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### Discipline or Destiny: A School-to-Prison Pipeline Story

Trayonna Hendricks

*Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism*

Kourtney Webb

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Schools are making children better suited for prison in their adult life

*By Kourtney Webb*

The school-to-prison pipeline is a phenomenon by which students, mainly students of color, are pushed out of schools and into juvenile detention centers and through the criminal justice system. Civil rights advocates say the process criminalizes children, making them vulnerable to harsh punishments that lead to contact with law enforcement for inordinate disciplinary contacts with the law.

Education and Mass incarceration researchers have long argued that “zero-tolerance discipline policies” in schools are a huge factor in funneling young children into the criminal justice system.

Akeem Barnes, an English Language Arts teacher at Riverdale Avenue Middle School in New York City and school-to-prison pipeline researcher says these policies started as a way to prevent gun violence in schools, but quickly became a way to target Black and brown students.

“School shootings were taking place in predominately suburban white neighborhoods and schools, but the policies have been affecting students of color in urban neighborhoods,” says Barnes. “The idea of these zero-tolerance policies was to hold students accountable for their actions to prevent violence in schools. Those rules led to more suspensions and more expulsions of students of color for even small things.”

Michael D. Eberhardt, a criminal lawyer in Suffolk, Va., says that school discipline has grown harsher with each generation. He attributes today's strict discipline to the so-called War on Drugs "targeting Black people." The drug epidemic of the 1970s disproportionately hit Black communities. That time put fear in a lot of white people and made Black people look like criminals.

As Black communities beginning to rise in socioeconomic status, says Eberhardt. "The result Eberhardt is stricter rules and regulations in schools that "are enforced by stereotyping and racism," he says.

Barnes, who also works with the Brooklyn College Urban Community Teacher Project, says that these zero-tolerance policies do not help deter bad behavior. In some cases, it makes the student more likely to act out.

“I had a student who was suspended and when he came back, he just seemed lifeless. He had no interest in what was going on in my class,” says Barnes. “You isolated this kid from his friends, he went without instruction and he missed the second marking period. He wasn’t able to catch up, so he failed that marking period.”

Studies seem to show that Black and brown students are targeted for discipline in a way that students of other races are not for the same infractions. A report by the Government

Accountability Office found that Black students in K-12 schools are far more likely to be disciplined through suspension, expulsion or law enforcement referral than any other race. Black boys are three times more likely to be suspended for the same disciplinary reasons as white boys of the same age. Black girls are six times more likely than a white girl of the same age to be suspended.

This rate of disproportionate discipline was found no matter the type of school (public, charter, Alternative, special education, magnet school) and no matter the rate of poverty at the school. The study also showed that people generally view Black boys as older and more violent starting at the age of 10.

Police officers posted in schools - known as resource officers, or SRO's - are supposed to increase safety in schools, but are having a counterproductive effect, increasing the likelihood of arrests. Haroon Kharem, who teaches education at Brooklyn college in New York City says that the viral video of a young black girl who was flipped over in her chair by a school resource officer was nothing new. Kahrem says that Black kids don't have the luxury of "presumed innocence." The video of Tamir Rice's death was evidence enough for him. "That cop just came to the park where Tamir was playing and within two seconds shot him. He didn't think "oh maybe this is a toy, or nothing - just shot him. And that leads to be that he did it on purpose."

Nationally, a public student is suspended every second and a half. This equates to 3.3 million children being suspended each year. One study found that 95 percent of out-of-school suspensions were for nonviolent, minor disruptions such as tardiness or disrespect, according to the American Bar Association.

Some students can internalize this bias and end up seeing themselves as "bad" or "criminal" after being suspended or expelled from school, Barnes says. Coming into contact with law enforcement early on builds mistrust and resentment of authority figures as adults. "Kids that have contact with officers in school are more suitable for [prison] as adults," he says.

Barnes says that when it comes to disciplining students, school administrations need to check their biases at the door.

"Teachers need to understand the culture and where their students come from," he said. "Some of my [students] live in shelters, so it's understandable that they come into my class and put their head on the desk and are not engaging in class. That doesn't mean they are disrespecting you. Some students act out because they don't know how to articulate the fact that they want attention. You don't know what they are going through. It's up to us as educators to understand that and to check ourselves."

## **Descriptions**

**Haroon Kharem** is an associate professor of education at Brooklyn College in New York City. He has long worked in childhood education and studied the effects that the school-to-prison pipeline has on communities.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-519935498/akeem-barnes-school-to-prison-pipeline>

**Akeem Barnes** is an English Language Arts teacher at Riverdale Avenue Middle School in New York City and a school-to-prison pipeline researcher. Barnes says that when it comes to restorative justice, school administrators, parents and teachers need to be involved.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-519935498/haroon-kharem-school-to-prison-pipeline>