



EFFECTIVE TO GREAT EDUCATION

‘The Great *un*Equalizer’: School Discipline Thwarts Social Mobility and Threatens Civil Rights for Low-Income Students of Color

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Abstract: Education in America is glorified as the ultimate equalizer, but is falling devastatingly short of this ideal. Rather than helping students exercise social mobility, the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration have molded schools into institutions of confinement that thwart such vertical movement. Racial and socioeconomic disparities lie at the heart of the problem: low-income students of color are less likely to experience schools as institutions of social mobility and are more likely to experience them as systems of confinement. Moreover, the school-to-prison pipeline increases the likelihood that vulnerable American youth—particularly low-income students of color—will forfeit certain civil rights and a sense of personal security once they reach adulthood.

Introduction

The American public school system is idealized as the ultimate beacon of social mobility. In this work of research, social mobility refers to the upward movement of people over socioeconomic strata and the acquisition of social privileges. At its best, education stimulates social mobility like a well-oiled machine: primary education ingrains basic skills for a meaningful life, a high school diploma opens up a wealth of job opportunities, and higher education increases earning potential. Earning a degree at any level also grants social privileges: better health outcomes, higher career satisfaction, and access to alumni networks are just three examples (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2023; Neumann University, 2019). To tap into the social mobility that the idealized American educational system can provide, however, students have to make it through school without falling into the traps of the criminal justice system.

Graduating high school without a criminal record is generally a foregone

conclusion for socioeconomic and racially privileged Americans. For low-income students of color, however, the educational system has become a relentless gauntlet of criminalization, with the first pitfalls in preschool. A child's preschool education is considered one of the most critical factors in their intellectual development, yet Black boys are expelled from preschool at the highest rates, and the preschool expulsion rate nationwide is more than three times that of all of K-12 (Rashid, 2009, p. 349; Heitzeg, 2014, p. 24). The perils continue past preschool. As students move through primary and secondary school, more obstacles emerge, namely the presence of police officers in school and alternative school placement programs. Police officers arrest children when responding to violations of school rules that could be quelled by school personnel. A six-year old throwing a tantrum, a twelve-year old writing "I love my friends," on their desk in permanent marker, and a chronically tardy teenager are all examples of misbehavior that escalated into the arrests of children (Simmons, 2017, p. 64; Chen, 2010; Kim et al., 2010, p. 79). Alternative school placement programs forcibly remove children who have violated school rules from the classroom and into academic facilities without the adequate supervision or resources for a satisfactory education (Morris, 2016, p. 148). Both the presence of police officers and alternative placement programs hamper social mobility by diminishing graduation rates and increasing incarceration rates.

By hindering social mobility for vulnerable American youth, school disciplinary practices are negatively affecting adult outcomes. Schools are contributing to the forfeiture of certain civil rights and a sense of personal security in the long-term for low-income children of color. This paper will expose the toxic combination of the criminalization of student misbehavior and laws that limit social mobility for criminalized adults. By examining disenfranchisement laws that strip millions of convicted felons of the right to vote—among other civil rights—and analyzing public housing guidelines that prevent convicted felons from accessing affordable housing, the potential lifelong effects of disproportionate judicial enforcement at school will become clear. In demonstrating how, for many, the school-to-prison pipeline leads to a life without the right to vote or a safe place to live, this paper will reveal the American

educational system to be robbing many of its students of social mobility in the most innate sense.

The History of Social Mobility at School & The War on Crime

American schools did not become institutions of confinement all at once. Rather, the War on Crime provided a steady, relentless socio-political impetus for the transformation of schools from places of social mobility to places of confinement. Interrogating the parallel histories of nationwide school discipline and the War on Crime will demonstrate how low-income children of color became unable to exercise social mobility at school.

In the 1980s, the “Broken Windows” policing theory was adopted across the United States in response to rising crime rates. The theory rests on the idea that if the vandal of a broken window goes unpunished, more damage will be brought upon the building (Singer & Thompson, 2018, p. 125). Applied to the policing of communities, police forces across the country leaned into the idea that all infractions ought to be met with swift and decisive consequences to prevent further crime. Broken Windows policing contributed to mass incarceration and in turn, diminished social mobility for those swept up in the criminal justice system.

Not coincidentally, the 1980s marked the beginning of an incarceration boom in the United States. The American prison population increased by just more than 140,000 between 1940 and 1980, but between 1980 and 2010, the prison population skyrocketed by 1,200,000 (The Sentencing Project, 2023).

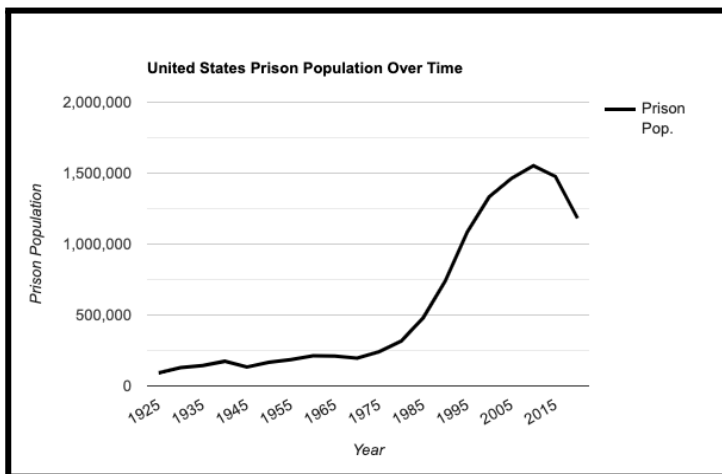


Figure 1: United States Prison Population Over Time
Source: *The Sentencing Project, 2020*

Much of the meteoric rise in arrests and convictions could be attributed to harsh anti-drug laws as part of the War on Crime. Particularly during the Reagan administration, drug laws were enforced disproportionately against people of color, and such policing made it so illicit drug use became culturally synonymous with that same population (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 14). Simultaneously, the news media contributed to this false and exaggerated narrative. The media sensationalized crime, overreporting violent crimes committed by young people of color with white victims. Furthermore, the racist notion that many young Black men were violent “superpredators” emerged in this era and perpetuated discriminate policing (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 12).

Critically, scholars have found a connection between the rise of the “superpredator” narrative in the national media, which paints young Black men as especially violent and without remorse, and the development of the school-to-prison pipeline, which contributes to disproportionate incarceration rates for young Black men (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 12). The policies of the Reagan administration thwarted social mobility for those who became ensnared in the criminal justice system at unprecedented rates. These harsh anti-crime sentiments and policies would find their way into schools in the following decades, impeding social mobility for low-income children of color.

The Clinton presidency marked a significant shift in the War on Crime where policies became especially focused on schools. The Safe Schools Act of 1994 and the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act Amendment of 1998 linked schools to law enforcement more directly than ever before (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 21). Both pieces of legislation funded a strong police presence in schools. The Consequences for Juvenile Offenders Act of 2002 (proposed in 1996) laid the groundwork for zero tolerance policies in schools, which meant that any infraction of a school rule would be met with a predetermined consequence, with no room for context or mitigating circumstances to lessen the blow (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 18). The Gun Free Schools Act of 1993 specifically imposed zero tolerance policies for gun-related offenses, but these zero-tolerance policies trickled down to minor offenses too, such as tardiness (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 21). With the rise of the zero-tolerance policies, especially for non-violent offenses, these vulnerable students became less likely to graduate high school and more likely to become incarcerated. In other words, when schools became centered in the War on Crime, it impeded low-income children of color from exercising social mobility at school.

Reimagining the Conceptual Imagery of the School-to-Prison Pipeline

It has been well documented how harsh school disciplinary procedures are funneling children—predominantly lower-income children of color—into prisons. What has not yet been well documented, however, is how the pipeline impacts lifelong social mobility. This paper seeks to uncover how exposure to the criminal justice system at an age where one cannot yet drive a car or buy a lottery ticket shapes one's outlook in adulthood. To make these long-term connections, the conceptual imagery of the school-to-prison pipeline needs to be reimagined. First, the school-to-prison pipeline ought to be referred to as something other than a pipeline: a pipeline flows in only one direction, which negates the “push-pull” factors of juvenile justice (Simmons, 2017, p. 29). A more accurate conceptualization of the problem would account for the nuanced and nonlinear

reality of a child becoming incarcerated as a result of shortcomings by the educational system.

Furthermore, the conceptual imagery of the school-to-prison pipeline falls short in that confinement is not exclusive to prison (Morris, 2016, p. 12). Children are being criminalized and confined through other means as well. Thrusting children into the criminal justice system, which has been proven to diminish their potential for lifelong social mobility, is a form of confinement in itself. In the discussion of how school discipline hinders social mobility which threatens civil rights and personal security, the conceptualization of the school-to-prison pipeline needs reworking to include these negative outcomes.

Considering the push-pull dynamic of juvenile justice, that racial and socioeconomic biases take root in preschool, and that confinement comes in many forms, a more apt but grim conceptualization of the school-to-prison pipeline would be the preschool-to-civil death passage. That being said, this paper will continue to refer to the school-to-prison pipeline as such for clarity and cultural continuity. However, in making the argument that schools are hindering social mobility and contributing to the loss of civil rights and personal security, it is critical to note that the current jargon is conceptually insufficient.

Social Mobility for Preschoolers

Preschool should be a time of joy and immense physical, emotional, and cognitive development: growth spurts, new pals, and the ABC's. For too many though—especially low-income children of color—preschool is the first phase of a vicious cycle of marginalization and criminalization that will carry over into adult life. As the entrance point of the educational system, preschool has the unique potential to drastically help or harm a child's outlook, and to predetermine how much social mobility that child will experience in adulthood.

Here, it is critical to remember that social mobility refers to the upward movement of people over socioeconomic strata and the acquisition of social privileges.

Without the necessary foundation of an adequate preschool education, graduating from high school or higher education is at best delayed, and at worst, impossible.

A strong correlation between quality of preschool education and future intellectual development has been demonstrated (Rashid, 2009, p. 349-350). For example, researchers have found that early elementary literacy rates are a strong predictor of high school literacy rates (Rashid, 2009, p. 353). A preschooler who struggles to learn the fundamentals of literacy and is without extra support may find themselves more likely to fall behind in every grade level to come. Such a scenario would make it harder for that student to earn a degree of any kind and in turn, to exercise social mobility.

Although disparities in the quality of preschool education are problematic, disparities in access to preschool education itself preclude that issue. Benefitting from any preschool curriculum requires consistent attendance and time with instructors. Excessive suspensions and expulsions have created a barrier to preschool access. The preschool suspension rate in the United States is greater than three times that of all K-12 grade levels (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 24). Preschoolers—who arguably get the most significant and long-term benefits from their classroom instruction—are the most likely to be removed from the classroom.

Preschool suspension rates become more troubling when considering the racial disparity in enforcement. Black children make up 19% of the preschool population yet 47% of suspensions from preschool (Morris, 2016, p. 57). Implicit biases against Black preschoolers make it so teachers are more likely to perceive them as acting out or in need of a disciplinary consequence than their white counterparts (Morris, 2016, p. 50). Implicit biases also plague low-income students: teachers, even if subconsciously, expect less success from them (Rashid, 2009, p. 351). These biases compound when faced with statistics like that 40% of Black children live in poverty (Morris, 2016, p. 21). Another contributing factor to the racial and socioeconomic disparities is a lack of access to behavioral disorder diagnoses for children of color. The label of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is disproportionately assigned to white boys even

though, generally, all impacted children exhibit the same behaviors (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 24). In general, Black boys are being suspended and white boys are being diagnosed for the same behavior.

The racial and socioeconomic disparities in preschool discipline are mirrored in more advanced grade levels, and all impede social mobility down the road for impacted students. That low-income Black children are less likely to receive an adequate preschool education makes it less likely for them to succeed later on. Opposite from the joy an elementary education ought to provide, disparities in preschool discipline are hindering lifelong social mobility for low-income students of color.

Police in Schools and Social Mobility

The presence of law enforcement in schools is perhaps the single greatest perpetuating force of the school-to-prison pipeline and in turn, the greatest impediment to social mobility for low-income students of color. Police stationed at school, also known as school resource officers (SROs), limit social mobility by arresting children for misbehavior that could be dealt with by school personnel. When a student is arrested for any offense, their odds of dropping out of school double. If that student appears in court for that offense, their dropout odds double again (Kim et al., 2010, p. 113). Arrests at school are driven by SROs, not egregious student misconduct. There is a well-researched connection between an increase in SROs and an increase in how many students become processed in the juvenile justice system (Morris, 2016 p. 75). Students who violate school rules should face consequences, to be clear. Considering the connection between SROs and juvenile detention rates, though, it is clear that SROs—not student misbehavior itself—is making it more likely for impacted students to appear in court and less likely to appear in a cap and gown.

Juvenile incarceration detention rates skyrocketed in accordance with the rise of SROs and mass incarceration, but there were significant racial disparities in these developments (Rovner, 2023). Between 1985 and 1995, juvenile detention rates ballooned by 180% for Black children and 140% for Latino youth. During that same

period, juvenile detention rates decreased by 13% for white children (Kim et al., 2010, p. 133). More children were being locked up during this time, but it was disproportionately children of color. One reason for this racial disparity is the “adultification” of Black children (Morris, 2016, p. 34). Adults at school, including SROs, are more likely to perceive Black children as intentional and malicious in their misbehavior in the same way an adult wrongdoer would be. This mindset leads to Black children being treated without the empathy, compassion, or benefit of the doubt extended to students whom adults perceive as prone to making mistakes.

SROs impede social mobility in schools—especially for low-income children of color—because they make graduation less likely through arrests. As previously noted, earning a degree at any level is the primary way education bestows social mobility. By undermining the ability of impacted students to graduate, police in schools are thwarting social mobility.

Social Mobility in Alternative Placement Programs

Alternative placement programs are educational facilities separate from traditional school for students with identified behavior problems. School systems around the country insist that alternative placement programs are rehabilitative in nature—that they give students extra support and ultimately provide a pathway back into traditional school. However, in reality, alternative placement programs exist chiefly as a disciplinary measure: students with demonstrated behavior problems are sent to these facilities to receive their education separate from the rest of the general population. Herein lies the great irony of alternative placement. It systematically removes students from the classroom and makes it more difficult for them to find success at school. These programs make it less likely that enrolled students will graduate and as such, hinder the social mobility they can exercise through school.

Overwhelmingly, alternative placement programs are not rehabilitative because they lack the resources to provide an adequate education. Many of the instructors at such programs are not effectively trained to teach students in need of extra support, or have

no teacher training whatsoever (Morris, 2016, p. 150). Such programs claim to separate students in everybody's best interest, but the model breeds “counterproductive exclusion,” significantly and sometimes irreparably harming a student’s chances of finding social mobility through school (Morris, 2016, p. 148).

Once a student is sent to an alternative program, their odds of graduating high school plummet. Per the Department of Education, 43% of students sent to an alternative school or juvenile detention facility did not return to the traditional school setting, and as a result, failed to graduate (Morris, 2016, p. 165). With that dismal success rate, alternative placement programs get an ‘F’ for supporting and rehabilitating students. The alarmingly low success rate is due to multiple barriers to reentry. First, in many states, academic credits earned at alternative schools do not carry over, forcing students to potentially retake years of classes should they make it back into the traditional classroom (Kim et al., 2010, p. 110). Second, resocialization represents a significant barrier: being uprooted from one’s social situation at an alternative school and thrown into an entirely new environment can be detrimental to success (Kim et al., 2010, p. 110). Finally, some schools create a barrier to reentry simply by not informing students they are allowed to return to traditional school, effectively leaving them to twist in the wind (Kim et al., 2010, p. 110).

On the surface, alternative placement programs justify their existence by enrolling students with behavioral problems; students who supposedly need extra support. However, racial and geographical disparities in the enrollment at these institutions shed light on their true impact. These programs are more likely to be found in disadvantaged districts; often urban school districts that are socioeconomically underprivileged and racially diverse (Kim et al., 2010, p. 99). By nature of this trend, children of color are more likely to be diverted to alternative programs. Compounding this geographical disparity is an explicitly racial one: Black students are disproportionately held responsible for misconduct that is subjective in nature, such as classroom disruption (Simmons, 2017, p. 34). Meanwhile, when white students are suspended, it is more often than not for an “objective event,” such as smoking marijuana

in the school bathroom (Simmons, 2017, p. 34). Taken together, it is clear that racial bias creates a lower threshold for the discipline of Black students, which makes it more likely for them to be sent to alternative placement programs. Alternative placement programs are making it harder for low-income students of color to graduate high school. Already, there is a 50% chance that a marginalized student of color will receive their high school diploma (Heitzeg, 2014, p. 26). Alternative placement programs are making it even harder—diverting mostly low-income students of color away from school and in turn, away from the social mobility it can provide.

Social Mobility in the Long-Term: Disenfranchisement Laws

Thus far, this paper has discussed how the school-to-prison pipeline impedes social mobility, mostly by highlighting how harsh and disproportionate discipline makes it harder for low-income students of color to graduate from high school or college. Notably though, there are other ways in which the school-to-prison pipeline robs vulnerable students of social mobility. Apart from earning a degree—which opens up job opportunities and increases earning potential—the school-to-prison pipeline undermines social mobility in a more fundamental sense: by taking away the right to vote. The right to vote is a quintessential American freedom. How can one even think about social mobility when they lack fundamental freedoms that supposedly level the playing field of society?

An estimated 4.6 million Americans are disenfranchised because of a felony conviction (Uggen et al., 2022). This number is down from 2016, when approximately 6.1 million were without the right to vote, but is dramatically higher than the 1976 total when only 1.2 million were disenfranchised because of a felony (Uggen et al., 2022). The current total demonstrates progress in recent years towards restoring peoples' voting rights, but reaffirms the alarming wave of incarceration and disenfranchisement that paralleled the War on Crime and the school-to-prison pipeline. 25 states currently restrict the voting rights of individuals only when actively imprisoned for a felony (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023). 16 states continue this ban until parole has

expired, and the following nine states continue the voting ban for life in many cases: Alabama, Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Iowa, Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia, Wyoming, (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023). These nine states have varying policies where some offenders can apply to reinstate their voting rights, although these processes can be convoluted, as well as onerous and costly to pursue (Restoration of Rights Project, 2021).

As a result of the school-to-prison pipeline, low-income children of color are disproportionately charged and convicted of felonies stemming from misbehavior at school. Disenfranchisement laws disproportionately take away the right to vote from that very same population: convicted felons. Taken together, it is clear that the school-to-prison pipeline has a direct hand in the racially and socioeconomically disparate disenfranchisement of millions of Americans. For example, if a student is convicted of a felony stemming from misbehavior at school—for example, selling a small bag of marijuana to a classmate—they may lose the right to vote for years, if not for life. The criminalization of misbehavior at school represents part of the problem, but the key link between the school-to-prison pipeline and disenfranchisement laws is recidivism.

Rather than an institution of rehabilitation, recidivism statistics show the American carceral system to be a harmful cycle of confinement. When a child becomes ensnared in the criminal justice system because of misbehavior at school, the direct consequences of that event are harmful, but the long-term effects can be even more disastrous. 71% of people who were released from prison in 2012 were rearrested within five years (Council on Criminal Justice, 2021). Examining recidivism rates by crime type, one finds the highest rates of recidivism for public order and drug crimes, which are among the most pertinent offenses at school (Council on Criminal Justice, 2021). Breaking down recidivism by age, it shows people released from prison at 24 years old or younger were 64% more likely to reoffend within five years than recently released older adults (Council on Criminal Justice, 2021). No matter how you slice it, recidivism rates demonstrate the harm of incarcerating young people via the school-to-prison pipeline: rather than helping young offenders chart a better path forward, incarceration

leads to more prison time. In other words, young people may not lose their voting rights from a specific incident at school, but that event will throw them into a cycle of incarceration—the American carceral system—that will make it much more likely for them to lose those rights as they age.

The graph below demonstrates the connection between the school-to-prison pipeline and disenfranchisement laws. Using data of the percentage of schools with police officers in each state (on the X-axis), as well as disenfranchisement data that shows the percentage of people without the vote in each state (on the Y-axis), the graph below shows a moderate positive correlation between the two. In other words, the higher the percentage of schools within each state that have a police presence, the higher the percentage of citizens within that state are without their voting rights, generally speaking. This graph suggests that the presence of police in schools—a cornerstone of the school-to-prison pipeline—is contributing to mass disenfranchisement. In turn, the school-to-prison pipeline impedes social mobility in the most fundamental sense, by taking away freedoms that preclude the upward movement of people over socioeconomic strata or the acquisition of social privileges. This paper selectively focused on disenfranchisement laws, but it is worth noting that other civil rights are lost for life in many states due to a felony conviction: namely, the right to hold public office, and the right to serve on a jury (Restoration of Rights Project, 2021). Even more treacherous than the loss of civil rights, however, the school-to-prison pipeline can impede impacted individuals from meeting their basic human needs.

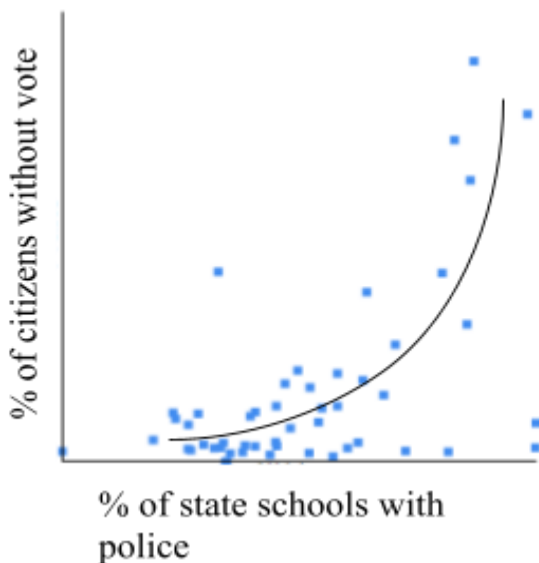


Figure 2: The Connection Between the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Mass Disenfranchisement
Sources: *Education Week*, 2023 & *The Sentencing Project*, 2022

Social Mobility in the Long-Term: Public Housing Agencies

Secure and affordable housing is a human right, according to the United Nations (United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner, 2023). Housing is necessary to exercising social mobility. Without it, one fails to meet their basic human needs. In the United States, however, millions of people struggle to find access to housing. At present, there is a shortage of 7.4 million affordable housing units based on the nationwide demand (Weiss, 2018, p. 21). On top of this shortage, millions of formerly incarcerated felons have to overcome barriers that exclude them from both private and public housing options. The school-to-prison pipeline—by contributing to youth felony convictions and ensnaring children in a cycle of incarceration—makes it harder for impacted individuals, particularly low-income people of color, to find secure and affordable housing. As such, overly harsh and discriminatory discipline limits social mobility by robbing vulnerable students of a basic human right.

Current housing policies make it so formerly incarcerated people face an uphill battle to find a secure and affordable option. For those seeking a privately-owned rental unit, landlords have broad discretion in whom they rent to, which often presents an insurmountable barrier to formerly incarcerated individuals (Weiss, 2018, p. 21). While various local and federal protections set limitations on a landlord's inquiries into one's criminal history, the discretionary nature of private housing makes denying service easily justifiable. In most cases, a private landlord can argue that a prospective tenant would pose a danger to others in the unit or the surrounding community (Weiss, 2018, p. 21).

While public housing may seem like a more accessible alternative to privately-owned housing, federal regulations paint a different picture. The Housing Opportunity Program Extension Act (HOPEA) of 1996 granted public housing agencies the ability to evict current tenants based on previously undisclosed criminal histories (Weiss, 2018, p. 21). Two years later, the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act gave public housing agencies the freedom to deny prospective tenants on account of their criminal records (Weiss, 2018, p. 21). Similar to private housing, those in charge of public housing agencies have broad discretion in judging if a tenant would pose a risk to public safety (Weiss, 2018, p. 22). As recently as April, 2023, the Biden administration announced new protections for prospective public housing tenants with criminal backgrounds, calling for agencies to consider mitigating circumstances and to refrain from denying an applicant solely because of their criminal background. While well-intentioned, enforcing these protections will prove difficult, as public housing agencies still maintain wide, mostly unchecked discretion (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2023).

Students are convicted of felonies for misbehavior as a result of the school-to-prison pipeline. Alarming recidivism rates in the United States also make it so criminal records snowball, becoming lengthier and more serious. Both phenomena point to how the school-to-prison pipeline is impeding social mobility by making it more difficult for impacted students to find access to secure and affordable housing.

One aspect of public housing policy that makes the school-to-prison pipeline so harmful is the lack of timeframe for how far back an agency can look into an applicant's criminal history. It is only noted that an agency should use a "reasonable time" as the basis for how far back they search. Depending on the agency and their discretion, an applicant with a criminal history may be denied access for any record at all. Even if a public housing agency does not find an offense from the applicant's youth, more offenses may have stemmed from that encounter with the criminal justice system. A harmful feedback loop exists where formerly incarcerated people without housing are more likely to reoffend, and more convictions makes it harder to find housing (Weiss, 2018, p. 21). By erecting barriers to secure and affordable housing, the school-to-prison pipeline is thwarting social mobility in a fundamental understanding of the term.

The racial disparities of the school-to-prison pipeline are reflected in housing access statistics. Black Americans represent 13% of the population, yet four out of every ten homeless Americans are Black (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020). That there are immense racial disparities in suspension rates, arrest rates, alternative program placements, and homelessness rates is not a coincidence: the school-to-prison pipeline has lifelong effects. For low-income children of color, harsh and disproportionate discipline is making it harder for them to find secure and affordable housing and in turn, social mobility.

Paths Forward

To transform schools from institutions of confinement into institutions of social mobility, significant changes need to be made both within and outside the American educational system. As this paper has demonstrated, what happens in the socio-political sphere impacts what happens in schools. Any solution to the school-to-prison pipeline must acknowledge this phenomenon and work accordingly. Below are six guiding principles to address the problems outlined in this paper. These principles would be most effective if acted on in conjunction with one another; however, each one could affect positive change in isolation.

1) Center wellness.

Overly harsh and discriminatory school discipline is a reactive response to an issue that requires proactive solutions. Schools should center wellness by promoting mental health initiatives. To prioritize wellness, schools should incorporate culturally response and trauma-informed mental health education into their curricula.

2) Adopt antiracist practices.

Racial disparities underlie all the issues raised by the school-to-prison pipeline. Schools should have mandatory anti-racist and implicit bias training for all faculty and staff at regular intervals. Such trainings should aim to acknowledge, identify, and correct instances of racial bias and discrimination that arise from disciplinary matters. In addition, curricula should feature a diverse array of perspectives to reflect the experiences of all students.

3) Reevaluate the role of police.

Police in schools arrest students for misbehavior that school personnel could effectively handle. At the same time, police officers are a vital component of security at some schools. The Department of Education should form a committee to evaluate the necessity of police officers at every school, and where applicable, police officers should be replaced by trained, unarmed school personnel without the power to arrest students.

4) Support or stop alternative placement programs.

Alternative placement programs are meant to provide extra support, but in practice, they exclude predominantly low-income students of color from the classroom, making it harder for them to graduate. Schools should either provide the appropriate funding to

these programs to ensure they are institutions of extra support, or close them entirely. The harmful in-between must be avoided.

5) End disenfranchisement laws.

Disenfranchisement laws rob people of social mobility in the most fundamental sense. Lobbyists, political action committees, and individual donors should appeal to lawmakers seeking to end oppressive laws in the nine states that take away voting rights from convicted felons even after the completion of their sentence.

6) Build public housing and mobilize the private sector.

There is a harmful, generational cycle of inaccessible and inadequate housing that leads to incarceration. Lobbyists, political action committees, and individual donors should support public housing initiatives. In addition, to partially alleviate the housing crisis, those same players should push for laws that provide tax breaks to private landlords who rent to formerly incarcerated individuals.

Conclusion

Heralded as the ‘Great Equalizer,’ education in America is idealized as the ultimate beacon of social mobility. In theory, school is supposed to equip students with tools to traverse socioeconomic strata and garner social privileges. Before students earn a high school diploma or college degree, however, they must avoid the school-to-prison pipeline. Some students, on account of their socioeconomic or racial privilege, are far removed from the perils of the pipeline. Many will never come into contact with police at school, and will never fear the repercussions. But for too many, the criminalization of misbehavior is a constant threat at school.

Police in school and alternative placement programs both represent impediments to social mobility in the immediate term. Both phenomena make it harder for students to

graduate high school and in turn, to exercise social mobility. These practices—cornerstones of the school-to-prison pipeline—must be reevaluated in order to restore social mobility to low-income students of color.

Disenfranchisement laws and public housing agencies are two examples of how the school-to-prison pipeline thwarts social mobility in the long-term. Any introduction to the criminal justice system at a young age can make it more difficult for individuals to maintain their civil rights into adulthood, as well as safe and secure housing. Broader socio-political changes are needed to address these cycles of harm, notably legislation that ends disenfranchisement for formerly incarcerated individuals, increased public housing, and a stimulated private housing market.

Too often, the school-to-prison pipeline is viewed as a problem exclusive to the educational system. Simply by tracing the impacts of the pipeline, and by identifying cycles of harm, it is clear that the criminal justice system, the War on Crime, the War on Drugs, policing, media bias, “superpredators,” voting rights policies, public housing agencies, and the private housing market all have a hand in the current landscape of harsh and disproportionate school discipline. In addition to reforming the education system, there are a wealth of other areas to push for change. In all areas, one throughline is clear: proactive solutions should supplant reactive responses.

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