

Turning off the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Zero-tolerance practices of exclusionary discipline fuel school failure and push students into the justice system. Inclusive school climates with restorative practices foster academic success leading to positive life outcomes.

The causal link between educational exclusion and criminalization of youth is called the *school-to-prison pipeline*. This is a byproduct of “zero tolerance” policies which have been widely discredited by research (APA, 2008; Skiba, 2014). However, these practices are still widespread in the United States and have been exported worldwide (Wacquant, 1999). School failure and exclusion predict poor life outcomes and are implicated in the mass incarceration of boys and young men of color. Still, these are not insoluble problems as educators and policy makers are discovering effective strategies to engage instead of exclude these students.

A Culture of Incarceration

While home to only 5% of the world’s population, the U.S. has 25% of the world’s prisoners. According to the Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, prison populations have quadrupled since 1980 (NAACP, 2014). Persons of color make up the majority of this population with African-Americans locked up at six times the rate of whites. The United States has become a culture of incarceration, removing from society people who present difficult problems, including conditions caused by disability and addiction. Prisons spawn a new generation of future prisoners: there are more than two million children with at least one incarcerated parent, and these youth are five times more likely to end up in prison themselves (Murray & Farrington, 2005). Schools are a significant contributor to the current prison crisis with more than half of incarcerated individuals entering prison without a high school diploma.

In the late 80s and early 90s, a rise in high-profile violent and drug-related crime, particularly in urban areas, was hyped by predictions that we were raising a generation of “super predators.” Fearing

the worst, jurisdictions raised penalties for juvenile offenders. Boot Camps became a popular remedy with an emphasis on a heavy dose of coercive discipline. Later research showed that the vast majority of “Boot Campers” subsequently wound up in prison (Lutze & Bell, 2005).

