

## **Turning Off the Faucet: The Role of Schools in the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

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### **What is the School-to-Prison Pipeline?**

The School-to-Prison Pipeline refers to “policies and practices, especially with respect to school discipline, in the public schools and juvenile justice system that decrease the probability of school success for children and youth, and increase the probability of negative life outcomes, particularly through involvement in the juvenile justice system” (Skiba, Arredondo, et al., 2014, p. 546). In particular, the School-to-Prison Pipeline often involves exclusionary discipline practices that lead to both negative short- and long-term student outcomes. This paper will explore the role that schools play in the School-to-Prison Pipeline system (hereafter STPP). It will investigate the relationships between the STPP and school quality, exclusionary disciplinary practices, and other school risk factors that may exacerbate negative outcomes. Ultimately, identifying how schools function as the source of the STPP will elucidate the interventions that schools can take to turn off the metaphorical faucet by enacting policies and practices that best prepare students for success both in and out of school.

A comprehensive literature review by Russell Skiba, Mariella Arredondo, and Natasha Williams (2014) establishes that, while scholars’ definitions of the STPP vary, four common principles consistently appear across interpretations: that exclusionary discipline practices have “become widespread, systematic, and increasing in usage;” that the STPP “increases the probability for long-term negative outcomes, in particular juvenile justice involvement;” that the “practices and outcomes fall disproportionately on specific populations;” and that the expression itself, school-to-prison, indicates “a direction of causality—that policies and practices of schools, rather than solely the characteristics of students themselves, are responsible to some degree for those negative outcomes” (Skiba, Arredondo, et al., 2014, pp. 547–548). This final observation serves as the basis for this paper, which reviews literature and causal studies that address the role of school policies, procedures, and administrative practices in the STPP. If schools act as the origin of the pipeline, they have the ability and obligation to disrupt its flow.

### **Effects of Exclusionary Discipline on Student Outcomes**

Exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion are common in American schools; a study of almost one million Texas students found that “nearly six in ten public school students studied were suspended or expelled at least once between their seventh- and twelfth-grade school years” (Fabelo et al., 2011, p. IX). This is largely due to the enforcement of zero-tolerance policies that punish students without regard for the context of individual cases. Some trace the advent of these policies to the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, under which public schools are required to use a zero-tolerance approach for firearm violations. Since then, many schools have also implemented similar approaches to other illegal offenses (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). However, exclusionary discipline is not reserved for illegal offenses alone; Fabelo et al. (2011) found that less than 3 percent of the observed infractions in their Texas study “were related to behavior for which state law mandates expulsion or removal,” while 90 percent of infractions were due to violating the school’s code of conduct (Fabelo et al., 2011). Misbehavior that at one time may have led to a figurative or literal slap on the wrist is now more likely to be handled within exclusionary practices or even police involvement. This change in school policy and culture is not without consequence.

In their 2019 research paper, “The School to Prison Pipeline: Long-Run Impacts of School Suspensions on Adult Crime,” Andrew Bacher-Hicks, Stephen Billings, and David Deming investigate the causal impact of school discipline on the achievement, educational attainment, and subsequent criminal activity of students. This study utilizes difference-in-differences and instrumental variables methods to analyze data from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina’s second-largest school

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district, from 1998-2011, before and after a race-blind redistricting policy was enacted. The authors generated predictions of school effects on suspensions and leveraged the rezoning of the schools by estimating “the effects of students who live in the same neighborhoods and attended the same school in 2001-02, but were re-zoned into two different schools in 2002-03” (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019, p. 11). The outcomes of the study indicate that attending schools with stricter policies negatively impacts students in the long run. The authors found that students who attend a school with a one standard deviation increase in suspension effect are 17% more likely to have ever been arrested and 20% more likely to have ever been incarcerated than students in their respective sample means (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019, p. 18). They conclude that exclusionary punishment for misbehavior in school leads to increased crime in adulthood, thus confirming “that there is, in fact, a ‘school to prison pipeline,’” which disproportionately affects male students of color (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019, p. 27).

This finding is significant, as it provides quantitative, causal evidence that the STPP exists and is not merely a metaphorical concept. However, one alternative explanation this study fails to consider is the possibility that there may be a macro-level factor of a school’s culture that impacts both suspension rate and life outcomes. For example, the authors determined that individual principals played a crucial role in school disciplinary practices; this indicates that perhaps school leaders and the cultures they imbue could explain some variation in student outcomes. Nevertheless, this causal study provides quantitative evidence that schools with strict discipline policies increase adult crime.

Similar outcomes were confirmed by a non-causal 2018 study by Janet Rosenbaum, in which individuals who had been suspended in school were matched, using 60 variables, to other individuals who had not been suspended. Twelve years after their respective suspensions, Rosenbaum found that “suspended youth were less likely to have a high school diploma or BA, and more likely to be expelled, arrested, convicted, and to have been imprisoned or on probation” (Rosenbaum, 2018, p. 529).

It is important to note that schools do not dole out disciplinary practices equally across demographics. Bacher-Hicks et al. observed significant racial disparities in the censure of students. Specifically, they found that Black and Latino male students were suspended at more than three times the rate of white male students. (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019). Black female students are also “overrepresented in both out-of-school suspensions and expulsions,” an outcome that has worsened over time (Paul et al., 2019, p. 341). A limited research base suggests that LGBTQ+ youth also experience school discipline disproportionately. LGBTQ+ youth may specifically be disciplined for infractions for which their straight peers are less likely to be punished, including public displays of affection and dress-code violations for defying heteronormative gender expressions (Snapp et al., 2015). Likewise, students with disabilities also bear disproportionate disciplinary practices; they are suspended at more than twice the rate of students without disabilities. Further, students with disabilities “represent a quarter of students subjected to a school-related arrest, even though they are only 12 percent of the overall student population” (National Council on Disability, 2015, p. 11). Students whose identities place them at the intersection of racism and ableism experience even more incommensurate disciplinary practices: one in four Black K-12 students with disabilities were suspended at least once during the 2009-10 school year (Losen & Gillespie, 2012, p. 7). Exclusionary discipline is applied in a discriminatory fashion, and students with marginalized identities find themselves being pushed out of school and into the carceral system.

### **The Effect of School Quality on Student Criminality**

While exclusionary discipline plays an important role in the STPP, when considering the ways in which schools could disrupt the pipeline to prison, one must also examine preventative measures for criminal activity outside of school. In David Deming’s 2011 study, “Better Schools, Less Crime?,” he uses random assignment and an ordinary least squares regression to analyze the effects of school quality on criminality. Like Bacher-Hicks et al., Deming capitalizes on the changes in school assignment caused by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools’ 2002 redistricting initiative. By comparing detailed administrative data from redistricted schools with state and local arrest and incarceration records, Deming uses OLS to analyze the effects of a student winning a lottery (a random outcome) to attend a top-choice school on adult criminality. He finds that “a treatment of between 1 and 4 years of enrollment in a higher quality

public school led to large and persistent reductions in young adult criminal activity.” Effects are especially pronounced for students in the sample’s top quintile of risk, which is composed mostly of Black males. Ultimately, Deming finds that “across several different outcome measures and scalings of crime by severity, high-risk youth who win the lottery commit about 50% less crime” (Deming, 2011, p. 2065). Interestingly, he finds no effect on student test scores (Deming, 2011, p. 2101).

A limitation of this study is that it does not include data regarding juvenile criminal offenses, so the impact of school quality on juvenile crimes is undetermined. However, in regards to exclusionary discipline outcomes, students who won the lottery were less likely to be involved in an “incident where the punishment was long-term suspension, expulsion, or police involvement,” suggesting that school quality can also play a role in decreasing STPP-related disciplinary practices (Deming, 2011, p. 2101). Potential alternative explanations for these findings include peer effects (degree of exposure to crime-prone youth) and enrollment impacts (total time spent in school). However, based on the findings, these explanations do not seem to plausibly outweigh the effect of school quality itself. Another explanation could be human capital returns, suggesting that students who attend better schools may stay in school longer and leave with more skills, empowering them to secure higher-paying employment and leading them to commit fewer crimes. (Deming, 2011, p. 2104). While further research is required to determine what specific aspects of school quality have the most impact on criminal activity, this research demonstrates that schools themselves can prevent future crime and alter the likelihood of a student’s future incarceration.

### **Law Enforcement and the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

In recent decades, police officers have become customary additions to the public school apparatus. Stationed with the intended goals of decreasing student misbehavior and improving student relations with law enforcement, cops serving as School Resource Officers (SROs) usher the criminal justice system directly into public schools. Emily Owens’ 2017 study, “Testing the School-to-Prison Pipeline,” examines the effect of police presence in schools on students’ criminal justice outcomes. Using a difference-in-differences approach, Owens compares student crime and arrests before and after federal grants were allocated to place law enforcement officers in schools through the Cops in Schools (CIS) program. She cross-references ten years of data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Owens finds that agencies granted CIS funding “seem to serve schools that are disproportionately more dangerous than schools where agencies do not receive funding,” with crimes committed in schools comprising a disproportionately large portion of overall crime in the agency’s area. Districts served by CIS-affiliated agencies also tend to have less funding available per student and more students enrolled per school (Owens, 2017, p. 18). Police serving schools through CIS learn of more violent crimes and weapon and drug violations taking place in schools, as well as minor violations outside of school. Owens suggests that this demonstrates an increase in citizens’ propensity to contact the police. However, CIS presence also leads to increased punitive action on students. “Not only do police learn of more crimes in schools, they also make more arrests for these offenses.” The arrest of students under the age of 15 drives the overall increase in student arrests (Owens, 2017, pp. 14, 32).

Student arrests for violent crimes often follow incidents that “could be reasonably characterized as scuffling, rather than acts of life-threatening violence,” indicating that something like a schoolyard fight that once may have resulted in a trip to the principal’s office may now result in police contact (Owens, 2017, p. 34). Further, she suggests that by the measurement of the number of incidents reported to police, their presence makes schools safer (Owens, 2017, p. 14). However, Owens fails to define what “safer” means beyond the number of incidents reported; safer for whom, and how? Notably, Owens could not determine if involving or notifying an SRO in an incident qualified as reporting the incident to law enforcement. Given that several of her findings were predicated on the number of incidents reported, this is a significant gap. Moreover, the study itself was somewhat less compelling than its counterparts, as the data was at times imprecise and fuzzy. While utilizing federal data allows one to observe nationwide

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patterns, it may also mask valuable information about variations at the state- and community-levels. Still, Owens' findings suggest that the CIS program, regardless of intention, has "resulted in the accumulation of arrest records for young students" (Owens, 2017, p. 14), leading to increased student exposure to the criminal justice system.

### **Intervening in the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

Just as schools can increase a student's likelihood of encountering the carceral system, they can also reduce it through the use of preventative and/or non-punitive policies and interventions. In their 2017 study, "Exposure to Same-Race Teachers and Student Disciplinary Outcomes," Constance Lindsay and Cassandra Hart analyzed the effect of same-race teachers on the exclusionary discipline of Black students. Using both student fixed effects methodology and instrumental variables, they investigated whether having Black teachers leads Black students to experience less exclusionary discipline compared to when they are taught by different-race teachers. Using six years of individual-level student data from North Carolina, they found that "exposure to a higher fraction of teachers who are Black reduces the likelihood of receiving exclusionary discipline for Black students" (Lindsay & Hart, 2017, p. 498). This finding was true for male and female students across all grade levels, regardless of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch eligibility, and was confirmed by both research methods.

An important consideration is that students are not randomly assigned to their teachers. Lindsay and Hart found that "principals may strategically match teachers and students, such that Black teachers are disproportionately likely to teach students with established records of discipline problems" (Lindsay & Hart, 2017, p. 497). This non-random student sorting can lead to biased, and perhaps underestimated, effects of having a same-race teacher on student discipline outcomes. Further research is needed to determine what aspect of having a same-race teacher drives the most effect, and whether or not it could be replicated by different-race teachers. For example, if the primary factor is having shared experiences based specifically on racial identity or anti-Black racism, it would be unlikely for non-Black teachers to capture this same effect. However, if Black teachers are using distinct pedagogical and classroom management strategies, these strategies could potentially be taught to and successfully implemented by non-Black teachers.

Further research is also needed to help inform the dosage effect of exposure to same-race teachers (e.g., the effect of a primary school teacher with whom a student spends all day, compared to a middle school teacher with whom a student spends 50 minutes). Relatedly, does having one same-race teacher and several different-race teachers impact the likelihood of a student experiencing exclusionary discipline at the hands of a different-race teacher, or is the same-race teacher simply disciplining the student less? Ultimately, Lindsay and Hart's findings suggest that diversifying America's teaching force could lead to a decrease in the use of exclusionary discipline on students of color, in turn plugging one tributary of the STPP.

Non-punitive interventions can also play a role in decreasing the likelihood of students entering the STPP, as evidenced by the 2013 study, "Preventing Youth Violence and Dropout: A Randomized Field Experiment," by Sara Heller, Harold Pollack, Roseanna Ander, and Jens Ludwig. The authors examined the effect of a non-punitive intervention program on violence and dropout rates. Using instrumental variables and a randomized controlled trial of 2,740 male students in grades 7-10 from high-crime Chicago neighborhoods, Heller et al. analyzed a program called "Becoming a Man" (BAM), which was implemented in eighteen Chicago Public Schools by two local nonprofit groups. BAM featured programming both in and after school that exposed students to positive adult role models; occupied them after school, a time when they may otherwise have run into trouble; and utilized aspects of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a psycho-social intervention that encourages metacognition, or "[thinking] about thinking" (Heller et al., 2013, p. 10). Students were divided into four groups: in-school treatment, after-school treatment, both, or none (control).

BAM yielded promising results; participation in the yearlong program led to a 44% decrease in arrest for violent crimes and a 36% decrease in arrest for other crimes for student participants during the program year. However, these effects did not persist into the following year (Heller et al., 2013, pp. 19,

20). Heterogeneity in treatment effects suggests that the reduced arrest rates may have been driven by students who had not been arrested prior to program enrollment.

Nevertheless, the program led to academic gains that persisted into the future. While the program participants were too young to graduate during the period of the study, the authors estimate that the improved academic outcomes they observed could translate to a 7-22 percent increase in graduation rates (Heller et al., 2013, p. 6). Interestingly, though in-school participation in the program led students to miss academic classes (as BAM occurred during the school day), the program still yielded positive academic results. The authors hypothesize that the key element of the intervention may be its implementation of cognitive behavioral therapy. “The fact that previous programs that provide interactions with pro-social adults or after-school activities tend not to show similarly large effects is at least suggestive evidence that the novel ingredient here – CBT – may be important” (Heller et al., 2013, p. 6). The dosage effect of this study was promising, with student participants completing an average of only 13 out of 27 one-hour sessions, suggesting that further exposure could potentially lead to more pronounced results.

A confounding factor of this study concerned the intent to treat: only half of the youth assigned to treatment chose to participate. This leaves room for bias due to the potentially differing characteristics of students who choose to participate compared to those who opt out. Another confounding factor the authors observed was some degree of contamination between treatment and control groups. Further research is necessary to understand why the effects on student arrests did not persist into the following year, as well as what changes could potentially increase the effects’ persistence. While this program saw noteworthy success, reproducing it at scale poses a challenge, as different facilitators and cities may produce varying results. Further, BAM was administered by external nonprofits; results may differ if the program is facilitated by a school itself. Regardless, the work of Heller et al. demonstrates that non-punitive intervention strategies can have an immediate effect on student criminality, arrest, and academic success.

### **Conclusion: Disrupting the STPP**

Whether students receive harsh exclusionary discipline in school is dependent on a combination of factors, including “severity of infraction; race, gender, and to a certain extent SES at the individual level; percentage Black enrollment; school achievement level; and principal perspectives on discipline” (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014, p. 664). Ultimately, though, what seems to matter most is the policies, practices, and cultures of schools themselves. “Systemic, school-level variables appear to contribute to disproportionality in out-of-school suspension far more than either type of infraction or individual demographics” (Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014, p. 664). Policies, practices, and cultures can drive disproportionately high levels of harsh discipline that ultimately result in more students entering the carceral system via the STPP. Therefore, alternative policies, practices, and cultures can feasibly have the opposite effect, in turn, “drying up” the pipeline by cutting off its supply. Schools can actively work to redirect students from a path that may have otherwise led them to prison. This is especially pertinent for high-risk demographic groups. For “youth on the margins of society, public schools may present the best opportunity to intervene” in their choices, habits, and actions (Deming, 2011, p. 2111). Schools and school leaders must cultivate an environment that decreases student involvement in the criminal justice system.

To advance efforts to end the STPP, research on the long-term outcomes of non-exclusionary and/or non-punitive interventions is necessary. Specifically, causal research determining whether alternative methods of student management and discipline lead to decreased rates of arrest and incarceration would bolster arguments that zero-tolerance exclusionary discipline policies should be discontinued.

Schools are the origin point of the School-to-Prison Pipeline. The causal research reviewed above demonstrates that certain policies, like exclusionary discipline and police presence in schools, can increase student exposure to the criminal justice system, and that this exposure is borne disproportionately by marginalized populations. Meanwhile, school quality, teacher demographics, non-punitive interventions, and other policies can reduce student exposure to the criminal justice system. Thus, schools

can choose to either perpetuate or curtail the flow of students from school to prison. Schools have a moral and professional obligation to disrupt the School-to-Prison Pipeline because they have the power to turn off the faucet.

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