

## Introduction

The school-to-prison pipeline represents a pervasive and intimidating threat to today's youth. Dancy (2014) describes the funneling of students from public schools into the criminal justice system as a "disturbing national trend" (p. 476), one that not only holds great sway over contemporary society, but also that of future generations. Both societal influences and systemic issues contribute to the marginalization and incarceration of youth, and though there is a growing awareness of the disproportionate representation of historically marginalized identities within the system, the phenomenon is allowed to continue with a vengeance. The school-to-prison pipeline flourishes in an environment defined by racial discrimination and economic disparity. Against the backdrop of an underfunded education system, the pipeline draws in youth at a prolific rate.

While the justification presented regarding youth incarceration centers around the need for public protection, it is critical to understand that many studies show how "putting youth behind bars not only fails to enhance public safety; it does just the opposite, driving low-level delinquents deeper into criminality and increasing the likelihood that they will wind up behind bars again and again" (Bernstein, 2014, p. 7). Not only is the current system reinforcing strain and inequities for youth, it is also damaging communities in the process, ultimately promoting recidivism instead of rehabilitation. Additionally, the cycle of racial discrimination and systemic social injustice is allowed to continue. As Bernstein (2014) states, the current system is damaging not only youth, but also society by "exposing far too many young people to inhumane conditions with the sole measurable result of increasing the odds that they will be drawn ever more deeply into delinquency" (p. 8). In this way, the pipeline becomes a cycle, one that is allowed to persist despite its obvious repercussions. It is eye opening to consider that "while home to only 5% of the world's population, the U.S. has 25% of the world's prisoners. According to the Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, prison populations have quadrupled since 1980" (Wilson, 2014, p. 49). With a disproportionate representation of marginalized identities within the system, these statistics highlight the difficult future facing youth of color and reinforces that the United States is wasting its greatest resource, its children.

It is impossible to approach the topic of the school-to-prison pipeline and the systemic marginalization of youth without considering the multi-dimensionality of the issue. An approach that identifies the factors leading up to incarceration must include the experience of juvenile offenders within the system and the lasting repercussions facing youth post-incarceration. Only by gaining a fundamental understanding of the pipeline process is it possible to break it down to identify concrete examples of problematic areas.

Within the context of factors predating incarceration, there are numerous areas for exploration. The educational setting has been identified as a primary source of racialized disparities defined by “differential achievement and school completion rates; curricular inequities; over-expulsions and suspensions; over-representations in special, general, and vocational education; and under-representation in rigorous or gifted and talented courses” (Dancy, 2014, p.476). Additionally, the pervasive realities of racial discrimination are not to be ignored. As Cramer, Gonzalez, and Pellegrini-Lafont (2014) state, “African American students are twice as likely as their white peers to drop out of school and Hispanic students are two and a half times as likely to drop out” (p. 461). This is telling when contextualized by the fact that more than fifty percent of individuals entering the correctional process do not possess a high school diploma (Wilson, 2014, p. 49). As countless scholars and social activists have argued, the services and treatment students receive in the educational setting foreshadow their likelihood of entering the criminal justice system.

Looking to the prison experience of youth, once an individual is incarcerated it becomes even more difficult for them to lift themselves out of delinquency due in part to the unjust treatment they receive within the system. The disparities do not terminate upon incarceration in fact it is quite the opposite. Hess, Orthmann, and Wright (2013) go on to elaborate that programs involving punitive measures or punishments do not aid in stemming recidivism, however strategies that focus on strengthening a juvenile’s ties to school and family are found to have positive effects (p. 375). Continued reliance on retributive measures compounds the issue of reoccurrence in the system. That being said, it is difficult to prioritize programming and resources surrounding education when schools play such an influential role in shuttling youth into the criminal justice system. After being released from their sentence, youth face yet another challenge, making their way in the world without a high school education, or returning to a school that they feel does not care about them or show any interest in their success. The elements of education and prison are intrinsically intertwined. It is impossible to examine this phenomenon as anything but a vicious Catch-22.

This essay seeks to identify societal and systemic issues that perpetuate the unequal treatment of historically marginalized juveniles. It investigates how the continuous shortcomings of educational structures directly impact the disproportionate intake of the criminal justice system. It also examines strategies proposed for confronting and eliminating this trend. Ultimately, this paper asserts that there is already a significant amount of research showing that the current system is flawed and that there are numerous concrete areas for change. It strives to point out the fact that the system as it stands today is resistant to alteration even

in the face of extensive evidence which points to the desperate need for a societal, educational, and correctional shift.

### Systemic Issues

In order to understand the complexities of the challenges facing youth with respect to the school-to-prison pipeline, it is key to gather foundational evidence regarding systemic issues compounding the phenomenon. The concept of discriminatory practice plays a central role in disproportionate detention rates of juveniles and numerous scholars have explored the ways in which both race and sexual orientation inform how youth are treated by the system. Bernstein (2014) labels juvenile incarceration as “one of the most glaring examples of racial injustice our nation has to offer” (p. 8) and Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell (2015) highlight how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth also are victims of disproportionate criminal sanctions within schools (p. 58). Tying in these findings to the concept of systemic perpetuation, Bennett-Haron (2014) explores how

“one of the primary ways that oppression maintains its influence is by trapping both the oppressed and oppressor in a prison of political apathy once they conceptualize the totality and systemic nature of their position in the system” (p. 425).

Despite widespread knowledge that inequity exists in today’s education and criminal justice systems, many organizations remain frozen in the face of the overwhelming pervasiveness of the problem. While numerous systemic factors contribute to the mass incarceration of youth, there are three key areas for exploration that underscore some of the most pressing issues, namely, failures of the educational system, youth incarceration experience, and re-introduction to society post-detainment.

Education structures simultaneously offer protective and risk factors to students. Looking specifically at elements that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, it is easy to identify a number of key shortcomings. With the school-to-prison pipeline beginning “as early as elementary school, when some students begin to feel that they are not part of the school’s culture” (Cramer et al., 2014, p. 462), the path to marginalization begins at an early age and cements experiences of youth both inside and outside of school. Snapp et al., (2015) discusses how this process often experienced by certain racial and ethnic groups can also be seen with respect to LGBTQ youth (p. 58). After embarking on an educational experience characterized by being continually ostracized, various school policies often target marginalized youth at a disproportionate rate leading to high rates of

suspension and expulsion that eventually culminate in soaring levels of drop-outs (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, & Leone, 2012, p. 309). With students first feeling excluded from the mainstream educational culture, the application of sanctions represent a pivotal transition between ostracism and the creation of the criminal label.

Fader, Lockwood, Schall, & Stokes (2015) examine how zero-tolerance policies proliferated schools in the 1990's in response to threats of violence against students, and how "in recent years, the scope of these policies has increased dramatically, allowing schools to utilize exclusionary discipline to address minor infractions" (p. 124), effectively twisting a legitimate policy to suit unjust demands. Instead of using the policy solely to protect students from gun violence and other serious threats, zero-tolerance has become an excuse to punish youth for a wide variety of infractions, most of which do not pose a violent threat. Even as overall juvenile crime rates decline, the number of youth arrests at schools have skyrocketed (Fader et al., 2013, p. 125) showing how these policies, enacted with the intention of protecting students, are actually condemning them and pushing forward a cycle of discriminatory practice.

The marginalization of youth does not end when they are taken into custody. The incarceration process possesses many of the same exclusionary weaknesses that the education system exhibits. While "some jurisdictions have reduced racial disparity by analyzing data by race and ethnicity to detect disparate treatment" (Hess et al., 2013, p. 403), the disproportionate incarceration of youth of color remains an issue at the forefront of the criminal justice system. This reality speaks to the underlying theme of racial injustice and reinforces that to break with the current trends being perpetuated by the school-to-prison pipeline, measures must be taken at a society-wide scale. Social change will be one of the driving factors to technical change; progress cannot be achieved without the ideological shift to back it up.

Bennett-Haron et al. (2014) presents an alternative viewpoint to the school-to-prison pipeline and highlights the

"fundamental premise that there is no crisis because each institution- the educational system and the criminal justice system- is functioning per their design and the demands of society. Racial and ethnic disparities, therefore, can best be understood not as dysfunctions of these important and foundational social institutions but rather as expected outcomes" (p. 411).

This statement connects to the idea that in order for change to occur, society must be the driving force. Right now the incarceration of youth is damaging the future of the United States. Vast numbers of youth are unable to reach their full

potential and are incarcerated on a daily basis, torn from their chance at obtaining an education and being thrust into the criminal justice system.

A recent study involving 35,000 juvenile offenders asserts that the individuals incarcerated as youth “were twice as likely to go on to be locked up as adults as those who committed similar offenses and came from similar backgrounds but were given an alternative sanction or simply not arrested” (Bernstein, 2014, p. 7). This idea shows that the incarceration of youth does not supply an answer to minimizing crime and reducing recidivism. Locking up juveniles for minor infractions greatly increases their chances of reoffending later in life.

After youth undergo the transition from school to incarceration, it is vital to contemplate the process by which they are reinstated to society and an educational environment. It is no coincidence that Black and Hispanic male youth have both the highest incarceration rate and lowest graduation rate (Cramer et al., 2014, p. 462). The relationship between school and prison is a reciprocal one. Not only do policies enacted in schools contribute to the growing number of school arrests, the large quantity of students in the juvenile justice system aggravate the dismal graduation rates of marginalized youth.

An element that can contribute to this phenomenon is the reality of labeling theory and its application to juvenile experiences in school and society. The “interplay between social control and personal identity” (Hess et al., 2013, p. 82) comes into conflict when youth are taught from a young age that they are not important, whether the message comes from racial marginalization or discrimination based on another identity. The reality that the system doesn’t place value on their well-being or abilities, and forces them to be labeled and categorized, does not promote a positive experience. When a young person commits a primary act of deviance and is given the label of delinquent, that young person, much like an adult, is driven to secondary deviance by the belief that they will be treated as lesser no matter their actions (Hess et al., 2014, p. 83). Looking at how the school-to-prison pipeline mirrors this phenomenon, it is clear that “official efforts to control crime may actually increase it” (Hess et al., 2014, p. 82).

Historically marginalized youth face challenges before, during, and after their disproportionate experiences in the juvenile justice system. By focusing on specific issues that arise at each element of the pipeline, it is possible to reduce the foundational and exacerbating issues inherent in the structure.

Acknowledging the shortcomings and failings of both the educational and justice systems is just the first step in a long and difficult journey to revolutionize the way that today’s youth are treated. Alternatively, as highlighted by Bennett-Haron et al. (2014), perhaps society needs to acknowledge that the systems currently in place are doing exactly what they were created to do, namely,

maintaining the unequal status quo. From both perspectives, the next step that emerges is identifying concrete areas for change and strategies that can be implemented universally.

### Foundational Research and Conclusions

The goal of the foundational materials informing this analysis was to provide a well-rounded and comprehensive basis for the conclusions drawn. Articles were selected from a variety of perspectives and were chosen from scholarly, peer-reviewed publications and published texts. The sheer mass of research present on the school-to-prison pipeline allowed for selectiveness in creating an inclusive bibliography. To begin, several articles were directed at critiquing the current realities of a penal system fed by educational institutions. These selections looked at how schools and societal, as well as criminal justice structures are failing youth. Some articles focus on the key role of racial discrimination while others emphasize the issues surrounding school disciplinary actions. A second perspective looks to the overall trends present within the criminal justice system and the punitive realities as well as a growing phenomenon of militarization and zero-tolerance policies. Additionally, Bennet-Haron et al. (2014) argues that these issues are not a failure of educational and criminal justice systems, but rather the fulfillment of their exclusionary and damaging purposes (p. 411).

The school-to-prison pipeline persists due to a combination of educational, criminal justice, and societal factors. Looking to schools, the existence of racial discrimination and unfair treatment of certain sexual identities combined with zero-tolerance policies heightens the flow of students from schools to prisons. Additionally, lack of resources and funding contribute to systemic causes of poor education quality. Within the correctional system, additional concerns surrounding disproportionate incarceration rates and unequal treatment of juveniles complicates an already flawed system. Upon release, youth are convinced that they are not valued by society and choose to engage in recidivist behaviors.

As Gonsoulin, Zablocki, and Leone (2012) explain, addressing these cyclical issues involve “cultivating a culture within the school community that addresses youth problems through early intervention and prevention” (p. 310). Schools may not be able to right the wrongs of society, but they can play a critical role in shifting away from ideology that promotes the unequal treatment of youth. Wilson (2014) also emphasizes that “removing exclusionary practices from the educator’s tool box will require serious staff development and often a change in personal philosophies” (p. 51) in such a way that school culture is shifted and preconceived ideology is questioned. This step is critical due to the fact that research shows that educators play a key role in preventing “students from

entering the pipeline by establishing relationships of mutual trust, building a caring learning environment, and applying positive behavioral approaches (Wilson, 2014, p. 51). By creating educational settings where students are encouraged to feel empowered, a hurdle to the school-to-prison pipeline will be constructed.

Once a child enters the justice process, it is important that the implementation of rehabilitative and restorative strategies be prioritized. Instead of simply punishing youth, an exploratory approach to working with juveniles in the system has the potential to yield positive results. It is not a matter of exercising punitive measures, on the contrary, by engaging youth with their personal stores of potential, recidivism rates could drop and the system could minimize reoffending and reduce incarceration numbers drastically both at the juvenile and adult levels. Additionally, enacting a restorative approach would counteract the labeling theory effects seen when youth reenter mainstream society and school. If juveniles are taught that they are valued they will have a better chance of developing positive self-esteem and pro-social behaviors. In order for this to be successful, major societal shifts must occur and become ingrained.

As Porter (2015) warns, “if lawmakers and school administrators allow the strict disciplinary practices in public schools to continue, an even greater number of African American and Latino students will be deprived of an education” (p. 55) and will continue to fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. Schools reside at the foundation of the phenomenon, but are greatly controlled by systematic cultural, economic, and political elements. While Shippen et al.’s (2012) suggestions of implementing “practices including utilizing restorative justice, expanding diversion programs, providing [personal development] to community stakeholders, and enhancing parent involvement may lead to positive outcomes avoiding entrance into the STPP” (p. 305), lasting change will only be made possible by a combination of technical changes to the system and a comprehensive shift in societal demand and design.

## Resources

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