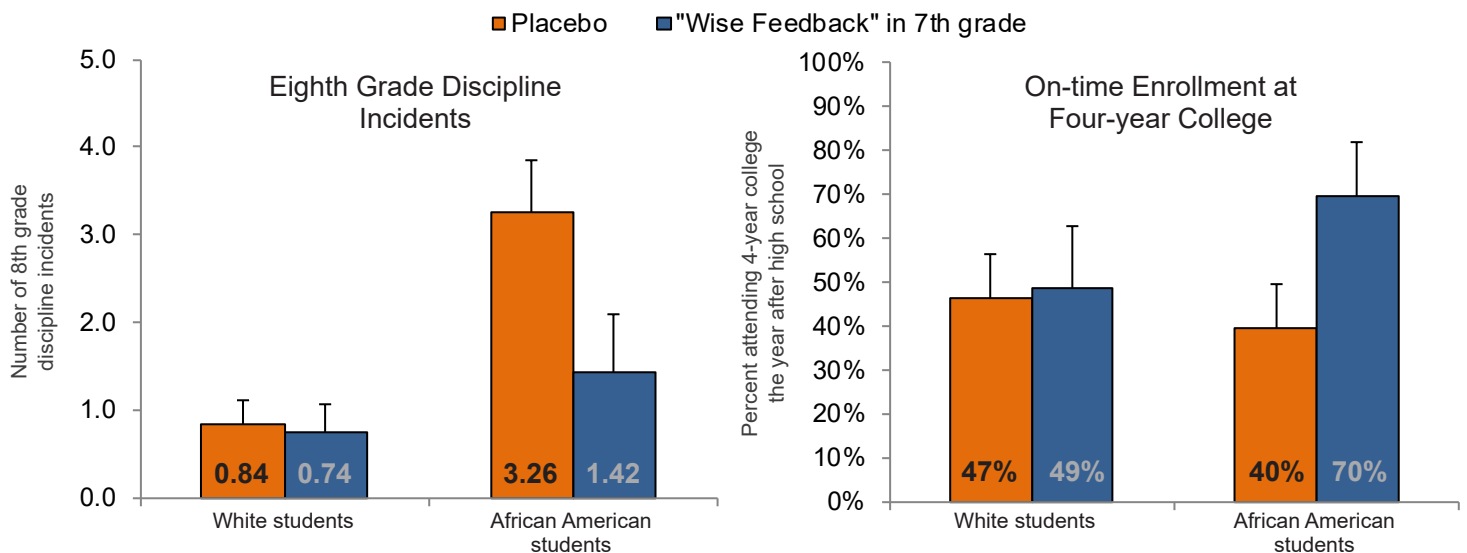
Next, the authors examine the effects of a trust-restoring “wise feedback” intervention in the seventh grade—in the form of a teacher’s handwritten note on an essay that communicated respect and trust—on the number of eighth grade discipline incidents and on the students’ on-time enrollment at a four-year college.

Finally, they analyze data from a one-year, cohort-sequential study of Latino and White middle school students (Study 2).

KEY FINDINGS

- > **The emergence of the middle school racial trust gap.** Trust decreased from grades six to eight among both African American and White students. But trust declined faster for African American students, producing a racial trust gap by the fall of seventh grade.
- > **Predictors of the trust gap.** Because students did not lose more trust over the summer, it is most likely that the experiences in school, rather than aging and maturation, caused the gap.
- > **School experiences that might account for the growth of the trust gap.** (1) African American students outnumbered White students by nearly three to one for subjective discipline problems (defiance and disobedience), likely leading African American students to feel a sense of procedural injustice in school discipline. (2) African American students also were more likely to expect that they, rather than White students in their school, would be disciplined for the same events. White students did not report perceived bias in discipline.
- > **Does a loss of trust predict discipline incidents?** Yes. Lower trust each spring predicted discipline incidents the following year.
- > **Long-term consequences of loss of trust.** Students who lost more trust than expected in seventh grade were less likely to enroll in a four-year college after high school. This finding held even after controlling for important predictors of college enrollment such as pre-middle school academic performance.
- > **Effect of the “wise feedback” intervention.** (1) Eighth-grade discipline: Receiving a trust-restoring “wise feedback” intervention in the spring of 7th grade significantly reduced African American students’ eighth-grade discipline incidents. (2) College enrollment: Wise feedback in seventh grade significantly increased the likelihood that African American students would enroll in a four-year college after high school. Treatment effects for White students in both areas were not significant. (See figure.)
- > **Study 2 findings.** As in Study 1, trust declined every semester of middle school for both Latino and White students but this decline took place more quickly and strongly for Latino students compared to their White peers. Latino students’ awareness of bias, i.e., procedural injustice in their school, predicted a decline in trust.

LONGITUDINAL EFFECTS OF TRUST-RESTORING “WISE FEEDBACK” INTERVENTION



This figure shows the covariate-adjusted longitudinal effects of a trust-restoring “wise feedback” intervention (administered during spring of seventh grade) on eighth-grade discipline problems and on-time enrollment in a four-year college five-and-a-half years postintervention.

- African American students who received “wise feedback” were less likely to have discipline incidents in eighth grade and more likely to attend college on time.
- Treatment effects for White students were not significant.

Covariates include prior achievement (grade point average and test scores), preintervention trust, gender, and cohort. Covariate-adjusted values for each racial group estimated at each racial group’s mean.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These findings inform education policy and practice by demonstrating that a teacher's show of respect toward African American youth during a key developmental period created a virtuous cycle in which trust in institutions was restored. Discipline incidents went down the following year and college enrollment went up over five years later. However, without this timely intervention, students' sense of mistrust grew, producing perceptions of procedural injustice that caused trust to decline further. The "wise feedback" intervention therefore demonstrates a method for helping teachers to create a classroom climate that is more likely to preserve the trust of racial and ethnic minority youth who contend with discrimination.

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REFERENCE

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