
The Impact of Colorism on Upward Mobility

Chyonika Roy, Benedicta Kwarteng, Talia Danastorg

Principal Investigator: Melissa Machuca

Affiliation: International Socioeconomics Laboratory™, John Jay College of Criminal Justice

Abstract

Colorism in the United States of America has a long history rooted in systematic racism and slavery. The idealization of white skin affects darker-skinned individuals in various parts of life. Our research touches upon colorism's effects on upward social mobility among dark-skinned individuals. There is very little written about the effect of colorism on social mobility, so our research may provide more information on this subject to the public. In this essay, we explore the adverse impact colorism has on upward social mobility. This study considers school bias in suspension as a contributing factor. Students of darker skin tones are more harshly disciplined than lighter-skinned students, making them more prone to school arrests, detention, and suspension. The effects of this disciplinary action on the future of students' prevents them from sometimes graduating high school, attending college, or advancing in their respective careers. During our research we explored suspension rates among high school students in correlation with their skin tones. After obtaining archival data in addition to launching an original survey, we concluded that an increase in educational resources, abolishing the school-to-prison pipeline, and introducing regulation on the zero-tolerance policy are integral steps towards academic success for students of color, thus increasing the social mobility of darker-skinned individuals.

Categories: Colorism, Social Mobility

Keywords: Skin Tone Stratification, Prison Pipeline, Suspension, Zero-tolerance, Wages, Social Stagnation

Literature Review

Colorism is the discrimination, the continued practice, and unconscious bias that causes favorable treatment to light-skinned people to their darker-skinned peers. In the United States specifically, this practice of discrimination resulted from colonization and slavery. When slavery was prevalent in the United States preferential treatment was given to lighter-skinned people with darker skin. This is because light-skinned slaves were seen as more physically attractive, more valuable economically, and intelligent (Noordwood & Wilder). The preferential treatment took place in the type of jobs people did. While darker-skinned people were doing grueling and intensive labor in fields, having more contact with the sun. Lighter-skinned people contrastingly did more domestic work (Nittle. K Nandra, 2020). And this preferential treatment exhibited during slavery may have correlated to what is occurring today to people of color. Such as suspension, light-skinned African-American males are 2.5 times as likely compared to darker-skinned African-American males who are 3.4 times as likely to become suspended from school (Hannon. L, Defina. R, & Baruch. S, 2013). This impacts students' quality of education because suspensions impact how many days students are in school. According to the ACLU, in the 2015-2016 school year nationwide, there were 11 million school days lost for students due to suspension (Daniel J. Lossen & Amir Whitaker). How many days a student is in school is an indication for future success rates such as graduating from school or being employed. Due to suspension rates of African Americans being higher, it correlates with reduced academic performance (Sonika. R).

There is an indication that the perceived “whiteness “ of individuals has effects on the success rates of people of color. For example in regards to the names of people correlates to labor outcomes of black people (Bertrand & Mulliathan, 2004). A similar trend can be seen with preconceived Asian and Hispanic names that can lead to fewer job interviews (the University of Toronto and the University of Missouri). This indicates an already existing bias whether unconscious or conscious towards “whiteness” even if people have similar qualifications. Due to this bias towards a eurocentric ideal, it may correlate with lighter-skinned people being seen as more eurocentric. This may correlate to various measures of success such as mean hourly wages and income. A study dictates that among African Americans as skin tone lightens there is a higher hourly wage. \$11.72 is the average hourly wage for darker-skinned men vs. \$14.72 for lighter-skinned men of the time of the study in 2007 (Goldsmith. A, Hamilton, D, & Dairy. W, 2007). This bias towards “whiteness” is also seen in the criminal justice system. An average sentence for a black prisoner is 378 days longer than a white prisoner when controlling for the types of offenses committed (Tonry, 2007). When comparing varying skin tones, the sentence of a light-skinned black woman was 12% shorter than that of a dark-skinned black woman. This connects to the concern with the School to Prison pipeline, how it relates to colorism and social mobility. Schools have enacted zero-tolerance policies.

Policies that aim to remove weapons from school by adopting intense disciplinary policies heavily rooted in suspensions. For instance, what the Zero Tolerance Policy has heavily criticized as “weapons” seems to be interpreted too loosely and students are suspended for anything that is related to a weapon or has any reference to one such as finger guns. Along with this policy, there

has been the adoption of the broken window policing policies in response to students' behavior. The main idea behind this policy is to crack down on small offenses to stop larger ones from occurring, which has resulted in an increase in suspensions to actions that previously may have not warranted such a punishment (Lind & Nelson, 2015). These policies have resulted in increased policing in schools and outsourcing of disciplined students to police officers and juvenile courts. For example, the number of School Resource Officers has increased by nearly a third from 1998-2007 according to the Justice Policy Institute. Due to these policies, there is an increase in suspension, which results in a student landing in the criminal justice system to handle their cases. In addition, punishment by suspension is more likely to impact darker-skinned peers, thus putting them more at risk of the School to Prison Pipeline. For example, Darker Skinned African American males are 3 to 4 times more likely to get suspended than their lighter-skinned counterparts. Suspension causes more missed days of school, which adds to the difficulty of completing high school or attaining higher education and overall upward social mobility. Taking into account the grave impact suspension has on the lives of dark-skinned students, what then are the consequences of the effects of suspension on their ability to climb up from one social class to another?

Hypothesis

In our research, we intend to gain a broader understanding of the relation between colorism and upward social mobility among people of color in the United States. We will observe the success rates between people of color and their white counterparts in areas of education with the skin tone as a factor. The relationship between colorism and social mobility is spurious, that is a third factor relating to both colorism and social mobility is in play. Our goal is to establish the relationship between the two using archival research data gathered and the results from our survey.

Our hypothesis considers high school suspension rates as a factor for the relationship between colorism and upward social mobility. We conducted archival research to support this hypothesis. The effects of colorism are prominent when it comes to education and criminal justice especially towards darker-skinned individuals, most likely due to the intersections between racism and colorism. Suspensions often funnel students of color into the school to prison pipeline, contributing to the disproportionately large number of incarcerated individuals of color in prison (Hannon. L., DeFina. R., & Bruch. S. 2013, June). When there is an educational hindrance on people with darker skin, there is bound to be an effect on their future career as well. In educational terms, colorism has infiltrated schools' disciplinary methods. Black female students with darker skin are shown to be three times more likely to be suspended in comparison to lighter-skinned students. Additionally, black male students are two and a half times more likely to be suspended (Data S., 2019). Due to the significant relationship between suspension and academic success, this gives light-skinned students a higher advantage not only educationally, but career-wise as well. Studies show that black and brown women earn far less than their white counterparts, resulting in women with the lightest skin complexions earning \$2,600 more a year than women with darker skin tones (Data S., 2019). This huge difference significantly impacts the chances of a dark skin person to move up from one social group to another.

Materials and Methods

Survey

To examine our hypothesis, we conducted a survey with a sample size of $n=137$. The survey aimed to gather responses to six questions about skin color stratification and high school suspension. Our survey also asked respondents about what state they live in and a couple of other questions on how they feel suspension in high school impacted their chances at;

- a) Graduating high school
- b) Attending college or other post-high school equivalents
- c) Current wages, if employed.

While these questions aided in our understanding of the correlation between colorism and upward social mobility, they are neglected from the survey analysis because they do not provide any conclusive evidence to our hypothesis. The six questions from the survey are discussed below

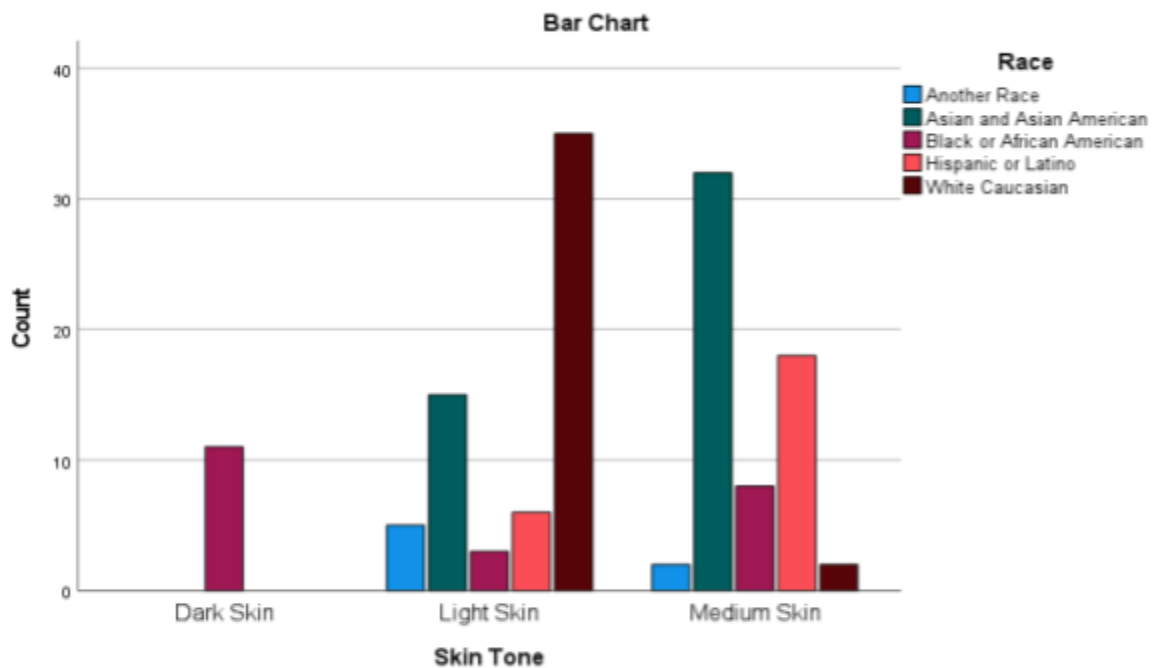


Fig. 1 Count of each race with the 3-scale skin tone

Fig.1 cross tabulation of skin tone and racial identity.

1. What racial group do you identify with?

This question asked participants to select what racial groups they belonged to. To account for the possibility of one person being associated with multiple groups, the response to the question allowed for multiple selections and also added write-in options for racial groups not represented in the options given. Out of the seven racial groups options provided, our survey respondents identify with five of them. These five variables were coded in IBM SPSS as; 1= “Asian”, 2= “Black or African American”, 3= “Hispanic or Latino”, 4= “White Caucasian” and 5= “Another Race”.

2. What skin tone is closest to your natural skin color?

The question on skin tone asked participants to choose among three skin tone options given. Which were light skin, medium skin, and dark skin. Using a modified version of the Massey-Martin Scale (Fig.1) as a reference, we consolidated the 10 point scale into 3 and coded the variables as; 1= “Light Skin”, 5= “Medium Skin”, and 10= “Dark Skin”.

Scale of Skin Color Darkness



Fig. 2 shows the Massey-Martin scale of skin color from 1 to 10 using a palette of colored hands.

3. Were you ever suspended in high school?
 The survey also required respondents to indicate if they have ever been suspended. They were given two answer options coded as 0= “Yes” and 1= “No”.
 4. How many times were you suspended?
 To get an accurate picture of the number of times students were suspended in order to =better identify the differences across racial groups. We used a scale of 0-5. Based on the overall response then coded into three variables as; “Low” = 0, “Medium” = 1-2, and “High” = 3-4.
 5. Did you graduate from high school?
 The survey also required respondents to indicate if they graduated high school. They were given two answer options coded as 0= “Yes” and 1= “No”.
 6. Did you go to college, trade school, or other post-high school equivalents
 Finally, we asked respondents to indicate if they attended college, trade school, or other post-high school equivalents. They were given two answer options coded as 0= “Yes” and 1= “No”.
- The content of the six survey questions was analyzed using the IBM SPSS statistical tool. We used crosstabulation to analyze the relationship between; (a) Skin Tone and Suspension Rates, (b) Skin Tone and High School Graduation, (c) Skin Tone and Suspension.

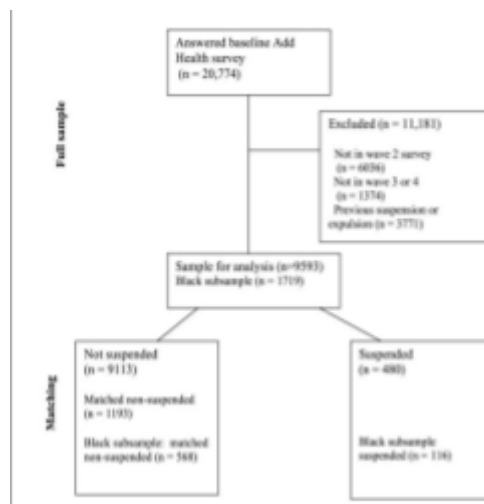


Fig. 3 Add Health data sampling and matching

Archival Data

We obtained our archival data from the CRDC and Add Health. These sources add relevant details to the study of colorism and upward social mobility. We analyzed the source for the archival data using the CRAAP test as a guideline to objectively decide the reliability of the data for this study. The criteria for the CRAAP test are as follows;

Currency: how updated and time-relevant is the information in the source

Relevance: the importance of the information to our research

Authority: how credible is the institution, publication, and author

Accuracy: how truthful, reliable, and valid is the content of the data

Purpose: What contributions does this study add to the general discourse on this topic.

Results

The results in Fig. 4 shows that when factoring suspension frequency among the different skin types, 27.3% of dark skinned students indicated being suspended at least 1-2 times compared to 2.1% of their light skinned counterparts. The accounted difference between the two races displays the bias in disciplinary actions that dark skinned students receive compared to that of white skinned students.

Skin Tone * Suspension Rate Crosstabulation

Count

		Suspension Rate				Total
		Missing	low	Medium	High	
Skin Tone	Dark Skin	0	8	3	0	11
	Light Skin	0	59	4	1	64
	Medium Skin	3	58	1	0	62
Total		3	125	8	1	137

Fig. 4 Comparison of skin tone with suspension rate scale using crosstabulation

Skin Tone * Graduated High School Crosstabulation

		Graduated High School				
			No	Yes	Total	
Skin Tone	Dark Skin	Count	0	4	7	11
		% within Skin Tone	0.0%	36.4%	63.6%	100.0%
		% within Graduated High School	0.0%	8.9%	7.8%	8.0%
		% of Total	0.0%	2.9%	5.1%	8.0%
	Light Skin	Count	1	17	46	64
		% within Skin Tone	1.6%	26.6%	71.9%	100.0%
		% within Graduated High School	50.0%	37.8%	51.1%	46.7%
		% of Total	0.7%	12.4%	33.6%	46.7%
	Medium Skin	Count	1	24	37	62
% within Skin Tone		1.6%	38.7%	59.7%	100.0%	
% within Graduated High School		50.0%	53.3%	41.1%	45.3%	
	% of Total	0.7%	17.5%	27.0%	45.3%	
Total	Count	2	45	90	137	
	% within Skin Tone	1.5%	32.8%	65.7%	100.0%	
	% within Graduated High School	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	1.5%	32.8%	65.7%	100.0%	

Fig. 5 Comparison of skin tone with the possibility for high school graduation

The survey results displayed in Fig. 5 assessed the disparities in high school graduation in relation to skin tone. Within the sample surveyed 36.4% of dark-skinned individuals did not graduate high school in comparison with 26.6% of light-skinned individuals. The 9.8% difference is a huge loophole that contributes to the hindrance of upward social mobility.

Skin Tone * Suspension Crosstabulation

		Suspension			
		No	Yes	Total	
Skin Tone	Dark Skin	Count	8	3	11
		% within Skin Tone	72.7%	27.3%	100.0%
		% within Suspension	6.3%	33.3%	8.0%
		% of Total	5.8%	2.2%	8.0%
	Light Skin	Count	59	5	64
		% within Skin Tone	92.2%	7.8%	100.0%
		% within Suspension	46.1%	55.6%	46.7%
		% of Total	43.1%	3.6%	46.7%
	Medium Skin	Count	61	1	62
		% within Skin Tone	98.4%	1.6%	100.0%
		% within Suspension	47.7%	11.1%	45.3%
		% of Total	44.5%	0.7%	45.3%
Total	Count	128	9	137	
	% within Skin Tone	93.4%	6.6%	100.0%	
	% within Suspension	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	93.4%	6.6%	100.0%	

Fig. 6 Comparison between skin tone and suspension experience

Figure 6 details the number of participants in our survey who have been suspended across the three skin tones tested. The results indicate that 27.3% of the darker-skinned participants in our survey have been suspended before. Compared to 7.8 and 1.6% of the lighter and medium-skinned participants who have been suspended before.

The differences between in percentage of disciplinary action rates of both black and white students. Black students experience discipline at an accelerated rate in comparison to white students, black students receiving a 13.46% rate of out-of-school suspension where white students experience an out-of-school suspension rate of 3.5% (Riddle, T., & Sinclair, S., 2019). Additionally, black students experience arrests at school at a 0.28% rate in comparison to white students at 0.08% (Riddle, T., & Sinclair, S., 2019). This data shows the evident contrast in rates, black disciplinary rates being disproportionately higher than their white counterparts (Riddle, T., & Sinclair, S., 2019). This emphasizes the racial bias when it comes to disciplinary methods in schools, as seen when black students are punished more harshly than white students for the same offense.

Metric	Black	White
School Arrest	0.28%	0.08%
Expulsions	0.51%	0.18%
Law Enforcement Referral	0.91%	0.34%
In-school suspension	11.22%	4.23%
Out-of-school suspension	13.46%	3.5%

Fig. 7 Percentage of students from each race receiving the each type of disciplinary action. From the PNAS Data Analysis of CDRC Data

Discussion

The analysis of our survey and archival data heavily suggests that schools need to reinvent how they approach discipline, especially when it comes to suspensions and the enforcement of the zero-tolerance policy. Due to racial bias present in the education system, there is evident prejudice towards students with darker skin. Having a record of suspension or other disciplinary actions can be detrimental to someone's socioeconomic status. The effect is similar to having a record of arrests for nonviolent drug offenses. Not only would it hinder their educational opportunities, but their future career as well. This can lower their chances at job opportunities that could help advance their career aiding in a more flexible upward social mobility. Regardless of where they work, if the individual has a darker skin tone they will most likely receive lower wages (Chetty, R., Hendren, N., Jones, M. R., & Porter, S. R., 2020). This can make suspended individuals more prone to social stagnation as they are unable to claim any social success that will “upgrade” their socioeconomic status.

Recommendations

1) Creation of Educational Resources

The lack of education is a catalyst to colorism and hinders upward social mobility. Oftentimes the stigmatization that comes with having a darker skin color closes off many academic opportunities for competent people of color. Educational discrimination against people of color contributes to the academic achievement gap between students with darker skin tones and their lighter-skinned peers. A lack of educational opportunities amongst students of color is typically rooted within socioeconomic segregation, causing people of color to be placed in inadequate housing, schooling,

and financial situations, creating a cycle of systemic oppression. The majority of students of color are often in the public school system, and a low population of colored students is seen attending gifted programs and private schools (Monroe, C.R., 2015). Schools primarily composed of students of color are often underfunded. Sparse funds in underprivileged schools often go towards militarizing schools through hiring police guards for disciplinary purposes, rather than educational and recreational resources. Funds would be more beneficial as means for educational resources, such as Advanced Placement courses, extracurricular activities, test preparation, and a stronger curriculum. Giving students of color more educational opportunities can deter them from being funneled into the school to prison pipeline; instead pursuing their educational and career goals when allowed to do so, thus moving them upwards on the social mobility ladder.

2) Abolishing the school-to-prison pipeline system

As mentioned in the first recommendation, the school to prison pipeline continues to serve as a detrimental factor in people of color's social mobility. The school-to-prison pipeline is a prominent phenomenon defining the disproportionate amount of students from underprivileged backgrounds going to prison through disadvantages at school. When talking about suspension rates among people of color with dark skin it is integral to take into account the school-to-prison pipeline. Suspension and other disciplinary actions within the educational system serve as a catalyst that makes students more likely to be sent to prison, commonly amplified by racial bias on the school staff's part (Riddle, T., & Sinclair, S., 2019). If having a darker skin tone makes someone more prone to racism, then darker-skinned individuals are more likely to be hurt by the school-to-prison pipeline (Hansson, L., DeFina, R., & Brunch, S., 2013). In order to combat this, one must take into account the militarized presence in underfunded schools. Schools in impoverished areas are more likely to have increased security and policing. Racial bias is heavily prevalent in the justice system, especially in terms of police. So an influx of police in predominantly black and brown schools doesn't only serve as a component in the school to prison pipeline, but police brutality as well. This is further amplified by the presence of metal detectors and other security measures as well.

3) Zero tolerance policy regulation

Schools with zero-tolerance policies are biased and enforce it more strictly on students of color. While this disparity may not strictly pertain to a student's race, teachers and school personnel who deliver disciplinary actions to students are influenced by their own biases. Teachers are often the ones with the first account of misbehavior in school and are required to report to an administrator who decides the outcome and the disciplinary action to ensue. Now, "there may be differences in reporting (eg. the types of behavior that elicit an official report); thus, similar behavior may be handled and/or reported differently" (Welsh.R, Shafiqua. L, 2018) across different racial groups and with students of color, skin tone becomes a factor. Thus, regulating schools with a zero-tolerance policy ensures that authorities do enforce dictionary principles with intended and unintended racial bias. Federal legislation in 1994 was what first mandated states adopt a more rigorous disciplinary policy after the shooting in Columbine High School, a public high school in Littleton, Colorado. The aftermath of that was a flood of states across the country adopting a zero-tolerance policy that several research studies have proved to disproportionately hurt students

of color. “The American Psychological Association, American Association of Pediatrics, and American Bar Association (ABA) have criticized zero-tolerance school suspension policies for potentially reducing educational attainment, harming employment prospects, increasing risk behavior, and increasing criminal justice involvement (American Association of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, 2003; Lamont et al., 2013; Reynolds et al., 2008)” (Rosenbaum. J, 2018). We propose that, if the federal government were to introduce legislation mandating states to adopt an unbiased process in enforcing school disciplinary policies, the high suspension, and expulsion rates among students of color especially those with darker skin tones would dramatically decrease. The Association of Pediatrics recommends Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in place of in-school and out-of-school suspensions, as a positive reinforcement method to discipline students (Rosenbaum. J, 2018). Therefore, a policy accounting for the proposed method for school disciplinary regulations would serve the interest of students much better and curve the inordinate bias towards darker-skinned students.

Limitations

This study is limited in multiple ways and should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, even though our survey conducted adds originality to the research, it is not very representative nor is the sample significant enough to falsify the hypothesis. As such, while the survey outcome is useful in understanding the different racial demographics and how their respective skin color influences their chances of graduating high school and attending college or a post-high school equivalent, the study is not conclusive on the magnitude of impact it has on upward social mobility. We are certain that further research using a longitudinal study approach would yield better findings in the establishing of these relationships. Second, although we had access to a wide range of archival data, most of the studies conducted were on African-Americans in correlation to their whites counterparts. While this may not necessarily be a valid limitation due to trends explained in the second hypothesis, it does inherently lean our findings towards one racial demographic. If additional research is conducted, we suggest accounting for the lack of data on other racial groups. Finally, since our survey was voluntary participant bias can not be ruled out. As our sample size is not representative enough, we could not afford to factor in participant bias.

Conclusion

Data from our survey along with archival data confirmed our hypothesis. Individuals with darker skin tones receive harsher discipline in schools due to racial bias, making them more prone to social stagnation. Suspensions in schools along with a lack of inclusive curriculum contribute to the perpetual hindrance of people of color, said suspensions potentially sending students into the school to prison pipeline. In order to achieve upward social mobility, extensive changes will have to be made in our present education and criminal justice system. We strongly recommend creating educational resources, accounting for the school-to-prison pipeline, and regulating the zero-tolerance policies in schools.

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