

Zero-Tolerance Leads to Prison Pipeline

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PRE-READING:

1. Discuss the terms “pipeline,” “zero-tolerance,” and “tough love.”
2. Look up and/or share definitions of: infraction, inherently.

In 2010, Massachusetts spent almost \$46,000 per person in jail while only spending about \$13,000 per pupil in our public schools. Why are we spending more of our tax dollars to keep people behind bars rather than spending more on educating our children—our youth—our future? Why is it that not enough is being done to prevent youth from being incarcerated? Why is there an increasing rate of young people dropping out of school?

I was mostly a good girl when I was in school (or at least enough to get by and do well). I was

sent to detention a few times because I was late for school but never for anything major. Now as an adult supporting youth and adults in realizing their full potential (academic, career and otherwise), I find that many of them quit high school because of minor infractions—like the kind I used to get detention for. I have often wondered why so many young people in my community are dropping out of school.

Well, it turns out, they're not just *dropping* out. Many are being *pushed* out.

“Zero-tolerance” policies criminalize minor infractions of

It turns out, young people are not just dropping out of school. Many are being pushed out.



This mural was part of the art exhibit, *Anonymous Boston*, shown in Boston in December 2011. It illustrates the school-to-prison pipeline. The artist is Kwest. Used here with permission.



school rules, such as fighting, talking back to teachers, arriving late to school, and even for being out sick for too long. In Texas, hundreds of children appear in court every day on charges of misbehaving on the school bus, getting into fights, smoking cigarettes, or wearing inappropriate clothing. When I was in school, we got in trouble for breaking school rules, but we didn't get *arrested* and treated like criminals. Do we think handcuffs and detention centers are the type of "tough love" these students need? I am not excusing the students' behavior, but something is making them act out. There needs to be a better assessment of why these young people are behaving as they do, rather than punishing them for not knowing how to control their emotions.

According to the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), the "school-to-prison pipeline refers

to the national trend of criminalizing, rather than educating, our nation's children. The pipeline encompasses the growing use of zero-tolerance discipline, school-based arrests, disciplinary alternative schools, and detention to marginalize our most at-risk youth and deny them access to education." Even the American Bar Association has condemned zero-tolerance policies as inherently unjust: "Zero tolerance has become a one-size-fits-all solution to all the problems that schools confront. It has redefined students as criminals, with unfortunate consequences."

The worst part about this is that there is no evidence that indicates whether zero-tolerance policies make schools safer or improve student behavior. If anything, research suggests the op-

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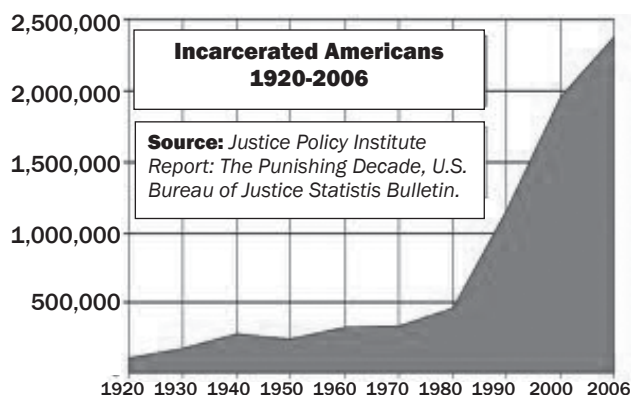
Estimated Prison Population by Race and Gender								
	Male					Female		
	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
Total	1,443,500	479,000	563,500	303,500	105,200	51,200	28,200	17,500
% of Total		33%						

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, December 2010, Revised October 2011, p. 27. **Note:** The white, Black and Hispanic prisoners do not add up to the total because this chart does not include all races. Totals are based on prisoners with a sentence of more than one year.

Make Sense of the Chart

1. What percentage of the total prison population is each racial group, by gender? Write the percentage in the blank. The white male percentage has been done for you.
2. Write three true statements about the data in the chart.
3. Do you think the prison population is proportionate by race and gender to the population as a whole? Write three statements about the relationship between the prison population and the larger population. How could you verify your statements?

What's Age Got to Do with It?



positive: the overuse of suspensions and expulsions may actually increase the likelihood of later criminal misconduct.

As the Manager of a GED program in Boston for the last eight years, I have seen the average age of our students decrease over time. Most of our students are now between the ages of 17 and 26 and most of them left high school because they didn't feel they had the support they needed to

feel comfortable enough to want to learn. Most of them felt misunderstood and unappreciated. Some of them got into fights because they felt they were not being heard.

As educators, it is our responsibility to support our youth and adults with open hearts and minds. Together we can stop this prison pipeline by providing our students with options, offering various educational pathways and showing them our love and support no matter what.

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Sources: <www.mass.gov/eopss/agencies/doc/annual-report-2010-12-15-11.pdf>; <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/ppx.aspx>; ABA Juvenile Justice Committee, ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY: REPORT (Feb. 2001); <www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/09/texas-police-schools?fb=optOut>.

Take it Further

What is most surprising or interesting to you about this article?

Have you ever experienced zero-tolerance policies? If so, where? (Your family, workplace, or school?) How did these policies affect you?

What can you do?

JOIN WITH OTHERS and investigate the zero tolerance policies in your school system.

LEARN MORE AT: <www.childrensdefense.org/programs-campaigns/cradle-to-prison-pipeline/>. Click on your state to get a fact sheet on what is happening in your state regarding poverty, health care, education,

child welfare, juvenile justice system and incarceration, and community violence. These fact sheets also list action steps.

GET IN TOUCH WITH the ACLU for more support at <www.aclu.org>.

LEARN ABOUT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE. For example, watch "Interrupters"—a film about a community of people in Chicago working together to "interrupt" violence. See the preview of the film and learn more at: <www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/interrupters/>.

Read more on this topic in the winter (2011-12) issue of *Rethinking Schools* <www.rethinkingschools.org>.