

The School to Prison Pipeline

Students of color and students from marginalized communities – especially Black students – are disproportionately affected by harsh punishment policies, regardless of economic status or school location. Though Black children make up 18% of students in the US, they account for 34% of suspensions and 46% of students suspended more than once. Students with disabilities also face higher rates of punishment, especially Black students with disabilities. The Southern Poverty Law Center’s Learning For Justice initiative found that “about 1 in 4 Black children with disabilities were suspended at least once, versus 1 in 11 white students with disabilities.”

Disciplinary issues are frequently initiated by teachers’ reports, which can stem from cultural misunderstanding and implicit bias against students of color. Today, it is not uncommon for nonviolent students reported as being ‘disruptive’ to face suspension or expulsion, a punishment that withholds their education. Some scholars report that minority youth who are punished by their school are more likely to disengage from educational institutions and, consequently, perform worse in school, often leading to repeated probation or suspension. Black students are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white classmates.

Some scholars have pointed to zero-tolerance policies in schools as the basic building blocks of the school to prison pipeline. This phenomenon is a series of practices and policies that disproportionately propels students of color, especially Black students, into the prison system. These policies mirrored federal priorities and a national narrative driven in a large part by rhetoric associated with the war on drugs, a campaign to reduce drug use and trafficking beginning in the 1970s. As drug policies were tightened, harsher punishments for non-violent crimes became more commonplace, leading to more frequent incarceration, particularly among people of color.

One example of a consequential zero-tolerance policy was the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act, which required schools to expel students for possession of weapons and remand them to the juvenile justice system. In addition to zero-tolerance policies, other school practices and policies contributed to the school to prison pipeline, including increased police presence in schools, harsh tactics like physical restraint, and minimizing teacher oversight for disciplinary responsibility in their classrooms. For example, the number of school resource officers (SROs) grew by 38% between 1997 and 2007, coinciding with an increase in the frequency with which school officials transfer discipline for student infractions to the juvenile justice system.

Though other factors also affect the criminalization of Black youth, Barnes and Motz found that “if the probability of suspension/expulsion was equalized across Black and white students,” there may be as much as a 16% reduction in racial inequality in the risk of later arrest. A prisoner in Michigan, quoted in an ACLU report, said: “suspension prepared me for prison cells and juvenile hall. I don’t see how isolation civilizes a child.” The report goes on to recommend that schools use a ‘restorative justice’ framework to involve parents, school psychologists, or other specialists before considering the last resort of referring a child to the criminal justice system.

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Information gathered from: J.C. Barnes and Ryan T. Motz’s “Reducing Racial Inequalities in Adulthood Arrest by Reducing Inequalities in School Discipline: Evidence From the School-to-Prison Pipeline” in *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 54, no. 12, Dec. 1, 2018; Diane Bukowski’s “The school-to-prison pipeline” in *Michigan Citizen*, July 5, 2009; “The School-to-Prison Pipeline,” Learning For Justice (www.learningforjustice.org); Rhoda Rae Gutierrez and Pauline Lipman’s “Zero Tolerance, Race, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline” in *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012); “Reclaiming Michigan’s Throwaway Kids: Students Trapped in the School to Prison Pipeline,” American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Michigan (www.aclumich.org).