

## **From the Playground to the Prison Yard: Zero Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline**

Stephanie Harris is 13 and has been attending Dekalb County Public Schools since kindergarten. She has always been a gifted writer and dreams of becoming a world renowned screenwriter. Stephanie also doesn't have the best living situation. Both of her parents are in her life ,but her mom is severely abusive. Often times Stephanie will go days without sleeping through the night or even having clean clothes. Most times, the only meals she gets are the ones provided by the school. Because of this, she struggles with PTSD and depression.

Stephanie usually stays quiet,but one day she had a particularly hard time at home before coming to school. Her teacher found her crying and flailing on the bathroom floor. The principal said she was inconsolable, and had damaged school property in the midst of her tantrum. When the police arrived to the school, Stephanie was immediately handcuffed and transported to the police station.

“In the last decade, the punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system have seeped into our schools, serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison.... The School-to-Prison Pipeline is one of the most urgent challenges in education today.” (NAACP 2005)

The School to Prison Pipeline is a trend where students in public schools are funneled out of public school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems through the use of Zero Tolerance policies. This is all part of a national trend that “criminalizes rather than educates students.(Kaba, 2017) Zero Tolerance policies first became popular in the last two decades as a form of “broken windows” policing. The “broken windows” theory of policing states that “crime is a disorder that, if not eliminated or controlled early on, increases the likelihood of committing a more serious crime later in life. (Thompson, 2018)” Zero tolerance policies force school officials to use punishments that are “consistent, and harsh regardless of the circumstances.” Some of the behavior covered by the zero tolerance policy are disruptive behaviors, breach of peace and assault. The problem is that the behaviors that result in a zero tolerance level punishment are largely left up to interpretation from school to school and administration to administration. For example, a disruptive behavior can be something as small as cutting in line at lunch.

“The notion of deterring future misbehavior is central to the philosophy of zero-tolerance, and the impact of any consequence on future behavior is the defining characteristic of effective punishment. Rather than reducing the likelihood of disruption, however, school suspension in general appears to predict higher future rates of misbehavior and suspension among those students who are suspended. In the long term, school suspension and expulsion are

moderately associated with a higher likelihood of school dropout and failure to graduate on time.” The American Psychological Association

Stephanie’s story happens all the time. Students, particularly black students, will go to school with their backpacks and boxed lunch and leave in handcuffs. From 2013-2014 nearly 70,000 students were arrested in just 8,000 public schools around the nation. According to an analysis done by Education Week, black students account for only 16% of the total number of students enrolled in public school but make up for 33% of the total arrests in the schools. (Thompson, 2018) The analysis also said that “at both the middle school and high school level, black students are most likely to be in a school with a school-based law enforcement officer.(Thompson, 2018)” The problem with this is that it is hurting students more than it is helping them. Students are facing criminal charges for various behaviors that in the past would have been handled with the school’s disciplinary tactics such as detention, suspension, or expulsion.

Today, school aged children are facing record levels of anxiety, depression, and multiple forms of trauma. (ACLU, 2019) 72 percent of children in the United States “will have experienced at least one major stressful event - such as witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, or experiencing the loss of a loved one- before the age of 18. (Thompson, 2018)” Resources like counselors, nurses, and psychologists are trained to help children that are sick, depressed, traumatized, or are dealing with mental illness. The U.S DOE reports that “students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based

health centers for treatment than anywhere else.” They also found that “schools that employ more school-based mental health providers see improved attendance rates, lower rates of suspension, improved academic achievement and career preparation and improved graduation rates.”

The United States Department of Education is required to report on the number of social workers, nurses and psychologists employed in every public school. The statistics when it comes to health care providers in schools is astounding to say the least.

1.7 million students are in schools with no police counselors.

3 million students are in schools with police and no nurses.

6 million students are in schools with police but no school psychologists.

10 million students are in schools with police but no social workers.

14 millions students are in schools with police but no counselors, nurses, psychologists, or social workers.

The consequences of school funding going to the wrong resources is affecting the most vulnerable students: black students.

Police that are placed in schools do exactly what they are trained to do: handcuff and arrest. This leads to the increased criminalization of black youth. A North Carolina state grant program recently conducted a study where they monitored the effectiveness

of school resource officers. The study found that having police in schools contributes to “a less inclusive school climate and makes students feel less safe. (Thompson,2018)”

The fact of the matter is that most school resource officers are not qualified to work with children. Education Week reported that 25 percent of school law enforcement officers recorded having no experience working with children before working in a public school. In the article they also said that “police are trained to focus on law and order, not student social and emotional well being. This lack of training and education undermines effective behavior management.”

Schools in black areas are more likely to have resource officers. Which in turn means that black students are more likely to be incarcerated than other students. This also means that the jail to prison pipeline disproportionately affects black students.

If you were to construct a powermap of the key players in the school to prison pipeline, the students would be at the center. Surrounded by them would be the parents, voters, policy makers, community, school system, and prison system. There are so many people and groups that go into this topic, that it is strange to not see a heavy social media presence for this issue.

Social Media campaigns do not always do what they are intended to do. This can happen when there isn't a clear unifying hashtag or keyword for the movement. On social media, anti zero tolerance and school to prison pipeline rhetoric can be hard to find. I searched through countless possible hashtags and keywords and could not find a

consistent social movement happening. Various anti school to prison pipeline organizations have used social media to further their social movements, but their content can be hard to find because of the lack of unifying hashtags or keywords. The majority of progress made for this social movement has been made without the use of hashtags or social media in general. Like most issues concerning the black community, most of the visibility of this issue has come from word of mouth. Social Movements that are largely based on social media lack direction and focus.

The American Civil Liberties Union has continued to be a trailblazer in the fight against criminalizing our youth through the School to Prison Pipeline. They have spearheaded and co-signed various social movements such as the Dignity in Schools Campaign, and Gone Too Far: Our Kids in Handcuffs. Their campaigns largely take place off of social media. At the ACLU, they focus on educating the general public through articles and infographics.

In the past we have seen that social media isn't always the most effective tool when used in social movements. Often times, using social media can lead to having a large group of people that aren't completely devoted to the movement. Social Movements of this size and importance need fully dedicated and passionate leaders. Because of this, this social movement would be deemed digitally unsuccessful . There is little to no online presence for the issue on any social media platform. In order for this social movement to be seen as successful in a digital space there would need to have more uniformity. People need to have a clear movement to be a part of.

Without the digital aspect, the anti school to prison pipeline movement is successful. There are clear goals and standards for each organization. They also provide research articles, court cases, direct ways for the general public to get involved.

## Sources

Aclu. "Cops and No Counselors." *American Civil Liberties Union*, American Civil Liberties Union, 27 Feb. 2019, [www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/cops-and-no-counselors](http://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/cops-and-no-counselors).

"Dignity Denied: The Effect of 'Zero Tolerance' Policies on Students' Human Rights." *American Civil Liberties Union*, [www.aclu.org/other/dignity-denied-effect-zero-tolerance-policies-students-human-rights](http://www.aclu.org/other/dignity-denied-effect-zero-tolerance-policies-students-human-rights).

Fowler, Deborah. "School Discipline Feeds the 'Pipeline to Prison.'" *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 93, no. 2, Oct. 2011, pp. 14–19,

Kaba, Mariame. "How the School to Prison Pipeline REALLY Works." *Teen Vogue*, Teen Vogue, 9 Oct. 2017, [www.teenvogue.com/story/how-the-school-to-prison-pipeline-works](http://www.teenvogue.com/story/how-the-school-to-prison-pipeline-works).

Mallett, Christopher A. "The school-to-prison pipeline: A critical review of the punitive paradigm shift." *Child and adolescent social work journal* 33.1 (2016): 15-24.



Skiba, Russell J., Mariella I. Arredondo, and Natasha T. Williams. "More than a metaphor: The contribution of exclusionary discipline to a school-to-prison pipeline." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 47.4 (2014): 546-564

Thompson, Katie. "Zero-Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline." *Shared Justice*, Shared Justice, 18 Jan. 2018, [www.sharedjustice.org/domestic-justice/2017/12/21/zero-tolerance-policies-and-the-school-to-prison-pipeline](http://www.sharedjustice.org/domestic-justice/2017/12/21/zero-tolerance-policies-and-the-school-to-prison-pipeline).

Turner, Cory. "Does Your School Arrest Students?" *NPR*, NPR, 27 Jan. 2017, [www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/01/27/511428075/does-your-school-arrest-students](http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/01/27/511428075/does-your-school-arrest-students).

Wald, Johanna, and Daniel J. Losen. "Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline." *New directions for youth development* 2003.99 (2003): 9-15

Winn, Maisha T., and Nadia Behizadeh. "The right to be literate: Literacy, education, and the school-to-prison pipeline." *Review of Research in Education* 35.1 (2011): 147-173.