Shawnna Ledden

Professor Neelakanta and Professor Shane

BHP 150: Great Ideas II

11/24/2025

From Classrooms to Courtrooms: The Hidden Costs of Zero-Tolerance Policies on Students of Color

Imagine this: You are fourteen years old. Your mother has been making progress in drug rehabilitation, but she has recently relapsed. Overnight, you become the stand-in parent for your two younger siblings. You push your own needs aside to attend to them by cooking breakfast and sending them to school. Sleepless nights and constant worry become your normal. Exhausted, you drift off at school and lay your head down, seeking a moment of peace until your teacher's voice cuts through the silence. She orders you to sit up again. Something in you snaps. The days of fear and pressure spill out as you mutter, "B–" under your breath. The teacher drags you into the hallway where your anger explodes. You curse, you shout, and in your blind rage your hand swings towards a face you didn't register that entered the hall. The next thing you hear is "suspension," a word that feels like an inevitable sentence on your future.

This was Tommy's reality, except he was fortunate. Eric Butler, executive director for Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) was the face he swung at. Butler intervened when the Principal demanded a suspension. Instead, he applied restorative practices rather than pushing Tommy into exclusionary discipline (Davis 39). Tommy's story is not an anomaly. It represents the experiences of numerous students who face significant hardships and receive punishment instead of support. The shift toward punitive disciplinary systems like suspensions, expulsions, and zero-tolerance policies has created and expanded what is known as the

school-to-prison pipeline. This pipeline disproportionately impacts students of color through biased school discipline, increased policing in schools, and harsh exclusionary practices. Yet efforts such as California's Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth program show that meaningful reform is possible and necessary.

The school-to-prison pipeline describes the national trend in which zero-tolerance policies and harsh school discipline increase a student's likelihood of entering the criminal legal system rather than obtaining a quality education. These pathways operate both directly and indirectly. The direct pathway stems from the growing presence of police officers on school grounds. Since the 1990s, U.S. schools have employed roughly 20,000 police officers, a 40% increase from 1997, resulting in school-based arrests rising 300-500% during the same period (Prins). The indirect pathway stems from dramatic increases in suspensions and expulsions. Over the past forty years, out-of-school suspensions have more than doubled, and students are twice as likely to be arrested in the month following a suspension than during months when they remain in school. Zero-tolerance policies mandate exclusion for a wide range of behaviors, both violent and non-violent.

A critical question is whether these policies are applied equally across socioeconomic groups. Schools commonly employ discipline by citing behavioral concerns that often result from substance use. Studies found a strong correlation between school-level drinking or drug use on the premises and disciplinary practices, showing "between 16% and 21% higher prevalence of total discipline in the subsequent year" (Prins). Research indicates that substance use occurs in both affluent and low-income communities, yet schools in wealthier areas report fewer suspensions and arrests (Prins). Therefore, students in poverty face a greater likelihood of exclusionary punishment, despite having fewer resources for support.

Punitive policies were intensified after publicized school shootings. The 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting is an example of incidents that largely occurred in white, suburban, middle-class areas (Mallett). As fear increased, policies expanded and now disproportionately affect already marginalized groups. Students of color often live in low-income neighborhoods shaped by long-standing structural racism, leaving them with greater exposure to more biased systems. Despite legal desegregation, racial segregation in housing persists, making it nearly impossible for Black people to live in economically advantaged areas, "Nationwide, the average African-American student attends a school where nearly two of every three classmates are low-income, double the comparative Caucasian student rate" (Mallett). These conditions create fertile grounds for disproportionate punishment.

Black students are not targeted by only socioeconomic status. Data indicates that they face harsher discipline for the same behaviors exhibited by white students. According to the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts for comparable offenses (Davis 40). When behavior does not justify suspension, schools increasingly rely on security practices that also disproportionately impact Black students. For example, "26 % of African-American students report walking through metal detectors upon entering school compared with only 5.4 % of Caucasian students" (Mallett). These biases disproportionately affect students of color, and the resulting disciplinary records reinforce the stereotype that they are more likely to misbehave.

The criminal justice system already displays deep racial disparities, and the school-to-prison pipeline feeds directly into them. Some studies argue that the pipeline's disproportionate treatment of Black students contributes to their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (Prins). Introducing the biases of the criminal justice system into schools

makes learning environments unsafe for the very students who need safety the most. Outside of school, Black individuals are already more likely to be arrested, stopped by the police, or subjected to force–in the worst scenarios, death because they "had a gun" which was really a hairbrush. Racial disparities persist after incarceration. An October 2021 report found that in twelve state prisons half the population consists of Black people, and seven other state prisons display a racial disparity in imprisonment rates of 9% or greater Black inmates than white inmates (NCSL). Black prisoners receive longer sentences, on average, 20% longer than white men convicted of comparable crimes, and of all people serving life sentences, 48% are Black (United States Sentencing Commission). Data shows that when suspensions are disproportionately applied to Black students, they increase the likelihood of future criminal involvement, with deeply alarming implications for Black communities.

Despite this grim reality, effective alternatives exist. Restorative Justice programs focus on repairing harm instead of inflicting punishment, which provides a promising path forward. Instead of asking only what rule was broken and how to punish the offender like punitive practices do, restorative approaches ask who was harmed, what is needed to repair harm, and how all parties can be supported moving forward. Punitive justice meets harm with more harm, whereas Restorative Justice seeks accountability, healing, and reintegration.

Oakland, California provides one of the most notable examples of incorporating Restorative Justice into school policy. In Tommy's case, Eric Butler facilitated a restorative conference where all involved expressed their perspectives and created a plan to address all wrongdoings. This approach defused anger, repaired relationships, and prevented further punishment. Research supports these successes. A UC Berkeley Law study found that RJOY's 2007 middle school pilot eliminated violence and expulsions, while reducing suspension rates by

87%. At one of the RJOY school sites, student suspensions decreased 74% after two years, referrals for violence fell 77% after one year, and racial disparities in discipline were eliminated. Graduation rates and test scores improved as well (Davis 41). The program proved so effective that the Oakland school board adopted Restorative Justice as a district-wide alternative to zero-tolerance policies.

To address the school-to-prison pipeline and its racial disparities, adults must also take accountability. Student misconduct rarely stems from rebellion or the desire for negative attention. Their behavior is affected by students' experiences and school environments.

Studies indicate that higher suspension rates counterintuitively increase student misbehavior and decrease school completion rates (Mallett). Poor school climate, driven by policing, exclusion, and inadequate support, worsens behavior rather than improves it. Real solutions must target root causes: mental health, poverty, trauma, and lack of support.

Some New York City schools illustrate misplaced priorities. According to Prins, the city employs twice as many police officers as social workers and psychologists combined, and nearly twice as many police officers as school counselors. The author continues to explain that student safety and comfort in schools correlate with lower prevalence of total discipline. Schools may be inclined to shift the blame, suggesting that there needs to be stronger support at home; however, studies demonstrate that home support has no effect on student misconduct. "Peer and home support, student resilience, and feeling safe in one's neighborhood were not associated with school discipline measures" (Prins). The current system has made schools harsher, not safer. If schools used student records to foster sympathy rather than justify punishment, they might see that student misconduct is often a sign of deeper needs that are unmet.

Ultimately, the data points to one conclusion: supportive school environments that incorporate Restorative Justice and/or similar approaches reduce student misconduct, while punitive systems such as zero-tolerance policies exacerbate it. These policies harm mental health and signal that race and socioeconomic status limit access to quality education and future opportunities. To dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, schools must invest in culturally sensitive counselors, mental-health workers, and restorative practices—not more police. This investment would increase the likelihood that students of color get the support needed to attain a successful life. America's emphasis on efficiency and quickly providing solutions contributes to the problem. The culture encourages schools to enact swift disciplinary solutions like zero-tolerance policies that do not support students' long-term well-being. Instead, these policies disproportionately drive marginalized students towards the school-to-prison pipeline. If schools fail to adopt restorative practices, they risk perpetuating cycles of inequality that affect entire communities, not just individual students.

Word Count: 1541

Works Cited:

Davis, Fania. "Discipline With Dignity: Oakland Classrooms Try Healing Instead of Punishment." *Reclaiming Children & Youth*, vol. 23, no. 1, May 2014, pp. 38–41. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=3e3b6128-2625-3110-8ee8-92c3b3433ba7.

Mallett, Christopher. "The School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Critical Review of the Punitive Paradigm Shift." *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, Feb. 2016, pp. 15–24. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-015-0397-1.

National Conference of State Legislatures. *Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the Criminal Justice System.* Updated 24 May 2022, National Conference of State Legislatures, https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/racial-and-ethnic-disparities-in-the-criminal-justice-system.

Prins, Seth J., et al. "School Health Predictors of the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Substance Use and Developmental Risk and Resilience Factors." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 70, no. 3, Mar. 2022, pp. 463–69. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.09.032.

United States Sentencing Commission. *Demographic Differences in Federal Sentencing.* November 2023, United States Sentencing Commission,

https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/research-publications/2023/20231114_Demographic-Differences.pdf