

Who's Really Disrupting the Classroom? An Examination of African American Male Students and Their Disciplinary Roles

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ABSTRACT

A plethora of research (McCadden, 1998; Monroe 2005; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 2000) on student discipline emphasizes the inequities surrounding the distribution of disciplinary actions taken by schools/school districts in regards to behavior, particularly for African American males. This study provides an in-depth examination of disciplinary roles, and argues that by making distinctions between whether a student can be identified as an *instigator* (i.e. any individual who encourages another individual to commit an offense), *participant* (i.e. any individual who willfully instigates, abets, or commits an offense), or *offender* (i.e. any individual who commits an offense) will potentially reveal more about their level of disruption. Drawing upon a sample of 6,301 behavior occurrences committed by African American males in a K-12 urban school district in the mid-western region of the U.S., a counterargument is presented suggesting that African American males are not the primary culprits of disruption. As a result of the findings of this study, recommendations will be made to teachers, counselors, and administrators to reduce the behavior patterns of African American males and improve academic achievement.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, scholars have consistently investigated the disproportionate discipline of African American male students- a phenomenon that is commonly referenced as the discipline gap (McCarthy & Hodge, 1987; Thornton & Trent, 1988; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Ferguson, 2000; McCadden, 1998; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Monroe, 2005, 2006). Several studies reveal that African American males have become the most frequent targets of harsh disciplinary sanctions for subjectively defined infractions, which has consequently lead to allegations of systematic bias in many of the discipline practices adopted by U.S. public schools (Skiba et al., 2002; Monroe, 2002). Yet, it is worth mentioning that amidst these practices, it has been found that African American male students are no more likely to misbehave than their same-gendered peers- Anglo and Hispanic boys (Skiba et al., 2003). With this in mind, the important question becomes, who- if not African American males- is really disrupting the classroom? Grounded in critical race literature, this paper delves into this inquiry by providing an in-depth examination of the relationship between race and disciplinary roles.

This study has been divided into four sections. First, we will offer a review of the discipline literature. Second, we will provide a description of the methods/findings used to cross-racially assess disciplinary roles. Finally, we will offer recommendations to teachers, counselors, and administrators concerning strategies that are likely to reduce the behavior patterns of African American males and improve academic achievement.

The evolution of discipline scholarship

Over the past decade, suspension and expulsion have increasingly become the primary methods for responding to problem behaviors in America's schools, due in part to the widespread and contentious adoption of rigid, automatic and exclusionary "zero-tolerance" approaches to discipline (Leone, Mayer, Malmgren, & Meisel, 2000; Skiba & Knesting, 2001). "Zero-tolerance" was born during the Reagan Administration's war

on drugs, back in the mid-1980s. However, it was Bill Clinton's administration who gave it new currency in the schools when Clinton signed the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, mandating expulsion of students who bring weapons to school. It was a time in American history where public hysteria about youth crime, hyped by pop criminologists like James Q. Wilson, who predicted a violent juvenile crime wave (Wilson & Hernstein, 1985), and John Dilulio, who coined the term "superpredator" to describe a new, viscous young criminal (DiIulio, 1995), the face of whom was implicitly a black or Hispanic urban male (Fuentes, 2003).

Educational researchers are increasingly alarmed about the toll of zero tolerance policies in today's public schools especially for African American males (Lewis, Hancock, James & Larke, 2008). While school administrators may believe suspensions and get-tough policies make schools safe and improve student behavior, the research shows otherwise (Hyman & Snook, 1999; Gay, 2000). Excluding students from school for two days or two months increases the odds of academic failure and dropping out. Furthermore, suspensions and academic failure are strong predictors of entry into the criminal justice system, especially for African-American males (Fuentes, 2003).

Recent research has also linked zero tolerance policies to the gradual process of academic and social disengagement which increases the probability of subsequent disciplinary exclusions, academic failure, and the likelihood of dropping out of school (Bakken & Kortering, 1999; Bock, Tapscott, & Savner, 1998; DeRidder, 1991; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Skiba, 2002). Zero tolerance policy has also been criticized for contributing to the loss of instructional time, inefficient use of school resources, disenfranchisement between families and schools, and unsupervised time out of school (Office of Special Education Programs, 2001; Townsend, 2000).

African American Students and Disciplinary Practices

More than three decades of research has consistently demonstrated the overrepresentation of African American youth in the exclusionary discipline consequences of suspension and expulsion (e.g., Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Gonzalez & Szecsy, 2004; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba & Rausch, 2006), with inconsistent findings for other minority groups, such as Hispanics (Gonzalez & Szecsy, 2004; Skiba et al., 2000). African American youth are suspended and expelled at rates that are two to three times higher than those for other students, despite the lack of evidence that these students exhibit higher levels of disruptive behavior (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000; Townsend, 2000; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982).

Nationwide, African American children account for approximately seventeen (17) percent of the student population yet they constitute approximately thirty-three (33) percent of all suspensions (Education Trust, 1998). Many educational scholars acknowledge that these figures arise at least in part from: (a) racial and gender discrepancies in the dispensation of disciplinary measures that result in more severe consequences for African American males, (b) the proliferation of zero tolerance policies in urban schools that do not abound in suburban communities, (c) interpersonal and cultural misunderstandings, (d) vague and ambiguous policies that can give way to bias, (e) the attitudes of school personnel, and (f) parenting styles that do not foster in children a sense of accountability (Bireda, 2002; Tucker, 1999). Cartledge and Middleton (1995) argued that the dynamic interaction between race and poverty doubly jeopardizes urban African American adolescents who misbehave, which leads teachers to make more negative attributions about infractions committed by African Americans than their other race and gendered peers.

The new canons of discipline research have significantly questioned the basic assumptions, paradigms, and methodologies that zero tolerance policies have on classroom practice, particularly for African American males. Understanding how

teachers respond to various disciplinary situations involving African American males will reveal possible solutions to counter the disproportionate representation among this identified group. Casella (2003) explains that school personnel perceive such individuals [African American male students] as "not fitting into the norm of the school." Which in turn fosters teacher anxiety on the part of classroom management that mainly emphasizes the importance of always being in control of student behavior (Domenico, 1998; Noguera, 1995), those who are not perceived as fitting the social and behavioral norms of the school are subsequently labeled as "dangerous" (Casella, 2003) or as "troublemakers" (Bowditch, 1993).

A number of quantitative assessments reveal that black pupils are statistically more likely to be suspended than their Anglo counterparts (Irvine, 2000; Skiba, et al., 2002). Similarly, a small subset of qualitative studies have supportive evidence that suggests teachers confine reprimands and punitive consequences to black children even when youths of other races engage in identical unsanctioned behaviors (Emihovich, 1983; McCadden, 1998). According to Skiba et al. (2000) much of the extant research, both quantitative and qualitative, indicates that African Americans receive harsher punishments than their peers, often for subjectively defined offenses. Additionally, the literature contends that inequities, of this type, are most pronounced among male students (Ferguson, 2001).

Teacher perceptions and expectations of their students serve as key mediating influences in their decision to impose disciplinary consequences (Bennett & Harris, 1982). In some instances, teachers may not explicitly connect their disciplinary reactions to negative perceptions of black males, yet systematic trends in disproportionately suggest that teachers may be implicitly guided by stereotypical perceptions that African American boys require greater control than their peers and are unlikely to respond to non-punitive measures.

Researchers (Grant, 1988; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Noguera, 1995) and others have argued that negative views of black males largely emanate

from environmental dynamics that circumscribe how young African American boys' identities are perceived both inside and outside their communities. When examining research literature on school discipline, the criminalization of black males appears to provide a powerful context for the discipline gap. On one level, researchers widely recognize that teachers frequently approach classes populated by low-income and African American youths with a strong emphasis on controlling student behaviors. On a second level, when disciplining African American students, teachers are likely to demonstrate reactions that appear to be more severe than required. Additionally, there is evidence that practitioners may devote little effort to addressing behavioral concerns in their infancy when non-punitive techniques are likely to be effective (Emihovich, 1983). Such tendencies are less likely to be true with Anglo students.

Educational expectations, practices, and policies reflect the values of the individuals who create them. As a consequence, judgments about student disruption are imbued with cultural norms (Ferguson, 2000). Since Anglo and middle-class individuals occupy most positions of power in educational settings, decisions concerning behavioral expectations and infractions are set forth by a culturally-specific bloc; and prevailing beliefs and practices often proceed unchallenged, and as a result the culturally based nature of school discipline has remained a firm component of school life.

DATA AND METHOD: A CROSS-RACIAL ASSESSMENT OF DISCIPLINARY ROLES IN CISD

This study is part of a series of scholarly investigations focusing specifically on African American K-12 students in one Midwestern urban school district, referred to hereafter by the pseudonym Cascade Independent School District (CISD). The data in this study was collected during the 2005-2006 academic school year. The goal of these investigations was focused primarily on the status of African Americans in CISD in an effort to improve the academic achievement of

this population at both the district and national level. Another major goal of this specific investigation was to examine the disciplinary roles of African American male students within CISD- juxtaposed to their counterparts of other ethnic groups- as a means of developing more effective discipline techniques.

To achieve these goals, two research questions were developed. The first asks which group of male students is most disruptive. Here, the researchers were interested in identifying those students most frequently cited as either the participant or offender in the offenses examined. The second question asks, is there evidence suggesting that African American male students are victims of discipline disproportionality? Here, the researchers were interested in assessing whether African American males receive more stringent sanctions, in comparison to Anglo male students, for similar offenses. The analysis, that is to follow, grapples with each of these questions in greater detail.

In this series of investigations, the third author of this paper collaborated with CISD to obtain the dataset used in this study.¹ The data reported was collected from official records derived from the district's Research Department. To offer some additional background information, the following descriptive statistics have been provided to allow the reader to understand the demographic makeup of the school district. During the 2005-2006 academic school year, CISD had a total student population of 32,183 students (i.e. twenty-one (21) percent African American, twenty-five (25) percent Anglo, and forty-nine (49) percent Hispanic), with 6,801 of these students being African American males enrolled at all grade levels (see table 1). This group's enrollment is approximately thirty-seven (37) percent of the total male population, and twenty-four (24) percent of the total student population. Because the database is extremely extensive, the data that follows only focuses on a subset of the data collected- which provides a detailed analysis of the disciplinary roles, infractions, and sanctions associated with African American male students attending schools located within CISD.

TABLE 1. Gender Breakdown of CISD Student Population, 2005-2006

Students	Male	Female	Total
African American	6801	3649	10450
Asian American	477	220	697
Native American	205	130	335
Hispanic	6962	3616	10578
Anglo	4075	1749	5824
N	18520	9364	27884

Given that the focus of this study is specifically on the dynamics of disciplinary practices in CISD, we examined the top 10 behavior infractions committed- and sanctions imposed upon- male students in all grade levels. Tables 2 and 3 lists the most cited infractions and sanctions; respectively. In examining these tables individually, we learn that acts of disobedience are the most common form of disruption committed by male students- regardless of race. Subsequently, school detention is seemingly the

most frequently imposed resolution used to counter acts of disruption by male students.

Data Limitations

Prior to the discussion of our findings, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of our dataset. Because of the manner by which the data was initially coded by CISD, the preferred method of regression analyses could not be employed². We turn now to the cross-racial analysis of the variation in disciplinary roles, infractions, and sanctions imposed upon male students.

FINDINGS

To properly explain the findings of this study, the authors utilize three tables that will be discussed throughout the remainder of this paper. As a caveat, the findings of this study are case specific, thus we refrain from making generalizations. The first of the three tables will present descriptive comparisons of the disciplinary roles (i.e. witness, victim, instigator, participant, or offender) for

TABLE 2. Top 10 Behavior Infractions for Male Students in CISD, 2005-2006

Indicator	AA	Hispanic	Anglo	Event	AA
Disobedience	2909	2735	1827	7727	37.65%
Defiance	1032	1111	440	2623	39.34%
Truancy	533	1003	586	2263	23.55%
Fight w/ Student	674	623	371	1743	38.67%
Tardiness	263	394	152	855	30.76%
Improper Dress	272	174	86	561	48.48%
Threat to Student	160	109	56	329	48.63%
Profane- Adult	137	105	74	320	42.81%
Profane- Student	102	99	51	260	39.23%
Theft	76	82	27	197	38.58%

TABLE 3. Top 10 Behavior Sanctions for Male Students in CISD, 2005-2006

Indicators	AA	Hispanic	Anglo	Resolution	AA %
Assigned School Detention	1508	1906	981	4538	33.23%
In School Suspension	1155	1172	608	3032	38.09%
Out of School Suspension- 3 Days	479	512	241	1262	37.96%
Restricted Lunch	462	376	269	1158	39.90%
Restricted Recess	326	362	324	1055	30.90%
Conference w/ Student	451	356	203	1047	43.08%
Assigned Saturday School	281	480	218	1030	27.28%
Warning	272	249	220	784	34.69%
Out of School Suspension- 5 Days	218	224	100	565	38.58%
Conference w/ Parent- Student	182	161	96	452	40.27%

TABLE 4. Disciplinary Role and the Racial Composition of Male Students in CISD, 2005-2006

Role	African American	Asian American	Native American	Hispanic	Anglo	TOTAL
Witness	46.15%	0%	0%	23.08%	30.77%	0.07%
Victim	50.00%	0%	0%	40.00%	10.00%	0.05%
Instigator	37.03%	3.04%	1.03%	36.66%	22.24%	33.07%
Participant	35.23%	1.92%	1.09%	41.65%	20.12%	6.47%
Offender	36.69%	2.40%	1.15%	37.68%	22.08%	60.34%
TOTAL	36.72%	2.58%	1.11%	37.59%	22.00%	100.00%

TABLE 5. Cross Racial Comparisons of the Top 10 Behavior Resolutions for Reports of Disobedience in CISD, 2005-2006

Resolutions	African American Males	African American Total	Anglo Males	Anglo Total	TOTAL Reports
Assigned School Detention	24.61% (770)	35.19% (1101)	18.34% (574)	24.64% (771)	— 3129
In School Suspension	29.60% (615)	43.41% (902)	15.16% (315)	19.39% (403)	— 2078
Out of School Suspension- 3 Days	29.01% (85)	44.71% (131)	13.99% (41)	19.80% (58)	— 293
Assigned Saturday School	19.82% (87)	33.49% (147)	12.76% (56)	18.45% (81)	— 439
Restricted Lunch	28.92% (260)	42.05% (378)	18.46% (166)	23.80% (214)	— 899
Conference w/ Student	28.23% (188)	44.44% (296)	15.62% (104)	21.77% (145)	— 666
Warning	26.10% (119)	39.04% (178)	14.25% (65)	23.90% (109)	— 456
Restricted Recess	22.63% (208)	31.12% (286)	25.03% (230)	35.58% (327)	— 919
Out of School Suspension- 1 Day	26.50% (93)	34.19% (120)	15.95% (56)	19.94% (70)	— 351
Out of School Suspension- 2 Days	33.94% (56)	41.21% (68)	14.55% (24)	17.58% (29)	— 165
TOTAL	2481	3607	1631	2207	9395

male students by race. The remaining tables will provide a more detailed analysis of potential discipline disproportionality in sanctions imposed upon male students for acts of disobedience and truancy. The findings for each individual table will be discussed.

Cross Tabulations

Table 4 illustrates- by race- the disciplinary roles that characterize the male students attending schools within Cascade ISD. A typology of these roles has been established to give the reader a

TABLE 6. Cross Racial Comparisons of the Top 10 Behavior Resolutions for Reports of Truancy in CISD, 2005-2006

Resolutions	African American Total	African American Males	Anglo Males	Anglo Total	TOTAL Reports
Assigned School Detention	19.41% (105)	11.09% (60)	8.50% (46)	16.27% (88)	— 541
In School Suspension	21.03% (183)	10.11% (88)	8.85% (77)	15.40% (134)	— 870
Out of School Suspension - 3 Days	16.19% (17)	9.52% (10)	2.86% (3)	7.62% (8)	— 105
Assigned Saturday School	20.46% (134)	11.76% (77)	13.74% (90)	22.75% (149)	— 655
Restricted Lunch	29.74% (113)	15.26% (58)	18.16% (69)	31.05% (118)	— 380
Conference w/ Student	30.67% (23)	12.00% (9)	21.33% (16)	30.67% (23)	— 75
Warning	28.24% (172)	14.61% (89)	19.70% (120)	34.65% (211)	— 609
Restricted Recess	8.33% (1)	8.33% (1)	16.67% (2)	33.33% (4)	— 12
Out of School Suspension - 1 Day	50.00% (11)	31.82% (7)	4.55% (1)	4.55% (1)	— 22
Out of School Suspension - 2 Days	14.29% (2)	7.14% (1)	7.14% (1)	14.29% (2)	— 14
TOTAL	761	400	425	738	3283

better sense of the level of involvement for cited infractions. Students are identified by one of five classifications: (1) *witness* (i.e. any individual that can provide a firsthand account of an offense); (2) *victim* (i.e. any individual targeted or harmed while an offense is committed); (3) *instigator* (i.e. any individual who encourages another individual to commit an offense); (4) *participant* (i.e. any individual who willfully instigates, abets, or commits an offense); or (5) *offender* (i.e. any individual who commits an offense).

Since the nature of this study is comparative, it is important that we offer a discussion about the behavioral roles of African American male students in relationship to their peers. According to table 4, African American male students in

CISD are not the primary disruptors. This group trails their Hispanic counterparts in classifications as the participant and offender of all behavioral offenses assessed within the dataset; hence, making Hispanic males the most disruptive group of students within this analysis. Though this finding challenges conventional wisdom that suggests African American males are the most disruptive group of students; it still leaves to question whether students of color- in general- are disproportionately targeted for disciplinary action.

All things considered, what evidence can be provided that supports the claim that students of color- particularly African American males- are singled-out at higher rates for disciplinary action?

McCadden's (1998) qualitative study found that by examining disciplinary sanctions imposed upon students, one could determine if African Americans received harsher punishments than their Anglo peers for committing the same infraction. In alignment with McCadden's logic, the remaining tables assess the parity/ inequity in the distribution of sanctions cross-racially (with Anglo male students as the benchmark) for acts of disobedience and truancy.

Table 5 shows that though there persist inequities in the appropriation of certain penalties for acts of disobedience for African American male students. At first glance, it seems that sanctions are evenly distributed for infractions relative to this form of disruption. However, another look reveals that while twenty-five (25) percent of Anglo males get restricted recess for acts of disobedience, thirty-three (33) percent of African American males receive two-day suspensions. The former is considered a less punitive sanction and the later more severe.

After review of the data, it is clear that African American male students, in comparison to their Anglo counterparts, typically receive harsher punishments for committing the same infractions in accordance with CISD's discipline policy³. Unfortunately, the findings in this study are consistent with much of the existing literature that suggests these students- and more broadly, students of color- are susceptible to disproportionate discipline practices. Though we do not concede that these students are innocent of the alleged violations, we do acknowledge that their punishment is oftentimes inconsistent with the offense. The following section offers recommendations for educators concerning strategies that are likely to reduce the behavior patterns and improve academic achievement for African American male students.

DISCUSSION

With regard to the larger scope of behavior patterns of African American males in K-12 urban schools, the findings of this study shed new light on what groups of male students are actually disrupting the classroom through their behavior

patterns and what students receive harsher punishments from CISD. These findings also reveal several trends that school personnel in CISD should seriously consider addressing as it pertains to African American males. First, when examining the top 10 behavior infractions for male students in CISD in 2005-2006 (Table 2), the number one area was Disobedience. In this category, African American males were cited with approximately thirty-seven (37) percent) of these infractions even though they only comprise approximately 10.8% of the total student population in CISD. Given this finding, school district personnel should seek to investigate internally why teachers are reporting these infractions for African American males at three times their representation in the district. Furthermore, based on the high frequency of reporting of disobedience infractions in CISD, the African American male student is removed from the academic environment more frequently than other male students in the district. This phenomenon puts the African American male student at a great disadvantage in their development of becoming academically successful (Moore, 2001).

Second, when examining the behavior sanctions recommended by CISD, we still find that African American males are impacted at a greater level than their male peers even though they are not the largest ethnic group disrupting the classroom environment. In all of the indicators listed in Table 3 (e.g., assigned school detention; in school suspension; out-of-school suspension - 3 days; restricted lunch; restricted recess; conference with student; assigned Saturday school; warning; out-of-school suspension - 5 days; and conference with parent/student), we find that African American males are recommended for these sanctions at two, three and four times their representation in the school district. As a result, educators are encourage to launch an equity audit- an investigation that is intended to facilitate insight, discussion and response to systemic patterns of inequities found within schools- that seeks to explain why sanctions or behavior resolutions are harsher for African American males in comparison to their

male peers for the same type of offense (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004).

Third, and most revealing, this study also highlighted the roles (i.e., witness, victim, instigator, participant and offender) of the majority of disciplinary infractions within CISD. In this section, we found that African American males are not the primary behavior disruptors of classrooms in CISD. African American males trail their Hispanic male counterparts in the categories of *participant* and *offender* categories. As indicated earlier in this paper, this makes Hispanic males the most disruptive ethnic group in CISD. This finding goes against the prevailing notion in the research literature that African American males are the most disruptive students in many school districts across the United States.

Limitations/ Areas of Future Research

After completing this study, the findings are limited in a variety of ways. The limitations are as follows:

1. This study was restricted to one urban school district in the mid-western region of the country, which provided the researchers with access to their school district discipline database. As a result, caution should be taken in generalizing the results to other urban school districts.
2. Although this sample focused on the discipline infractions of African American male students in comparison to their ethnic group counterparts, the behavior patterns of African American males in other urban school districts may not fit this profile.

Recommendations for Future Research

To improve our understanding of African American male behavior patterns in K-12 urban schools, the following recommendations are provided as an area of future research that should be examined:

1. An analysis should be conducted that assesses discipline disproportionality among Hispanic students.
2. A more detailed study should be conducted specifically examining which teachers are

most frequently referring African American males for behavior infractions in comparison to their academic achievement in these courses and state assessment tests.

3. Research is needed detailing the total amount of class days/class time missed due to the behavior resolutions recommended by the school district under study.
4. Longitudinal research should be conducted to examine the patterns of CISD discipline patterns/resolutions have on African American males once they leave CISD.

CONCLUSION

The contribution of this study counters conventional wisdom that contends that African American males are the primary disruptors in a given classroom milieu. After extensive analysis, it was found that Hispanic males are most often cited as the offenders in citations of behavioral misconduct. This finding is proactive in the sense that although there is the perception that African American males are- as Carla Monroe (2000) states- 'bad boys', the reality of the matter is that this label carries with it a different face.

All things considered, there is much to learn about discipline disproportionality among students of color, especially when taking into account the dramatic population growth of Hispanics in the U.S. within the last two decades. Given the focus of the present study, it appears that those stereotypes that once held true for African Americans are now becoming the realities of other marginalized groups. Future research warrants further analysis into the disproportionate discipline representation of Hispanic male students.

Given the nature and the findings from this study it can be concluded that equity audits are not only needed, but necessary. This method of investigation not only exposes inequities that are not readily apparent, but it seeks to enact an immediate response to mitigate its consequences. Audits, of this nature, serve as a means of combating the discipline gap particularly between students of color and their Anglo counterparts.

In sum, public schools in the United States

appear to have grown complacent with their discipline practices. Because of this complacency there has been little, to no, acknowledgement of potential disparities found in school punishment. In denying, or ignoring, that such inequities exist, the systemic patterns of inequity found within U.S. schools will facilitate the perpetuation of this discipline phenomenon; and subsequently disproportionality among students of color will be exacerbated. In order to negate this pattern solutions to the discipline gap must be proposed and implemented.

Footnotes:

1 The authors of this study have been provided the necessary research approval from CISD to conduct this analysis.

2 As an alternative, a series of cross tabulation were used to examine the research questions posed.

3 An evaluation of Hispanic male students was excluded from this portion of the analysis for two reasons. First, there is no evidence that disproportionate representation impacts Hispanic students in CISD. That is the rate at which they were disciplined did not appear to be higher than their student population percentage. Second, Hispanic males were excluded because the objective here was to show that although African American males are not the primary disruptors they are in many cases targeted for harsher disciplinary action that- consistent with the literature- further widens the discipline gap between their Anglo peers.

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