Teacher/Police: How Inner-City Students Perceive the Connection Between the Education System and the Criminal Justice System

Cara McClellan
*University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, caralm@law.upenn.edu*

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I. Purpose

The purpose of this project is to learn how inner-city teenagers perceive the connection between the education system and the criminal justice system. In particular, this study examines how the increased connection between the criminal justice system and school discipline system affects disadvantaged students. Do these students perceive the phenomenon researchers refer to as “the-school-to-prison pipeline” or is this a concept imposed from the outside? In order to interpret the full impact of how criminalizing school discipline affects students, it is essential to understand how students perceive the relationship between these two systems, in particular, whether it expands the vulnerability that disadvantaged communities experience in the criminal justice system to the education system. This project questions: if misbehavior that occurs in school is increasingly categorized as crime, and students are aware that the poor and minorities are disproportionately prosecuted within the criminal justice system, will they perceive this injustice as carrying over to the school setting?

Adolescence is the critical period of identity formation when such perceptions develop, remaining remarkably stable throughout the rest of life (Shedd 2006: 6). This study has important implications for assessing the extent to which young people believe in education as an institution that fosters equal opportunity. If students view themselves as powerless to overcome the discrimination within established rules, they respond
by avoiding authority structures and questioning the legitimacy of mainstream institutions (Kupchik 2009: 312). This study documents how a typical group of disadvantaged inner-city youth perceive the criminal justice and education system to understand whether they believe in a school-to-prison pipeline that precludes equal opportunity in America.

II. Literature Review

The school-to-prison pipeline is a term that describes the process whereby criminalized discipline policies route students out of school and into the justice system. A focus on harsh legal sanctions and exclusion increases the risk that students will disengage or drop out of school and heightens the likelihood that students will become involved in the juvenile justice system (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Children's Defense Fund 2006).

By excluding students from school, educators limit the future options of misbehaving students and increase the likelihood that they will participate in a life of crime. As Western and Simon document, there is a direct correlation between academic attainment and involvement in the criminal justice system. Nearly all prisoners lack any education beyond high school (Pattillo 2004: 1). Failure to graduate from high school compounds the likelihood that any demographic group will serve time in jail, but for African American males the effects are catastrophic: 32.4% of African American male high school dropouts between fifteen and twenty were in prison. This represents a rate of incarceration that is nearly fifty times the national average (Western 2004: 18).

Moreover, criminal sanctions for misbehavior begin students’ involvement with the juvenile justice system. Just as mandatory sentences
may initiate young men into prison and extreme criminal lifestyles, Zero Tolerance policies bring students into the juvenile justice system which can serve as an introductory course in behavior that is, in fact, criminal. Once introduced, students are far more likely to become repeat criminal offenders (Western 2007: Chapter 5; Pattillo 2004: 13).

During the 1990’s, major changes in school discipline policy left the public education system more directly tied to the criminal justice system than ever before. States across the country embraced a crime framework for dealing with student misbehavior, incorporating elements of law enforcement once unique to the criminal justice system. They now impose legal consequences for rule violation, exclusionary punishment, and control through police and other surveillance. Today, most public schools include police officers titled School Resource Officers (SROs) and other forms of surveillance that were once unique to the penal system such as video cameras, metal detectors and drug sweeps (Kupchik 2010: 291). As Paul Hirschfield writes, the criminal justice system offers a “useful template and accessible tools” for the quick removal of problem students from the school (Hirschfield 2008: 92).

The tie between the education and justice system developed with the passage of formal laws dictating punishment for behavior within schools. In 1994, the Safe Schools Act passed, mandating that in order to receive federal money, a school must have close cooperation with police and juvenile justice agencies and a written policy detailing criminally enforced results for misbehavior (Simon 2007: 218). Under the Safe Schools Act, many schools created rules that limited teacher discretion and required legally enforced consequences for students who committed categorical acts, regardless of the context of infraction (Simon 2007: 218).
The vast majority of states require schools to refer students to the police for activity including drugs, violence, and weapons violations known collectively as “Zero Tolerance” discipline (Hirschfield 2008: 83). Zero Tolerance Laws formalized the tie between education and the criminal justice system.

At its inception, The Safe Schools Act of 1994 provided funding for non-punitive approaches to school safety, including intervention through conflict resolution and peer mediation (Irby 2009: 8). “The national mandate [of crime punishment], widespread misapplications and increasing scopes of Zero Tolerance approaches eventually shifted the focus beyond keeping schools free of weapons and drugs to ‘punishing dangerousness’” (Irby 2008: 9). The understanding that effective discipline requires rehabilitative approaches and not simply punishment was somehow lost. Today, Zero Tolerance policies often privilege looking for student misbehavior over “other school functions, such as helping students with their actual problems – including problems which may be prompting their misbehaviors” (Kupchik 2009: 305). School staff express a desire to want to help misbehaving students, but this help consistently avoids directly dealing with students who are deemed too “dangerous” to risk contact.

Since inception, the use of Zero Tolerance has extended not just to extreme cases of illegal activities, but more common instances of misbehavior such as classroom disruption and failure to follow school rules. Minor incidents compose the bulk of national suspensions and juvenile justice referrals (Hirschfield 2008: 83). According to statewide data on school suspensions in Connecticut in 2008, 60% of reported offenses resulting in an in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), or expulsion resulted from “school policy violations”: frequent absences or tardiness from class or “insubordination” such as
disrespect or use of profanity (Suarez 2009: 29). School policy violations resulted in OSS 91% of the time and attendance violations resulted in OSS 95% of the time (Suarez 2009: 29).

Like the phenomenon of mass imprisonment (Western 2007: 29), poor and minority students are disproportionately punished and excluded under Zero Tolerance policies and a crime framework for school discipline. Some argue that the crime framework for school discipline has extended the discriminatory effects that occur law enforcement from the justice system to the education system. Criminalization is more prevalent and intense in schools that are heavily populated by disadvantaged urban minorities (Hirschfield 2007: 81). The U.S. Department of Education Data reports that in public schools in Connecticut during 2006, African American and Latino students accounted for 58.63% of out-of-school suspensions and 62.57% of expulsions (Office for Civil Rights). Within Connecticut, the highest suspension rates occur in districts that serve the highest concentrations of minority, low-income students (Dignity Denied 2008: 23). While much research has studied the disproportionate effects of crime policies in schools, little research has explored how students perceive the relationship between the two systems.

III. Methods

Through intensive interviews and participant observation, this project highlights how 28 East Coast city youth perceive the public school system and criminal justice system. This ethnography focuses on a student-run group entitled Achievement through Expression. I learned about Achievement through Expression (A.E.) during my first interview with two brothers—Justin and Shawn, the group’s founders. I worked with the group’s founder, Justin,
to coordinate the meetings. The group met twice weekly from November through February. Justin, a charismatic young man and a recent high school graduate, is the main leader of the group who facilitated the activities. I conducted intensive interviews with 13 students: Justin (age 19), Shawn (15), Tammie (15), Dwayne (16), Bridget (16), Tyree (20), Michael (15), Maya (17), Juliet (16), Greg (17), Destiny (16), Arthur (15) and Jared (16). The interviews lasted approximately an hour and were free-form, allowing the participants to talk with little predetermined structure. I began each interview by saying, “please introduce yourself,” and then asked students to tell me about their experience at school. From there, I only asked follow-up or clarifying questions. I interviewed the students one-on-one before or after meetings, and, on rare occasions in their homes. The students gave informed consent to participate and were told that the material would be used anonymously. This paper employs pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the students in the data that I collected. Additionally, I changed specific data related to the identity of the youth group and other organizations that the students affiliated with to ensure anonymity. These details do not significantly affect the findings of this study.

There were an additional thirteen students who I observed through the group but who I was not able to interview: Finally, there were approximately five students with whom I met once or twice, but who did not attend meetings consistently enough to be included as participants in this study.

One of the students was Caucasian, seven were Latino, and the remainder identified as African American. In total, there were 16 males and 12 females. All of the students came from neighborhoods of concentrated poverty in a deindustrialized East Coast city of approximately 123,000 inhabitants. While the majority of the students were enrolled in high school,
three were recent high school graduates, two attended community college, and one recently completed vocational training. In addition, one student attended an alternative discipline school and two were high school dropouts. The remaining students were currently enrolled in one of three different high schools. The academic achievement of these teenagers varied; some were honor roll students while others had completely disengaged from school.

In the communities where the participants live, there is a violence epidemic. Between 2006-2008, more than 500 youth were victims of gun violence in the city of East Coast city (Suarez 2: 2010). Of the students I interviewed, everyone knew a young person who had been injured or killed as a result of gun violence. Everyone had at least one close relative or friend who was either currently in prison or had been incarcerated at some time. For approximately half of the students, this person was a father or sibling. At least four of the students, male and female, had personal criminal records or were on probation. One is currently engaged in court proceedings for a school infraction. Although this study lasted less than a year, before its completion the group was interrupted in late February and devastated by an act of extreme gun violence.

Several teenage boys shot Justin. It was early evening and he was walking home from work, accompanied by his younger brother, Shawn and friend/mentee Dwayne. Justin’s injuries were near fatal and he remains in recovery. A week after this tragic event, the same teenagers returned during the day, firing shots at his mother’s car outside of their home. As research documents, such bold acts of violence rarely occur in communities where there is greater police accountability (Roehl et al. 2008). The police have yet to identify the teenagers responsible for the shooting as of the publication of this paper.
IV. Findings

A. A lack of trust in police and the justice system

All of the teenagers that I interviewed believe the police profile inner-city teenagers as criminals, not as citizens who deserve protection. The students view the police not as a source of help, but as fundamentally against them.

Other teenagers described instances of police abuse that made them feel they are not the beneficiaries of police services, but instead targeted for harassment. Several students described occasions where friends or relatives were beaten up or robbed and police did not intervene. Shawn told of a time where a friend was jumped while police watched and laughed. Many of the teenagers perceive the police as in cahoots with criminals, either because they believe police are aware of drug dealing and other crime but do nothing to stop it, or because they believe police actively participate in illegal activities. Several students describe events where police were the attackers, physically harming teenagers.

Dwayne: We were coming from playing basketball and some of us weren’t even wearing our t-shirts. They started patting us down like we’re gonna have a gun in our shorts. One of the police officers actually took the food I just bought and threw it down and was like ‘You got an issue with what I just did?’ I guess they were trying to start an issue where they could arrest me. I wanted to talk back. I actually started talking back, but then I just got quiet. ‘Cause I’m basically falling for their trap. If they want me to be locked up then they want me to say something back or do something.

Students articulate harassment by police in school, titled School Resource Officers (SROs), that mirrors the police profiling they describe outside of school. Shawn tells how the security officer at the entrance to his school taunts him as he enters the building. Justin also describes how some SROs will
egg students on in a way similar to the police on the street. His feelings towards police outside of school carry over to how he views police within school.

Cops, they just never been a help to me. In school or whatever it just felt like they were making situations worse … They pester you they want you to get mad and if you get mad they suspend you.

Overall, the interviewees believe they are not the beneficiaries of police protection, but a danger from which a wider society is protected. As a result of the lack of police accountability, the students feel they must assert their ability to defend themselves. As Elijah Anderson writes, in inner-city communities, the code of the street emerges as an adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system. Police are seen as not caring to protect inner-city residents. Without formal law enforcement and other mainstream agencies to “champion one’s personal security,” citizens must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to defend themselves and their loved ones against transgression (Anderson 2000: 34). “The code of the street thus emerges where the influence of the police ends and where personal responsibility for one’s safety is felt to begin” (Anderson 2000: 34). Because police do not enforce civil law, “street justice” fills the void, underscoring the need for street credibility (Stewart and Simmons 2009: 2).

The code of the street mandates behavior of aggression and violence for survival. The rules of the code dictate street credibility through appearance, demeanor and willingness to fight to deter transgression. The person who proves he can take care of himself has street “cred”. Credibility then serves to deter advances and establish protection. This leads young people to be especially sensitive to advances and slights, which could serve as a warning of confrontation or danger, and when left unanswered, lead to
the erosion of street credit (Stewart 2009: 3).

The participants described the ways they employ the code of the street as a form of self-preservation because no other form of protection exists. Dwayne describes a situation where limits are tested through slights:

You’ll be walking and someone bumps into you and one of your friends will be like “your just gonna let him bump into you like that? You not gonna hit ‘em or say anything.”

Dwayne is afraid that if he does not respond aggressively, he will not have the credibility necessary to deter threat. He does not want to have to fight because he will get in trouble at school, but he also does not want to become a target for aggressors to take advantage of him. He admits there are situations “where I felt like I had to fight back to get out of the predicament.” Maya describes how she acts in a way that makes others fear her in order to assure her own protection. As she says: “There’s times when I have to stand up for myself.” She describes how the code of the street requires her to be threatening:

I want to change, but then, I don’t want nobody to think I’m a pushover, and then they start to think that I’m a sweet thing, and I’m not. I just want people to know …don’t mess with me to a point that I might have to hit you or stab you.

In most interactions, the code does not require violence so much as a street exterior to deter aggression. Knowledge of the code is defensive (Stewart and Simmons 2009: 2). Appearance and speech can serve as major indicators of who is and is not from the inner city and therefore familiar with the code of the street. Greg believes that failing to display emblems of the street can lead to highly dangerous situations.
This is my first pea coat ever... It makes me look nice and presentable. [The first time I wore it], somebody thought about robbing me – they were sayin’, “Yo look, he probably got money.”

In this case, dress operates as a signifier of the street. Failure to present according to the code can lead to the erosion of street credit. Thus, teenagers employ the code of the street as signals for self-defense in the inner-city to make up for the protection law-enforcement does not provide.

C. Disproportionate punishment

Through the code of the street inner city residents signal that they are not to be messed with and deter aggressors. Street credit is maintained through speech, dress, demeanor and aggression that serve to reinforce one's reputation of toughness. The teenagers acknowledge that the code of the street can take different extremes from behavior that is harmless to behavior that is actually dangerous. However, at school any display of the code of the street is punished. Fearful of teenagers they deem threatening of mainstream norms, adults may punish signs of street culture generally.

The participants believe that school staff— teachers, administrators, school officers —consider students who invoke “street” culture to be “bad” students, unfit for school. To determine who is “street,” the staff rely upon appearance, demeanor, use of street language and other signifiers within the code of the street. The teenagers describe how teachers and administrators determine who can “make it” at school based on: “What you look like. If you’re dressin’ in a certain way, if you dress in like baggy clothes, or if you got a mean mug on your face” or “They swag. How they talk.” Shawn highlights how school personnel fixate on street emblems. He believes that this leads adults at school to see him as criminally dangerous and unable to be a good student:
It’s just like how people perceive me. When I walk through the hall it’s like when I be downtown or whatever, people be crossing the street because they think I’m going to rob them. It’s just how I look.

Arthur agrees that teachers use “the looks of people” to punish students who come from the streets.

Ironically, the participants believe that the street exterior that leads others to view them as “dangerous” stems directly from a lack of police accountability and the resulting code of the street that mandates a tough demeanor for self-protection. A lack of law-enforcement leads to the code of the street, yet at school the code of the street is harshly punished through suspension and criminal sanctions.

D. Harsh punishment

The teenagers believe that school staff overpunish forms of street dress, speech and demeanor that are actually harmless. Students recounted stories of how school disciplinarians rely upon suspension and expulsion unnecessarily or with the intent of getting rid of students who they consider “street.” Every student I interviewed agreed that the majority of suspensions do not represent a real danger, but rather small infractions that are punished harshly. As Destiny says “You get in trouble more, I think, for stupid stuff.” The teenagers do believe that misbehavior needs to have consequences, but question the extent of the punishment for what Juliet calls “random little things.” Tammie echoes this sentiment as she describes how her sister was suspended for violating the dress code: “It’s like they focus on the clothes. I think they should be worried about whether you in school or not. They send a lot of people home or put them in in-school suspension.”

Dwayne describes how suspension is overused in his school for
misbehavior that doesn’t pose a real danger:

If you’re in the hallways fifteen minutes after the bell rings than that’s a suspension. Basically if you’re doing anything wrong, then they’ll suspend you for it. The reason most people get suspended is hats or doo rags. I think it’s dumb. They said they banned hats because of gang violence but they’re really no gangs at my school [that]… show it through hats and stuff.

By interpreting the hats as gang symbols, the school staff view a dress code violation as more dangerous and sinister than simple rule violations. In an attempt to root out the more threatening forms of the code of the street, the teenagers believe that adults at school misread all forms of the street as dangerous. For the students who do not actually engage in dangerous behavior, this punishment feels unduly harsh. Some describe harsh punishment of “street” behavior as discrimination directed uniquely against students who come from the inner-city.

The interviewees described teachers’ attempts to suspend, expel or refer “bad” students to juvenile justice as intended to remove the street students, not to reform misbehavior. Justin blames Zero Tolerance Policies for providing the tools for adults to remove unwanted students: “When they say zero tolerance, what they really mean is if we look at you and we think you’re a bad kid, we’re going to try and get you out as soon as possible.”

The teenagers felt that exclusionary punishment usually does not address the root of misbehavior. Destiny pointed out how, without addressing the underlying cause of misbehavior, suspension is a temporary solution “they just back in school a few days later.” Additionally, many of the students considered suspension unfair because they believe it interferes with education. As Tammie explains: “Some miss work…I don’t think they
learn like that.” In both cases, the students emphasize that exclusionary
discipline is counterproductive when it is overused because it interferes
with academic progress and causes students to disengage with school.

F. Punishment and differential opportunity

As inner-city teenagers come in contact with mainstream
institutions, they realize two sometimes diametrically opposed social
realities: mainstream society and the street. Within these two realities
two opportunity structures operate: work to succeed through mainstream
institutions or enter underground economic opportunities associated with
street life. The students that I interviewed describe teenage years as vacillating
between these two different orientations. Many of the students expressed the
necessity of code switching between school and the streets of the inner-city:
enacting different codes of behavior in order to meet the requirements of
being a good student while maintaining street credit. Shawn describes this
as knowing “when to do something and when not to.” That is, how to be
“decent,” but employ the code of the street when necessary.

Code switching does not always occur seamlessly. For inner city
students, a challenge arises at the intersection between the “two worlds”: the
times and spaces where mainstream norms and the code of the
street overlap and create contradiction. Teens who want to conform to
mainstream norms and avoid punishment in school also depend on the
code of the street and these two codes can proscribe irresolvable conflicts
in behavior, that force students to make decisions to succeed through one
of two competing opportunity structures. Although students acknowledge
that the street life is dangerous, its benefits are also clear, particularly
when the chance of success through school and employment seems
unlikely. As Suarez points out “School discipline can play a vital role with respect to this difficult choice” (Suarez 2010: 44).

The teenagers that I interviewed believe that adults at school do not have the tools to make sense of the behavior of inner-city teenagers because they do not share the opportunity structure that results from growing up in the inner-city. While inner city teenagers are forced to interact with mainstream institutions, the dangerousness of the inner-city ghetto maintains a level of isolation. As Justin says:

Most teachers who work in inner-city don’t understand the inner-city. They don’t understand what it is like to live in a box.

As Dwayne explains, the disconnect between teachers and students results directly from the failures of the criminal justice system. He believes that adults at school do not understand the experience of inner-city teenagers because they have the benefit of police accountability and therefore do not understand the need for the code of the street.

Dwayne: Because when they [teachers and administrators] were younger they didn’t have to worry about walking in a store and being followed. They’re not from the inner-city. Cause you don’t see police in the suburbs driving around, you only see them in the hood.

Cara: What would it take for teachers to understand? Dwayne: Having them walk into stores and be followed or asking them to leave the store because they’re wearing baggy clothes. Or I guess for us to share what we’ve been through with the teachers. But most of us don’t feel comfortable so no one shares anything.

Dwayne believes that adults at school cannot understand the behavior of inner city teenagers because they do not know what it feels like to have an adversarial relationship with police. The adults at school live in mainstream
America and are the beneficiaries of police protection. Therefore, a lack of police accountability leads to the code of the street, different opportunity structures, and the major disconnect between students and adults at school.

G. Punishment and labeling theory

The teenagers believe that by the time a student reaches middle school, staff firmly decide whether a particular student has the potential to be a good student. As Justin describes: “When you first walk into school and they [the school staff] see your face they label you as ‘Okay this kid is worth saving. This one is not because he would never be able to do it.’” The teenagers believe that adults do not waste time encouraging the “unsalvageable” to use school as a pathway to success. They believe that adults at school begin making distinctions about who is and is not able to be successful as early as second grade. As Shawn said: “It’s elementary.”

The teenagers I interviewed describe how students internalize the expectation that they are not fit to be students. As Destiny put it simply:

If the administration doesn’t believe in you, you can just be like “maybe I’m nothing.” So then, that determines where you’re gonna be in life.

Shawn describes how early on, teachers told him that he would not be good at school: “I’ve always been told I was stupid and stuff.” It made him feel like he didn’t fit in or meet the standards of school. Indeed, he cites this as the main reason he does not like school—the labeling that occurred in fourth grade has caused him to disengage, even at the high school level.

In accordance with labeling theory, the teenagers claim the expectations of school staff are self-fulfilling prophecies (Becker 1997: 33). Justin explains how this occurred amongst his friends in high school. Once
teachers labeled them “bad” students, they began to act out bad behavior that he believes they would not have displayed otherwise:

Justin: When you’re like 6, 7 years old and someone tells you you’re going to jail you’re going to be a thug subconsciously, indirectly they tell you that, you don’t know to think “no, I am going to dream and be the best I can be.” I think when you first hear it you become it. You mimic it.

H. Punishment and adult incarceration

Students described suspension not as an attempt to rehabilitate misbehaving kids, but instead as an effort to get rid of students who adults consider destined for crime and prison. Justin describes a situation where administrators at his school openly admitted intent to punish students who they believe do not have a future and protect students who they believe do.

We all got in trouble. We could all do the same thing, but what teachers used to say to me is, they would pull me away from the group and they would say to me: ‘Justin stay away from these guys. These guys are going to jail. These guys will be nothing and you won’t.’ And they would keep me from getting into trouble.

In this story, it is clear that participants believe there is a connection between who adults label “bad” and who they believe will end up in jail. However, as Justin’s story reveals, the distinction between who is a bad student is not based simply upon student action, but influenced by adult beliefs about students’ futures. According to students, adults in school make punishing decisions based on whom they believe will be successful in the future.

The teenagers believe that school staff see students’ behavior as stagnant. However, the teenagers view the “decent/street” dynamic as much more fluid and therefore not an accurate indicator of future life
chances. Indeed, many of the students who I interviewed believe they have gone through different phases where they behaved as street or “decent” in varying degrees. As Justin points out, all teenagers have a more fluid sense of identity than adults because they are still deciding who they want to become. However, code switching complicates this process as a result of the opportunity structures inner city teenagers face. Inner-city teenagers are uniquely required to navigate difficult contradictions at a very young age.

It’s funny because the people who you wouldn’t think are like that [street] are. All of them have come to me with the same things these kids have. Any kid who comes out of East Coast city is pretty much going to be the same thing of course at this age it’s like they’re gonna be contemplating this. It’s only a real small percentage of kids who are going to be like “I am going to be positive.” It’s like at this age they teeter totter in terms of what side they’re going to be on.

For many students, there were times when they acted out before they learned how to conform to mainstream norms in school. They believe that it takes time to learn how to code switch—what behavior is appropriate at a particular place and time. They often sympathized with students who employed the code of the street at school, admitting that they had “been there” at a different point in time.

Michael: I ain’t sayin’ kick them out from school. ‘Cause I ain’t gonna lie, I was one of the kids that would be loud in the classroom and stuff before I realized how to act.

Jared: To be honest I was about to be one of these people [suspended]. I used to be like “Oh you doing this? You bout to fight? Okay. I wanna see someone get jumped.”

As Michael describes, for inner-city youth, growing up is navigating both the
code of the street and mainstream America in order to find a personal identity.

I. Punishment and the pipeline-to-prison

It is clear that the students I interviewed conceive of a direct link between schools and the criminal justice system. The students believe that adults at school including teachers, administrators and SROs, intentionally punish inner-city youth with the understanding that exclusion from school leads almost directly to jail. Greg describes how while punishing him with suspension, a teacher once said to him: “I can’t wait for you to be a felon. I can’t wait to sign those papers.” The students believe that adults at school judge students based upon emblems of the street and “push” students deemed uneducable out of school and into prison. The push occurs through a criminalized discipline system, but also through a psychological toll on students whom adults view as future prisoners.

Destiny: They just pushed him out of school. It’s hard to describe. Like they go through his bags [to repeatedly search him]. And, ok, we all curse, we all say bad things, but they just used to highlight Jordan for the way he talked all the time. … It’s like I can say it as loud as I want, but if Jordan were to say that they would like, suspend him. It’s ridiculous.

According to Destiny, this student was the victim of a school-to-prison-pipeline. She articulates a direct connection between school discipline and the final fate of her friends saying: “They tried to push him out of school and now he got locked up.” The teenagers recognize that getting in trouble at school often translates into a life of crime and incarceration. In a separate interview, other students articulated situations in similar ways saying: “They tried to push him out cause they felt like he was ruining the rest of the school. And they succeed in that goal. Now he’s out and he’s in jail.”
The students believe discrimination within school discipline and the criminal justice systems is inherently tied. Shawn describes this dynamic:

They do not care. It’s like they try to get you in trouble. If not by putting you in the streets, they try to lock you up. It’s like streets, or lock you up. There’s no in between. That’s metaphoric but it’s also literal. Cops will literally lock you up. But teachers they won’t try to help your problem in a way that is going to do something else. They kind of like cops, too. They come across like cops. It’s like they got the same mentality. With cops it’s a lot more specific and strong. Teachers do it unintentionally. But both see you as a wrong kind of person.

For Shawn the focus on punishment instead of rehabilitation in school discipline is directly related to a larger criminal justice policy that views inner city teenagers as “unsalvageable,” destined for incarceration and not success in school (Ferguson 2009). In this way, he believes the work of police and teachers systematically serves a similar purpose. The students view a lack of police protection as the cause of the code of the street. They also observe that within school the code of the street is punished. Thus, indirectly, they feel the failures of the criminal justice system lead inner-city students to violate the rules of school.

K. Punishment and public resources

The teenagers that I interviewed believe adults at school make predictions about students’ adult futures and use these predictions to dictate punishment. In contrast, many of the students stressed the importance of having second chances and the ability of young people to change. As Michael says: “Everyone ain’t perfect, you may not be as good but [at A.E.] people are there to help you catch on so you won’t feel left out.”
Justin: We can't try to make a positive change in the community if all we accept is positive people who are already positive… [These are] at-risk children. There is going to be some risky behavior along the way.

Moreover, the participants believe that weeding out certain individuals who exhibit the code of the street does not get at the root of the problem. Even if it does remove the “bad influence” or “danger” in one particular setting, it does not address the fact that this individual is a part of the inner-city community.

Justin: As far as these people influencing them, I don't think that is going to happen because a lot of them know these people already and they live in their neighborhood. It's not like we're not around each other all the time anyway. We come from the same place.

While this individual may be removed from school setting, this individual is still a member of the neighborhood. The teenagers who are labeled dangerous and excluded from school are neighbors, friends and relatives of other students. Teenagers thus develop the sense that school staff are attempting to “protect us from ourselves.” Or, the sense that school staff are attempting to protect themselves from what inner city teenagers deal with every day. In reality, street behavior does not exist in a vacuum, but is symptomatic of larger social ills. An attempt to exclude individuals from a particular setting does not truly address the problem.

Dwayne: Organizations, once they open, they didn’t really want people from the hood I guess. Like the Y.M.C.A. They open it for like youth and stuff, but once they really see who we are they make it seem bad. They make the groups or programs for certain kids and then they try to push us out and then there's no point in having the program. What's the goal? Then they think we deserve it.

The conversation then turned into different students sharing stories about
people they believe would have turned out differently with some support from school or other public services.

The students believe that the distinction between mainstream norms and the code of the street is too complex to be categorized as purely good or bad. They believe that code of the street can translate into a range of behavior some of which is harmless, but some of which is indeed reprehensible. Students feel by punishing the code of the street generally, teachers deal with student problems in a superficial way that does not acknowledge the difficult circumstances in which behavior occurs. In order to truly address the danger of the code, we must acknowledge the root of the problem: the lack of protection that force inner city residents to provide their own defense. Inner city residents do not have access to traditional forms of help. They rely on the code of the street to fill a void. Punishing street behavior addresses the symptom, but not the root of the problem.

The students’ alienation from school discipline comes from the reality that the rules in school only have meeting in a limited setting. Students enter metal detectors to protect them from the weapons that go uncontrolled in their neighborhoods. They face police officers who fail to stop the violence they see happening in their neighborhoods. Thus, students conclude that the school’s concern with safety is not a sincere concern about inner city students’ lives, but an attempt to protect other members of the school community from the danger of the street that inner-city teenagers deal with everyday. Even if the “problem” individuals are eliminated, the code of the street would still exist. A solution that seeks only to remove individuals without redressing the systematic forces that lead to their behavior is short-sighted. Most important of all, a focus on exclusion denies the “problem” individuals access to the resources that
make change possible: education and communities like A.E. are proven to reduce the likelihood of an individual’s involvement with the criminal justice system (Stewart and Simon 2009).

From the teenager’s perspective, growing up is balancing competing codes for behavior in different times and setting. Youth in the inner-city must learn how to prioritize in ways that allow self-preservation in a world without police accountability. Because street behavior develops directly from a failure of the state to protect inner city residents, the question of who is and is not deserving of help is much more complex in the minds of the teenagers. As Greg says “Do not judge. People do what they have to to survive.”

III. Conclusion
A. Summary of findings

The interviewees believe they are not the beneficiaries of police protection, but profiled for punishment. Because the police are not accountable to them, they feel as if they have to protect themselves and enforce their own law and order. Street justice rules because the state has failed to step in and provide the resources that ensure the safety of impoverished, inner-city youth. The students view a lack of police protection as the cause of the code of the street.

In an attempt to root out the more threatening forms of the code of the street, the teenagers believe that adults at school misread all forms of street culture as dangerous. The teenagers believe that exclusionary discipline is counterproductive because it interferes with academic progress and causes students to disengage with school. Moreover, the categorical labeling of student behavior as dangerous can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which teenagers depend on
the street even more. Harsh punishment tremendously increases the likelihood that teenagers will rely on the street opportunity structure and become involved in the criminal justice system. The teenagers describe an interconnected cycle from the justice system, to school, to the justice system: a lack of police protection leads to street justice, leads to punishment in school, leads to criminal involvement.

In contrast with their schools, the students believe that the distinction between mainstream norms and the code of the street is too complex to be categorized as purely good or bad. They believe that code of the street can translate into a range of behavior, some of which is harmless, some of which is indeed dangerous. Because the teenagers believe the division between street and “decent” is complex, they do not believe it can be used as an accurate indicator of future life chances to make decisions about who is and is not worthy of public help. They recognize the potential of teenagers to change through the intervention of a supportive community and mainstream resources.

B. Recommendations

On a micro level, changing student perception of discipline includes engaging students in the discipline process and school community. This would require a focus on inclusion and rehabilitation as opposed to harsh exclusionary punishment. The Superintendent of East Coast city School District recommends many alternatives to suspension and expulsion including: social training, restorative justice, counseling, mediation, mentoring, anger management training, leadership opportunities, effective student governance committees, and a focus on teacher–student relationships (Unified Code of Conduct 2009: Appendix 3). Relying on alternative strategies
that allow marginalized students to engage in the discipline process may help schools to understand the specifics of a student’s individual experience, instead of relying on generalized assumptions about groups, improving communication and relationships between adults and students. Past studies have shown that effective discipline systems directly engage students (Kupchick 2006) This study confirms those finding: teenagers were highly likely to emphasize the importance of students actively participating in the discipline process through strong relationships with teachers who allow them to express their perspective instead of simply punishing students. They felt that this would allow adults to get at the root of the problem and better address misbehavior.

On a macro level, addressing student perception requires a rejection of mass incarceration and a sincere attempt to provide education and employment for inner-city youth, instead of assuming crime and imprisonment as the default option. This requires increased police accountability and improved relationships between police and inner-city residents. A school-to-prison pipeline facilitates the loss of massive numbers of people, the majority of whom are concentrated in the most marginalized (NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. 2010: 1).

The data in this case demonstrates the dangers of a national policy that fails to address the root causes of crime and violence, systematically viewing disadvantaged teenagers as disposable citizens, doomed to crime, incarceration and early death (Hirschfield 2008: 90). Whether due to exclusion from school, incarceration, or gun violence, the absence of young men and women affects their communities in dramatic ways. If police, school administrators, or other personnel are indeed making predictions about teenager’s future potential, their calculations do not consider how an
individual student’s future affects those around them and serve as resources to their peers. The story of Justin reveals more. Although he was written off by many as a “bad” student, he is instrumental in his community, a young leader who speaks in a way that engages others and inspires them to believe in a vision of hope. He has played a role in shaping the lives of every single teenager he works with, reminding them to believe in their dreams and in themselves. As Jared said:

I would’ve been one of those people who died real soon. I was gonna be one of those people who could just clap [shoot] somebody without even thinking about it. Justin would make me think about the consequences of my actions. A.E. is more than just a movement. It gave me a new lifestyle for me to do good.

Despite the daunting statistics, it is impossible to predict individual futures. Race, class, educational attainment, criminal involvement can tell us little about the effects that presence or absence of an individual can have on an entire community and the potential to create change. A policy that views any young person as disposable misunderstands how the presence or absence of one individual can irreplaceably touch those around him.

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