

The school-to-prison pipeline needs to be better defined and redirected toward greater opportunities for all youth.

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Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline

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THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM in the United States, like the country as a whole, is plagued by vast inequalities—that all too frequently are defined along lines of race and class. Students in high-poverty, high-minority schools are routinely provided fewer resources, fewer qualified teachers, and fewer advanced-level courses than their more affluent white peers.¹ Not surprisingly, they experience lower rates of high school graduation, lower levels of academic achievement, and higher rates of college attrition.

Recent policy trends appear to be intensifying these inequalities. The end of court-ordered and voluntary school desegregation plans in many jurisdictions has contributed to the steady resegregation of black and Latino students in public schools for over fifteen years. The proliferating use of high-stakes tests is increasing the numbers of students—disproportionately minority—held back in grade and denied high school diplomas for failure to pass one or a set of state-mandated exams. Official dropout rates often dramatically underestimate high school completion rates and mask a widening graduation gap between minority and white students. In the one hundred largest cities in the United States, 58 percent or more of

ninth-grade students in high-minority schools do not graduate four years later.²

A related educational trend that is proving to be particularly problematic for minority students involves school discipline. Since the early 1990s, many school districts have adopted a zero-tolerance approach to school code violations. The result is a near doubling of the number of students suspended annually from school since 1974 (from 1.7 million to 3.1 million),³ an increase in the presence of police in schools, and the enactment of new laws mandating referral of children to law enforcement authorities for a variety of school code violations.

Minorities are heavily overrepresented among those most harshly sanctioned in schools. Nationally, black students are 2.6 times as likely to be suspended as white students.⁴ In 2000, they represented 17 percent of the student population but 34 percent of those suspended.⁵ As the number of overall suspensions has increased over time, so have the racial disparities. Between 1972 and 2000, the percentage of white students suspended annually for more than one day rose from 3.1 percent to 5.09 percent. During the same period, the percentage for black students rose from 6.0 percent to 13.2 percent.⁶

This get-tough approach to discipline in schools is mirrored in the treatment of youths in the criminal justice system. Since 1992, forty-five states have passed laws making it easier to try juveniles as adults, and thirty-one have stiffened sanctions against youths for a variety of offenses.⁷ Despite a precipitous drop in juvenile crime during the last half of the 1990s, the number of formally processed cases involving juveniles—most of them nonviolent cases—increased, along with the number of youths held in secure facilities for nonviolent offenses.⁸

The racial disparities among those most severely sanctioned by these new laws and policies are startlingly similar to those found in student discipline data. In 1998, black youths with no prior criminal records were six times, and Latino youths three times, more likely to be incarcerated than whites for the same offenses.⁹ While comprising one-third of the country's adolescent population, they represented two-thirds of all youths confined to detention and correctional placements.¹⁰ Four out of five new juveniles detained between 1983 and 1997 were youths of color.¹¹

In fact, the racial disparities within the two systems are so similar—and so glaring—that it becomes impossible not to connect them. Many observers, advocates, and educators have done so, crafting terms such as *prison track* and *school-to-prison pipeline* to describe these dual trends. Such phrases depict a journey through school that becomes increasingly punitive and isolating for its travelers. Many will be taught by unqualified teachers, tested on material they never reviewed, held back in grade, placed in restrictive special education programs, repeatedly suspended, and banished to alternative out-placements before dropping or getting pushed out of school altogether. Without a safety net, the likelihood that these same youths will wind up arrested and incarcerated increases sharply.

Adult prisons and juvenile halls are riddled with children who have traveled through the school-to-prison pipeline. Approximately 68 percent of state prison inmates in 1997 had not completed high school.¹² Seventy-five percent of youths under age eighteen who have been sentenced to adult prisons have not passed tenth grade. An estimated 70 percent of the juvenile justice population suffer from learning disabilities, and 33 percent read below the fourth-grade level.¹³ The single largest predictor of later arrest among adolescent females is having been suspended, expelled, or held back during the middle school years.¹⁴

Yet despite the strong relationships that exist between troubled educational histories and subsequent arrest and incarceration, the specific ways in which schools may either contribute to or prevent the flow of students into the criminal justice system remains largely unexplored. Given the growing overall numbers of prison inmates—now at a record 2.1 million—in the United States, along with the glaring racial disproportionality within this population, achieving a more accurate and complete understanding of these relationships is urgent.

This urgency is underscored by the fiscal crisis facing most states. Between 1980 and 2000, state spending on corrections nationwide grew at six times the rate of state spending on higher education, with predictable consequences in terms of racial disparities. According to the Justice Policy Institute, there were

almost a third more African American men in prison and jail (791,600) than in universities or colleges (603,000) at the end of the twentieth century.¹⁵

As many legislators now confront the need to make drastic cuts in state and local budgets, they desperately need information about how targeted investments in education can reduce expenditures in corrections. For example, several recent studies suggest that schools that engage and hold onto their students can serve as powerful deterrents to delinquency. The surgeon general's report on youth violence, released in January 2001, found that commitment to school was one of only two protective buffers against specific risk factors for violence.¹⁶ A study released in 2002 found that school connectedness, defined as a student's feeling part of and cared for at school, is linked with lower levels of substance use, violence, suicide attempts, pregnancy, and emotional distress.¹⁷

The research presented in this issue represents, to the best of our knowledge, the first attempt to examine this complex issue systematically. These studies were originally presented at a conference on the school-to-prison pipeline sponsored by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Institute on Race and Justice at Northeastern University in May 2003. The goals were to (1) begin to methodically deconstruct the pipeline by identifying specific patterns, practices, and indicators along the continuum and (2) generate discussion, strategies, and policies for how this pipeline could be redirected toward greater opportunity for its travelers.

The authors of the studies contained in this issue have uncovered some provocative and interconnected themes that should give policymakers, educators, juvenile justice officials, civil rights, and other advocates serious pause. They provide clear evidence of dysfunctional systems that not only fail to serve the neediest children but in fact, as several studies powerfully illustrate, create conditions that exacerbate the harm inflicted on them. The studies in this issue have major findings, including these:

- *Failure to provide appropriate behavioral interventions may be contributing to delinquency among students with disabilities.* Minority students with disabilities, and especially poor black males, are at

greatest risk for being suspended repeatedly in a single school year, raising serious questions about the adequacy of behavioral supports that are being provided. This finding is particularly relevant today as Congress considers the elimination of due process protections for students with disabilities who are facing long-term suspension or expulsion.

Many schools employ preventive detention, a policy that excludes students from school for their perceived potential to be dangerous rather than for any overt act they may have committed. This policy may function as a form of racial profiling in schools, whereby students of color are disproportionately selected among those singled out for this type of punishment.

Juvenile and educational systems frequently work at cross-purposes, and this lack of coordination is further harming vulnerable students. Once referred to the juvenile justice system, students often miss multiple days of school to make court appearances, even if their cases are ultimately dismissed. The educational services offered by the juvenile justice system are frequently disconnected from the school system. On the education side, schools rarely offer adequate transition or reentry counseling programs for students who are returning from residential settings, thus increasing the likelihood of further failure for these students.

- *Following removal from school, many students experience enormous difficulty in reentering.* Students returning from long suspensions or expulsions, from residential placements, or from secure facilities are at particular risk of school failure and dropping out. They are often academically behind as a result of missing months or even years of schooling. Some schools may steer them toward alternative programs that do not match their educational goals. In one city, within a year of reenrolling in high school, nearly two-thirds of the first-time ninth graders and over three-fourths of the repeat ninth graders who were incarcerated and returned to school will either withdraw or dropout.

- *Effective interventions and programs that reduce risk and enhance protective factors for youths at risk for delinquency exist.* These have the potential to reduce the human costs of victimization and save tax dollars in both the short and long terms.

These studies clearly suggest that the school-to-prison pipeline is preventable, but harnessing the political will to do so is difficult, as several authors point out. This challenge may well prove to be more formidable than accumulating the knowledge base required to reverse the flow from the school-to-prison pipeline toward the school-to-graduation-to-postsecondary-education pipeline. Placing pressure on leaders to move beyond the simplistic rhetoric of zero tolerance and getting the “disruptive kids out of class” to address these complex problems and glaring racial disparities with compassion, care, knowledge, and determination will not be easy. We hope that these studies will help to convince them and others that in the long run, doing so will result not only in dollars saved but in lives salvaged and tragedies derailed.

Notes

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4. This ratio was calculated by first dividing the number of students of each racial group who were suspended by their total enrollment. That number represents the percentage of risk of suspension for members of that group. Next, using simple division, the risk of one group can be compared to that of any other.

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17. McNeely, C. A., Nonnemaker, J. M., & Blum, R. W. (2002). Promoting student connectedness to school: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *Journal of School Health*, 72(4), 138–147.

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