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Mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline: the intergenerational transmission of criminalization

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ABSTRACT

Although the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration arose in the United States at the same time, scholars have addressed them separately. In this article, we show that both systems rose due to an over-reliance on policing in society and are justified through shared racist characterizations of Black and Brown people. They apply the same logics of discipline and control and set Black and Brown individuals on a path to prison. We address how the systems reinforce each other. As Black and Brown students are policed in school, they are similarly more likely to face incarceration. Meanwhile, as Black and Brown parents are incarcerated at high rates, their children suffer the consequences and are susceptible to school pushout through exclusionary punishment, and even subsequent incarceration. The twin systems of mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline create an intergenerational transmission of criminalization. We argue that dismantling these systems must be integrated processes.

Over the past 20 years, an increasing number of scholars have documented and analysed how the system of mass incarceration was established as a new regime of racial control in the United States. These scholars have typically focused on policing and criminal legal practices as they take place in community settings (e.g. Alexander, 2010; Hinton, 2016; Muhammad, 2019). During a similar period, another set of scholars (e.g. Bahena et al., 2012; Mallett, 2016) began to identify the rise of the school-to-prison pipeline – examining how zero tolerance discipline policies and policing practices in American schools create a structure that criminalizes students, particularly Black and Brown students, queer students, and those with special needs, leading them to drop out of school and often end up in the criminal legal system Although some scholars identify the parallels between schools and prisons, as in the concept of the school-prison nexus (Simmons, 2017; Sojoyner, 2013), scholars typically have studied these systems of criminalization separately from each other. This article highlights the connections between the systems in a range of ways, including especially the role of parental incarceration.

In this article, we draw the connections between criminalization in schools and communities and show how these two systems work in tandem to create an intergenerational transmission of mass incarceration. While this paper is focused on the United States, mass incarceration and similar systems of racial control can be examined in other contexts (Ally et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2023). In this article, though, we focus on racialized policing and punishment systems across communities and schools. We argue that just as the system of mass incarceration was established to criminalize

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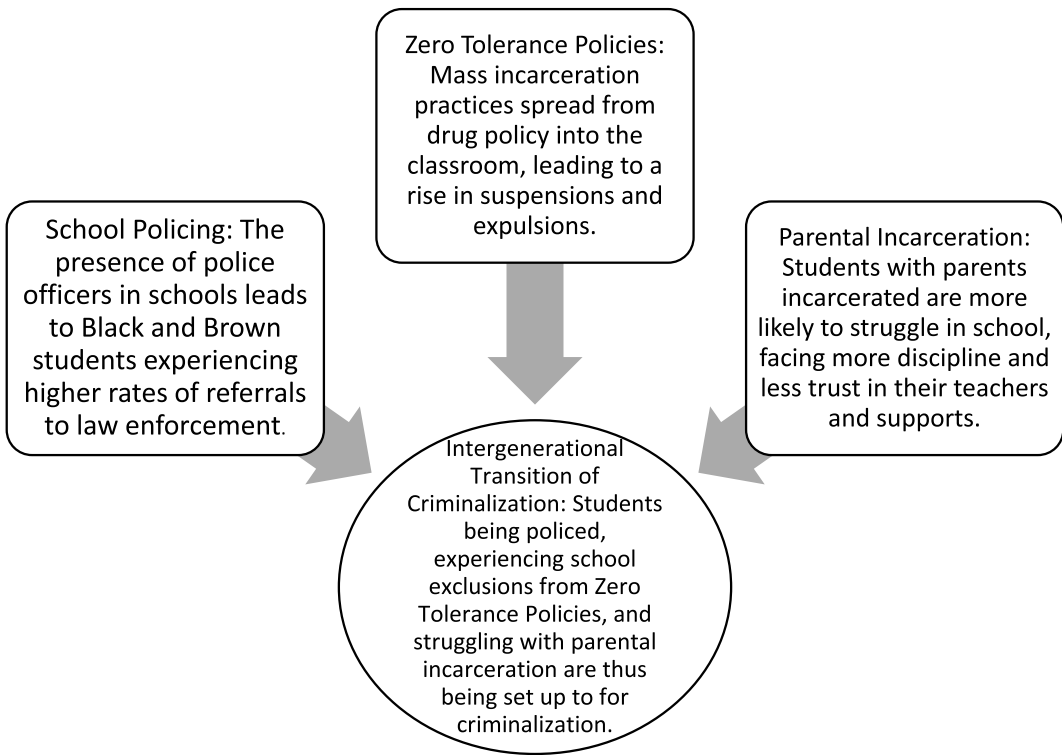
Figure 1. Processes that lead to intergenerational criminalization.

Black and Brown people in communities at large in the US, the school-to-prison pipeline was created to criminalize Black and Brown students in schools in those same communities. Many of the adults in justice impacted communities are also parents or primary caregivers of students in school. The criminalization of these parents contributed to the criminalization of their children, who then face incarceration themselves. We call this twin system the intergenerational transmission of mass incarceration and illustrate our argument in Figure 1.

History of mass incarceration

Mass incarceration is a term that refers to the sharp increase in the American imprisoned population towards the end of the 20th century (Alexander, 2010; Western, 2006). Some scholars argue that this rise in the rates of imprisonment came as a response to the movement for civil rights and the urban uprisings by communities of colour, especially Black communities, in the 1960s. Fuelling and fuelled by a politics of fear, the system of mass incarceration constituted a new system to control Black communities as the old Jim Crow system became dismantled (Alexander, 2010; Duxbury, 2021). White racial conservatism led to the 'criminalization of the urban world' and created a fear of the individuals who lived within it. There is no evidence that this kind of racialized fear was caused by any real increase in violent crime (Thompson, 2010).

The system of mass incarceration targeted communities of colour, and specifically Black men. At the end of 2022, the United States held 1.23 million people in jails and prisons. Black individuals make up 32% of those incarcerated, while making up only 14.4% of the total American population(Carson & Kluckow, 2023; Moslimani et al., 2024). The statistics are even more troubling for Black men who did not complete high school. If a Black man was born between 1975 and 1979 and did not have a high school diploma, he had a 69% chance

of being incarcerated before turning 35 (Western & Wildeman, 2009). In 1970, before the implementation of many mass incarceration policies, 1.6 of every 1,000 Americans was incarcerated. In 2012, past even the peak of mass incarceration, nearly 1 in every 100 American adults were incarcerated. While Black and Brown communities have always faced higher rates of imprisonment, much of the increase over that time comes from growth in incarceration of these populations (Travis et al., 2014).

During the height of mass incarceration, police began to institute zero tolerance policies that detained Black and Brown people who had often committed no crime at all, the most notable of which is stop and frisk. Black and Brown individuals were stopped substantially more often than white individuals, leading to disproportionate arrest rates, prompting many to believe that this policy was always intended to police minoritized communities (Goel et al., 2016).

Alongside the system of mass incarceration came the rise in police abuse and violence against Black and Brown individuals. From 2015 to 2020, Black and Latinx Americans made up 54% of unarmed people shot and killed by police officers (Schwartz, 2020). At the same time, Black and Hispanic individuals made up around 30% of the United States population (Frey, 2021). This disproportionate violence cost many Black and Brown people their lives, and drastically altered the lives of their loved ones.

Although the focus of scholarship on mass incarceration has been on the rise of policing and zero tolerance policies in communities (Alexander, 2010), one of the first instances of the increased presence of police in Black urban communities in the sixties happened in a school system. In the 1960s, Baltimore schools saw an increase in civil rights activism by Black students. As a result, the district brought in 21 police officers to be stationed within the schools (Thompson, 2010).

This early incidence of the increased use of police as a tool of racial control set the stage for decades of connection between the school system and policing. As Black and Brown people were arrested for minor criminal behaviour (or none at all) and removed from communities, Black and Brown students began to be suspended for minor or no behavioural issues and arrested or removed from schools. In both cases, many ended up in prison.

School-to-prison pipeline

Although a variety of factors, including inequitable funding, culturally irrelevant or colonialist curriculum and test-based accountability, drive students out of school and into the criminal legal systems, the term school-to-prison pipeline refers most specifically to zero tolerance discipline policies and policing practices that most directly exclude and criminalize students (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019). These policies and practices have been shown to be targeted towards Black and Brown students and those with special needs (Annamma, 2015; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). They create a culture and practice in schools that punish, control, and criminalize students (Warren, 2021). In this article, we focus on the dynamics of the school-to-prison pipeline in the United States, although we recognize that scholars have begun to identify the operations of a similar pipeline in other countries around the world, including Britain, South Africa, and Australia (Ally et al., 2021; Bei & Knowler, 2022; Graham et al., 2023).

In the school setting, the term zero tolerance describes the movement of schools towards strict punishment for any misbehaviour on the part of students, which is often very minor (Black, 2016). Typically, students are given no warning or correction before they are faced with substantial punishment, including out-of-school suspension and even expulsion. The implementation of zero tolerance policies is one of the key features of the school-to-prison pipeline. The following sections briefly outline the history of zero tolerance, how these policies have been implemented within schools, the impacts of zero tolerance policies, and the movement to challenge these policies and practices as a step towards dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.

History of zero tolerance and mass incarceration in schools

The rise of harsh and racist discipline policies in schools, much like the rise of mass incarceration, came in the wake of the gains of the civil rights movement, including the movement to desegregate schools. White communities and educators began to focus on 'order' as a code word for control of Black and Brown students now integrating schools (Kautz, 2023). During the 1990s, this repressive movement articulated a policy of 'zero tolerance' for any type of student misbehaviour, with its targets disproportionately Black and Brown students.

The term 'zero tolerance' actually points to the connection between mass incarceration in communities and the school-to-prison pipeline in education. The term 'zero tolerance' was first introduced in the 1980s during the 'War on Drugs' (Justice, 2018). In that context, it was intended to convey that there would be no leniency for criminal activity, and particularly activities surrounding the drug trade. As noted earlier, it created racial disparities that began the phenomenon of mass incarceration of Black and Brown people. However, the practice of zero tolerance, quickly spread beyond drugs to many sectors of society.

In the 1990s, the idea of 'zero tolerance' gained prevalence in schools. Teachers, faculty, and policymakers, alarmed by a perceived growth in school violence, at first turned to this model both to deter and punish students for possession of weapons on school property (Skiba, 2000). As was seen in the criminal legal context, however, the idea of zero tolerance spread quickly beyond its original intention, soon being applied to many student behaviours. Eventually zero tolerance policies were applied to a wide range of student misbehaviours, from fighting to even swearing (Skiba, 2000).

Zero tolerance policies

School systems, looking for greater 'discipline' in schools and complying with federal policy from the Gun Free Schools Act, created a strict set of zero-tolerance measures. State after state adopted policies requiring, allowing, or encouraging schools to suspend students for what was variously termed 'willful defiance' or 'disrupting school'(Warren, 2021). Zero tolerance policies punish students for both major and minor offences without regard to circumstance or individual judgement of the teachers and faculty (Skiba, 2014). These policies severely restrict students' access to education.

The rationale behind zero tolerance was to punish or remove the 'bad' students so the 'good' students could learn. Additionally, these policies were meant to deter and punish 'problem students' and 'unruly youth,' which turned out to be euphemisms for low-income Black and Brown students (Lyons & Drew, 2006). Zero tolerance was premised upon the racist stereotype that Black and Brown students, particularly boys, were dangerous, a view widely promoted by the media at the time and one with historical roots in white supremacist ideology (Muhammad, 2019).

There is no evidence that Black and Brown students are more prone to misbehave or be disruptive than other student (Huang, 2018; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). Rather, they are over-disciplined for the same kind of behaviour exhibited by their white counterparts (Skiba et al., 2002). The racial targeting of these young people responds to myth rather than fact and demonstrates that these policies are more about punishment and control than creating school safety(U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019).

Impacts of zero tolerance

Advocates for zero-tolerance policies argued that schools would be safer and crime in schools would fall as a result of the new policies. However, the evidence demonstrates that zero tolerance policies are not an effective way to reduce violence in schools (Justice, 2018; Skiba, 2000). While there is no evidence of positive impacts of zero tolerance, the harm it causes students is substantial.

Another impact of zero tolerance is the negative shift in school climate. With the increase in punishment, students feel less comfortable in their schools, and ultimately report a worse school

environment (Justice, 2018). In a qualitative study of schools with zero tolerance, Black students exhibited a marked lack of support. They did not report feeling safer, as the policies intended, but rather felt that zero tolerance made the schools unwelcoming (Bell, 2015) and that their 'schools feel like jails' (Nance, 2016). This is particularly damaging, as comfort and identification within the school is correlated with greater participation and academic performance (Voelkl, 1997). In other words, making students feel less connected to their environment undermines the stated goals of educational institutions.

While zero-tolerance discipline policies do not make schools safer, they have resulted in substantial and racially disproportionate increases in exclusionary discipline, that is, suspensions and expulsions. Studies have shown that schools with zero tolerance policies have a higher rate of suspensions, and especially higher rates for Black and Brown students (Curran, 2016). According to several studies, Black students have much higher likelihood of suspension compared to white students, in some cases they are up to three times more likely to be suspended (Curran, 2016; E. W. Morris & Perry, 2016). While in recent years the overall suspension rates have been falling, these racial disparities remain, with 1 in 8 Black students being suspended in the 2017–18 school year (McCombs et al., 2022). While Black and Brown boys make up the largest group of suspended students, the racial disparities are actually greater for girls of colour. Black girls, for example, are suspended at six times the rate of white girls. Black girls are often disciplined in race-gender specific ways (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; M. Morris, 2016). They are disciplined for being loud, sassy, and aggressive or dressing in 'inappropriate' ways. In one example, a Black girl was asked to take down her hair due to the pins in her hair setting off the metal detectors as she entered school (Evans-Winters & Equity, 2017).

The rise in suspension rates undermines the actual education process by keeping students from the classroom. School suspension is a leading risk factor for students underperforming in their classes (Peguero & Bracy, 2015). One study in Kentucky found that interaction with school discipline is responsible for a substantial portion of the so-called racial achievement gap (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2016). Additionally, students who have been suspended throughout their educational career are less likely to graduate than those who stay within the classroom (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019). The chances of a student failing to graduate from high school double with just one suspension in ninth grade (Balfanz et al., 2014). Students who fail to graduate are five times more likely to end up incarcerated than their peers with diplomas, with Black men particularly having a much higher chance at incarceration (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). In the end, zero tolerance policies, instead of preventing crime in schools, drive Black and Brown students into incarceration.

While there are clear damages against Black and Brown students, both boys and girls, there are other groups of students who are disproportionately harmed by these policies as well. LGBTQ2S+ students are particularly vulnerable to zero tolerance policies, particularly when they do not outwardly present with the gender assigned to them at birth (Carter et al., 2014) Queer students report harassment and policing of their gender expression or even just presence in the school. One student reported repeated harassment by security guards who subjected him to homophobic slurs (Bellinger et al., 2016) Black queer students face even higher rates of discipline, with nearly half reporting having been disciplined in school (Truong et al., 2020). Black girls who identify as queer, and thus who have multiple and layered minoritized identities, face over policing and being pushed out of schools at even higher rates (Nwabufo, 2022).

Students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined and suspended from school (Sullivan et al., 2014). Students with intersectional identities, such as Black students with disabilities, are at the highest risk for exclusionary discipline (Krezmien et al., 2006). In the 2017–2018 school year, almost one in five (19%) of Black students with disabilities received a suspension (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Clearly, zero tolerance policies have negatively impacted Black and Brown students, with some literature even labelling it a public health crisis (Aronowitz et al., 2021).

The movement against zero tolerance policies

In the mid-2000s a grassroots movement involving Black and Brown students and their families emerged to challenge zero tolerance discipline practices and school push-out, seeking as its goal to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline (Warren, 2021). Local groups gathered together in national coalitions like the Dignity in Schools Campaign and the Alliance for Educational Justice to challenge zero tolerance policies at every level. Advocacy groups, like the Advancement Project, and scholars also began to challenge the school-to-prison pipeline system. Within 10 years, this movement had a substantial impact on rhetorical support for zero tolerance and led to the end of suspensions for 'willful defiance' in many places. In December of 2013 the New York Times declared the end of zero tolerance as so many districts had changed their policies (Alvarez, 2013). In 2014 the federal government issued new guidelines warning districts away from zero tolerance (Duncan, 2014), although the Trump administration later withdrew the guidance. Since then, groups that previously supported the system, such as national teachers' unions, have issued statements against zero tolerance (Felton, 2016).

Suspension rates began to fall as zero tolerance lost its defenders and organizers won policy changes. For the past decade and a half, this decrease in suspension rates has been steady, from 7% in 2009–2010 to 5% in 2017–2018. The overall decrease is mirrored in the number of Black students suspended at well. During the 2009–2010 school year, almost 16% of Black students experienced suspension, while that number fell to just under 12% in the 2017–2018 school district. Despite the decrease in suspensions overall, they remain higher than the pre-zero tolerance period (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022) and racial disparities among those suspended persist (McCombs et al., 2022). At a rate of 5%, and higher in many districts and schools serving low-income students of colour, suspensions remain widespread. It appears that, even with some states formally abandoning the practice, zero tolerance practices remain at the school level in many districts (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). Without school level changes and training in restorative options, Black and Brown students are still being removed from classrooms and often sent into the juvenile and criminal legal systems (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Henry et al., 2022).

Policing children: school resource officers

At the same time as schools began to adopt zero-tolerance discipline policies in the 1990s, they also began to increase the presence of police. The presence of school resource officers (SROs) is now common across school districts in the United States. When support for SROs first began, they were justified as a way to protect students and keep schools safe. In reality, however, the dramatic increase in placement of SROs in schools came in the context of mass incarceration and zero tolerance policies. Much like the way police officers over police Black and Brown people in the community, SROs over police Black and Brown children in school (Lowe, 2020; Scott et al., 2017). SROs tend to be concentrated in schools serving low-income students of colour where they are used to police and control the students, rather than support them.

The rise of SROs

SROs were first introduced to schools in the United States in Flint, Michigan, in the 1950s. Some scholars argue that their numbers began to increase in the 1960s as a direct response to civil rights protests by Black students (French-Marcelin & Hinger, 2017). While they did grow in presence at that time, SROs were still very few in number until the 1990s. In the mid-1970s, only 1% of schools in the United States had any police presence. By 2003, that number had risen to 36% of schools. Today, 24% of American elementary students attend schools with a police presence as do 42% of American high school students (French-Marcelin & Hinger, 2017).

While there are diverse forms of school policing, in this article we use the terms school resource officers (SROs) and police in schools interchangeably. All are typically armed, sworn officers of the law with the power to arrest students (Ryan et al., 2018).The dramatic increase in SROs occurred alongside the rise of zero tolerance school discipline policies in schools and zero tolerance criminal legal policies in communities. SRO programmes gained early support from the federal government through policies encouraging schools to hire SROs by reducing the cost (Counts et al., 2018; Weiler & Cray, 2011).

The 1999 Columbine school shooting and other such tragic events became a further motivation or justification to the placement of SROs in schools. However, while school shootings typically occurred in predominantly white rural or suburban schools, SROs became disproportionately placed in schools serving low-income students of colour, where they were accompanied by the rise of metal detectors and zero tolerance discipline policies. For example, while on average 42% of high school students attend a school with SROs, 51% of high schools with majority Black and Brown students had an SRO (French-Marcelin & Hinger, 2017).

Impacts of SROs

While educators justified widespread SRO placement with concerns for school safety, there is no credible evidence that SROs do in fact make schools safer (Mann et al., 2019, Na & Gottfredson, 2013). There is some evidence that the increase in SROs correlates with more drug related arrests in the schools (Owens, 2017). However, it is not clear that they reduce the overall presence of drugs with the increase in arrests. Many claim that SRO presence is needed to reduce violence within the schools. However, a 2019 study found that there is no reduction in school violence due to the presence of a resource officer (King & Bracy, 2019). In fact, more incidents for which police are called involved misdemeanours and behavioural disturbances that could be handled by school staff (French-Marcelin & Hinger, 2017; Mann et al., 2019). The rhetorical strategy for employing SROs is not reflected in the actual arrests made.

Discrimination and racism of policing schools

There is substantial evidence that the behaviour of SROs is discriminatory and actively harmful to students of colour. As mentioned above, SROs are more likely to be placed in districts serving high proportions of students of colour (Heise & Nance, 2022) and in urban schools (Counts et al., 2018). Research based on a national survey showed that SRO presence did not lead to a higher rate of arrests for all districts, but did lead to more arrests in schools where greater incidence of 'racial tension' was reported, as well as in more urban settings (Pigott et al., 2018).

SROs have wide discretion in making arrests, taking into account subjective factors such as past behaviour, respect towards the officer, and student conduct (Wolf, 2014). Students of colour are often treated more harshly when the rules are subjectively enforced, as shown in our previous discussion of discipline policies concerning wilful defiance (Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen, 2014). Another study on arrest patterns confirms this claim, finding that SROs disproportionately arrest students of colour in situations where they are able to use discretion (Heise & Nance, 2021). In other words, SROs choose to criminalize behaviour by students of colour, when it could otherwise be considered a young person making a mistake and dealt with by school officials.

Evidence also shows that increased SRO presence leads to increased incidences of exclusionary measures, such as suspension and expulsion, for Black and Brown students (Crosse et al., 2022). The mere involvement of SROs within the school setting creates a negative and exclusionary climate for all students, but specifically for students of colour. Students who interact with SROs also report a lower rate of connectedness to their schools (Theriot, 2016).

In addition to the unequal application of SRO discipline, the roles that SROs play seem to vary by school demographics. As mentioned above, SROs do not hold a consistent role in school districts

around the country (Counts et al., 2018). While SRO presence is more likely in urban, diverse school districts, there is still a substantial SRO presence in many districts, including wealthy, white, suburban school districts. However, in these school districts, SROs take on a more supportive role for the students. SROs in wealthy, white schools traditionally function as a form of teacher or mentor. In an interview study of SROs, those assigned to wealthier, whiter schools indicated that they perceive their role as protecting the students. In less wealthy and particularly schools with higher rates of Black students, SROs see themselves as in charge of policing the activity of students (Fisher et al., 2022).

Many SROs see students as the major threat to safety in the school district (Curran et al., 2019). Officers view student-based aggression as something that is guaranteed to occur, and often attribute it to student deficits. One officer claimed, 'The student body, I would say for the most part, they have behavior issues. It's a public school' (Curran et al., 2019). In other words, students are perceived as inherently problematic by school resource officers who view their job as controlling students rather than keeping them safe. This trend is particularly expressed when SROs are in majority-minority settings. As SROs assigned to schools with minoritized student bodies take a more surveilling and controlling role, this leads to increases in arrests. Black students are more than twice as likely to be arrested in schools compared to their white counterparts (French-Marcelin & Hinger, 2017), yet there is no evidence that students of colour exhibit higher rates of criminal behaviour (Mann et al., 2019).

While Black boys experience the majority of these arrests, the racial disparities are actually higher for Black girls who are four times as likely to be arrested when compared to white girls (Mann et al., 2019). This mimics the same racial disparity experienced by Black girls in suspension rates, which are further exacerbated by school policing. The presence of SROs increases both the in and out of school suspension rates for Black girls (Williams et al., 2023). Black girls are often targeted by school police to the extent that some girls have reported feeling harassed (Watson, 2016). Significant research documents the gendered way that school policing affects Black girls in a way that places them onto the school-to-prison pipeline (Crenshaw et al., 2015; M. Morris, 2016). Trans and queer students also report being over-policed to enforce gender norms (Snapp et al., 2015).

Substantial evidence shows that students with disabilities are suspended and expelled from schools and face incarceration at disproportionate rates (Fedders, 2021). The presence of police in schools leads to greater contact with law enforcement particularly for Black students with disabilities (Fisher & Fisher, 2023). Students with learning or emotional disabilities are often misunderstood, seen as disruptive, and overpoliced (Annamma, 2015). Students with disabilities are substantially more likely to enter the juvenile justice system than their classmates. In 2005, a survey of educational programming in juvenile detention centres found that one third of students were receiving special education services (Quinn et al., 2005). This overrepresentation is contributed to by school-based discipline and policing, often times by SROs (Shaver & Decker, 2017).

Immigrant students also report less comfort in schools where police are present, particularly if they are undocumented. Many school systems and the SROs within them cooperate with the federal government's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents by providing them information on students, violating student privacy, and creating fear of deportation for the students and their families. In other words, when undocumented students face police in school, they risk being placed on a school-to-deportation pipeline (Hlass, 2017; Verma et al., 2017).

Abuse of power

School police have a history of excessive force and perpetrating violence against students, particularly students of colour. In one of the most highly publicized cases, an SRO dragged a Black high school girl from her desk after she was accused of using her phone in class in Spring Valley, SC. Another Black girl filmed the incident and the video went viral, helping to spark the national police free schools movement (Love, 2016). Police have also used excessive force with young children, with

many highly publicized examples. An elementary student acting out due to a disability was handcuffed around his arms, and was kept that way even when he complained that it hurt (Maddox, 2015). Unfortunately, these are just a few of many similar cases. A study sponsored by the Advancement project identified 285 incidences of assault by a school police officer on a K-12 student from 2011 to 2021, including 5 student deaths (Whittenberg et al., 2022). This is likely a conservative estimate of the rate of SRO assaults on students. Of these 285 incidents of police assaults in schools, over 84% were assaults on Black students.

SROs and the school-to-prison pipeline

The criminalization of low-income Black and Brown communities entered the public education system through school policing and SROs. Rhetoric surrounding 'super predator' children of colour and well-publicized incidences of mass school shootings built public support for this increase in police presence. However, there is no evidence that removing said 'bad kids' from the classroom would have any positive impact on school safety (Browne et al., 2001; Losen, 2014). Additionally, since the implementation of SROs, there is no evidence that they create a safer environment. In fact, for students of colour, students with disabilities, and queer students, the presence of SROs can lead to arrests and exclusion from school for typical adolescent behaviour. Too often, students who are facing genuine challenges are policed and punished, rather supported by their schools (Kupchik, 2010). One such challenge that Black and Brown students particularly face is parental incarceration. Zero tolerance responses to students facing parental incarceration demonstrates the clear connection between the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration in communities.

Parental incarceration

The impacts of mass incarceration reach schools even when the students themselves are not being policed. With the rise of mass incarceration came a rise in familial and parental arrests. Sixty-three percent of Black Americans have had an immediate family incarcerated, as have 48% of Hispanic Americans (Enns et al., 2019). From 1984 to 2009, the rate of children with incarcerated parents rose from 1 in 125 to one in every 28 (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). As we have previously demonstrated, mass incarceration led to a dramatic increase of Black men in the penal system. As a direct result, 24.2% of Black children will have at least one parent incarcerated before the age of 17, while among their white peers, that number (Sykes & Pettit, 2014). Among their white peers, the number falls to 3.9% (Sykes & Pettit, 2014; Turney & Goodsell, 2018).

Parental incarceration has profound impacts on students in physical and mental health, academic success, and likelihood of interaction with the criminal legal system. Students must deal with the stresses of a major, negative life event and are often not given the support they need to overcome the challenges. Instead, many are stigmatized or treated as delinquents. Students with incarcerated parents are typically those who are already marginalized in the education system (Turney & Goodsell, 2018; Wildeman et al., 2018). The cumulative effect often leads these students to be suspended, expelled, or even incarcerated themselves. Some advocacy groups aim to dispel the deficit mindset that might arise from emphasizing that students with incarcerated parents are less likely to succeed in school and life (We Got Us Now, 2023). Without wishing to contribute to deficit views, we believe it is important to understand the structural barriers that these students face as a result of mass incarceration.

Academic impacts

From an academic perspective, there are several challenges to having an incarcerated or formerly incarcerated parent. Studies have shown that students with a history of parental incarceration enter Kindergarten at a lower level of readiness (Testa & Jackson, 2021). Across the academic years,

students who have a parent that is incarcerated have a harder time succeeding in the traditional classroom setting (Tadros & Durante, 2022).

Students with incarcerated parents are more likely to be recommended for special education than the student without an incarcerated parent (Haskins et al., 2018). Meanwhile, students who are in special education are themselves more likely to be policed within the schools, particularly if they are a minoritized population (May et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2004) In other words, the same students who experience parental incarceration are then excluded due to their status as special education students, implicating them in the system of mass incarceration.

Although there is inconclusive evidence as to whether test scores decrease when a student is facing parental incarceration (Dallaire, 2015; McCauley, 2020), there is evidence that these students are more likely to be held back a grade in school (Haskins et al., 2018). Studies have also found that parental incarceration increases a student's likelihood of failing to graduate from high school (Shaw, 2019). As discussed earlier, Black men without high school diplomas are substantially more likely to be incarcerated (Western & Wildeman, 2009). In this very direct way, the system of mass incarceration is reproduced across generations.

Social emotional impacts

Parental incarceration has social emotional impacts on students that can directly impact schooling. Dealing with the difficulty of having a parent in the criminal legal system, students are more likely to act out. Whether for legitimate reasons or not, they are also more likely to have a disciplinary record (McCauley, 2020; Nichols et al., 2016). This stress often leads to externalizing behaviours that can end up with school-based consequences. Students with incarcerated parents face a higher rate of suspension (Haskins et al., 2018; Turney & Goodsell, 2018). They are more likely to experience delinquency and ultimately drop out of school, which can lead to a serious increase in their likelihood of entering into incarceration in the years following high school (Haskins et al., 2018). Some students under these pressures even turn to illegal externalizing activities such as theft and illegal drug use (Dallaire, 2015).

Students with a parent in prison report feeling out of place. In one study, many such students said that they did not feel 'normal,' which led them to isolate themselves from their peers and classmates (Smith & Young, 2017). Teachers, who could potentially be a source of support and stability for students in this time (Smith & Young, 2017), often extend a 'deviant' label from the parent to the student, and thus expected them to act out in class (Murray et al., 2012; Shaw, 2019). Even when teachers did not actively stigmatize their students, the students believed that they would and thus did not build social bonds with their teachers.

Students facing parental incarceration have been found to be more isolated from their school community. They report lower levels of connection to their school and have been found to be less engaged in extracurricular activities and sports within their school (Cochran et al., 2018; Nichols et al., 2016). This can be incredibly damaging as high school can be a critical time not only for academic growth but also for socializing and building networks of support.

Overall wellbeing

Parental incarceration impacts children's health (H. Lee et al., 2014), which, in turn, affects academic outcomes and life trajectories. Children with incarcerated parents face higher rates of mental illnesses, particularly anxiety and depression (R. D. Lee et al., 2013). They also report higher levels of speech and cognitive disorders (Turney, 2014). These kinds of health issues can derail a student's academic success (Brännlund et al., 2017; Eide et al., 2010).

Many of these challenges might be successfully addressed by mental health support and counselling services if offered in the school (Nichols et al., 2016). However, underinvestment in school counselling services is prominent in schools across the country, and funding is not provided

for adequate mental health supports(Mann et al., 2019). Mental health and counselling services are even less available in schools serving concentrations of low-income students of colour, the ones with the most likelihood of having an incarcerated parent (Mann et al., 2019). As schools move funding out of counselling services and into school policing measures, students are failed both by the lack of support and by discriminatory targeting.

Despite the efforts that families make to support their children during times of parental incarceration, the obstacles that exist place students at risk of criminalization themselves. School-based policies often exclude formerly incarcerated parents once they return to families and communities (Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017). Parents, for example, must comply with CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information) requirements to volunteer in classrooms, on field trips, or in other school activities; these CORI requirements typically exclude people with criminal records (White, 2018). Yet we know that strong family-school ties are an important contributor to student success (Mapp et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Although largely treated separately by scholars, in this article we show that the system of mass incarceration in communities and the system of the school-to-prison pipeline in schools are two sides of the same coin. They arose at the same time, are justified through shared racist characterizations of Black and Brown people, especially young men, as violent. These movements share underlying racist logics of discipline and control, apply similar zero tolerance practices to street and school behaviour, increase surveillance and policing in both communities and schools, and put Black and Brown individuals on a path to prison. Moreover, they reinforce each other in two ways. As Black and Brown students are removed from the classroom or referred to law enforcement in school, they are put on a road to incarceration. Meanwhile, as Black and Brown parents are incarcerated at high rates, their children suffer the consequences and are more susceptible to school push out through suspension and expulsion, and then subsequent incarceration. Incarceration of family and community members can have negative impacts on all involved, but particularly harms children and students. In these ways, the twin systems of mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline create an intergenerational transmission of criminalization.

Some scholars have articulated the similarities between prisons and schools, seeing both as institutions of the carceral state. The concept of the school-prison nexus appreciates that schools steer some young people to prison but mainly emphasizes how schools and prisons share similar cultures, structures and practices of surveillance and control (Kautz, 2023; Meiners, 2007; Sojoyner, 2013). Our analysis reflects these insights from the school-prison nexus concept by demonstrating the similarities between schools and prisons as agents of control and oppression, part of the same structures of criminalization. However, we emphasize the similarities between policing and discipline in communities and the same kinds of punishment systems in schools. Moreover, we go further in showing how the experiences of families interconnect across these institutions, leading to the intergenerational transmission of mass incarceration. The communities that face over policing and zero tolerance policies experience the same practices in their schools, bringing another generation into criminalization. We retain the school-to-prison pipeline terminology for two reasons. First, it is the term that the vast majority of movement organizers on the ground, and the families and students with whom they work, use to identify the system they seek to dismantle (Warren, 2021). Second, we believe it better reflects the notion of transmission, of movement of racially minoritized people into criminalization and incarceration.

While this article focuses primarily on the experiences of Black and Brown students in the United States, it is important to emphasize that exclusionary discipline and policing in and out of schools impacts marginalized communities in many other countries. Anti-Black racism and Islamophobia push students out of the classroom in the United Kingdom, while policing systems target the same communities (Bei & Knowler, 2022; Harris, 2024). In South Africa, illegal school drug tests push students out of classrooms and into detention facilities, thus permanently altering their futures (Ally

et al., 2021). In Australia, Indigenous students, already marginalized in society, are disciplined and suspended at significantly higher rates in schools (Graham et al., 2023). The legacy of enslavement and colonization present differently across nation states and their racial orders, but marginalized students face many of the same challenges created by a system of criminalization in and out of schools.

Organizing and creating change

As our analysis implies, dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline and ending the system of mass incarceration must be integrated processes. Too often, the movement to challenge disciplinary and policing practices in schools is separated from efforts to defund policing in communities and reform criminal justice. Yet both are fundamentally abolitionist projects. Progress in one domain can spur progress in the other, while defenders of the current system of punishment and criminalization oppose both efforts. This has been demonstrated, for example, by the work done by No Cop Academy, an organization in Chicago that opposed the construction of a new police academy while advocating for removing police from schools and using funds saved for placing resources in public schools to properly support students (No Cop Academy 2023).

Shifting funding within the schools from policing to student support services and counsellors simultaneously disrupts the school-to-prison pipeline while supporting students dealing with the impacts of mass incarceration. According to the ACLU, 1.7 million US students attend schools with police but no counsellors, while fully 10 million students attend schools with police by no social workers (Mann et al., 2019). Removing policing from schools can stop students from being placed onto the path to incarceration (Heise & Nance, 2021). At the same time evidence shows that mental health resources can help students cope with parental incarceration (Nichols et al., 2016). This kind of policy solution addresses both aspects of the intergenerational system.

To create more just and equitable educational systems, we must find ways like this to address the twin systems of the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration. More broadly, efforts to challenge harsh and racially discriminatory discipline practices and policing in schools and replace them with restorative or transformative justice will be stronger and more effective when linked to efforts to dismantle the system of mass incarceration and move towards community-based restorative approaches. In this way, a combined, intersectional movement can break the cycle of criminalization of Black and Brown people across generations and across schools and communities.

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