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THEMES in the NEWS

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School to Prison

By UCLA IDEA

For decades, social justice advocates have targeted the "school-to-prison pipeline." *Pipeline* is a powerful metaphor: When plans, products or people enter one end of the pipe, they're expected to exit the other end fully suited to their final purpose. There is a prison pipeline that begins in school and ends in jail, and it needs to be plugged.

This week, two reports further documented the phenomenon and its racial implications. In National Education Policy Center's "Discipline Policies, Successful Schools, and Racial Justice," author Daniel Losen analyzed data from the federal department of education's civil rights office. Often, entry into the pipeline begins with a minor infraction such as disruptive behavior, bringing cell phones to school or dress code violations. The data showed that black students were suspended three times as often as white students, even though no evidence suggests that students of color misbehave more often than whites.

Minority students with disabilities were also suspended at much higher rates than white students—16.6 percent of black students compared to 6.7 percent white students. Compounding the disparity is the greater tendency to classify African American and Latino children and youth as special education students.

"They're seen as the bad kids, and then special education becomes a feeder system to [juvenile hall] to prison," said Patricia Fitzsimmons, director of a child advocacy clinic at University of San Francisco.

Higher incidence of suspensions and expulsions is related to higher school dropout rates. Students who miss days or more of classroom time have a difficult time making it up.

"The massive increase in the use of suspension out of school, which is a really important indicator of whether or not a kid's going to drop out, is something a school can control," Losen said.

In a second report released this week, the United States is shown to have a hyper-reliance on juvenile detentions. And yet, locking up students fails to reduce youth crime, exposes them to violence and abuse, and requires enormous resources from states. According to The Annie E. Casey Foundation report "No Place for Kids," roughly 336 of every 100,000 youths nationwide is locked up in some facility; that's more than five times that of South Africa—the nation with the second highest rate.

Not surprisingly, the report found that early incarceration had a negative effect on educational success. In one study mentioned, exposure to juvenile detention by age 16 led to a 26 percent lower chance of graduating high school by age 19.

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Losen argues that educators can do something about the pipeline. First, they should routinely review their data, with an eye toward the racial and ethnic breakdown of their disciplined students and type of infraction. Combining classroom-management training, interventions, and school-wide atmospheres of support rather than punishment would enable more learning and safer campuses. We would add that these reviews and trainings should include parents and community groups both for their insights and for the schools' public accountability.

Later this fall, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights will release a national dataset breaking down suspension and expulsion rates by race and gender for public high schools. Access to this data creates a historic opportunity for educators and community groups to take stock of disciplinary practices at local public schools. Californians should make this a teachable moment and develop fair and meaningful alternatives to the prevailing over-reliance on strategies that push young people off the path to graduation and into the school-to-prison pipeline.

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