



## Prelude to Prison: Youth Perspectives on School Suspension

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Partnerships  
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## Center for Community Alternatives

*The Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) promotes reintegrative justice and a reduced reliance on incarceration through advocacy, services and public policy development in pursuit of civil and human rights.*





## Overview of Presentation

“I would like to tell you what it is like to be sent to an alternative school. I fell behind in my school work. I am in the 10th grade but I have to take 9th grade classes. I felt like I was in jail when I was in the alternative school. Sometimes I had to be checked three times a day. It is very uncomfortable being searched ... It is more uncomfortable for girls because sometimes they check you around your most private areas. I feel like the alternative school system has set up kids like me to fail. You go back to school so far behind that you just want to drop out of school. We need to look at why kids like me are suspended and if at all possible get rid of alternative schools.”



## School-to-Prison Pipeline

- Elements
  - Criminalization of normative adolescent behavior
  - Police in school
  - High stake testing
  - Zero tolerance discipline and school suspension

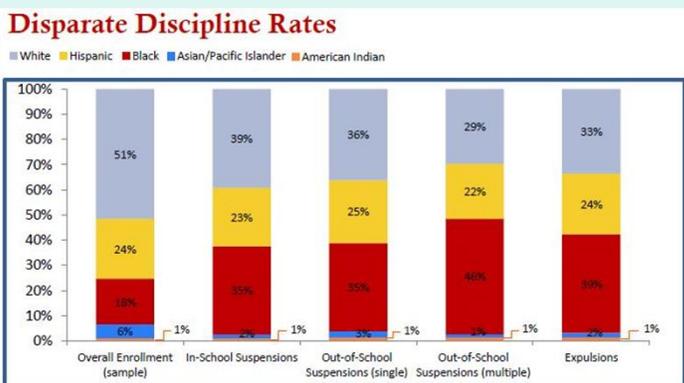
Suspension → Students who are suspended are more likely to dropout of school →

Dropping out → More than triples the likelihood that a person will be incarcerated later in life





“Education is the civil rights issue of our time.”



U.S. Secretary of State Arne Duncan



## Disparities at Home

City	% students of color in district	students of color as a % of OSS suspensions
Albany	79%	92%*
Buffalo	75%	85%*
Rochester	88%	89%*
Syracuse	69%	81%*
NYC	86%	95%**
NYS	47%	53%*

Sources: \* US DOE OCR data 2006; \*\*US DOE OCR data 2009. There are criticisms of the accuracy of OCR 2009 data but there are no other publically available data on suspensions by district by student race and ethnicity.

## Long term consequences of criminalization and suspension

THE COMMON APPLICATION  
For Undergraduate College Admission

### Disciplinary History

Have you ever been found responsible for a disciplinary violation at any educational institution you have attended from the 9th grade (or the international equivalent) forward, whether related to academic misconduct or behavioral misconduct, that resulted in a disciplinary action? These actions could include, but are not limited to: probation, suspension, removal, dismissal, or expulsion from the institution.      Yes              No



## Prelude to Prison:

### Schools and Social Reproduction



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## Voices of Youth in the School to Prison Pipeline: Interview Study with Suspended Students

- Demographics
  - Sex: 52% female; 48% male
  - Race/Ethnicity: 76% Black; 20% Latino; 4% White
  - Prior School Suspension: 64% yes
  - Juvenile Justice System Involvement: 44% yes
  - Parental or Sibling Incarceration: 100% yes



## Back Stories Family Connections

Rosa: “[I love] Important events like when we all get together and stuff. .... And me and my sister, we have a good relationship, we talk all the time. ...And then my dad comes over whenever I’m having trouble ... He comes over all the time. My mom and dad have a good relationship. They always playin’ around.”

Jose: “Because she’s the only one who’s been there for me. She been since I was zero age....she puts a roof over my head. She’s always asking me about school and stuff.”





## Back Stories

### Trauma and Violence

Kwame: "Like people, ...they just shoot anybody or try to hurt anybody. And it happens to my family. My aunt died and my two uncles died. Like every night I like pray ... I try not to think about them so that I won't try killing myself or something like that."

Damian "... I got jumped a few months back. I got my knuckle broke and somebody stabbed me in my head. And somebody kicked me in my eye. .... [They jumped me] Because I live, used to live over there. They used to think I was from there. I am not with nobody."

**Prelude to Prison:**  
Student Perspectives on School Suspension



## The Offense Behaviors

Rosa: "Like during the whole school year, we just kept arguing. And then finally at the end of the school year we both just had enough and so we decided that we was going to fight."

Damian: "I was suspended ..because I was charged with persistent disobedience. Like getting in trouble too much and having teachers complain to the principal ... and they were tired of me and all that stuff."



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## The Interrogation

Jena: “They [the officers] said, “What happened?” But when you go to stuff like that, you got like tell them what they want to hear. Like you got to tell them that you really did it and you are guilty. Because they don’t want to hear, ‘Oh, I didn’t do it.’ They want to hear that you did it and now you got to be punished for it.”



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## The Witnesses

Jalil: “I was mad because teachers always believe other teachers over the child and they never want to listen to us.”



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## The Trial

Rashaun: “It’s just like court once you go in there. Pretty much you go in there, they overrule you and they give you your time.”

Roland: “[My suspension hearing was] horrible because of the things that they were saying..... They was just trying to make me look like I was a bad kid, like I was literally a nobody and that hurted me too.”



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## The Verdict and the Mandatory Sentence

Ray: “They [school administrators] said to me that they know I didn’t do nothing wrong, but if my hand touches the knife then they have no choice but to send me to Brig. But I started crying because I didn’t understand ... because I thought that I was doing the right thing by taking the knife away so the other student wouldn’t be hurt.”



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## Reception: Walking through the Gates

Donela: “Brig is like jail .You got to take off all your stuff when you get in there. You got to take your shoes off and get searched. Then when you go up the stairs, you have to take off all of your clothes, all your, like jewelry and stuff and put it in this big old box. And then take your shoes off again and put them in the box. And then walk through the metal detectors and then you get wanded down. If you beep, they are going to take you in the bathroom and tell you to empty out all of your pockets. And then they move around and unzip your pants and all that stuff.”



## Serving Time

Celia “.. They really don’t do nothing in Brig. Like we all used to just walk out of the class, go play through the hallways, run up and down the stairs and we never used to get in trouble. So nobody really cared, but you wasn’t really learning nothing.”

Donela: “I can’t learn nothing in two hours that I could learn in six hours that I should go to school for. They shoving a bunch of papers in your face and you supposed to do it in two hours....Instead I could go to school at 8 o’clock until 3 o’clock; you know how much I could learn in them whole bunch of hours? What I can learn in two hours? I can’t.”





## Reentry: Continued Stigma and Exclusion

Jena: "He, [the police officer], like he assumes just because now that I go back to Kennedy, he assume because I fought once, that I'm a bad girl. He judges me before he knows. He don't know me. He don't know that I'm a good girl."

Raquan: "It makes people feel like they can't do nothing with their life. They just drop out."

Damian: "I used to feel worthless ... Because teachers used to tell me that and junk. Like when you feel bad already and they tell you ' You ain't going to be nothing. You going to be like a gang member. You going to be in jail or dead.' That makes you feel worse. And I think that's what makes kids drop out of school faster and start gangs and stuff."



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## The Reproduction of Prisoners through the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Raquan: "School to prison pipeline - ... you get kicked out of school you go to prison and then you die. ... It's like America itself, they just want to see people locked up, just for the fact of it."

People can't maintain themselves, can't get a job...they put them in a cage. When they come out, you may as well say they still inside because they now they on parole, they got somebody watching them. They can't do too much. Like if you coming from prison, you can't vote. So once you come home, you really don't have too much rights. So you really may as well say you still there, a slave."



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## Dreams Die Hard: Belief in Education

- “I like school.. It’s an education.” Shayna
- “I want to choose the right college.” Donela
- “I ain’t gonna quit school.” Jalil
- “I’m gonna make sure I graduate and go to college.” Jena
- “I have chances to get a scholarship.” Kwame
- “I love school.” Roland



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## Dismantling the Pipeline

Antoine: “The principal, Ms. Lark, she mad nice. She was helping me out, like if I had a problem. I go to her and I would talk about the problem. She was just a nice person.

Like if somebody was bothering me. I would talk to her about it. Like if I wanted to go the dance and I didn’t have no money, she would pay my way to the dance. She would make sure that I would do good so that I could go to the dance. ... She cared about me. It made me feel good. Like at least somebody wanted to see me do good.”



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## Ideas and Tools for Change

- Center for Community Alternatives
  - School Yard or Prison Yard
- Dignity in Schools Campaign
  - Model Code
- Solutions not Suspension
  - National Moratorium on School Suspension
- Alliance for Quality Education
  - Supportive Schools, Safe Communities



## Dismantling the Pipeline

- Affirm young people's human right to education
- Abolish discipline that excludes and exiles young people
- Implement curricula that is engaging and relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century lives and learning styles
- Employ and support teachers and other school staff that care about kids and are committed to their education
- Reduce or eliminate prison-like surveillance and policing in schools.

## For More Information

Center for Community Alternatives  
[www.communityalternatives.org](http://www.communityalternatives.org)

