The School-to-Prison Pipeline and Mental Health Nexus:

How the School-to-Prison Pipeline Facilitates itself by Exploiting the Mental Health

Disorders it can Provoke in Students

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Beginning in the 1980s, the public educational system in the United States has witnessed the introduction and operation of the school-to-prison pipeline, a systematic process by which students are forced out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Schools have adopted harsh policies and practices that criminalize students' behaviors, extend severe disciplinary measures often prohibiting students from attending school by suspension or expulsion, force students to come into contact with law enforcement, and flush students into the juvenile or criminal justice systems. The schools in which the pipeline operates are primarily underfunded and serve low-income and majority-minority communities, implicating that economically and racially marginalized populations are those primarily victimized by the pipeline and by which are absorbed into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Welch and Payne 2014) (UniqueWritersBay 2020). The school-to-prison pipeline fuels mass incarceration (Barnes 2018) and preserves social stratification through systematic educational disempowerment and disproportionate rates of impact on marginalized communities.

The harsh punishments doled out from zero-tolerance policies and substantial police presence in schools- the primary mechanisms of the school-to-prison pipeline- create harmful environments that can destabilize students' health and development. The trauma students face as a result of the daily interaction with the school-to-prison pipeline's apparatus can diminish emotional and mental well-being. The emotional and mental impact on students attributed to the school-to-prison pipeline occurs on a spectrum, meaning that while some may experience little to no effect, others may be implicated more severely and experience emotional distress and even

develop mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety. In these more severe cases, mental health disorders can affect or alter a student's mood, thinking, and behavior (Mayo Clinic 2019).

However, the behaviors that are symptomatic of mental health disorders, such as emotional outbursts and avoiding school, are often subjected to zero-tolerance policies and the severe punishments employed by the school-to-prison pipeline. The actions of students generated out of emotional distress may be used as grounds for disciplinary action that force a student out of school or put them in contact with law enforcement or justice systems, which furthers the pipeline.

Therefore, the school-to-prison pipeline may not only provoke the emergence of mental health disorders in some students, but the pipeline also exploits mental health disorders in order to facilitate itself.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline's Potential Impact on Student Mental Health

The school-to-prison pipeline requires certain mechanisms in order to function, meaning that the schools in which it operates have specific environmental features and modes of operation that systematically force students out of school and into the hands of the juvenile or criminal justice systems. The school-to-prison pipeline's primary operational features present in schools are zero-tolerance policies and high rates of police officers in school (also known as "Student Resource Officers"), both of which can have drastic implications for students' well-being. The utilization of these practices and policies that aid the pipeline's operation establish physical,

social, and academic environments in schools that are harsh, unstable, unsafe, and unkind; such harmful school environments can be destructive to the development of a child which can invoke the surfacing of mental health disorders in students.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

The usage of zero-tolerance policies in schools- the mechanism by which students are disciplined and forced out of school- was initiated by the implementation of the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 across states. The Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 was authorized with the intention of promoting safe, weapon-free learning environments in schools. The acts mandated every school receiving federal funding adopt zero-tolerance policies on certain major offenses -such as bringing firearms to school-, meaning that any student who broke such rules would be expelled regardless of the circumstances surrounding the incident (School Discipline Support Initiative). However, while the Gun Free Schools Act was initially intended to target the presence of weapons in school, states began to use the federal mandate as a justification for further adoptions of zero-tolerance policies for student actions outside of weapon possession. Zero-tolerance policies began expanding to require suspensions or expulsions for various violent behaviors (fighting, assault, harassment, indecent exposure, vandalism, destruction of property) and non-violent behaviors (drug/alcohol/tobacco use, verbal harassment, disobedience, obscene language, and truancy) (Mallett 2015). The Gun Free Schools Act was integral to the development of the school-to-prison pipeline as it instigated the emergence of zero-tolerance policies on a large range of student behaviors and enforced severe punishments for offenses; the

risk of being forcibly removed from school- the first step in the school-to-prison pipeline-
increased drastically (Mallett 2015).

       The implementation of zero-tolerance policies for a vast array of student behaviors
denotes the emergence of a high-stakes school environment wherein minor actions can incur
drastic consequences. For a policy to have zero-tolerance, there are meant to be no exceptions to
the rule regardless of circumstance. The dismissal of circumstances surrounding an offense
means that any nuance to a student's action is lost, allowing for non-harmful and perceivably
innocent behaviors to fall under broad categories of actions targeted for harsh punishment.
Bringing a butter knife to school can qualify as a weapon, bringing Aspirin to school can qualify
as a drug, talking back to a teacher can qualify as a threat, standing up for oneself can qualify as
violence, and using curse words when communicating with a peer can qualify as obscene
language use, all incurring the severe punishment of a zero-tolerance policy (Maxime 2015). In
2010, a 12-year-old student in Queens, New York wrote "I love my friends Abby and Faith" and
"Lex was here 2/1/2010" on her desk using an erasable marker. The school identified the writing
as vandalism, causing the child to be handcuffed, arrested, and detained (McDonough 2010). In
another case, a student was expelled for forgetting a pocket knife left in her purse (Flannery
2015). Zero-tolerance policies conflate non-harmful behaviors with harmful ones and lead
students to face severe discipline for innocent actions. When insignificant and normal behaviors-
such as writing on a desk- become crimes and cause for removal from school or police
involvement, school is no longer safe for students.

In order for students to remain in school and evade the minefield of causes for punishments from zero-tolerance policies, they must internalize the environment's intense pressure and instability to maintain a sharp awareness of their behaviors and their potential consequences; such insecurity can be mentally and emotionally harmful to the students. A lack of safety in a developing child's environment can induce feelings of stress (Polaris Teen Center 2018). Even if one does not become a victim of the harsh policies themself, witnessing peers being suspended or expelled and experiencing the threat from the policies' existence is a deleterious experience in itself. One study found that students attending schools with zero-tolerance policies have higher rates of stress than students from schools without such disciplinary policies (Swift 2012). Chronic, prolonged, or untreated stress can lead to further mental health issues, such as depression (Hall-Flavin 2020), anxiety disorders (Sambunaris), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Doughty 2018).

Furthermore, the students who do become victims of zero-tolerance policies and receive severe punishments, particularly suspensions or expulsions, have an even greater chance of developing mental illnesses (Doward 2017). Exclusion from school can cause a child to become depressed or anxious and can amplify pre-existing mental health struggles and disorders. Being punished without the ability to defend oneself is a frustrating experience that can make a child feel disempowered, disrespected, uncared for, and unheard. Feelings of helplessness or inferiority can decrease a child's confidence and increase insecurity- whether in themselves or in their position within society- causing emotional distress, depression, or anxiety. The zero-tolerance policies utilized in the school-to-prison pipeline generate intense and widespread

instability within the environmental and social structures of schools, potentially provoking the development of mental health disorders in some students.

School Policing

Alongside the use of zero-tolerance policies, the presence of police officers in schools- also known as Student Resource Officers- is vital for the school-to-prison pipeline as they facilitate the identification of rule violators and direct students to harsh punishments and criminalization. The increasing prevalence of school shootings in the country in the past few decades has led to a simultaneously increasing prevalence of police officers in schools. Although the intention behind introducing police into schools was to protect students from violence, there has yet to be any solid empirical evidence to suggest that school police do indeed increase safety (ACLU Staff). Student Resource Officers (SROs) are police officers designated to serve specifically within schools and have three primary purposes for which they serve: law enforcement and crime prevention, community relations liaison, and, at times, educator (Raymond 2010). Given their authority as police officers, SROs exercise their police training -to identify criminal/rule-breaking acts, handcuff, and arrest- onto students. Acting as student behavioral monitors, enforcers, and punishment bearers, SROs criminalize students and increase their risk of being disciplined (Barnum 2020) or arrested (Connery 2020), particularly for non-violent offenses and especially for Black students (Asmar 2020). The heavy involvement of police in the daily lives of students has several substantial and compounding implications for students' well-being.

Police presence in school has a negative causal effect on student academic attainment, which, in turn, can have its own negative effect on mental health. One study showed that the test scores of Black boys significantly decreased when exposed to heightened police presence (Legewie and Fagan 2019), and another study found that having police in school decreases graduation rates and college enrollment (Weisburst 2019). A decline in educational attainment has been shown to lead to a decline in mental health and vice-versa, as research has shown that the two phenomena have a strong causal relationship (Agnafors, Barmark, and Sydsjö 2020). Poor performance in school may induce feelings of frustration, stress, inadequacy, and inferiority in relation to a student's teachers and perhaps better-performing peers, all of which can potentially lead to depression or anxiety.

Police officers or SROs are in schools to locate, prevent, and detain rule-breaking or criminal acts/actors. It is thus in the police officers' duties to closely monitor students and keep a sharp and critical eye on their behaviors. However, the patrolling of police officers within one's school- their mere presence and close proximity of police officers in schools to a student- can cause emotional instability or distress in students that, over time, can emotionally and mentally harm students. The surveillance of students is exacerbated in diverse urban schools (in which the school-to-prison pipeline is most likely to function) because police officers in such schools are far more likely to emphasize students as primary sources of threat and, therefore, are more likely to closely and even intensely monitor them (Fisher et al.). For students, sharing the hallways with police officers who are closely surveilling their actions can feel imposing and stress-inducing. When minor and innocent behaviors can spark negative, sometimes severe, responses from police officers, particularly when compounded with zero-tolerance policies- such as in the case

of the 12-year-old girl who was arrested for writing on her desk (Maxime 2018)-, students are likely to become fearful and carry that fear with them throughout their entire school day. Prolonged or chronic fear or stress can cause depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Delagran). The sense of disempowerment students are likely to feel from the looming presence of police in their school creates a harmful school environment that can distress students and, over time in severe cases, may induce mental health disorders.

The potential detrimental repercussions police presence in school has on student mental health is particularly exacerbated for Black students. The complex relationship between the Black community and police in the United States has been one forged from a past entrenched in injustice. The police have a longstanding history of racism and committing acts of brutality against Black people, which has resulted in many Black people feeling distrust, fear, and anger towards police. If a Black student were to feel negatively and uneasy towards police, they are likely to feel the same for school police and SROs. Many studies have shown that Black students are less likely to feel safe with school police than their non-Black peers; a study in California found 60% of Black students in one school district did not believe school police were trustworthy or cared about them (Edwards et al. 2020). Researchers also found that police officers are more likely to view Black students as threats and target them for offenses in comparison to their White counterparts (Fisher et al.). In this way, schools are a microcosm of greater American society: in school, Black students are more likely to be arrested or harmed by school police (Asmar 2020), and, similarly, in society, Black people are more likely to be harmed and murdered by police (McPhillips 2020). The general emotional distress caused by police in schools, when compounded with the greater distrust of police for its history of systemically

ingrained racism and acts of extreme violence, can severely harm Black students' mental health and emotional well-being.

One of the most destructive features of the school-to-prison pipeline is the violence and brutality committed against students by school police. Cases of school police/SROs exercising brutal physical force against students have arisen across the country. In 2015, an SRO in Kentucky punched, kicked, and lifted up a 13-year-old boy by the neck in a chokehold that rendered him unconscious (ACLU Staff); in 2019, police in a Chicago school tased and dragged a 16-year-old girl down a flight of stairs by her leg (Osborne 2019), and in 2021, a 16-year-old experienced memory loss from being body-slammed to the floor by an SRO (WESH Staff 2021). Whether a victim of school police abuse, a witness to it, or a student with an awareness of such cases, being in the presence of school police can be incredibly emotionally distressing. Knowing of SROs' power and their history of violently extending it while interacting with them daily in school can incite stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD- particularly for students who personally experienced police brutality. While research has been unable to prove school police increase overall safety, what is clear is that school policing can, and has, caused tremendous physical, mental, and emotional harm to students.

Both zero-tolerance policies and school policing are critical to the functioning of the school-to-prison pipeline, serving as methods of interrupting students' education through their criminalization. These policies and policing practices erode school environments to render them unstable and unsafe for students. Delegated the role of criminalizing students, schools become concentrated, small-scale operations of the criminal justice system wherein there is law

enforcement (school police enforcing laws), a court system (school administration determining guilt and assigning punishment), and a correctional system (school enforcing and executing punishments) all within the four school walls. By creating a noxious school environment, such that is antithetical to healthy student and community development, the school-to-prison pipeline is capable of facilitating the decline of emotional and mental well-being in students and the emergence of mental health disorders.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline's Exploitation of Student Mental Health Disorders

Mental health disorders- such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD- can impact a person's emotions, thought processes, and behaviors and, if severe enough, may even incite an entire alteration of one's personality (Healthgrades Editorial Staff 2021). Some behaviors that commonly arise due to mental health disorders are behaviors that are disapproved of in a school setting and are thus prohibited. In schools where the school-to-prison pipeline is active, zero-tolerance policies can be sanctioned for these behaviors, requiring students who violate the rules to be punished accordingly without accounting for the cause of the behavior. Students struggling with their mental and emotional health can face harsh punishments, such as suspension or expulsion, for actions caused by their illness. Those punishments that often remove students from school can force students to come into contact with law enforcement and into the juvenile or criminal justice system. In this way, the zero-tolerance policies utilized in the school-to-prison pipeline can target behaviors consequential of mental health disorders and exploit them as means to facilitate itself.

Mental health disorders are linked to the balance of brain chemistry. Serotonin and dopamine levels in the brain, for example, are two neurotransmitters that can experience changes in quantity when experiencing mental illnesses. Because these neurotransmitters influence emotions, thoughts, and behavior, changes in their levels when experiencing a mental health disorder can incite changes in behavior (National Institutes of Health 2007). Children experiencing mental illness can incur various behavioral symptoms, such as difficulty concentrating, changes in eating habits, and decreased academic performance (Mayo Clinic Staff 2020). For children experiencing mental illness, these behavioral symptoms and changes would accompany them at school.

For students struggling with their mental health and experiencing behavioral symptoms, attending a school that employs zero-tolerance policies can pose a significant threat as these policies disproportionately target them. Out-of-control behavior, emotional outbursts, avoiding or missing school, talking about death or suicide, extreme moo.d swings, abuse of alcohol or drugs, and excessive anger, hostility, or violence are all symptoms of mental illness (Mayo Clinic Staff 2020) (National Institutes of Health 2007). Tardiness, truancy, disruptive behavior, defiant behavior, fighting, threatening violence, harassment, violence, vandalism, obscene language, and drug usage are all common examples of offenses schools subject to zero-tolerance policies (School Discipline Support Initiative). Consequently, avoiding or missing school can be identified as tardiness or truancy; out-of-control behavior, emotional outbursts, and extreme mood swings can be identified as disruptive behavior; talking about death or suicide can be identified as threatening violence or obscene language; excessive anger, hostility, or violent behavior itself is prohibited for fighting, violence, and harassment; and use of drugs or alcohol

itself is prohibited. Furthermore, extreme mood swings, out-of-control behavior, emotional outbursts, and excessive anger or violent behavior can lead a person to commit vandalism, use obscene language, fight others, or perform defiant behavior. Therefore, in these ways, zero-tolerance policies disparately impact students with mental health disorders as the behaviors caused by their disorder are often prohibited and thereby disciplined in the zero-tolerance policies.

Although students with mental illnesses are protected under law from discrimination, it is rarely the case that those protections are sufficiently administered. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 all forbid the discrimination of people with physical and mental conditions that inhibit major life activities and require that they receive reasonable accommodations (Mental Health America). In most cases, mental health disorders like anxiety and depression are protected under these policies so long as their condition impacts major life activities. Therefore, students with acute mental illnesses should be protected from the severe punishments of zero-tolerance policies because the policies are discriminatory in their disparate impact and targeting. However, researchers found that courts continually rule in favor of the school in cases bringing the issue to attention (Mental Health America). Parents and students may also not be knowledgeable about the extent to which their legal rights cover in the case of mental health disorders and school policy, meaning they are not able to invoke their legal protections from the severe punishments of zero-tolerance policies.

Additionally, for students to access their legal protections against discrimination for acute mental illnesses, they must be diagnosed. However, low-income people are less likely to have access to healthcare professionals who can offer a diagnosis for mental health disorders (Hodgkinson 2017), resulting in a decreased likelihood of being legally protected from the discriminatory nature of zero-tolerance policies. In considering further that the school-to-prison pipeline and its zero-tolerance policies primarily operate in low-income communities (UniqueWritersBay 2020), it becomes clear that the population of students most victimized by the school-to-prison pipeline is the same population that would be most unable to access any legal rights that protect them from the pipeline's harm.

Students who struggle with their mental health are disproportionately disciplined and victimized by zero-tolerance policies because the behaviors that are symptomatic of mental illnesses are often the behaviors subjected to zero-tolerance policies. School administrations seldom account for the role mental illness may have played in the student's performance of the behavioral infraction, regardless of the fact that such negligence on the part of the school is a form of discrimination. Zero-tolerance policies are integral to the school-to-prison pipeline because they are the first step in the funneling of students into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. As such, because the school-to-prison pipeline intends to remove students from school, and mental illnesses trigger symptomatic behaviors that are often utilized as grounds to remove students from school, the school-to-prison pipeline exploits student mental illnesses to facilitate its operation and achieve its end.

Conclusion: The Cyclical Nature of the Emergence of Student Mental Health Disorders and the Facilitation of the School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline can be simplified to be understood as having one end and two means of executing the end: by removing students from school and forcing their contact with law enforcement, they are funneled into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Zero-tolerance policies and school police are the primary mechanisms of the pipeline as zero-tolerance policies remove students from school and school police force students to come into contact with law enforcement.

The school environments produced by the presence of zero-tolerance policies and in-school policing practices are often unstable, harmful, and disempowering to students. The daily interaction with such a harmful environment can have detrimental effects on students' well-being, potentially destabilizing their mental and emotional health and, in severe cases, incite the development of mental health disorders. Some of the behaviors symptomatic and consequential of these mental health disorders are criminalized in schools' zero-tolerance policies and students are often never afforded protections from these policies' discriminatory impact.

Therefore, the school-to-prison pipeline is fueled by the very mental health disorders it can enable in students. The operation of the school-to-prison pipeline and the existence of student mental illnesses thus becomes of a cyclical nature wherein the two mechanisms facilitate one another: the school-to-prison pipeline facilitates the emergence of student mental health

disorders, and student mental health disorders facilitate the operation of the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline creates the conditions for the emergence of student mental health disorders and then exploits them in arriving at its end.

In order to create a public schooling system that is not only equitable but simply non-harmful to students, it is imperative to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. One method in accomplishing this goal is to disable the pipeline's ability to incite and exploit mental health disorders in students. While discarding zero-tolerance policies and police forces in schools in their entirety is the only truly effective measure for ending the school-to-prison pipeline, ensuring students receive adequate mental health care and protection from discrimination decreases the opportunity for students to be victimized by the pipeline. Positive behavioral interventions such as social emotional learning tools have been found to not only diminish emotional distress in students but also significantly decrease school referrals for student misconduct (Mahoney, Durlak, and Weissberg 2018), thus positioning itself as a potential salient method of increasing students' wellbeing, preventing their criminalization, and interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. At the intersection of mental health and education lies an extraordinary opportunity to empower marginalized communities by terminating one of the most egregious systems of oppression found in the American educational system.

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