

Stephanie Shen

Dr. Cannito-Coville

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The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The education system has experienced massive shifts in educational policies within the past decade that have intensified the intrinsic inequalities in public education. The original intention of fostering a safe and engaging learning environment as a method of promoting social mobility and professional opportunity has instead been clouded by implicit bias and systemic racism, consequently resulting in an obscured distinction between prison and school.

The school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon transcends the fundamental explicit racism much of American history and society has been built upon (i.e. slavery, segregation). Instead, it reveals the deep-rooted institutionalized discrimination all of society has unconsciously fallen victim to, bringing special attention to the criminal justice system in particular. It is a disturbing occurrence among the American education system that describes the implementation of punitive punishments intended to create structured learning environments, but instead unintentionally formulates a seamless transition from education to incarceration for its affected students. The problematic punitive measures of security guards, cameras, resource officers, and metal detectors are predominantly present in urban inner city communities, therefore predominantly affecting Black people and Latinos (Mallet 564). In fact, harsher discipline policies are found in urban schools with a greater population of Black students (Mallet 572). Perhaps the most notable of the punitive punishments is the zero-tolerance policy, a disciplinary approach that provides students with essentially no opportunity of redemption of their participation in an incident against the

school's rules. With additional outside research, another journal by Mallet was found that further elaborates on the problematic aspects of the zero tolerance policy. Such a policy not only fails to ignore but also further worsens the problems Black people and Latinos had already been facing, such as trauma, mental illness, familial issues, and poverty. Increased suspension and expulsion rates as a result of the policy also increases a student's chances of dropping out, in return making them at a higher risk for crime (Mallet 15).

Assessing the issue of the school-to-prison pipeline through the general strain theory offers an explanation as to why minority students behave the way they do and therefore reveals the systemic inequalities causing the issue. It is theorized that the disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates among Black people and White people originates from the possibility that severe poverty increases the chances of someone committing a crime (Kaufman, 425). Given the fact that the harsh punitive punishments occur mostly in urban inner-city areas, it is thus reasonable to conclude that Black and Latino students living in such areas may fend off this economic strain by committing crimes to alleviate their poverty. Therefore the pipeline system reveals the systemic economic inequalities embedded in society as well. This ideology is also supported by the fact that as a result of living in racially segregated communities, Black Americans are therefore more prone to victimization and school dropout (Crutchfield et. al. 220). Furthermore, Kaufmen's discussion of the educational strain also alludes to this correlation between lower quality schools and lower-income cities. Countless studies have shown that Black people and Latinos achieve significantly less academic achievement than a middle to upper class White school as a result of fewer academic resources (Kauffman 427). The nuances surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline system is worthy of understanding for several reasons. First, it is

only by comprehending its complexities that policy makers are able to finally address it as a result of a systemic issue, rather than a merit-based issue of the minority student. It is also by understanding its causes that effective solutions are finally able to be applied, and as a direct result a better education experience will be offered to urban inner city minority students. Perhaps the most harmful byproduct of failing to understand the root causes of the pipeline system is continued denial of the systemic inequalities of this issue (Alexander 177). It is this denial that will continue to foster a culture of racial educational and housing segregation.

Though the issue of race dominates the discussion of the pipeline, evaluating this phenomenon through an intersectional lens may be beneficial in grasping a deeper understanding of its causes. It is worth paying attention to the fact that as opposed to just racial minority students who are affected by this issue, it is specifically low-income males of a racial minority who are affected (Mallet 572). Thus it is necessary to also acknowledge the roles class and gender discrimination play into the school-to-prison pipeline, as failure to do so may result in root causes of the problem being unaddressed. Intersectionality also forces society to expand their existing understandings of identity past individual experiences. Evaluating how systems of power intersect and influence individual and/or group identities and the discrimination that comes with those identities shifts the attention away from the individual's personal experience to instead structures of power (Collins 233). This ideology is applicable to the school-to-prison pipeline in the sense that it acknowledges that the disproportionate arrest rates of Black people and Latinos is not in fact a result of any intrinsic inferior characteristic to those groups of people, but rather the works of systemic racism, classism, and sexism beyond their control.

Upon further research, valuable insight has been offered by other researchers and scholars that further support this notion. For example, Gass and Laughter conducted a long term quantitative study among several urban schools that concluded fostering a closer relationship between the teacher and the students increased a student's academic achievement and retention (Gass and Laughter 339). This finding thus exemplifies that the negative behavior conducive to juvenile delinquency is largely controlled by the environment. This was a common conclusion amongst other researchers including Yang, et. al. who did a comprehensive survey among educators in urban school settings on their opinions of the punitive punishment system. They found that most of the teachers were indeed aware of extrinsic factors responsible for the disproportionality in juvenile delinquency (Yang et. al. 6). It is with this social awareness that brings up potential solutions to the school-to-prison pipeline issue. First, like any issue stemming from systemic inequalities, it is essential to educate and train teachers and policy makers alike on their own implicit bias. It is through tackling one's personal unawareness of their own discrimination towards a group of people where effective change occurs. In terms of more practical and logistical solutions, perhaps the first step is removing any form of unfair punitive measures found in urban schools that are not found anywhere else. This will not only humanize the students but also decrease their risk of coming into contact with external law enforcement. In addition, it may be helpful to act directly on the students themselves by providing more college and career preparation, either through academic courses or special programs in place.

The original intention of providing a safer learning environment has been tainted by systemic and institutionalized racism and classism against Black and Latino students in urban

cities. Thus the system underwent a massive shift in educational policies that have done nothing but dilute what is supposed to be an equal opportunity to education and employment for all.

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