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Claremont McKenna College

Challenges within the Education System: An In-Depth Analysis of the School to Prison Pipeline in the United States

submitted to
Professor Costanzo

By
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Senior Thesis
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Challenges within the Education System: An In-Depth Analysis of the School to Prison Pipeline in the United States

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Senior Thesis

Professor Costanzo

May 3rd, 2021

Abstract

Many scholars have hypothesized the existence of a school to prison pipeline (STPP) – a phenomenon that describes how particular school policies and practices have inadvertently created a pathway from schools to the juvenile criminal system. The pipeline disproportionately affects certain communities and has serious short- and long-term consequences for students. This paper explores the validity of the hypothesized pipeline and examines three underlying mechanisms: zero-tolerance policies, school safety, and school culture. After reviewing the research literature on these three mechanisms, I conclude that there is evidence for both STPP risk and STPP protective factors embedded within the school system. This paper reviews case studies of STPP program initiatives in several school districts and concludes that there is sufficient support for the existence of the pipeline. Specific recommendations for educators, schools, and researchers are discussed. By understanding the underlying factors and the complexities of the STPP, greater work can be done to dismantle the pipeline and to provide a more inclusive and equitable education.

Keywords: school to prison pipeline, education, zero-tolerance policies, school safety, school culture

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> *"That school was run more like a prison than a high school. It don't have to be nothing illegal about it. But you're getting arrested. No regard for if a college going to accept you with this record. No regard for none of that, because you're not expected to leave this school and go to college. You're not expected to do anything*."
>
> JW— Former inner-city high school student, current maximum security prisoner (Hirschfield, 2008, p.79).

Introduction

Education is a significant institution in the United States. It has long been celebrated as one of the main avenues for intellectual growth, upward mobility, and economic success. For many immigrants and low-income families, the promise of an education, particularly a college education, offers hope for social advancement, economic prosperity, and future opportunity. Thus, there is a great emphasis on providing students with a quality K-12 education to ensure that all who aspire to higher education and professional careers are able to achieve their goals. However, this vision for education as a means for upward mobility remains an impossible feat for many because of systemic problems currently present in the educational system.

All children in the United States have a right to an education and are constitutionally ensured equal opportunities, regardless of race, gender, religion, or wealth ("Your Right to Equality in Education," 2021). Yet, despite this institutional right to education, the *quality* of education varies dramatically across the nation, and in particular, many communities experience harsh and unwelcoming learning conditions. One phenomenon that has gained much attention in recent years is known as the "school to prison pipeline" or "school pathways to the juvenile justice system" (Mallet, 2006, p.15). The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) is:

> "a construct used to describe policies and practices, especially with respect to school discipline, in the public schools and juvenile justice system that decrease the probability of school success for children and youth, and increase the probability of negative life outcomes, particularly through involvement in the juvenile justice system." (Skiba et al., p. 546).

Many researchers, school administrators, and advocates have drawn attention to this issue because of the large number of students that are harmed as a result of school policies and practices. These policies have *increased* the probability that students will come into contact with the criminal justice system at an early age and have the potential to significantly affect their development in adolescence (Martin & Besse, 2017). One of the main concerns with the STPP is that *not all* students are equally affected— some are disproportionately involved within the system. Scholars have agreed that there is an overrepresentation of certain racial identities in the STPP, including African American, American and Alaskan Natives, and Latino students (Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Additionally, low-income students, students with mental disabilities, and students with risk of academic failure are also overrepresented in the pipeline (Rocque & Snellings, 2018, p.4). This is significant because it illustrates how already vulnerable communities are pushed into the criminal justice system at higher rates than their counterparts.

Additionally, even if students do not remain in the justice system during their adulthoods, there are long-term ramifications that result from this early interaction. For instance, students who have been released from detention centers may be required to present their legal records when applying for various opportunities. Their legal records can be used to "deny youth access to higher education, employment, and a variety of public benefits" emphasizing how the consequences follow them after graduation (Mittleman, 2018, p.185). Goldstein et al. (2019) also

adds that this record can make students ineligible to join the army and disqualify them from public housing assistance. Some students may never even come in contact with the criminal justice system, and yet, components of the STPP may still affect their academic and future success. Thus, it is evident how dangerous the theory of the pipeline is because it is not restricted to a student's academic career, but rather, has the potential to severely harm the students' future endeavors.

In recent years, the school system transformed into an institution that prioritizes law and order over the education and wellbeing of all its students. In relation to the STPP, many commentators have noted the striking similarity of the American public schools to the prison complex. Both institutions advocate for order, discipline, and strict codes of conduct (Hirschfield, 2008). In recent years, the criminal justice system has grown significantly, and whether it is an intentional or unintentional effect, this growth has led to an increase in criminalization within the school systems. According to Hirschfield (2008), the criminalization in schools represent "the shift toward a crime control paradigm in the definition and management of the problem of student deviance;" it encompasses "the manner in which policy makers and school actors think and communicate about the problem of student rule-violation as well as myriad dimensions of school praxis including architecture, penal procedure, and security technologies and tactics." (p. 80). Thus, Hirschfield (2008) presents how schools have redefined criminal behavior in school grounds and have altered the school environment to grasp greater control over student behavior.

The school to prison pipeline is a relatively new concept that has attracted the attention of many community leaders and academics. However, because of its recent status, there is limited research surrounding the topic. As Barnes and Motz (2018) note, "it is important to recognize

that there is not one overarching theoretical explanation for why the school to prison pipeline exists" (p.2329). There are several mechanisms that contribute to the system and perpetuate the pipeline, and more research needs to address the various mechanisms. In an effort to further understand the school to prison phenomenon, this paper will analyze three main factors connected to the pipeline: *zero-tolerance policies, school safety, and school culture*. By analyzing these three components, there will be a more comprehensive understanding of the pipeline and its impact on the education of students. The paper will also address future recommendations to dismantle the pipeline and promote more equitable school practices.

Education and Discipline

The school to prison pipeline stems from this intricate relationship between education and discipline. The use of punishment in education has been a common practice since the 1800s, but changes occurred due to public disapproval (Mallet, 2006). For example, corporal punishment was a norm during the 1800s— and some forms of corporal punishment were still used up until the 1960s (Mallet, 2006). However, as these practices became less justifiable, there was greater demand for new methods of punishment. Additionally, there were new pressures in schools due to the dramatic increase in the number of students now attending schools (Mallet, 2006). Administrators were tasked to find new ways to account for the greater student population while still maintaining order in these institutions. This all culminated to the paradox of balancing between education and discipline.

One reason why discipline is emphasized so highly is the strong perception of school violence among the general public. Incidents such as school shootings, drug use, bullying, and gang violence contributed to the idea that the school environment is becoming more dangerous. For example, in the recent decades, the prevalence of school shootings has completely altered

how many schools function. The attack at Columbine High School in 1999 had a historic impact in how the public perceived school safety and, due to its large media coverage, there was a national push for greater control in schools (Mallet, 2006). Because of similar incidents in later years, such as Sandy Hook Elementary, Pearl High School, Health High School, and Thurston High School, to name a few, the public began to believe in a new type of "adolescent violence," which culminated in the idea of "a teenage super-predator" (Mallet, 2006, p.17).

In an effort to protect against these "teenage super-predators," there was a heightened concern for safety and protection. In fact, by 2001, the rate of U.S. juvenile incarceration became the highest in the world (Mittleman, 2018). This reflects how extensive the apprehension towards youth was that it significantly altered the national incarceration rate. The fear that these prior incidents instilled in students, parents, and communities was a powerful instrument— it allowed for greater emphasis to be placed on schools in creating a safe environment and to prevent future violent incidents. Policy makers and school administrators have called for greater school discipline to decrease the frequency of such incidents and lessen the impact of violence on the student body. For instance, previous research has connected school violence with "increases in disruptive student behavior, poor attendance rates, and academic failure, as well as stressful school environments" (Brady et al., 2007, p.456).

However, despite these widespread perceptions of violence, there is much evidence that schools are still one of the safest environments for students. Crime rates for violence, drug use, and delinquency are very low and have declined over time (Mallet, 2006). According to an FBI Crime Report, the juvenile violent crime rate peaked in 1994, but has since declined steadily; in fact, as of 2012, youth arrest for these violent crimes is at a historic all time low (Kang-Brown et al., 2013). This demonstrates how there is a positive, national trend of decreasing youth arrests

for violence in spite of greater public perception of teen delinquency. It calls into question the need for such strict and inflexible policies that, in all, cause greater harm than good to the student population.

Zero-Tolerance Policies: Introduction

One of the more compelling arguments regarding the STPP is the role of zero-tolerance policies in sustaining this pathway. Zero-tolerance policies are "those used to deliver a predetermined set of consequences, often punitive without consideration of offense severity, mitigating circumstances, or context" (McCarter, 2017, p.54). In short, they are a rigid set of policies that at face value offer an appealing and universal method to discipline students. The zero-tolerance approach was developed from the broken windows theory of crime (Goldstein et al., 2019). It reasons that small offenses are synonymous with broken windows in a building. These broken windows "send a message about the acceptability of inflicting damage on the building and, in a sense, sanctions or invites further and more severe damage" (Goldstein et al., 2019, p. 63). This mentality encouraged administrations to respond severely to small incidents to showcase to the student body that these acts are not acceptable. In sum, it is creating an example of students to discourage others from engaging in the same acts.

These zero-tolerance policies began in the 1990s and, initially, it was used as a push back against drug use and violent acts on school grounds (McCarter, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2013), at least 75% of all schools have enforced zero-tolerance policies since 1996. Some data reports even higher estimates, with 90% of schools nationwide implementing at least one zero-tolerance policy since 2000 (Fader et al., 2015). These figures illustrate a trend that zero-tolerance policies have gained momentum and are customary practices in schools.

Suspensions and expulsions are the most common example of zero-tolerance policy nationwide. These are labeled as exclusionary discipline practices because students are excluded from regular instruction and separated from the rest of the student body (McCarter, 2017). The idea follows that by removing students who are causing trouble from the school ground, the safety and functionality of the school learning environment is preserved. Within the last few years, there has been significant growth in the number of suspensions and expulsion in schools. In 1972, statistically one in thirteen secondary school students would be suspended or expelled over the course of one school year; by 2010, this figure increased to one in nine students, which accounts for over a 40% increase in only thirty-eight years (Kang-Brown et al., 2013). Because of this increase in zero-tolerance policies, there is a heightened need to evaluate these practices for their overall effectiveness and long-term impacts.

History of Zero-tolerance Policies

On a federal level, there were some measures taken to incentivize schools to enact nationwide policy changes that included these zero-tolerance policies. For example, due to the rising concern for safety in schools and the growing public pressure for a political response, Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994. This aligned with the national mission of "tough-on-crime" that infiltrated the educational sector (Kang-Brown et al., 2013). However, to ensure participation from the school districts, Congress determined that in order to qualify for federal education funds, states must pass a law that expels students for carrying a weapon to school (Kang-Brown et al., 2013). In this matter, this initial legislation worked two-fold by both motivating schools to enforce strict policies with promises of funding, while simultaneously threatening to end future funding if they do not comply. It placed school administrators in uncomfortable positions because even if they did not agree with such policies, there was no

alternative for them to take, especially if the districts generally had lower economic resources. This legislation paved the way for future zero-tolerance policies and created a culture of student criminalization and strict disciplinary measures.

Many have observed how these new zero-tolerance disciplinary policies have a striking similarity to the infamous three-strike laws (Mittleman, 2018). Students who repeated minor infractions or violations were met with very harsh penalties. These students become "marked" within the school system and they will continue to be labeled throughout their education experience (Mittleman, 2018). It highlights the emotional baggage that students must carry because their past mistakes continue to be held against them. This creates greater pressure on students not to commit even small transgressions in the future, like tardiness or incomplete assignments. Though it is understandable that schools need some form of order and discipline to maintain a positive learning environment, the problem lies in the overuse of these measures.

Short- and Long-Term Impact of Suspensions and Expulsions

In order to emphasize the profound weight that suspensions carry, simply receiving *one* suspension "increases students' likelihood of repeating a grade, dropping out, and coming into contact with the juvenile justice system" (McCarter, 2017, p.53). Additionally, suspension and expulsions are also correlated with lower levels of academic performance, self-esteem, and school attendance (Hemez et al., 2020). Another researcher supported these findings and added that overuse can lead to higher school dropout rates, higher aggression rates, and higher arrest rates (Martin and Beese, 2017).

One mechanism that may explain the association of suspensions and expulsions with problem behavior is Routine Activity Theory. This theory claims that three criteria must be met for a crime to be committed: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and absence of a capable

guardian (Monahan et al., 2014). In respect to schools, this theory hypothesizes that one reason why suspensions and expulsions can lead to greater criminal behavior is due to this lack of a "capable guardian" (Monahan et al., 2014, p. 1111). Schools act as a guardian because they monitor the behavior of students and a student's presence in school deters them from committing crimes. Thus, students who are absent from schools have a greater chance of falling into some form of delinquent behavior. This is a major discovery because it indicates that the actions schools are taking are inadvertently creating a funnel system of juvenile delinquency. By removing students from the school grounds, they are attempting to create a safe environment for the rest of the student body, but at the potential expense of that one student.

To further evaluate this relationship between suspension and expulsions with delinquency, one study focused on how these punishments are correlated with greater youth arrests. The study found that students who were suspended or expelled had a *2.10 times greater chance* of being arrested in that month compared with other students who were not given these punishments (Monahan et al., 2014). Additionally, not only has research indicated that youth incarceration rates can increase, but there is also substantial evidence suggesting how suspensions and expulsions can impact adult incarceration rates as well. One study collected a sample of 8,984 individuals from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 Cohort (NLSY97) database. The study found that experiencing any suspension during grades 7 through 12 "significantly increases the logged odds of incarceration in young adulthood by 288% when socioeconomic and contextual controls are incorporated in the mixed-effects model" (Hemez et al., 2020, p. 247). This is highly crucial because it demonstrates the large role that suspensions have on the long-term trajectories of young students.

Disparities

Racial. Much research strongly suggests that zero-tolerance policies disproportionately affect some specific groups of students in the education system. Race and ethnicity have been historically noted as playing a large role in these policies. For example, although Black students only comprised 15.5% of the national student population in 2014, they made up 32.5% of the students who received in-school suspensions and 46% of the students who received more than one out-of-school suspension (McCarter et al., 2019). White students comprised 50.4% of the national student population, but *only* accounted for 39% of the in-school suspensions and 28.9% of the out-of-school suspension.

Additionally, one study found that in a sample of 306 Virginia public high schools, Black student suspension rates were more than double the suspension rates for White students (Heilbrun et al., 2015). However, not only did this study find significant disparities in the rates, but they also found large disparities in the offenses. Black students, though suspended at a higher rate, did not commit more aggressive offenses than White students; rather, White students were actually *more* likely to be suspended for drug-and-alcohol related offenses (Heilbrun et al., 2015, p.496). Black students were more likely to be suspended for "disruption-related offenses," which are considered soft offenses— such as "classroom disruption, disorderly conduct, insubordination, and obscene language" (Heilbrun et al., 2015, p. 496). However, these actions, though objectively less severe in comparison to other offenses, are still punished with the same level of severity. There is a large debate regarding whether such small infractions truly merit punishments like suspensions instead of other more effective punishments. Ultimately, the authors (Heilbrun et al., 2015) raise a large concern for these racial disparities because their findings strongly support the theme that Black students are being punished both at a higher rate and for minor offenses in comparison to their peers.

One study conducted a survey of 2,539 students from grade ten to twelve to analyze outside factors that may lead to disparities in office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Mizel et al., 2016). The study found that Latinos were more likely to have office referrals compared to other races (White, African American, Asian American, Multiracial/other); African American students were found more likely to receive suspensions and expulsions. However, this study also found that there were certain potentially protective factors, such as academic preparedness, homework hours, and school engagement (Mizel et al., 2016). For instance, working on homework in the library or attending tutoring hours created safe spaces for students and can lead to a reduction in the disproportionate school discipline policies (Mizel et al., 2016). These findings offer some optimistic alternatives for improving the current system by encouraging these protective factors in schools.

Researchers have noted that one reason for such racial differences is attributed to how the justice system perceives students of color, specifically African Americans and Latinos. Courts tend to attribute White crimes to external factors, such as family or other personal problems; however, courts tend to attribute crimes made by youth of color to internal factors— such as personal flaws or having a disrespectful nature (Martin & Besse, 2017, p.1206). This distinction in attribution unfortunately is a reflection of the underlying biases that many of our institutions still hold. School policies tend to prescribe to these biases in which Black students are targeted at a much higher rate than their peers. The high punishment rate among Black youth perpetuates the cycle of criminality and incarceration in adulthood. As a result, the negative stereotypes continue to be reinforced and students are consequently both implicitly and explicitly persecuted by the educational system.

Gender. Research also indicates that gender influences the disparity rates of zero-tolerance policies. While male students comprise about 51% of the total national student population, they are historically overrepresented in the juvenile justice system and disproportionately receive greater punishments than their female counterparts (McCarter et al., 2019). In the 2011-2012 school year, boys accounted for 67% of the students who received in-school suspension (girls=33%), 68% of the students who received out-of-school suspensions (girls=28%), and 74% of students who were expelled (girls=26%) (McCarter et al., 2019). One study evaluated the suspension rates of 3,495 elementary students in the South during the 2008-2010 school year (Yang et al., 2018). After conducting a multilevel regression, the researchers found that there were statistically significant differences between the behavior of boys and girls, with boys being more aggressive and disruptive than girls (Yang et al., 2018). Boys also had much higher rates of suspension— in the 2009-2010 school year, 22.70% of boys were suspended compared to only 8.77% of girls. Mizel et al. (2016) also found evidence in their study that boys were more likely to receive office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions at a higher rate than girls. Thus, there is the pattern for young boys to be punished at a much higher rate than young girls in the educational system. Though research is still limited on this topic, it is apparent that more studies need to be done to further understand these gender differences and to find approaches that decrease these disparities.

School Safety: Introduction

Safety is a crucial component of the school system. School safety is defined as “the creation and development of a school environment in which students have a sense of belonging as well as personal efficacy, use alternatives to violence and feel secure, and in which early warning signs of violence are actively addressed” (Brady et al., 2007, p.456). One of the ways

schools have attempted to promote safety is through the implementation of police officers in educational settings. The use of police officers in schools, known as school resource officers (SROs) has been a standard practice for about seventy years in the American school system. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers, “a school resource officer, by federal definition, is a career law enforcement officer with sworn authority who is deployed by an employing police department or agency in a community-oriented policing assignment to work in collaboration with one or more schools.” (About NASRO, n.d.).

Though SROs have been in place since the 1950s, it became a much more common policy by the 1990s (Mckenna & White, 2018). This upward trend continued to be observed in the 2000s; in fact, from 1997 to 2007, there was a 38% increase in the number of SROs nationwide (Zhang, 2019). The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services reported that about one-third of all sheriffs’ offices together with half of the police departments have reserved about 17,000 sworn officers to be placed in schools nationwide (Zhang, 2019).

The dramatic growth of these SROs has been drawing significant attention due to its connection to the school to prison pipeline. Many researchers have noted that even as issues related to the pipeline gained more attention, there remained a failure to address the issue of full-time police being present at schools (Mckenna & White, 2018). The introduction of officers has now changed how schools function by altering the learning environment. It has become a space focused on law and order with regular surveillance of student activity (Paik, 2014). However, even more alarming is the prospect that all students under these conditions, even those who may never have any future interactions with the prison system, may face a criminalization experience during their school years (Paik, 2014). That is to say, even students who may never face school consequences are still subjected to the culture of law and order as a result of the SROs present. It

highlights the concern with the school to prison pipeline because policies, such as extensive security, can result in a system that negatively affects all students to some extent.

Effectiveness of School Resource Officers

Advocacy on behalf of school resource officers is difficult due to the conflicting literature regarding the effectiveness of SROs. Many studies point towards the overall ineffectiveness of SROs and how there should be a reconsideration of this role. For instance, one study noted that SROs did not have a positive impact on low level violence incidents (Zhang, 2019). Another found that as schools increase the number of police officers stationed in their school, there are more reports of weapons and drug use (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). This could be the result of simply over-policing, where schools with more patrolling SROs have a greater likelihood that more misdemeanors will be reported. But, this same study also concluded that after comparing schools who increased police use with schools that did not increase police use, there was “no evidence suggesting that SRO or other sworn law-enforcement officers contribute to school safety” (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). Such research raises the question as to what the full purpose of SROs are if studies are observing no benefits to school children.

However, many studies have highlighted some of the positive outcomes associated with SROs. SROs help maintain a level of safety and order that is necessary in school environments (Na & Gottfredson, 2011). Johnson (1999) also found that since the beginning of an SRO program in a southern school district, there has been a decrease in the use of a handguns, knives, and other objects that could act as weapons. Others have argued that the presence of officers can serve as a deterrent to crime. For example, there is evidence to suggest that simply having uniformed officers stationed in schools can help decrease violence in schools (Johnson, 1999). Additionally, in a survey with 128 principles, the researchers found that perceptions of school

officers is positive, with administrators feeling that "SROs provide a valuable addition to school safety in their schools" (May et al., 2004, p. 78). SROs created a feeling of security, and about 75% of faculty felt that SROs were effective in their jobs (May et al., 2004). But, it is important to note that this is simply measuring perception and does not reflect the degree of work SROs are completing. The faculty and administration may *feel* SROs are creating a safe environment, but it is not indicative of the full effectiveness of officers, especially in regards to how students are treated and how they perceive SROs.

There is much contradictory evidence regarding the overall success of SROs and, thus, it is difficult to generalize a conclusion. The opposing data creates a necessity for further research to explore the full costs and benefits of SROs. Nevertheless, the literature identifies two key themes that play a major role in the evaluation of SROs: role identification and student-officer relationships.

Role Identification. Several researchers have used role theory as a framework to guide their studies regarding SROs and their behaviors in a school setting. Role theory reasons that behaviors are predictable according to how one socially identifies in a given situation (Mckenna & White, 2018). Essentially, this means that when "individuals identify with a defined social position, they have a set of normative beliefs prescribing the expected behaviors for that social position, and they act in accordance with those norms" (Mckenna & White, 2018, p.450). Thus, by analyzing how school officers view themselves within the context of the school environment, this will affect how they respond to misconduct in schools.

For SPOs, there is a "triad model" that highlights the three main roles officers have. The first is the most common assumption of what an SRO is—law enforcer. Strictly speaking, under this role their purpose is to prevent crime, apply the law, and apprehend any violators (Mckenna

& White, 2018). This is the traditional role one envisions for officers stationed at schools. The second role of the triad model is that of educator. Under this, SROs can teach courses and create presentations relevant to safety (Zhang, 2019). The last role SROs take on is as counselor or mentor, offering guidance and resources to students (Mckenna & White, 2018). As a result of this triad model, there is a level of nuance that can potentially lead to unclear expectations of how SROs should operate in a given school. The role the officers more closely identify with will have an effect on the way they perform their daily tasks, leading to great variety among officers and a lack of consistency.

For example, one study analyzed 564 surveys of SROs in Texas to assess what roles officers most closely identify with (Mckenna & White, 2018). The study found that a large majority (69.5%) of respondents identified with the law enforcer role; there was also significant evidence that a majority also identified with a mentor role as well. One major implication of this study is the "historically prevailing dichotomy between the two predominant roles of policing: crime fighter versus public servant" (Mckenna & White, 2018, p.466). The results demonstrate how these two roles (law enforcer and mentor) are the ones most SROs resonate with, creating an internal struggle between the two roles in a school setting.

Mckenna & White (2018) note how an officer who takes on a law enforcement role will be more likely to use legal responses, such as arresting students or issuing tickets; they will also be less lenient when it comes to application of the law. In contrast, an officer who identifies more with the mentorship role will more likely use counseling and search for alternatives solutions to the problem; they may opt for conversations with the students who misbehaved and suggest other school resources to help the student. (Mckenna & White, 2018). Thus, there is a heightened need to address role identification and the culture the school administration creates

for the SROs. If schools want to limit the number of legal responses taken, then it is worth reevaluating the expectations placed upon the SROs and making efforts to shift towards a mentorship role.

Researchers also suggest that in addition to the roles SROs have for themselves, other figures can also impact the role of SROs. For instance, teachers, principals, faculty, and even students can shape the role of SROs. This is encouraging because it highlights the active voice that these figures have on positively changing their school environment. However, there is also the risk of role overload, which is the result when a person has too many expectations of themselves in regards to their role (Mckenna & White, 2018). Not only do officers hold high expectations for themselves, but parents, teachers, administrators, and the greater community are also holding high expectations for these officers and the tasks they should be performing. Thus, it is important not to overwhelm the officers and practice good communication with them to establish a set of basic expectations and role identification.

Student- Officer Relationships. In order to assess the effectiveness of SROs, it is worth investigating the relationship between students and officers in the school context. By doing so, we can better understand areas that need improvement and target problematic tendencies. One particular area that is found to be concerning is the level of discretion that SROs have while performing their duties with students. The liberation hypothesis guides this thought because it explains differences when reporting crimes. The hypothesis suggests that there is greater discretion taken when an offense is a low-level crime (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018). Because school offenses would be classified as low-level, this would imply that there is not a universal application of punishments at school, leading to inconsistencies among students.

For example, one study surveyed SROs in 19 Delaware school districts and found that SROs exercise great discretion when they arrest students. Approximately 74% of the respondents reported that they did not make arrests when presented with strong evidence of offense (Wolf, 2014). Additionally, these SROs reported that they find *evidence*, *seriousness of misbehavior*, and *disrespect from students* as important factors when making their arrest decision; they also reported that one of the least important factors of arrest is the consequence the arrest would have on a student's future (Wolf, 2014). Thus, this points to the potentially harmful practice where SROs are giving themselves full authority to make life-altering decisions based on personal biases. It speaks to a greater issue that ultimately SROs are trained police officers first and foremost and are not as receptive to student needs. There should be a push for greater consideration of the context these officers are operating in because an officer of the city encompasses different values than an officer of a school.

It is also important to evaluate how students' feel in regards to school safety and how interaction with SROs may impact these feelings. By surveying 1,956 middle and high school students, Theriot and Orme (2016) found that there was no significant relationship between the two variables of student interaction with SROs and feelings of safety. However, they did find a significant relationship between student's positive attitudes regarding SROs and increased feelings of safety (Theriot & Orme, 2016, p. 141). This emphasizes how important it is for SROs to present themselves in a manner that evokes respect and fairness to cultivate a safer school environment. Officers who practice aggressive and authoritative tactics are creating hostile conditions for learning and decrease the safety students feel (Theriot & Orme, 2016).

Gender and racial differences have also been identified as factors that influence perception of SROs. One study analyzed student perceptions of police nationwide by selecting

eleven major cities to survey. White and Asian students were found to have more favorable attitudes toward police officers as compared to Hispanic and African American students (Taylor et al., 2001). Supporting this, Theriot and Orme (2016) also found significant results that indicated African American students felt most unsafe in schools with SROs compared to other racial groups. Additionally, Taylor et al. (2001) found that girls tend to describe more positive attitudes towards police officers than boys. One reasoning for this occurrence is the influence of traditional gender norms and how there is an emphasis for boys to be more assertive and independent than girls. These more "masculine" values may lead to more resentment towards established authority (Taylor et al., 2001). Thus, in applying these findings to a school environment, it is evident that greater efforts must be made to have better relationships between SROs and students.

School Culture: Role of Teachers

Introduction

Teachers are an integral element of the school setting. They are responsible for the education of the students and for promoting a positive learning environment. Students spend a considerable portion of their day at school, and their interactions with teachers constitute a significant adult-child relationship. In order to have a holistic understanding regarding how adults impact childhood development, it is critical to evaluate not only the roles of parents as caregivers, but also of teachers (Westerberg et al., 2020). In analyzing teacher-student relationships, many researchers derive their framework from attachment theory (Ansari et al., 2020). Attachment theory predicts that:

> "adult-child relationships support cognition and self-regulation in part through providing children with a sense of security that enables them to explore the object world and

> establishes an 'internal working model' for engaging in interactions with an attachment figures" (Ansari, 2020, p.2).

Thus, teachers, and the classroom setting by extension, have the potential to positively influence a child's development by fostering meaningful relationships and providing a supportive environment for students. A positive classroom emotional climate "is characterized by teachers' responsiveness to children's emotional needs, a warm and positive atmosphere, and an absence of negativity and conflict" (Yan et al., 2016, p.1248). By advocating for a positive classroom climate, teachers demonstrate a commitment to their students and to prioritizing their needs. By creating safe and comfortable learning spaces for students, the relationship between teachers and students is strengthened and there is a greater feeling of mutual trust and respect.

Teacher-Student Relationships

The benefits of positive teacher-student relationships are supported by a large body of research. For example, one five-year longitudinal study analyzed how student-teacher relationships as early as preschool influenced behavioral patterns in later years (Howes, 2000). The results indicated that children who had close child-teacher relationships displayed high prosocial behaviors with their peers. Additionally, the researchers also found that children who had high child-teacher relationship conflict had a greater likelihood of peer aggression, disruption, and social withdrawal (Howes, 2000, p.197). This same study also found student-teacher relationships are independent of prior relationships, including child-parent relationships (Howes, 2000). This is significant because it suggests that even if children had negative experiences with past teachers, they are still able to form meaningful connections with current and future teachers. Additionally, it also sheds light on the protective factors of teacher-student

relationships because if the children's home environment is distressing, teachers can serve as the secure base that children need in their development.

Another study that investigated teacher-student relationships from kindergarten to sixth grade found a series of positive outcomes associated with having close teacher-student relationships (Ansari, 2020). Among these, the study found that such students had significantly better academics, including having higher GPAs, higher educational aspirations, higher enrollment in upper-level science courses, and higher assessments in math and English (Ansari, 2020).

Varghese et al. (2019) sampled 503 low-income kindergarteners and first graders to gauge how teacher-child relationships impacted literacy development and social competencies. The researchers found that conflictual relationships were significantly negatively correlated with children's literacy achievement and prosocial behaviors (Varghese et al., 2019). These findings add to the literature because the sample included a more diverse group that accounted for lower income students and those in rural communities. It further supports the data that students with teacher-student conflict have a greater likelihood of experiencing a series of harmful academic and social setbacks.

In further evaluating the benefits of teacher-student relationships, one study investigated the buffering effects that a classroom's emotional climate can have on young children with mothers suffering from depression (Yan et al., 2016). Past research has indicated that maternal depression can significantly affect a child's development, including poor academic performance and difficulty socializing with others (Yan et al., 2016). The results of the study found that in a sample of first grade children, being in a warm and positive classroom decreased their likelihood of being affected by the mother's depressive symptoms as compared to children in less

supportive classrooms (Yan et al., 2016). These findings suggest how children are positively influenced by factors outside of their immediate environment. These adult relations and classroom environments are thus significant elements of a student's development and heightens the need to promote these beneficial and protective relationships.

In expanding on the idea of how one environment can impact another, one study investigated the spillover effects of teacher-student relationships to home environments, specifically focusing on parental stress (Westerberg et al., 2020). Parental stress encompasses "the negative response associated with the everyday hassles and frustrations surrounding caring for a child" (Westerberg et al., 2020, p.634). These negative feelings can be exacerbated by a low-quality teacher-student relationship. This may be due to the parents' feelings of hopelessness for their children's future, a feeling of failure as a parent, and a low sense of efficacy (Westerberg et al., 2020, p.635). After collecting their data, the researchers found that teacher-student conflict did create greater levels of parenting stress (Westerberg et al., 2020). This is significant because it demonstrates how teacher relationships influence a much greater domain than simply academics. These relationships have the potential to alleviate or increase conflict in the home.

Institutional Issues that affect School Culture

Racism. The profession of an educator is typically associated with lower levels of racial bias (Starck et al., 2020). The reasoning being that as an educator, there must be some internal desire to work closely with students to cultivate their academic and personal growth. As a result, it would be expected that teachers have high regard for *all* their students and the potential they have for future success. This would naturally lead to lower levels of racial bias among teachers. However, one study found that teachers actually reflect the racial attitudes of the broader

society— that is, both teachers and nonteachers "hold pro-White explicit and implicity racial biases" (Starck et al., 2020, p.273). Additionally, Quinn and Stewart (2019) conducted a study that had respondents rate Euro-, African-, Asian-, and Hispanic Americans on various dimensions to evaluate their racial attitudes. The results indicated that white educators tend to have *less positive* racial attitudes in comparison to the general population of racially minoritized Americans. These two studies are significant because they contradict the idea that schools are automatically safe havens of equality and justice. The findings create a sense of urgency to remedy the problem of racial biases and illustrates how the profession of teaching is not inherently anti-racist. By recognizing that teachers are as susceptible to these racial attributes as the broader community, administrators can provide more training programs to target these biases.

Current literature suggests that racial stereotypes and biases may cause teachers to unconsciously reinforce certain attitudes in their own classrooms (Bryan, 2017). Media has commonly portrayed very harmful stereotypes of Black males as hostile, lazy, criminal, and violent (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015). These misrepresentations are dangerous and frustrating for students because they must learn to navigate spaces where hurtful perceptions of them have already been made. Additionally, teacher educational programs have contributed to these perceptions by reinforcing the belief that certain communities are "inherently problematic" in comparison to other communities (Raible & Irizarry, 2010, p.1200). There have been testimonies that reveal how these programs make hurtful comments regarding the safety of the neighborhood— advising teachers to walk in groups, leave early, and protect one's belongings (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). This exacerbates the negative perception towards the students from such neighborhoods because of the belief that there is a danger. As a result, teachers may

internalize these sentiments and lead to greater conscious and unconscious bias in their classrooms.

Impacts of Racism. These racial biases provide an explanation for the disproportionate amount of discipline that young students of color, primarily Black students, endure (Bryan, 2017). Allen and White-Smith (2014) affirm the roles of educators in perpetuating the STPP due to a culture of discrimination and marginalization occurring in schools. They emphasize how "this type of marginalization is engrained within school culture to the extent that it is normalized" (p.449). This is a powerful sentiment because it reveals how culture shapes the experiences of students, specifically those of color. For instance, as a result of this prevailing culture, educators have learned to "adopt normative deficit views of their black boys," such as low intelligence and high deviancy behavior (Allen & White-Smith, 2014, p.449). Schools have thus become the setting for harmful racial socialization that upholds the historic institution of racism.

Racial biases may lead to serious consequences on students. For example, Chin et al. (2020) used a large data set from the Project Implicit archive (2008-2016) to measure racial attitudes through the implicit association test (IAT). The researchers found that "counties with higher levels of pro-White/anti-Black bias among teachers tended to show larger Black/White disparities in both test scores and suspensions after adjusting for a wide range of county-level covariates" (Chin et al., 2020, p.575). This study strongly suggests how racial attitudes perpetuate the STPP by limiting student success and increasing use of exclusionary policies.

However, literature also suggests how these biases do not harm all students. For example, Kozlowski (2015) conducted a study that found both White and Asian students appear to benefit from positive teacher bias (p.43). The researcher used the Educational Longitudinal Study of

2002, which surveyed over 15,000 students at over 700 schools. The bivariate analysis revealed that Black and Hispanic students "are significantly more likely to believe they are working hard when their teacher disagrees and at fairly large magnitude" (Kozlowski, 2015, p.58). On the contrary, Asian students were more likely to be rated positively by teachers in regards to effort displayed. Kozlowski (2015) notes how this can be the result of the "model minority" stereotype, which creates an expectation that Asian students are high achievers, well-mannered, and perform well academically. This stereotype provides some privilege to Asian students because teachers tend to report high evaluations, even when Asian students self-reported low effort in class (Kozlowski, 2015).

Racial Literacy. Scholars note how discussions surrounding race, especially as a White educator, may prove to be an uncomfortable topic to address. Nevertheless, it is imperative that teachers and school administrators develop racial literacy as a means to challenge and decrease the culture present in the school system. Racial literacy is defined as a "a skill and practice in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race, probe the existence of racism, and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotypes" (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015, p.60). Teachers should be able to have difficult conversations with students in order to reconstruct the discriminatory culture of school systems. Sealey-Ruiz & Greene (2015) also emphasize how as part of racial literacy, teachers not only need to discuss and criticize the racist institutions of the country, but moreover, they must be actively anti-racist in their behavior.

Despite advocacy for racial literacy, many educators opt for a colorblind approach in classroom and school settings. According to the critical race theory, a colorblind approach is simply a position that "camouflages the self-interests of dominant groups and maintains that status quo of inequalities." (Allen & White-Smith, 2014, p.447). This is not a solution for racism,

but rather serves as a means to ignore the problem at hand. By “not seeing color,” teachers try to emphasize how race does not play a role in the classroom environment. However, teachers can only practice a colorblind ideology because they are not the ones being targeted in an oppressive system (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015).

Diversity Among Teachers. A second institutional issues associated with school culture is surprising low rate of diversity in current U.S. teaching programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics ("Fast Facts: Teacher Characteristics and Trends", 2018), during the 2017-18 school year, 80% of public-school teachers were white. This figure is high compared to only 7% of Black teachers, 9% of Hispanic teachers, 2% of Asian teachers, and 2% of Pacific Islander/American Indian/ Alaskan Native in the public school system. Though on its surface this may not seem to have serious implications, current literature points to the underlying repercussions that this lack of diversity may have. A majority of white teachers are women who originate from suburban communities with middle or upper-middle class family background (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Yet, the student population has grown increasingly more diverse over time, and, instead of reflecting such trends, educators are part of a homogenous group inconsistent with its target population (Allen & White-Smith, 2014).

Allen and White-Smith (2014) used the term “academic gatekeepers” to describe how educators have a large impact on a student’s path for social mobility. These teachers, despite not being an accurate reflection of the student body they serve, hold much power in their roles by dictating students’ academic and future experiences. These experiences then have significant repercussions in a student’s adult life. For instance, there are anecdotes from parents of black students, who despite performing well academically, are recommended by their teachers and counselors to pursue community college and vocational programs (Allen & White-Smith, 2014).

Teachers and counselors are, whether intentionally or not, gatekeeping students from pursuing more challenging opportunities which could significantly alter their future lives. By practicing such exclusionary tactics, educators are harming the students and limiting their full capabilities.

***Impact of Racial Mismatch*.** Quinn and Stewart (2019) used the term "student-teacher racial mismatch" to describe this discrepancy found between the student and teacher population and discusses how this racial mismatch can lead to troubling outcomes. For instance, most distinctly is the potential lack of cultural understanding between teachers and students. Teachers who are placed in neighborhoods with vastly different racial, social, and economic backgrounds than them may not be the best equipped to work with these communities without the proper training (Allen & White-Smith, 2014). The lived experience of low-income students of color would be a strikingly different experience than that of the teachers instructing them. This can produce a large disconnect between teachers and students (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). As a result, there can be problems in developing the healthy teacher-student relationship discussed above and create greater risks for the student.

Secondly, this racial mismatch can increase the likelihood of committing racial microaggressions to students of color (Quinn & Stewart, 2019). Microaggressions are defined as "commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Quinn & Stewart, 2019, p.275). These authors also highlight how these teachers may not only be the instigators of these comments, but they may not be able to recognize them when students commit microaggression towards each other, thus allowing harm to continue within the school system. Their survey found that White teachers were less likely than Black participants to attribute differences in jobs, income, and housing for Black and White

Americans as a result of discrimination (Quinn & Stewart, 2019). The authors note how this is highly relevant because these beliefs about discrimination illustrate the disconnect white educators have with racial inequalities. It can significantly shape how educators lead conversation in the classroom and how they respond to student experiences. These factors can thus increase the probability of microaggressions.

Diversity Training as Protective Factor. It should be noted that many of these teachers, despite their disconnect with the communities they serve, are still passionate about education and do want to do what is best for their students. The issue remains more of an institutional problem rather than an individual one. U.S. educational programs have historically done little to prepare these teachers to work with diverse populations (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Thus, one of the main recommendations to remedy the racial mismatch is to advocate for greater diversity within the education section.

For example, Raible and Irizarry (2010) highlight how programming that focuses on diversity can be useful not only to White teachers, but men and women of color can also learn important strategies and understand at a greater extent the intersection of race, gender, and class in a school setting. This programming can help teachers be more critical of policies that can harm their students and work towards solutions instead of remaining complacent. Thus, there should be greater advocacy for such programs that emphasize better training and a greater focus on diversity in the field of education.

Additionally, one study conducted in North Carolina analyzed data from 2007 to 2013 to investigate whether having same-race teachers contributed to any differences in the disciplinary outcomes of Black students (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). The study used several covariates to control for extraneous factors that may affect the disciplinary outcomes. The results indicated that

students who had a greater number of Black teachers had *lower* discipline rates. In fact, "exposure to a large share of same-race teachers significantly reduces the number of reported incidents for Black students, particularly for types of offenses that required more subjective evaluation." (Lindsay & Hart, 2017, p.507). This is significant because it is suggesting how having Black educators can be a protective factor for Black students.

However, Lindsay and Hart (2017) do note that the mechanisms for these results are not clear— meaning that it is not certain *why* there is a decrease in disciplinary actions for Black students with same-race teachers. Some theories discussed include better classroom management, more tolerant of mild misbehavior, and/or better student responses to teachers. Nevertheless, these findings provide compelling evidence for greater diversity in schools as a means to challenge disproportionate discipline policies. In fact, the study actually reveals how non-Black students "saw null effects to small advantages from being matched to Black teachers," demonstrating how increased teacher diversity can lead to many positive outcomes with virtually no drawbacks to the student body as a whole (Lindsay and Hart, 2017, p.507).

School Culture: Role of Students

To have a holistic understanding of the school to prison pipeline, it is critical to understand the perspective of students and their experiences within the school system. Two important components provide insight to this experience: the mental health of students and their perception of school climate. Understanding of mental health provides awareness of the personal difficulties students face and the responsiveness of schools to student needs. Additionally, an understanding of school climate informs the public about the lived realities of students. By evaluating these two components, we are better able to understand the school culture from the

students' perspective and better able to assess the weaknesses in the education system that may directly and indirectly support to the school to prison pipeline.

Mental Health

The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) is an initiative funded by the Health Resource and Services Administration. It aims to evaluate the physical and mental well-being of children aged 0-17 in the United States (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2019). According to its most recent survey, 22.1% of the participants responded that their child has "a mental, emotional, developmental or behavioral (MEDB) problem" (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2019). In addition, the CDC reported that depression and anxiety rates have increased within the last few years ("Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health," 2021). In 2003, only 5.4% of children aged 6 to 17 years were diagnosed with anxiety or depression; by 2012, this figure increased to 8.4%. It is also significant to note that among all the children diagnosed with a behavior disorder, *only* 53.5% of them actually receive treatment. This data calls attention to the limited mental health resources available to children and indicates how many young children who need professional help are not receiving any.

The CDC also highlighted how family and community factors can influence the mental health of children ("Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health," 2021). For instance, children who are living below the federal poverty level are at a *greater risk* for developing a mental or behavioral disorder— in fact, one in five children in these conditions will develop such problems. A large majority of students who comprise the school to prison pipeline are those in low-income communities. These statistics highlight the added risks for low-income students.

There is also evidence to suggest a significant disparity among children of different ethnicities in receiving treatment for mental health problems. Some studies indicate that minority

groups tend to have negative stigmas associated with mental health. African- Americans have been found to distrust medical professionals and the services offered for mental health (Emmons & Belangee, 2018). Because of this distrust, they are less likely to seek out these professionals for diagnosis and treatment. This increases the rates of undiagnosed mental health problems within such communities (Emmons & Belangee, 2018).

Moreover, not only are there economic and cultural barriers for mental health, but there are also institutional factors that limit treatment access for certain communities. The National Council on Disabilities (2011) published a report noting that up to 85% of youth in detention facilities have some form of mental health and/or learning disability. This should have made them eligible to receive special education services in their schools. However, *only 37%* of youth actually received such services during their educational career. This is significant because it demonstrates how a large portion of the student population is not receiving the support that they need. It is worth noting that a disproportionate number of incarcerated students who did not receive special education services were students of color (Emmons & Belangee, 2018, p.143). In reflecting upon these findings from the National Council, the authors Emmerson and Belangee (2018) note how this "lead[s] to the conclusion that many disabled youths in the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems are deprived of an appropriate education that could have changed their position in the school-to-prison pipeline trajectory" (p.143).

School Climate

School climate refers to "the quality and character of school life, typically as reflected in the nature of interactions among adults and students" (Shirley & Cornell, 2012, p.117). Most scholars agree that the concept of school climate is a multidimensional construct that encompasses many different elements, such as safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and

the environment (Suldo et al., 2012). Studies have also supported that school climate can impact various areas, including school engagement, academic achievement, and reduced risk of antisocial behavior (Bracy, 2011). Additionally, there is also research that suggests that positive school climates can lead to less aggression, violence, and sexual harassment in schools (Salle et al., 2018). Thus, there are many benefits for the students in a positive school climate. However, several studies have indicated that students have complex perceptions of school climate, especially in regards to perceptions of safety, support, and discrimination.

Perceptions of Safety. Safety is one of the most critical aspects of the school system. A positive school climate creates a space where students feel safe, both physically and emotionally, and feel motivated in their studies (Shirley & Cornell, 2012). Educators are entrusted by parents to keep their children protected, and so (as mentioned in previous sections), schools have adopted practices like zero-tolerance policies and use of SROs to promote a culture of law and order. As a result of these strategies, schools currently are, overall, very safe environments. Despite this, one area of high interest is the student perception of safety in their schools. This matters because research suggests that positive student perceptions of rules and policies are correlated with safer schools and lower levels of disorder (Bracy, 2011). This can be because students who view the school policies as fair may be more inclined to "accept the authority of the school as legitimate and worthy of being obeyed" (Bracy, 2011, p.368).

One study interviewed and observed students from two high security high schools in the Mid-Atlantic region (Bracy, 2011). The researchers found that students are not against having school resource officers, but do not think that the officers make any serious difference in the school— overall, there was a reported feeling of indifference towards the officers. The same study also found high discontent among the students regarding how the schools handle discipline

and punishment. There were many students who complained about the lack of due process and the failure of the administration to listen to the students (Bracy, 2011). These testimonies reveal how the students feel a sense of powerlessness within the school system and this can have negative long-term effects.

Another cross-sectional study examined the perceptions of school safety among 585 students in a southern high school. The results indicated that about 25% of the students felt unsafe (to some degree) within the last 30 days (Williams et al., 2018). The study also found that 14% of the students reported missing at least one day within that last 30 days because they felt unsafe at school (Williams et al., 2018). However, the researchers actually suspected that this number was much higher since students who feel unsafe may not have reported, may not have been present that day at school, or may have dropped out of school altogether. It is worth noting that there was a racial difference found in the surveys. Nonwhite students were “more likely to report missing school due to safety concerns than White students" (Williams et al., 2018, p.326).

Factors that foster a healthy school climate include the school’s responsiveness to bullying, peer aggression, and misconduct (Shirley & Cornell, 2012). Problems like bullying and school violence impact the degree of safety felt in schools (Williams et al., 2018). Being bullied has been identified as a form of victimization within U.S. schools and negatively affects the well-being of students (Kupchik & Farina, 2016). One study analyzed how school climate and bullying are related by reviewing the data from the 2009 School Crime Supplement of the National Crime Victimization Survey (Kupchik & Farina, 2016). They found that 25% of students reported verbal bullying, 12.7% reported physical bullying, and 5.5% reported cyberbullying. They also found that students who perceive “school rules and punishment as fair,

strict, and consistently enforced, have significantly lower odds of each type of bullying victimization" (Kupchik & Farina, 2016, p.156).

These authors, Kupchik and Farina (2016), speculate how schools contribute to the culture of bullying due to the harsh policies they adopt. Strict school practices (such as zero-tolerance policies), extreme security measures, and a rigid authority structure can model a system of bullying that students may then imitate (Kupchik & Farina, 2016). Students witness an unequal power dynamic at school filled with unfair practices and this can potentially lead to greater levels of bullying among peers (Kupchik & Farina, 2016). They are modeling what they see, and it is therefore of high importance for schools to cultivate a space of respect and support that provides a model for better behavior.

Perceptions of Support. As discussed in the previous section, teacher-student relationships are associated with several positive outcomes for students. However, it is important to consider how perceptions of teacher-student relationships may vary from teacher to student. By understanding how students feel about these relationships, we can bridge the gaps and foster more comprehensive and sustainable relationships.

As described, students most impacted by the school to prison pipeline are low income, students of color. Boys are a particularly vulnerable group, and it is essential that young boys feel supported within their school system. One study explored the perspective of boys of color, ages 12 to 19 years, within teacher-student relationships, focusing especially on their experiences with respect (Liang et al., 2020). The researchers conducted eight focus groups and found that similar themes developed among the different groups. For example, one major theme was school climate and students reported feeling a lack of trust in relationships, power struggle in classrooms, and an inconsistency of school practices (Liang et al., 2020, p.348). There are

several testimonies of students that recount how teachers are unfair and disrespectful, and these students are frustrated that they have such little voice within the system. One student named Marcus remarked:

> "I do not feel like teachers let you talk it out because the second you start to talk they just want to send you to the office for talking back. And if they do let you talk they just sit you in the hallway and you cannot put in your input. They just tell you what they want you to hear. We're all supposed to be able to express ourselves, but we cannot." (Liang et al., 2020, p.348).

This study provides valuable insight in how boys feel unsupported and silenced, all which contribute to negative perceptions of school climate.

It is also important to gauge how students and faculty perceive the school environment differently. In analyzing school perspectives, studies have revealed the perception discrepancy between students and faculty (O'Neill & Vogel, 2020). For example, school employees tend to perceive higher student engagement, higher sense of school belonging, higher levels of safety, and a more positive school climate than do students (O'Neill & Vogel, 2020, p.1493). In an effort to further evaluate these discrepancies, O'Neill and Vogel (2020) conducted a longitudinal study that surveyed over 3,100 middle school students and 409 teachers. They found that school personnel are more likely to report higher levels of school cohesion than students. Additionally, they found that students who reported lower levels of school cohesion than faculty were *more likely* to engage in delinquent behavior. The authors O'Neill and Vogel (2020) suggest that this may be due to students perceiving greater levels of disconnect from their teachers and peers as well as less school support, all which may increase the risk of delinquency. This is significant because it provides support for greater inclusion of student voices to have a realistic

understanding of the school climate. Faculty may be incorrectly assessing their schools as supportive spaces, and thus, should be placing greater emphasis on catering to student needs.

Perceptions of Discrimination. Discrimination is also an important component of school climate. In the study conducted by Liang et al. (2020), students reflected upon the discrimination they felt during school, both racial and gender based. Boys reported that girls receive better treatments in classrooms and felt that teachers believed more in the academic performance of girls than boys (Liang et al., 2020). Additionally, in seven of the eight focus groups, students also reported that educators treated students differently depending on their race and socioeconomic backgrounds (Liang et al., 2020, p.350).

In a similar fashion, one survey of 400 middle school students found that African American students were less likely than Euro-American students to seek out help from teachers and adults with issues like bullying or personal problems (Shirley & Cornell, 2012, p.126). This is significant because it signals how students of color feel a mistrust towards school faculty and are more hesitant to speak to them about personal matters. This has serious implications because the survey also finds that students who are less willing to seek out help are also *more likely* to be referred to the office for disciplinary reasons (Shirley & Cornell, 2012).

Additionally, Verma et al. (2017) argued that it was through the mechanisms of state and school policing that racialization becomes more prevalent. Racialization is “the process by which students come to be regarded (by themselves and the broader society) as a part of the U.S. racial paradigm” (Verma et al., 2017, p.209). The practices of surveillance and profiling cause students to feel excluded and “othered” within their school systems and it negatively impacts their educational experience (Verma et al., 2017). These researchers conducted over 600 interviews in seven different cities across the United States in an effort to gain greater insight on the

experience of racialization among recent immigrant students. The students reported that they felt perceived as "potential threats" in the schools due to the safety policies, surveillance, and profiling occurring within the school (Verma et al., 2017). These practices are directly impacting how students perceive their own racial identities and their feelings of belonging within their own communities. One Latino student expressed his frustration by sharing:

> "And if I was born as a white American, life would be easier. I think Latino people are hunted by the police and stuff like even for breaking small rules. They send them off to prison." (Verma et al., 2017, p. 223).

This testimony speaks to the policing practices present in school. Students of color feel targeted in their own communities and this leads to a disconnect between them and their school system. All these findings suggest the need for more supportive teachers and staff that are responsive to the needs of students of color.

Correlations: Suspensions and Absences

The authoritative school climate theory highlights two important mechanisms associated with school climates: structure and support (Heilbrun et al., 2018). Structure in the school settings refers to having strict but fair disciplinary practices that promote academic success and support refers to the positive perceptions of students regarding their teachers concern for them (Heilbrun et al., 2018, p.327). Using this theory as a framework, Heilbrun et al. (2018) investigate the relationship between an authoritative school climate and suspension rates. The researchers found that schools in which students perceived reported higher levels of structure and support had lower levels of suspension rates. Additionally, they also found that in the context of suspensions, high-disciplinary structure schools had *lower levels* of racial disparities than low-disciplinary structure schools (Heilbrun et al., 2018, p. 333). The racial disparity in high-

disciplinary structure schools was 2.6%, while lower structure schools had a 10.8% difference between its white and black students receiving suspensions. While this is only a correlation, it nevertheless suggests how crucial school climate, specifically school structure, is in the context of the school to prison pipeline because low structure can have detrimental impacts on students of color.

One large study surveyed 25,776 to investigate how student perceptions of school climate affect chronic absences in urban schools (Van Eck et al., 2017). The school district in which these surveys took place were predominantly African American (89%) and about 61% of the students in the district were eligible for federal subsidized school meals (Van Eck et al., 2017). These statistics are relevant because the population most impacted by the school to prison pipeline systems are low income, students of color, and so, this study provides greater insight to the experiences of these students. The researchers Van Eck et al. (2017) found that "chronic absence was significantly lower in the 'positive climate' profile than the "moderate" or "negative" climate profiles," creating a link between school climate and chronic absence (p.98).

Case Studies

Because of how pressing the school to prison pipeline problem is, many educators, activists, and political leaders are calling for initiatives to combat this problem. Few studies have investigated the effectiveness of such programs and the effects these programs have on the community. It is valuable to explore these initiatives to analyze how successful they are in combating the school to prison pipeline. If successful, such programs can model proper interventions for other school districts.

Example #1

One example of a program is the New York City Impact Schools Initiative designed in 2004 (Brady et al., 2007). Despite this being an older study, it nevertheless discusses important implications of the role of school resource officers and risk of excess police presence on school grounds. The NYC Impact Schools Initiative was a response to the growing violence in schools and was created with the intention of promoting safer school environments. The guiding principle behind this initiative was a “zero-tolerance” approach to reduce criminal activity, including minor offenses (Brady et al., 2007). As a means to accomplish this goal, there was a significant increase in the presence of police officers and security at the middle and high schools with the impact initiative program.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the program, a study was conducted during the 2004-2005 school year in schools with the impact program. Demographically, the researchers found that New York City impact schools had higher proportion of African American students (52.59%) when compared to non-impact schools (33.21%) (Brady et al., 2007). Additionally, there were very small rates of Euro-American and Asian American students at impact schools—combined, they comprised only 10.73% of the student population while at nonimpact schools they comprised 32.33% of the population (Brady et al., 2007). This is important because it underlines how there are serious racial differences between impact schools and non-impact schools. As a result of these differences, programs, such as this one, are affecting students of color, specifically African American students, more severely than other students. If harmful, students of color will bear the brunt of the consequences and this will add momentum to the school to prison pipeline. Thus, it is important to evaluate whether these initiatives are helping or harming vulnerable communities.

The researchers found that impact schools had the highest number of suspensions and police incidents prior to implementation of the impact program. Specifically, impact schools had a mean 78.49 suspensions for every 1000 students, compared to a mean 60.50 at other non-impact schools in New York City (Brady et al., 2007, p.469). When analyzing the program's effectiveness, the researchers found little support for its success. Suspension rates and absences actually increased during the 2004 school year. For example, in 2002-2003, suspensions occurred at a rate of 78.5 for every 1000 students; in 2004-2005, it rose to 114.1 for every 1000 students. In regard to criminal activity, there was a slight decrease in major crimes. However, there was an increase in reported noncriminal police incidents— rising from 32.8 per 1000 students to 50.6 per 1000 students (Brady et al., 2007, p.473). From this, it is evident that the program has several limitations. The authors note how "a noticeable shortcoming of New York City's Impact Schools Initiative is the absence of a child- and youth-centered perspective of school safety." (Brady et al., 2007, p.474). As a result, Brady et al. (2007) recommended creating stronger relationships with parents, family members, and community leaders instead of solely focusing on a partnership with the police department. Greater police surveillance is not the solution for these school challenges, and there needs to be a more collaborative approach.

Example #2

In a similar manner, another study investigated the impacts of a school policing program in West Virginia middle and high schools (Zhang, 2019). This study was intended to measure how the school officers improve the safety of schools. To evaluate the program, three years of data was collected from the 2014, 2015, and 2016 school year at 230 schools. The demographics of the sample included students of low income (over two-thirds) and about 10% of minority students (Zhang, 2019). One of the findings was that there was *little difference* between schools

with and without prevention resource officers (PROs) in recorded violent incidents. However, in breaking down statistics by year, Zhang (2019) found a pattern that indicates that the longer a PRO is present at school, there is a decrease in violent crimes, property crimes, and disorder over time (p.53). It is important to note that an effect was not noticed until the third year of PROs implementation. This finding suggests some support that PROs can act as a deterrent to crimes and can also promote greater safety after many years present in schools.

The study also found that schools with PROs had twice as many incidents of drug crime than schools without PROs. It is not to say that PROs lead to greater drug usage in schools. Rather, the author notes how this simply implies that with greater PROs, detections of drug-crimes are more likely to occur due to increased surveillance on students (Zhang, 2019). However, this has a direct impact on the punishments given to students. Zhang (2019) found that there was an increase in out-of-school suspension due to drug-related crimes. There appears to be a connection between PROs and exclusionary zero-tolerance policies, highlighting the risky effects that greater policing has on school communities. The author advises caution for schools considering PROs, especially if it is in the hopes of decreasing the use of exclusionary discipline. There should be careful evaluation of whether PROs are the right fit for the school, and Zhang (2019) recommends the intervention of guidance counselors or social workers as an alternative to officers.

Example #3

Another study investigated the effect of the WISE Arrest Diversion Program in Utica, New York. This program was created as a direct response to the school to prison pipeline because communities had called attention to the criminalization taking place of non-serious misbehaviors that had created a pathway from the classroom to the criminal justice system

(Fader et al., 2015, p.124). Students who have committed low level (but still arrestable) offenses at school were recommended for the WISE program as an alternative to arrest. It is a two-pronged approach that targets two areas: the students and the school. At the student level, the program aims to offer academic and attendance support; at the school level, the program tackles the issues of zero-tolerance policies and police presence by creating alternatives and greater administrative discretion (Fader et al., 2015, p.127).

This program is quite different from the first two programs examined, which solely focused on the relationship between the police and school. As suggested by both programs, the WISE initiative is a much more integrative approach that recognizes the value of including various groups of professionals. For example, under the WISE model, team meetings occur often to review new student cases and discuss whether they should be eligible for the program (Fader et al., 2015). Community organizers, members of the school district, and police officers attend these meetings and provide their perspectives for each case. Once the student is admitted, the parents become involved and all members sign a contract for the program. These details highlight how this is a collaborative and cooperative effort— it is not one person making a decision for the punishment of a student, rather it is a community coming together to decide the best path for the child. The program then provides a variety of resources for the student, including tutoring, mentoring, recreational activities, and check-ins with WISE staff during school (Fader et al., 2015).

The study analyzed data five years prior to the implementation of the WISE program and two years of implementation to have a wider range of data and establish a baseline. During the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school year, the WISE arrest diversion program had a total of 85 participants. Sixty percent of the students were male and about two thirds identified as an ethnic

minority, with 49.4% being African American, 15.3% being Hispanic, and 2.4% being Asian (Fader et al., 2015). The top offenses included harassment, fighting, and theft. In analyzing the pre- and post- results, the researchers found that there were improvements in grades, attendance, and disciplinary referrals, but these improvements were small (Fader et al., 2015, p.136). However, the authors do note that there were some areas that had considerable student-level improvements. For example, there was an 11% increase in GPA by at least 10 points; additionally, 26% of participants missed at least five fewer days, and 15% who received at least three fewer disciplinary referrals (Fader et al., 2015, p.136).

In evaluating the school-level improvements, the researchers found that only three of the 85 students were re-arrested during their time in the program. The authors note how "despite an increase in the number of arrests during the second year of program implementation at Upstate High School, mean changes between the baseline and 2-year program period […] reveal substantial reductions in in-school arrests after program implementation," a total reduction of 42% (Fader et al., 2015, p.132). This is quite significant because it illustrates how there were large effects at an institutional level due to this program. One speculation can be that the program created a positive shift in culture which led to a decrease in arrests. However, there need to be more studies conducted on future years of implementation to fully understand the impact of the WISE program. Additionally, the sample size used in this study was small, and future work should aim to include larger samples.

The authors Fader et al. (2015) note how these findings are very promising as a means of challenging the school to prison pipeline. They also add how the findings suggest that there were greater improvements and successes at the school level (reducing arrest) rather than student level (grades and attendance records). This implies that the problem of the pipeline is more of an

institutional issue than a student one, which reflects what many authors have proposed (Fader et al., 2015, p.138). School efforts like zero-tolerance policies and increased security have created rigid structures that make it more likely for students to be punished. By focusing on alternatives to these school policies and practices, much can be done to reduce the impact of the school to prison pipeline.

Suggestions Based on Case Studies

Alternatives to Suspensions. The case studies illustrate the need to move away from suspensions as the main form of school punishment. Research that suggests suspensions may not be very effective for students with behavioral disabilities, problems with aggression, hyperactivity, poor social skills, and difficult experiences with academics (Chin et al., 2012, p.157). As Chin et al. (2012) notes, schools should push away from a "one-size fits all" when it comes to school punishment and policies. Rather, there should be greater priority to account for the differences among students and to find the method that works best in that specific scenario.

Suspensions have very little value as a school consequence. The purpose of suspension is to punish the student, alert parents of the problems, and protect the school faculty and other students from the suspended student (Chin et al., 2012, p.158). There is no learning or growth taking place for the student who has been punished, but rather, suspensions seem to benefit those impacted by the student's actions. Under a behaviorist model, consequences are meant as a response to an undesired behavior as a signal to the person to stop the behavior (Chin et al., 2012). Suspension, as the consequence, should in theory serve as a way to deter the undesired behavior from reoccurring. But "for some students, the consequence of being suspended is a reinforcer (increases the likelihood of the behavior) rather than a punishment (decreases the likelihood of the behavior), as the suspended students perceive suspensions as an 'officially

sanctioned school holiday'" (Chin et al., 2012, p.158). In other words, some students do not consider suspensions as real punishment because it rewards them with a day off from school. In turn, this can actually lead students to continue engaging in negative behavior because they did not mind their original punishment.

Chin et al. (2012) conducted a study of a pilot program at an elementary school which provided an alternative to suspension when students misbehave. The demographics of the sample consisted of 94% Latino, 3% Anglo, and 1% African American. Ninety two percent of students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The program was a positive behavior support intervention (PBSI) that focused on intervention on four levels: school-wide, class-wide, small-groups, and individual. The belief was that by having alternatives that emphasized skills and learning, students would be less likely to misbehave in the future (Chin et al., 2012). Students received weekly class lessons focused on socio-emotional learning, which discussed issues like anger management, emotional regulation, bullying, and problem solving (Chin et al., 2012, p.162). Moreover, the program also had individual interventions that moved away from a "one-size fits all" approach. Some examples include self-management plans, reflection assignments, behavior contracts, consequences directly related to inappropriate behaviors, individualized socio-emotional training, counseling, parental involvement, and in-school suspensions (Chin et al., 2012, p.163). As part of this program, any one of these or a combination can be recommended for the student.

The study compared data five years before the implementation of the ATS program and found that there were less suspensions once ATS began (Chin et al., 2012). For example, in the 2005-06 school year, there were 57 suspensions; in 2009-10, there were 66 suspensions. By

2010-11 (year of ATS implementation), there were 23 suspensions. Additionally, of the nine students involved in ATS programming, seven (78%) of the students did not reoffend.

However, it should be noted that this study did have limitations in the data collection. It was a qualitative study but had no control groups to examine how effective the program actually was (Chin et al., 2012). Additionally, it was a small sample size and future research should focus on collecting more data to have a greater understanding of the effects of such a curriculum. Nevertheless, this study provided support for potential success of this program and offers encouragement for other schools looking for alternatives to suspensions.

Integration of roles. The case studies highlighted the importance of incorporating several roles within the school system. This framework of an integrated approach is supported by other authors who see the benefit of this model. For instance, Thompson and Alvarez (2013) discussed an integrated school safety model that included school resource officers, school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers. These four groups can work together for the same goals and can support one another in fostering a safe and supportive environment. The authors acknowledge the challenging aspects of school resource officers and how often they can have negative consequences on students. As a means to remedy this, Thompson and Alvarez (2013) recommended having other professional groups present that can bring forth their strengths to foster school success. For example, school counselors can provide universal screening, student career planning, and identify high risk students early on; school psychologists can assess the academic and cognitive function of students and can create planning when necessary; school social workers can conduct social-environmental assessments, communicate with parents and teachers, and organize community services; and school resource officers can focus on public safety and serve as a law-related educator (Thompson & Alvarez,

2013, p.134). By having this collaborative effort, the risks associated with school resource officers can be minimized while offering the services of other groups to students.

Additionally, the role of social workers is also important within the context of shifting the culture of schools. Kyere et al. (2018) argue that social workers can have much advocacy in education sector, such as by voicing student concerns with teachers, collaborating to designing more culturally responsive approaches for an ethnically diverse student population, and emphasizing more anti-bias education strategies at the personal and institutional level (p.430). Kyere et al. (2018) argue that this can lead to drastic changes, most significantly by altering the school climate to be more inclusive, accepting, and supportive. Moreover, it is also critical that school social workers should be aware of the intersection of multiple factors, such as trauma, SES, physical and mental health, child welfare, race, ethnicity, culture, and family situations (McCarter, 2017, p.57). This can help create greater understanding of each individual student and abandon a one size fits all approach.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine the hypothesis of the school to prison pipeline (STPP). This hypothesis aims to describe how certain school policies and practices can harm student outcomes by limiting educational success and contributing to negative life trajectories. The STPP does not mean to imply that all students will come in contact with the criminal justice system at one point in their life. Rather, the hypothesis serves to highlight how certain school practices can exacerbate the problem of youth and adult incarceration, especially in communities of color. The STPP sheds light on the risk factors currently in education and creates a sense of urgency to resolve these problems.

By evaluating zero-tolerance policies, school safety, and school culture, research supports that these components perpetuate, to some extent, the continuation of the pipeline. Zero-tolerance policies create an exclusionary disciplinary practice that significantly harms students. There is much evidence suggesting that these practices are not useful deterrents to misbehaviors and instead increase the probability of student dropout. In regard to school safety, school resource officers provide little help for students and contribute to greater use of zero-tolerance policies. School culture also highlights the need for improved teacher-student relationships and better support for students in terms of academic achievement and decreasing racial bias.

There is still much work that needs to be done regarding the school to prison pipeline. Because it is a new concept, there are a limited number of studies focusing on ways to stop the pipeline. More empirical research should be conducted to understand how the pathway from school practices contribute to incarceration. In sum, students deserve an equitable education, regardless of their racial, financial, or social background and there needs to be efforts to challenge this process.

Below are some recommendations for educators, school institutions, and researchers as they attempt to challenge the STPP:

- **Operationalize terms**: decrease vagueness in the term “school to prison pipeline” and create more clarity for audiences.
- **Effective research**: there should more tightly controlled research with multiple control groups to accurately evaluate the STPP.
- **Decrease reliance on exclusionary policies**: limit use of suspensions and expulsions as means of punishment; instead, opt for consequences that serve to educate the student about their misbehavior and to promote personal growth.

- **Use an integrated approach for student discipline:** limit use of SROs and opt for programs that include a greater range of professionals, such as school counselors, psychologists, and social workers.
- **Diversity**: increase diversity in teacher programs and increase training on racial biases.

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