Understanding the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Potential Solutions

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In the 2011-2012 school year, over 300,000 youth throughout the United States dropped out of high school without obtaining a degree. These students are at a much higher risk for making contact with the law, which often leads to incarceration and far bleaker outcomes in educational and vocational achievement. The United States' high incarceration rates of its population are closely linked to low academic achievement among adjudicated youth. However, the demographics of this population present disparities that exist in several areas: race, gender, and mental health. This article describes the problematic and disparate mass incarceration of youth within the United States, explains the school-to-prison pipeline that contributes to these disparities, and provides suggestions for improving the treatment of youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

Each year the United States houses roughly 2.2 million individuals in residential facilities according to the World Prison Brief (Institute for Criminal Policy Research, n.d.). This is more than any other country in the world, and over half a million more prisoners than the runner-up, China, despite having a nationwide population over four times smaller. In fact, there are so many prisoners that the occupancy level of U.S. correctional institutions is at 102% of the official capacity of 2.157 million people. Incarcerating that many people is extremely expensive, costing roughly $88,000 annually to incarcerate a single juvenile, and nearly $5.7 billion for juveniles in total (Justice Policy Institute, 2009). Recidivism rates are not promising either. As many incarcerated juveniles have been removed or dropped out of school, many are also without a high school diploma. Upon release from correctional facilities, students without a diploma are at a huge disadvantage. Unlikely to return to the schools in which they have often experienced failure, students are left to find employment without having graduated high school, having typically very little work experience, and having spent time in correctional facilities – all factors working against their success.

When individuals leave prison and are unable to find jobs or return to school, they are likely to commit another crime and recidivate, further increasing their chances of being incarcerated as an adult. Not only is recidivism detrimental to the incarcerated individual, but it is extremely expensive and unproductive for the country to pay for people to be incarcerated instead of having them serve as productive members of society.

Based on national statistics, the average incarcerated juvenile will be a minority male, who has dropped out of school or is struggling academically, with one or more mental disorders. In many cases, students fitting this description often make contact with law enforcement and are incarcerated through the school-to-prison-pipeline, which describes a combination of policies and practices that "push our nation's school children, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems" (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015). This pipeline often begins in low-performing schools where there is a lack of appropriately trained staff and funding. Zero tolerance policies and "test based accountability regimes" result in students with academic and behavioral problems being removed from regular public schools. They are often sent to disciplinary or alternative schools if they have had no legal trouble, though there are usually even fewer resources available to the neediest students at these institutions. These same students often struggle with attendance, low test scores, and conduct issues, which combine to increase their chances of making contact with the law.

In order to improve the climate of juvenile justice, steps must be taken to reform the practices and inequalities which funnel minority, at-risk youth into residential facilities. Students who are at risk for academic failure, or who show signs of struggling with mental illness, should be provided with the resources and community support needed to stay in the classroom, graduate high school, and find general success as young adults.

Characteristics of Incarcerated Youth

In regards to gender, males make up the majority of those youth incarcerated in residential placements. Nationwide, men comprise more than 90% of prisoners (Institute for Criminal Policy Research, n.d.). Among youth during 2013, roughly 80 and 85% of incarcerated youth were male in the state of Indiana and the United States, respectively. While the total number of incarcerated youth decreased in the last 20 years from over 105,000 in 1997 to over 54,000 in 2013 as it became clear mass incarceration of youth was problematic for the nation, males have by-and-large dominated juvenile residential facilities (Sickmund et al., 2015). This is significant, especially considering that males comprised only 51% of the population under the age of 18 during 2013 (Sickmund et al., 2015).

Race is another area where disparities present themselves. Among youth under the age of 18 in the United States in 2010, around 73% of the population was white/Caucasian and around 15% were black/African American. However, whites made up only 32% of the incarcerated youth while blacks made up nearly 41% (Sickmund et al., 2015). These disparities can be traced back to the schools, however, where minorities are often removed from the system at much higher rates than white students, despite similar offenses. Minority students are nearly twice as likely to drop out, and in federal prisons just under two-thirds of adult males never received their high school diploma. Thus, low educational attainment can be linked to racial

disparities that funnel minority youth out of school systems at much higher rates than white youth.

The presence of mental health disorders is also highly prominent among incarcerated students, and this is often a major contributing factor in the disruptive behavior that leads to youth being removed from schools or making contact with law enforcement and being incarcerated. Learning disabilities are one of the most common mental health issues, with roughly 40% of incarcerated students being enrolled in special education classes (Rovner, 2016). The large majority of incarcerated youth also have a history of trauma, which leads to high rates of emotional behavioral disorders. Almost 80% of incarcerated youth have witnessed violence in their homes, with 80% of girls experiencing physical abuse and 77% experiencing sexual abuse during their youth (Rovner, 2016). Many are also in public housing and face chronic poverty, which can have serious implications on mental health over one's lifespan. When youth face these issues at home, or suffer from untreated mental illness, it is unreasonable to expect that they will behave as well as students who are not experiencing these same traumas and mental illnesses – especially when they are not receiving any support or treatment, medical or otherwise. The combination of racial and gender disparities, along with high instances of mental illness among incarcerated youth, paint a picture which suggests that for the majority of incarcerated youth, the odds were already stacked against them.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The term "school-to-prison pipeline" encompasses various policies or practices that funnel youth in schools "out of classrooms and into juvenile and criminal justice systems" (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015). As previously described, this pipeline unequally targets minorities with educational or mental health deficits and affects young males more severely. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (2015), this pipeline begins as a result of two primary factors: failing public schools and a general focus on school discipline, which includes zero-tolerance policies and law enforcement presence in schools.

When a public school is considered failing, it is usually due to a lack of necessary resources. Often times, there is a teacher shortage, resulting in overly large class sizes. This makes classroom management difficult, and can lead teachers to respond to poor behavior by removing the child from a classroom in an attempt to regain control and attend to the needs of the other students. Because these schools are often desperate for any help they can get, these teachers may be underqualified and have minimal training in classroom management, amplifying this issue. Funding shortages also mean that there are shortages of other important staff, such as counselors or special education teachers, who would otherwise help with the students whose behavior is causing problems in the regular classroom. These funding shortages can also translate to outdated textbooks and teaching materials, providing students with a sub-par education. As educational achievement is a critical protective factor in avoiding contact with the law, students in failing schools face increased contact with or involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice systems (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015).

In addition to a general lack of resources, many public schools have an emphasis on discipline which may result from zero-tolerance policies and policing of schools. Zero-tolerance policies mean

that when a student violates a school rule, they are subject to strict punishments that are often irrationally severe. For example, students may be expelled for minor infractions such as bringing nail clippers to school or suspended for tardiness and given no warning or chance to improve their behavior (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015). As the statistics suggest, these punishments are unequally implemented among minority students, students with mental health issues, or students with low academic achievement. Unfortunately, these students who are already most at risk for making contact with law enforcement are targeted and far more frequently removed from the classroom through suspensions or expulsions, disrupting their learning process and further increasing their chances of becoming involved with juvenile justice systems.

In addition to zero-tolerance policies, the presence of law enforcement such as security guards, police officers, or school resource officers, increases the amount of disciplinary action taken when behavioral issues arise in the student population. Instead of a teacher dealing with a student who refuses to participate or comply with school rules, the police officer on duty might be summoned. The presence of law enforcement often escalates these situations, and many officers are not trained specifically to work in schools with youth. Thus students sometimes face a much harsher response from the officer than they would from a teacher or principal, as officers are used to responding to disobedience on the street with force. The student might be arrested due to a conflict with an officer that started as a minor violation of a school rule. The pipeline initiates student contact with law enforcement either through in-school discipline or from suspending or expelling students who are then unsupervised

and unengaged in their communities, eventually resulting in students being sent to juvenile correctional facilities (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015). However, these disciplinary practices do not address the mental health disorders, lack of school resources, or challenging home environments that many of these students face. These practices respond to behavioral issues without acknowledging or addressing the root cause of the issues.

Currently, there are several laws such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that place mandates upon correctional facilities and schools which affect youth diagnosed with a disability or mental health disorder. These laws are designed to ensure that all students have equal chance to succeed academically, both in public schools and in correctional facilities. The ESSA states that "every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will" (Civic Impulse, 2017). Part of the ESSA requires juvenile correctional facilities to provide or help coordinate services for the student, such as drug cessation treatments, health exams, and counseling, as well as facilitating the transition process of the juvenile from the correctional facility to school. The success of these students is measured by test scores and states are subject to a variety of sanctions if schools are not meeting standards of proficiency, as defined by individual states (Civic Impulse, 2017).

The IDEA focuses more specifically on the educational requirements for students with disabilities. In part, it requires that juvenile correctional facilities complete individualized education programs (IEPs) for all students with disabilities. Similar to the

ESSA, it mandates that all IEPs discuss academic and functional goals and the services that are being provided. If a student has been identified as at-risk for psychopathy, for example, or displays severe antisocial behaviors, they could then be referred to individual counseling or behavioral therapy programs through their IEP. While it is not ideal that the student is incarcerated, legislation such as this can provide opportunities for early intervention that might otherwise not be initiated in an overwhelmed school system (Ochoa et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, even these pieces of legislation designed to assist youth with disabilities can result in a climate that works against these same students. For already failing public schools, legislation such as the ESSA which provides funding based on school achievement on standardized testing can encourage schools to push out failing or troublesome students in an attempt to raise school scores. Additionally, the requirements set by ESSA and IDEA laws are often not accompanied by the funding required to implement the mandates, leaving students without the services they desperately need to succeed (Klein, 2015). Frequently, these students who are causing problems in schools are then funneled into disciplinary schools or alternative schools, which have a tendency to be even less sufficiently funded, in spite of having a population of students who likely has the greatest demand for additional support in both staff and educational materials. Though designed with the intention of providing a special educational environment for students struggling in public schools, these alternative environments often have the effect of increasing a student's chance of making contact with law enforcement and inhibiting their academic achievement.

Suggestions

There are many potential solutions to the issue of mass incarceration of youth in the United States. Some of these solutions address the school-to-prison pipeline with the goal of keeping students in school and avoiding contact with the juvenile or criminal justice system in the first place. These include addressing issues in training of teachers and student resource officers within schools, identifying youth with mental health issues sooner, and modifying disciplinary policies to acknowledge the cause of behavioral issues within schools. Other solutions acknowledge that until this system and practice of incarcerating youth has been dismantled, the juvenile correctional facilities will be full of youth, and thus address the sentencing and rehabilitation of youth who have already made contact with the system. These include alternative sentencing for youth, mental health courts, and improved transition services for youth exiting correctional facilities and returning to their communities.

First, teachers need to be given more training on classroom management. In order to keep students with behavioral issues in the classroom, teachers need more support in learning how to manage these admittedly difficult students without simply removing them from the environment. Staff in disciplinary roles, such as School Resource Officers (SROs), usually police officers stationed in the school, also need to be trained on how to deal with discipline in a school setting in a way that is appropriate for youth. Teachers and SROs should be trained on how to recognize signs of potential mental illness, whether emotional/behavioral disorders, ADHD, PTSD, or other conditions that might impact a student's capacity to learn and follow school rules, and incorporate this knowledge into their interactions with

students.

Second, there needs to be increased communication between school administration and SROs about the appropriate role of each staff member. The intention of an SRO is to serve as a counselor and teacher primarily and to serve as law enforcement only in extreme cases where force is absolutely necessary, or legal repercussions are non-negotiable (such as in the case of dealing drugs or bringing guns to school). Currently, teachers often expect SROs to forcibly remove students whenever they are behaving disruptively without understanding the scope of the SROs role (Ochoa et al., 2016). Both teachers and SROs should be educated on the school-to-prison pipeline as well, and provided training on being culturally sensitive to provide the most unbiased response to disruptive school behaviors.

Finally, schools need to be more aware of the impact of mental illness and general environmental factors that inhibit student performances in school. When mental illness is present, the appropriate counselors and academic modifications need to be in place. Many disorders such as bipolar disorder, depression, or ADHD, which have a strong genetic component, will not respond to punishment because it ignores the biological basis of the disorder. A student suffering abuse at home may be experiencing PTSD and may need special counseling to cope with the trauma at home. If bad behavior is a result of abuse, for example, being forcibly removed from a classroom by an SRO will likely only exacerbate the trauma instead of helping. Understanding the cause of disruptive school behaviors is critical in providing students with the best chance at succeeding, academically and otherwise.

For students who have already made contact with law enforcement, there are several promising alternatives. Mental health courts are promising for both youth and adults who have serious mental illness. Instead of sentencing someone to prison for a crime they committed as a direct result of their mental illness, such as in the midst of a psychotic breakdown stemming from schizophrenia, the individual would be required to seek regular psychiatric help and comply with their medications. This more accurately addresses the root of the criminal behavior, and prevents creating a cycle where mentally ill individuals are sent to prison, rehabilitated through consistently supervised medication and treatment, released into the community without supports, and then faced with relapse when they are unable to continue the strict medication and therapeutic cycles often required for serious mental illness.

In addition to alternative forms of sentencing, all youth already sentenced to correctional facilities should have comprehensive transition services that continue once the student is released from the facility. Currently, students who are released without a probation or parole officer have very little support but are typically at a disadvantage academically and vocationally. Others are in need of mental health services that are often discontinued upon the youth's release from the facility, as there is limited supervision requiring the youth to continue seeing a psychiatrist or attending regular support groups. Community mentors can be helpful in this area, serving as positive role models, helping youth set and work toward goals, and connecting youth to other community resources such as counseling or volunteer groups that can address the needs of the youth and encourage them to stay positively engaged in their community.

Conclusion

The prison system in the United States is hugely overwhelmed and more youth are failing out of school or behaving disruptively in class, resulting in enormous numbers of incarcerated youth. The students who are being suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement are overwhelmingly minorities with mental health issues and low academic achievement. This is

made even more extreme by the school-to-prison pipeline, which tends to target these youth, funneling them out of schools where these students often complicate the job of teachers with large class sizes, and reflecting poorly on schools who rely on high test scores to receive funding. Coupled with an emphasis on discipline rather than rehabilitation, including zero-tolerance policies and inappropriately utilized SROs in schools, students who have the most severe needs are punished for behavioral issues that usually stem from environmental trauma and mental illness.

Modifications should be made in the school system at all levels; federally, more money needs to be allocated to schools whose student population demonstrates a higher need for additional support in the form of more teachers, counselors, and up-to-date teaching materials. Teachers and SROs need improved training to manage classrooms and students with severe behavioral issues and also need improved collaboration and communication to understand each other's roles and work together more effectively for the benefit of the students. For students already caught in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, alternatives such as mental health courts should be considered as more effective methods at rehabilitating students with behavioral problems. Greater transition support should be provided to youth

returning home from correctional facilities as well; mentors should be considered as individuals who might help fill this service gap. With further research into best-practice school and correctional facility interventions as well as implementation of practices already known to be effective, the number of youth newly incarcerated each year will be curbed and youth already involved in the justice systems will have greater chances at success.

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