

Unveiling Disparities: The Causes and Impacts of the School-to-Prison Pipeline on
Black Youth

Humanities Senior Seminar

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After graduating from Eastern Michigan University, well-known football star Turan Rush resolved to give back to his community and positively influence his city's youth population. Upon contemplating his time spent attending the local municipal schools, Rush had concerns regarding the school-to-prison pipeline. He observed many of his peers become victims of the pipeline due to the severe disciplinary measures implemented in the schools he attended (McDonald 1).

When he returned to his former schools to visit, he was discouraged to learn that these extreme policies had not changed. For example, when he visited a district middle school, he entered a 7th-grade classroom where the students sat with their desks facing the wall. To make matters worse, one student asked to use the bathroom in the classroom, and the teacher responded by reprimanding the student and stating that “[Their] job is to sit, face the wall, and do your work” (McDonald 1). These alarming conditions caused Rush to conclude that the school-to-prison pipeline was present definitively.

Several schools in America deal with similar problems that prevent their students from succeeding and being funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline refers to policies implemented by schools that push children out of the school system and into the criminal justice system. It is no secret that African Americans are disproportionately affected by the pipeline because they are more likely to be punished within school systems than their white counterparts (Bacher-Hicks, Deming, Billings 1). Specifically, Black students are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled. Although Black children represent 18% of students in the United States, they account for 46% of those who have been suspended more than once (Elias 1). According to the *Education Next Foundation*, White teachers and administrators frequently have

rooted racial biases that prevent them from seeing all children, regardless of color, with the same eye. These concerns often have an impact on students' academic and behavioral performances.

Furthermore, because of institutional racism, schools in minority communities are more likely to lack financing and resources that are beneficial to students' educations. As a result, the system frequently works against African American students, which means that they must work harder to achieve than their non-black peers. The school-to-prison pipeline has unevenly impacted African American youth as a result of racial biases carried by school staff and administrators, harsh zero-tolerance regulations adopted in schools, and a lack of resources for schools in economically disadvantaged communities.

Implicit racial bias carried by school officials and educators frequently plays a significant role in the school-to-prison pipeline. Implicit bias is attitudes or stereotypes that unconsciously affect our understanding, actions, and decisions. Implicit biases are often rooted in societal stereotypes and teachings. They can influence how we interact with others, even if we are not aware of these biases or do not explicitly endorse the stereotypes associated with them (Mason 1). Many of these prejudices are also brought about by mainstream media, such as television and social media, that depict young Black people as gang members who are dangerous and violent. Stereotypes and biases increase as images of people of color are portrayed unfavorably in the media (Heitzeg 4). According to Evelyn Carter, a social psychologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, "Bias is woven through culture like a silver cord woven through cloth. In some lights, it is brightly visible. In others, it is hard to distinguish. Moreover, your position relative to that glinting thread determines whether you see it at all" (Carter 1).

In schools, these biases are harmful not only to the teacher carrying them but also to the students for whom they are responsible. For example, if teachers are biased toward a specific

ethnicity or race, they will be biased toward their students with those identifiers (Bacher-Hicks 1). As a result, the student is more susceptible to biased grading and consequences. According to researchers from the *American Bar Association*, “Implicit bias can impact different aspects of education, such as discipline, identifying disabilities, and access to advanced or gifted programs. This often leads to disproportionate negative impacts on Black children, indicating a trend where certain groups are disadvantaged within educational settings.” Suppose a student is not fulfilling educational criteria at their school. In that case, rather than receiving the academic support they need from their teachers, they may be recommended or placed in an alternative school alongside students with behavioral issues, increasing the likelihood that they will begin to engage in some of those behaviors (NAACP LDF 5). These misdiagnoses and lack of attention towards the education and mental health of Black children contribute to a cycle of lowered expectations and opportunities for specific student groups, reinforcing educational inequalities and impacting students’ long-term and social development.

Often, educators hold the notion that being “colorblind” within an academic setting is an appropriate response to increases in diversity in schools. However, being unaware of student dynamic differences is often another problem. As Jessica Nordell, an award-winning author and science writer, cites Patricia Devine, psychology professor and director of Prejudice Lab, states: “Trying to ignore these differences, Devine says, makes discrimination worse. Humans see age, gender, and skin color: That is vision. Humans have associations about these categories: That is culture. Moreover, humans use these associations to make judgments: That, Devine believes, is a habit—something you can engage in without knowing it, the way a person might nibble fingernails down to the bloody quick before realizing they are even doing so” (Nordell 1).

By ignoring the notions and biases that individuals have against another culture, educators are not adequately caring for the needs of each student.

Bias from administrators in the educational system not only affects the schoolchildren but also affects Black educators. Rosemarie Allen, lecturer of Early Childhood Education at the Metropolitan State University of Denver, details how “many Black educators were discriminated against as a result of white parents voicing concern over Black children.” Due to this, many Black educators lost jobs, and some were not even looked at as possible candidates for schools. This is a problem because White educators “[do] not necessarily understand the students of color in the classroom” (Scialabba 1). Eighty-percent of African American elementary students are taught by teachers who do not look like them (Scialabba 1). This dynamic creates a lack of connection between Black students and their teachers, which again puts students at risk of not being exposed to the necessary resources that each child deserves.

Implicit bias can also significantly influence the implementation of harsh-zero tolerance policies, particularly when it comes to Black students. These policies, which are intended to maintain discipline and safety in schools, are disproportionately enforced against them due to deeply ingrained racial stereotypes and prejudices. Educators, who are unconsciously influenced by biases, may perceive Black students’ behavior as more “threatening” or “problematic” than that of their white peers, leading to stricter disciplinary measures (Heitzeg 6). Consequently, students are being severely punished for minor infractions that could be resolved through restorative approaches, such as tardiness, talking during a lesson, or dress code violations which fosters environments where students feel targeted and unfairly treated. In fact, according to Nicole Scialabba, “Black students represent 16 percent of student enrollment but account for 27 percent referred to law enforcement and 31 percent subjected to a school-related arrest.” These

policies contribute to a culture of distrust between students and school authorities, which fosters environments where students feel targeted and unfairly treated (Walker 1).

Many students who have already been caught within the criminal justice system due to bias in policies have a difficult time escaping. In essence, researchers found that suspension in the first year of high school doubles the dropout chance for the student, and children who are expelled are three times more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system (Walker 1). Frequently, though, bias is enough to send a student directly to the criminal justice system. For example, at only sixteen years old, Kalief Browder was racially profiled and wrongfully convicted of stealing a backpack. Once he was released, he found himself struggling to keep up with the normality of society. “I see businessmen and businesswomen dressed in suits. I want to be like them, you know... I want to be successful like them,” Browder stated in his documentary. Unfortunately for Browder, three years of vital education from his high school career was now lost. However, there are many other African American youth across the United States who have faced similar mistreatment from educators and those in the criminal justice system.

The alienation that comes from punishments such as suspensions and expulsions due to zero-tolerance policies creates a disengagement from school, ultimately increasing the likelihood of students becoming entangled in the criminal justice system. Removing children from a structured educational setting disrupts their education and creates time periods for them to get in trouble. According to the *NAACP Legal Defense Fund*, stringent behavioral policies that schools try to enforce do not benefit the students but instead have a detrimental impact on them because they are not receiving the necessary support. Additionally, students may feel isolated and left out by being sent out of the classroom. As 2012 Maryland State Teacher of the Year, Josh Parker, wrote, “When trust and decorum are breached, our actions either educate or alienate. The

offenders in today's classroom could grow into tomorrow's offenders in public. Power struggles in the classroom can foreshadow life or power struggles in the future, particularly when we fail to explore the power dynamics at play with our Black boys and girls." Teachers need to recognize what constant unruly discipline does to the Black youth population. Rather than using minor infractions within the classroom as excuses to abuse their authority and discipline, educators should take the opportunity to inform the students of their mistakes, which will help them learn and grow from their actions.

Furthermore, the intertwining of zero-tolerance policies with a lack of resources in schools adds to the challenges faced by Black students across the United States. However, the impact of zero-tolerance policies is inconsistent, as students in underfunded and resource-deprived schools face harsher penalties due to limited access to support for their education. Schools that implement these policies are often in high-crime neighborhoods and lack access to necessary resources such as guidance counselors, mental health services, and intervention programs (NAACP LDF 3). This further exacerbates how these policies are applied, with Black students in marginalized communities suffering the worst. Because many schools are unprepared and unwilling to provide alternative measures, the root causes of students' misbehaviors are ignored.

Zero-tolerance policies prolong a cycle of isolation, driving students further away from an educational path. Josh Parker questions these practices, suggesting that "...students bear the weight of their decisions...but what will be the result of our decision to separate students from classes?" (*What happens when a student*). Teachers that enforce this pattern of isolation fail to allow students to recognize and learn from their mistakes. Suspending and expelling students for

infractions is ineffective unless the student is informed of how their actions have harmed both their education and that of their classmates.

In contrast, some may argue that zero-tolerance policies are effective for the sole purpose of uniformly removing any distractions and interruptions from a learning environment. However, these policies are not applied uniformly, as they are proven to be applied more rigorously to students of color. Due to these factors, the positive aspects that stem from these policies outweigh the negative aspects. As a result, many socially advanced schools have implemented different strategies to approach negative behaviors. For example, School Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) is a behavioral system that is organized into three tiers in order to better fit the needs of each student (Schneider 1). Tier one focuses on frequent positive reinforcement, constantly addressing social errors, and arranging learning environments that benefit both students and teachers. Many of the petty behaviors that students in zero-tolerance enforcing schools are harshly punished for are resolved with these measures. Tier two focuses on more personal approaches such as small group interventions, which help to engage a student and monitor their progress. Tier two action benefits students who are classified as “at risk”. Tier three serves as a last resort to students who have not had much progress with tiers one and two. The repercussions in this tier range anywhere from referrals to meetings with parents. The uniqueness of this system is that instead of receiving punishments that are similar to those in tier three, each student is given the opportunity to have direct conversations with teachers and administrators who are willing to give each student the proper support that they need (“What is SW-PBS” 1-3). Strategies such as SWPBS not only personally benefit the students’ behavior, but it also lessens the time that students spend outside of the classroom due to strict zero-tolerance policies.

Moreover, economic disadvantages play a significant role in funneling students into the school-to-prison pipeline by creating multiple barriers that hinder students' academic success and overall well-being. Specifically, students who are in lower income areas tend to have access to less of the necessary resources for academic success. Systemic racism exacerbates these economic disparities, leading to harsh disciplinary actions against Black students because schools are not equipped with adequate resources that aid to the students' needs ("Who Is Most Affected" 1). Some of the challenges that schools in minority communities face include "over-crowded classrooms, insufficient materials, and a lack of qualified teachers [and a lack of support services]... which can hinder a child's ability to succeed academically" (5 Ways That Overcrowded1). This leaves the vulnerable in these neighborhoods students with few opportunities for positive engagement with role models and growth.

The higher the number of students is in a classroom, the less likely they are to retain information that they are being exposed to in the classroom. Unfortunately, this is the case for many schools in minority communities. An overcrowded classroom is not only completely chaotic and distracting for students, but it also makes it difficult for the teacher to educate. Because of this, students are provided with less opportunities for personal feedback from their teacher who is distracted with trying to maintain the class. According to *Walden University*, the more students there are in a classroom, the more noisier it is. This increased noise level makes it harder for children to concentrate, which prohibits students from being able to learn valuable and essential lessons that will highly benefit them in their future school careers. However, not only do overcrowded classrooms strain academic opportunities for students, but they also create more room for bad behavior. Due to this, teachers often spend more time trying to manage and discipline students than teaching them ("5 Ways That Overcrowded 1). Because of the absence of

personalized attention in the classroom, students are introduced to a cycle of persistent misbehavior, which eventually leads to more severe consequences as they progress in school.

It has been proven that economic hardships, specifically in schools, contribute to increased stress and mental health issues amongst Black youth, which are not properly addressed due to the stigmas surrounding Black mental health and the scarcity of mental health resources. According to *Evokate*, an organization that draws awareness to minority mental health, “BIPOC youth with mental health issues are also more likely than White youth with the same issues to be sent to the juvenile (in)justice system instead of being sent to get care” (“The School-to-Prison Pipeline 1). Because of the lack counselors available for Black students, they are much more likely to suffer from mental health disorders than their white peers. As a result, behaviors that should be taken care of through mental health interventions are criminalized, funneling Black youth into the criminal justice system at disproportionate rates.

Additionally, schools with lower incomes tend to have teachers with less experience, which hinders the students from receiving the education they deserve. This becomes a problem when students with the most needs are under the supervision of teachers who are not qualified to help. However, due to the fact that students at schools in well-funded neighborhoods do have the access to qualified teachers and counselors and students in lower socioeconomic areas do not, about one in four Black students with disabilities are suspended versus one and eleven White students (Elias 1).

Ultimately, the school-to-prison pipeline reflects a well-known trend in which disciplinary actions in educational settings disproportionately place minority students directly into the criminal justice system. This stigma stems from the complexities of implicit bias, zero-tolerance policies, and socioeconomic disparities in schools in underprivileged areas.

Instead of offering students help and guidance, these factors work against them by limiting access to critical resources essential to academic achievement. Because these aspects unfairly target minority children, they have a substantially lower probability of keeping out of trouble both inside and outside of school.

When addressing the school-to-prison pipeline, one must consider every factor that contributes. Evaluating zero-tolerance policies and incorporating more restorative justice approaches can assist in developing a supportive school atmosphere that promotes rehabilitation over discipline. Educator training in acknowledging and responding to implicit biases is critical for creating an equitable atmosphere, particularly in predominantly Black schools. Furthermore, tackling socioeconomic gaps necessitates the government's commitment in supplying resources and support systems for schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods, ensuring that every student has access to a high-quality education and opportunities for success. Subsequently, dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline will require a collaborative effort from policymakers, educators, community leaders, parents, and society as a whole to address its root causes. Taking action against it will create a more equitable educational system that benefits all students, regardless of background or circumstances.

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