

School Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events



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Topic Summary

A recent [video](#) of a rough takedown and arrest, in which a police officer (“School Resource Officer”) in a South Carolina school flips over a high school student and her desk, has brought the “School-to-Prison Pipeline” topic into the headlines.

Behavior that once led to a trip to the principal’s office and a detention, such as school uniform violations, profanity, and “talking back,” now often leads to suspension, expulsion, and/or arrest. Largely as a result of “zero tolerance” policies that mandate harsh punishments for even minor misbehavior in schools,

3.3 million children are suspended or expelled from school each year, about double the rate of the 1970s. In addition, schools have increasingly become dependent on school-based police officers, commonly known as School Resource Officers (SROs), to act as disciplinarians. In 2009, about 68% of students reported the presence of security guards and/or police officers in school, whereas in 1975 only 1% of principals reported police presence in their schools.

Harsh school discipline policies disproportionately impact students of color, students with disabilities, and students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/questioning (LGBTQ). [Data](#) from the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights shows that black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than their white peers and black girls are six times as likely to be suspended as white girls. Studies have found little difference in students' behavior across racial lines to account for the disproportionality; African American students tend to receive harsher punishment for less serious behavior, and are more often punished for subjective offenses, such as "loitering" or "disrespect." Similarly, students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive out-of-school suspensions as students with no disabilities and LGBTQ youth are much more likely than their heterosexual peers to be suspended or expelled.

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education jointly issued guidance for schools to assist them in implementing student discipline without discriminating on the basis of race, color or national origin. The guidance urges schools to conduct training for all school staff that includes alternatives to "zero tolerance" and harsh discipline policies. The guidance also encourages schools to do trainings that improve staff awareness of "their implicit or unconscious biases and the harms associated with using or failing to counter racial and ethnic stereotypes."

We define the School-to-Prison Pipeline as follows:

A set of policies and procedures that drive our nation's schoolchildren into a pathway that begins in school and ends in the criminal justice system. Zero tolerance and other harsh discipline policies that often impose suspensions, expulsions and arrests increase the likelihood that students will drop out of school. Students who drop out of school, in turn, are much more likely to go to jail or prison later in life. Studies show that students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students are more likely to be suspended, expelled or arrested in school than their peers, even though evidence shows that there is no difference in students' behavior to explain the different treatment.

Age

12 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- Have you seen the [video](#) of the girl in South Carolina and how did you feel when you watched it?
- How does the information you heard relate (or not) to your experiences in your school?
- Are there police officers ("School Resource Officers") in your school? How do you and your friends/classmates feel about having them or not having them in school?
- What do you think someone's race, ability, sexual orientation or gender identity has to do with school discipline?
- What do you think should happen with students who talk back or are disrespectful to teachers?

Questions to Dig Deeper

- How do you think the School-to-Prison Pipeline works? Can you describe it in your own words?

- What are your school's discipline policies/practices? What works well and what is unfair about those policies?
- What do you think school administrators and SROs should do differently so there aren't differences in how students are treated?

(The "Related to this Resource" and Additional Resources section provide articles and information that address these questions.)

Ideas for Taking Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?

- Find out more about the numbers of [student referrals to law enforcement](#) in your state; if those statistics reveal disparities, write a letter to your local Congressperson to share your thoughts and concerns.
- Educate others about the School-to-Prison Pipeline: share information on social media, talk with friends and classmates or organize an educational forum in your school.
- Learn more about what advocacy organizations such as [Dignity in Schools](#), [Children's Defense Fund](#) and the [Advancement Project](#) are doing about this issue and join their efforts.

Additional Resources

- [School-to-Prison Pipeline](#) (ADL infographic)
- [The School-to-Prison Pipeline, Explained](#) (Vox)