

# The School to Prison Pipeline: An Exploration

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Between 1995 and 2010, juvenile incarceration rates decreased by 41%, according to Vox. Yet, at the same time, the number of out-of-school suspensions has been on a continual rise, increasing about 10% since 2000. There is a simple explanation for this phenomenon: in-school discipline efforts have overlapped with several out-of-school juvenile justice measures, creating what is known as the "School to Prison Pipeline." At first, this data flew under the radar as the public dismissed it as an inevitable outcome of police presence in schools for violent offenses. However, recent videos circulating on social media of police officers acting aggressively, untrained, and irrationally toward students in tandem with new policies being implemented at a state and local level prove that zero-tolerance approaches are wholly preventable. Instead, educators, parents, and communities across the nation have created durable solutions to the new wave of police violence.

## What factors have caused the School to Prison Pipeline?

While there is no root cause of the School to Prison Pipeline, a few underlying factors have increased alongside the pipeline:

### *1) Zero Tolerance Policies.*

In the 1990s and early 2000s, punitive measures in schools established a "ceiling" on the consequences for a particular action whereby administrators and teachers could evaluate the circumstances at hand and subsequently decide on a disciplinary effort. However, modern-day schools have undertaken a "floor" that automatically prescribes a harsh, minimum penalty for a

category of actions, regardless of the circumstances. Not only has this instilled an automatic presumption of guilt when a student is called to the front office, but it has also contributed to students missing valuable class time. Suspensions and expulsions are likely punishments for offenses, forcing families to undergo the tedious and difficult task of finding a new school and uprooting their daily schedule. Many experts in the educational field have analogized this pattern to incarceration efforts like mandatory minimums and collateral consequences in the criminal justice system, which require prisoners to serve a minimum sentence for certain offenses, regardless of context. In some extreme cases, the relationship between expulsions and criminal justice sentences is not even an analogy — police officers in schools often send students straight to juvenile court without prior deliberation with principals and vice-principals. The overlap of so many methods of retribution clearly demonstrates the modern existence and functioning of the school to prison pipeline.

## *2) School Disturbance Laws.*

Similar to, although in some fashions distinct from, zero-tolerance policies, school disturbance laws are rules that students must follow to prevent disturbances in the classroom. This may include activities like physical or verbal altercations or threats to students and teachers. While on face, these may seem like proactive measures by school administrations, the waters are often muddied between what is and isn't considered a "disturbance." Nearly half of all U.S. states have school disturbance laws, but enforcement and penalties are far from uniform. This ambiguity leaves difficult decisions in the hands of ill-informed teachers and, if necessary, law enforcement officials. A clear example of this is Niya Kenny, a student at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina. New to the school, Kenny was asked to hand over her phone to her algebra teacher and, rightfully confused, questioned the teacher's decision. Not long after, a sheriff's deputy was called to handle the situation, which led the situation to escalate out of control. Videos circulated on Snapchat and Instagram of the deputy acting aggressively towards the student, forcing the school district to launch press conferences and speak about the incident. Niya's case is far from an anomaly. According to *The Atlantic's* report on students in the juvenile justice system, nearly "1,200 kids are charged with disturbing school in the state — some for yelling and shoving, others for cursing." The connection to the pipeline could not be more clear — the punishment for violating these laws is often time spent in juvenile detention facilities. Still, even without a comparable terminal punishment, the belligerency of police officers in schools is similar to the hostility of police officers out of schools.

### *3) Police Presence in Schools.*

According to the University of Connecticut's School of Education, only 1% of schools reported having a law enforcement official on campus in 1975 compared to nearly 58% of schools reporting having a police officer on school grounds in 2018. This is no coincidence — the United States federal government has explicitly invested over \$1 billion to increase police presence in schools and implicitly invested over \$14 billion to advance community policing broadly, including at places of education. The resemblance is perhaps far more apparent to the criminal justice system than the aforementioned zero-tolerance policies: School Resource Officers, or SROs, are the juvenile equivalent to over-policing in urban, predominantly black neighborhoods. At first glance, one may assume that the increase in funding prevented large-scale acts of violence. However, enforcement of penalties originally under the jurisdiction of school administrations has shifted to police officers who discriminate racially. According to Aaron Kupchick, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Delaware, the most rigorous and comprehensive studies conclude that SROs have little to no causal relationship with reducing crime rates or preventing mass shootings. Furthermore, these studies conclude that, although crime and shooting rates have increased throughout the years, the response to this is far better suited in the hands of social workers, school psychologists, and teachers with de-escalation training.

These statistics not only demonstrate that other professions are more trained and prepared to handle these situations; they also demonstrate that SROs contribute to psychological trauma experienced by black and brown students, expanding the scope of implicit bias that students face in their day-to-day lives. Aaron Kupchick also notes that the mere presence of SROs on school grounds instills an educational atmosphere that is “more focused on law and order” and less focused on “social and emotional well-being” (Kupchick). Some form of reduction or elimination of SROs would also shore up the costly burden that school systems face maintaining police officers in school. At the very least, a reallocation of certain funds would allow better de-escalation training to a wider variety of cops. Another factor that increases the propensity of SROs to focus on law and order is the fact that very few students are aware of their legal rights. When SROs feel that there will be a more dampened form of potential consequences, they are more likely to circumvent traditional methods of arresting citizens. To counter these practices, efforts both in and out of the classroom should be explored to ensure students understand their rights when confronted with the police.

## **How has the School to Prison pipeline shifted with online learning?**

Although the factors previously mentioned only occur in brick and mortar schools, the pipeline has undeniably adapted to COVID learning environments. Here are some of the ways that the pipeline has shifted:

### *1) Zoom Fatigue.*

Virtual learning entailed reconceptualizing the ways that students across the country study and receive information. Instead of watching the teacher write notes on a whiteboard, students have to take notes from their computer screens. For some, this transition was seamless, but for other students, particularly those with learning disabilities like ADHD, ADD, and ASD, the switch consisted of struggles to maintain motivation and energy. This is what many experts have deemed “Zoom Fatigue,” or a “physical and mental toll as a result of constant virtual meetings” (Fernstrom). This is especially true for education, because school is often a place to hang out with friends aside from actual lessons. The connection to the pipeline is evident in how teachers presuppose certain behaviors students would usually embody in regular school but not in online learning. A clear example of this is seen in Grace, a student from Beverly Hills, California. Grace was on academic probation prior to her school switching to an online format, but, as a student with ADHD, the change only made it more difficult for her learning patterns. Today, Grace stays in a juvenile detention center in Detroit, Michigan, not for committing a crime but for failing to complete her coursework in online learning. This demonstrates that, in many ways, the School to Prison Pipeline is worse in online school — all of the regular rules and expectations for students still exist, but now it is a far higher bar for students to meet. Furthermore, the pipeline has morphed to increase its harms on disabled students.

### *2) Police Presence in Homes.*

No in-person school means no in-school police officers, but it would be foolish to assume that police presence and interference have disappeared. Instead, police presence has shifted to officers being sent to the homes of students. Similar to the reason police presence in schools may sound like a good idea, police presence in homes may sound intuitively appealing to prevent

instances of domestic abuse, child abuse, and other instances of violence. However, studies prove that not only are other professions like social workers and psychiatrists better suited to handle those situations, but such cases are a drop in the bucket of total police calls. Isaiah Elliot, a 12-year old black student in El Paso, Texas, was suspended for five days for having a Nerf gun in the background of his camera frame, which his teacher mistook for a legitimate weapon. Elliot's teacher also covertly consulted with the El Paso Police Department, and a group of officers showed up at Elliot's door. The parallels between events like these and the criminal justice system are perhaps more similar than in-person school: police officers are now called to unexpectedly show up to students' houses much like they would when an adult is suspected of committing a crime. In the instance of Elliot, police officers went to his family's house with very little evidence, much like how police warrants are obtained with very few legitimate suspicions, especially with black families.

## Conclusion

The School to Prison pipeline is undeniably a new facet of American education, both in-person and virtual. The solution to these issues of SROs, hardline policies, and presumptions of guilt in online learning has already occurred in micro-level forms at the state and local levels. However, preventing the Pipeline altogether requires a unified collective to resist instances of police brutality. The first step to this, as with any social justice effort, is to spread often covert and under-the-radar information regarding the problem at hand. The statistics and accounts in this article demonstrate that pragmatic solutions to the Pipelines are well within reach.

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