

The Origins of the School to Prison Pipeline

Harsh school policies and practices and an increased role of law enforcement in schools have combined to create a “schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track,” in which out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests are increasingly used to deal with student misbehavior, especially for minor incidents, and huge numbers of children and youth are pushed out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This is more than an education crisis; it is a racial justice crisis because the students pushed out through harsh discipline are disproportionately students of color. Students with disabilities and LGBTQ students are also disproportionately impacted by these policies.

The ideology of “zero tolerance” school discipline comes from the “get tough on drugs and crime” policies of the 1980s. In the 1980s, we know that (spurred by the Reagan Administration’s declaration of a “War on Drugs”) there was a move in the criminal justice and law enforcement world to move toward taking a “tough on crime stance.” This led to a tripling in the national prison population over the last thirty years: the United States leads the world in its incarceration rate. We make up only about 5% of the world’s population, but we incarcerate a full 25% of the world’s imprisoned people. In the 1990’s the misguided “Super Predator” theory branded young people of color as criminal, not only perpetuating a negative story about them but also leading to increased punishments for them.

Schools and school districts are using these exact strategies in their own school discipline codes. Mandatory minimum sentencing laws are used in the criminal justice system requiring fixed sentences for individuals convicted of a drug crime, regardless of culpability of other mitigating factors. “Three-strikes” laws say that a person is incarcerated at their third offense, no matter the circumstances or severity of the crime. And the broken windows theory is a disproven idea that if you aggressively punish minor offenses that have been traditionally ignored, this will prevent crime in the future. In schools, these policies look like students getting sent home for having the wrong colors and students being automatically suspended or expelled without regard to their individual circumstances.

Schools have also increasingly brought law enforcement into the classroom. Police presence in our schools has dramatically increased in the last twenty years. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the number of school resource officers increased 38% between 1997 and 2007. The regular presence of school security guards increased 27% between 1999 and 2007. This phenomenon is the result of our reaction to incidents of highly publicized juvenile crimes and the perception that our schools were getting more violent – not because schools were actually more dangerous. Placing more police in schools has significant and harmful unintended consequences for young people: increasing arrest rates, alienating students and making them feel less safe, and the very real possibility that students will be assaulted by the officers patrolling their schools. The presence of police in schools increases the likelihood that students will be arrested, often for minor conduct. For example, in Florida 2/3 of the arrests are for misdemeanors—not serious crimes.

We know that overuse of suspension, expulsion, and other harsh disciplinary policies increases the likelihood that youth will enter the juvenile or criminal justice systems. Suspension is linked with lower ratings for overall school climate, lower academic performance among students, lower school-wide academic performance, and an increased likelihood of school dropout. Decades of social science research, quantitative data, and the lived experiences of devastated families and communities tells us these policies are putting youth—especially youth of color—on a pathway to prison.

When students are pushed out of school through harsh disciplinary policies, their education is interrupted. Stopping the school-to-prison pipeline thus not only promises to treat our children humanely and keep them out of prison, it also promises to be a first step towards offering every child the opportunity to succeed in school and beyond.

