

DISRUPTING the School-to-Prison Pipeline

An Action Guide for Libraries

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Introduction

The school-to-prison pipeline impacts communities all over the country. Most of us are likely to know, or know of, a youth who has been incarcerated. From time to time their stories make the headlines, like the kindergartener whose arrest was captured on video or an autistic teen who dies in custody. Most of the time, however, this system and the children and teens impacted by it are invisible. We have written this book with the hope of making these youth visible and demonstrating how all types of libraries can support them.

We both have worked with youth before, during, and after incarceration. This book includes our experiences and moves on to showcase library staff doing this work around the country. Where we could, we focused on current initiatives. We have also included work in other fields that we think could be easily folded into the library environment. In these cases, we have reached beyond the library world, looking at research and best practices in the mental health, social work, education, arts, and criminal justice fields.

We have spoken with library staff, researchers, educators, and people who work in the juvenile justice fields as well as educators and mental health professionals. We have also tried to include the perspectives of the youth themselves. However, because of the sensitivity of the topic and confidentiality issues, we have had, for the most part, to rely on their published accounts and those found online and in social media.

Time and time again, we heard that libraries and reading were life altering for youth impacted by incarceration. Library workers provide youth with information, visibility, knowledge and skills, recreation, role models, and much, much more. Dieter Cantu, founder of Cantu's Books, was incarcerated at the age of sixteen. Reading was his anchor while inside: "I discovered solace, hope, and a path forward through the pages of books. . . . [They] provided me with a lifeline, a way to envision a brighter future, and the opportunity to explore endless possibilities" (Cantu 2023, paras. 5–6). Dieter has since made a career of getting books and literacy programming to incarcerated youth through Cantu's Books to Incarcerated Youth Project and Position of Power.

There are three parts to this book. Part I, “Disrupting Incarceration Pathways,” defines the school-to-prison pipeline and explains which youth are likely to be incarcerated and how they get there. Clear demographic factors, such as race, gender, and being in foster care, emerge that affect which youth are funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline. Building on that knowledge, we identify ways to disrupt youth incarceration pathways by giving these young people the tools and support they need before they end up incarcerated.

Part II, “Library Services to Incarcerated Youth,” looks at what libraries are doing for youth while they are incarcerated. We offer ideas, examples, and resources. Extrapolating from work in adjacent fields, we envision what else can be done that libraries are currently not doing. The book points out how this work can differ from facility to facility and in different types of facilities.

Part III, “Reentry Services to Formerly Incarcerated Youth,” moves the book’s focus from working inside facilities to working with youth after their incarceration. Reentry is the process of leaving a carceral setting and returning to life in the broader community. The process is complex, fraught, and all-consuming. We look at the few library programs that exist specifically for reentering youth. We draw ideas and lessons from the work being done in libraries for reentering adults and identify those programs and services your library can apply to assist youth with the reentry process.

Each chapter in this volume covers the background of the topic, including data and research; provides examples of work being done; and suggests ideas for work that could be done. We introduce concrete strategies for implementation that have proven track records. Chapters close with resources that will allow you to dig deeper on your own.

The unique needs of youth are central to this book. Neither their bodies nor their brains are fully developed. They start with fewer skills, less knowledge, and less experience than adults. They are growing into themselves and learning to navigate the world while they are separate from it. Understanding this allows us to create programs and services that work for them.

We hope these pages will inspire you and provide a blueprint to help you support the youth you encounter who might be impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline. Libraries and library staff can help. It’s just a matter of how.

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PART I

Disrupting Incarceration Pathways

Libraries are full of young people, from babies picking up their first board books to young adults attempting to write a lengthy research paper for coursework. At every library and every stage of youth, library staff can incorporate the knowledge, examples, and strategies found in this section to disrupt the processes that conclude with a young person in prison.

An Overview of the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Although juvenile incarceration rates in the United States were at a historic low in 2022, the United States still has one of the highest levels of any industrialized country in the world. Like mass incarceration, the burden of this practice falls most heavily on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, disabled, and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus [others]) youth. Libraries of all types, but particularly public and school libraries, are in a position to make a difference. We can offer information, programs, and referrals to youth before they are pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline, while they are incarcerated, and as they are exiting facilities. But first we need to know who they are, what their needs are, and how we can meet those needs.

WHAT WE KNOW

For most incarcerated children, the road to detention begins in school. The term school-to-prison pipeline refers to the route by which children are increasingly punished at school, leading to the child being incarcerated in a facility (see figure 1.1). The term especially refers to how this process often ensnares Black and Latinx children. The school-to-prison pipeline encompasses policies and practices of both schools and law enforcement, including those that criminalize normal adolescent behavior and mental health issues, forcing students out of school, temporarily and permanently. As we will see later, the school-to-prison pipeline is propelled by racist, sexist, ableist, classist, and heteronormative enforcement, and it is insidious. This road to incarceration often begins at school. Many processes contribute to school failure to keep kids out of prison and jail. These processes include lack of early intervention services, ineffective

THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

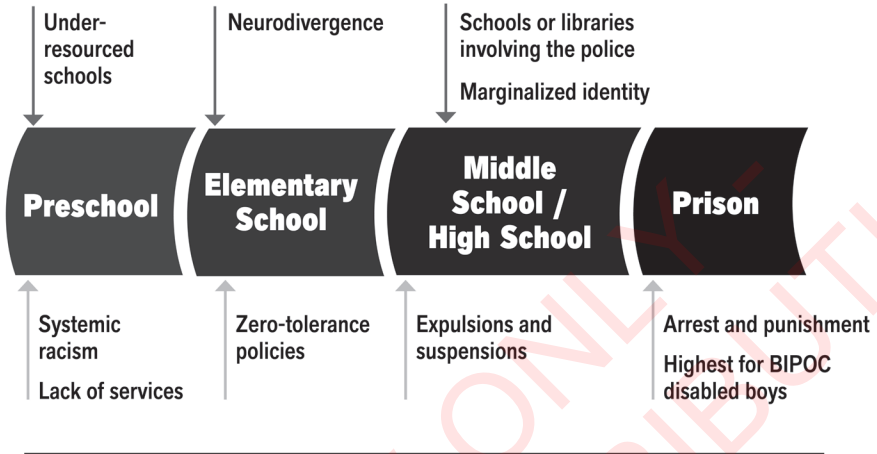


Figure 1.1 The School-to-Prison Pipeline

approaches to teaching, bad pedagogy, lack of needed special education services, inappropriate classification and special education services, disciplinary processes, and the criminalization of trauma and mental health. Other systems and circumstances play a role as well, including health care, foster care, and carceral systems themselves.

Where Youth Are Incarcerated

Youth are incarcerated in a variety of settings. Jails hold people awaiting adjudication and those serving short sentences. Older youth and those charged with violent crimes are often held here with adults or in a separate section within the facility. Jails are run by local jurisdictions. Prisons hold adults and older youth who have been sentenced to incarceration, usually for more than a year. They are run by states and the federal government and can be minimum, medium, or maximum security.

Juvenile detention facilities house only youth, including those awaiting trial and those who have been tried and sentenced. They can be secure, limited secure, or nonsecure. Nonsecure facilities can take the form of

SYSTEM FAILURES

By the time a student is incarcerated, systems meant to educate and support them have failed them, often multiple times. I first became directly involved with supporting incarcerated youth and their families when the mother of a smart, funny son with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and emotional disabilities asked for help. The family was Black, and the mother was worried about her son being stopped by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) during the height of the department's stop-and-frisk campaign, wherein department policy encouraged officers to temporarily detain and question individuals on the street. The middle schooler had an Individualized Education Program, or IEP, in place to help him deal with his ADHD. An IEP is a legal contract between a family and a school to provide the resources a disabled student needs to succeed in school. However, his IEP and its behavior plan were routinely ignored by school personnel. He was illegally suspended from school for discipline code violations without a hearing to determine if his behavior was related to his disability. While the mother was working with a special education advocate, her son was in fact detained by the police in a stop-and-frisk situation and, when he mouthed off to the police, arrested.

This example showcases the many systemic failures that often bring youth into contact with the criminal legal system and with incarceration. Some systemic failures illustrated by this example follow:

1. The school did not implement the IEP.
2. The school did not reconvene the IEP meeting when asked.
3. The school suspended the student even though his behavior was related to his disability.
4. There were long waits for mental health providers.
5. The disproportionate enforcement by NYPD of stop-and-frisk tactics meant the vast majority of those targeted were Black, Latinx, male, and disabled.
6. The mother was not notified when her underage child was arrested.
7. The juvenile justice system did not take into account the youth's ADHD or his history of mental illness as required by law.

By understanding these and other failures, library staff can develop strategies for supporting youth and families caught up in this nightmare.—**CARRIE BANKS**

group homes. Immigration facilities hold youth who arrive undocumented in the United States. The children may be with their families or on their own. These facilities are run by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in their own facilities or are run by subcontractors in nongovernmental facilities. Unaccompanied youth are transferred to the custody of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement. Knowing which type of setting can help you plan outreach and design your services.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT OF JUVENILE INCARCERATION

The complications, inequalities, and ill effects of imprisoning children disproportionately impact BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, [and] People of Color), disabled, and nonheteronormative youth. Incarceration numbers are higher for Black male students. Black students of any gender are suspended and expelled three times more often than white students. Black and Latinx students account for 70 percent of school referrals to the police, three times the rate of white students. And it starts early. Although Black children make up only 18 percent of preschoolers, of those preschoolers who are suspended, 48 percent are Black. Students with a disability are twice as likely to be suspended as those without a disability, LGBTQ+ students are 1.4 times more likely to be suspended, and a black student with an emotional disability is 17 times more likely to be suspended than another student (Flannery 2015, under "Let's Talk About Racism").

Race

In 2020 Black youth were 2.3 times more likely to be arrested than white youth. Once arrested, they were 69 percent less likely than their white peers to be referred to a diversion program. When referred to juvenile court, Black youth are 60 percent more likely to be detained. Among youth found to be delinquent, Black youth are 63 percent more likely to be

committed to a carceral facility than white youth, who more often receive probation or other sanctions (Rovner 2024).

Gender, Gender Identity, and Sexuality

Gender, gender identity, and sexuality are the single largest distinguishing factors. Put simply, cis males are 5.5 times more likely to be incarcerated than females (Development Services Group, 2023). That is not the whole story, however. Girls experience the carceral systems differently:

“[G]irls today are still typically sent to the justice system for less serious offenses (status offenses and technical violations) than boys, and they are more likely to be detained and stay in juvenile justice facilities longer for those minor offenses.” (Jafarian and Ananthakrishnan 2017, under “Why Criminalization,” para. 4)

Girls are heavily penalized for those status offenses, which are things that are a crime only when they are done by juveniles. Technical violations are breaches of the terms of probation. Although girls are 15 percent of those incarcerated, they are 34 percent of those incarcerated for status offenses, and over 50 percent of those held for running away. And while the overall incarceration rate for children has been falling since 1980, the proportion of girls to boys has risen from 18 percent to 31 percent (Budd and Monazzam 2023).

LGBTQ+ youth are incarcerated at twice their share of the general population. Being unhoused is a particularly strong driver of incarceration rates for LGBTQ+ youth. Several factors may be at the root of this phenomenon, including escaping abuse and rejection and the enforcement of offenses related to homelessness, such as loitering, panhandling, and sleeping outside (Stammen and Ghandnoosh 2022).

Disability

Students with disabilities are three times more likely to be arrested than students without disabilities and are two to three times more prevalent in detention settings than in the overall population. While approximately

COMMON STATUS OFFENSES

- drinking alcohol
- truancy
- running away from home
- curfew violation
- possession of a firearm
- ungovernability or not responding to parental control

In some states the possession of tobacco and smoking by minors are also status offenses.

13 percent of students receive special education services and up to 20 percent of youth are estimated to have a disability, 65 to 70 percent of youth involved with the juvenile justice system have a disability (Snydman 2022).

Intersectionality

The picture is bleakest for youth with intersecting identities. Incarceration numbers are higher for Black male students, particularly for Black male students who are also disabled and identify with the LGBTQ+ community. BIPOC girls are three times more likely to be incarcerated than white girls; Indigenous girls are four times more likely (Budd and Monazzam 2023). Once they are adjudicated, 21 percent of Black girls are assigned to residential placement compared to 8.3 percent of Latina and 6.8 percent of white girls (Morris 2016, 21). “Disproportionality is highest for Black female students. Black girls are 6x more likely to get suspended than white girls, Black boys are 3 times more likely to be suspended than white boys” (Greenlee, Alabi, and Zinzi 2021, 43–44). In the 2018 school year, Black and Indigenous girls were most likely to be suspended, expelled, or referred to law enforcement. Black girls and those identifying as two or more races are most likely to be transferred to alternative schools or physically restrained. The disproportionality for girls is significantly higher than

that between Black and white boys (Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality 2020).

Sexuality plays a role too. Forty percent of girls in custody identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, four times the number of the general population. Eighty-five percent of incarcerated LGBTQ+ youth are also youth of color, while only 67 percent of non-LGBTQ+ detained youth are people of color. Although there is very little data on trans youth who are incarcerated, the impact of intersectionality may be strongest on trans people of color of all ages. Forty-seven percent of trans Black people have experienced incarceration at some point in their lives (Stammen and Ghandnoosh 2022).

MECHANISM OF THE DISPARITIES

There are many reasons for these skewed rates on incarceration across various systems. Implicit bias is a thread that runs throughout these systems. A 2022 study found that “students’ misbehavior may be processed differently by school staff depending on who enacted the behavior” (Snapp, Day, and Russell 2022, 10), resulting in students of color and LGBTQ+ students receiving harsher discipline measures than their straight white peers for the same offenses. Additionally, the study noted that white middle-class schools tended to address discipline issues internally rather than calling the police, and they also used fewer forms of exclusionary discipline (Snapp, Day, and Russell 2022). One literature review cites a study of teachers that demonstrated “teachers tend to view black girls as louder, more unruly, and more in need of reprimanding for being ‘unladylike’ than other girls”; the authors also note that police officers “tend to view black kids as less innocent” (Jafarian and Ananthakrishnan 2017, under “Why Criminalization,” para. 5).

Cultural norms are another factor. Black girls’ lack of conformity to a white middle-class definition of femininity leads to their behavior being seen as more “insubordinate, disrespectful, uncooperative and uncontrollable, especially when they respond to oppression or have trauma responses” (Morris 2016,11). Disabled youth, particularly autistic youth and those with mental health issues, experience a similar effect when their

behavior is seen as intentional rather than as a result of their disability (Snydman 2022).

The National Center for Learning Disabilities identifies additional reasons youth with disabilities are likely to be detained. Disabled students are not identified, or they are misidentified. They are not given effective support. Zero tolerance policies and punitive school cultures impact disabled students more than students without disabilities, often because their behaviors are misunderstood as voluntary and not considered within the context of their disabilities. As a result, they experience exclusionary discipline more often. The use of law enforcement offices as school security increases the likelihood of misunderstanding and arrest (Snydman 2022).

LGBTQ+ youth interact with several systems that move them toward the school-to-prison pipeline. They often have mental health issues. They are twice as likely to be bullied at school, twice as likely to use opioids outside of a medical context, and four times more likely to attempt suicide (Rotherham, Foster, and Corral 2023). They are more often unhoused, making up 40 percent of unhoused youth but only 9.5 percent of the overall youth population (National Network for Youth, n.d.).

WHAT HAPPENS IN SCHOOLS?

Many things happen in schools that push youth toward the school-to-prison pipeline. Harsh and ineffective school discipline procedures, bad pedagogy, and overcrowded classrooms all play a role.

School Disciplinary Processes

The grotesquely uneven rates of incarceration discussed previously are mirrored by school disciplinary practices. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students were on the receiving end of every form of school discipline, from corporal punishment and suspensions to expulsions, referrals to law enforcement, and school-related arrests significantly more often than white or Asian students in the 2017–18 school year (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2022). This data is consistent with previous

and subsequent years. For example, members of the demographic group “American Indian/Alaska Native” in the *Digest of Education Statistics* were suspended at the rate of 4.88 in the 2017–18 academic year in spite of being less than 1 percent of the student population. Extrapolating from the NCES *Digest*, we find that Black students were 2.5 times more likely to incur an in-school suspension, 3.4 times more likely to get an out-of-school suspension, 4.0 times more likely to be expelled, and 35 times more likely to be arrested for a school-related matter (NCES 2022). BIPOC students and students with disabilities are much more likely to be suspended than their white, typically developing peers. While Black girls are 20 percent of the preschool population, they are 54 percent of females suspended from preschool (Hull 2018). In 2023 the U.S. Department of Education confirmed that exclusionary discipline disproportions still affected male and Black students as well as students with disabilities and are correlated with negative long-term outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights 2023). These school disciplinary rates play out in detention rates. Twenty-five percent of school calls to the police involved students with IEPs (Heasley 2025).

In the United States as a whole, boys were more than twice as likely to be suspended and almost three times as likely to be expelled than girls. Again, we see these incarceration rates foreshadowed by school discipline rates. Lesbian, gay, or bisexual students receive harsher discipline than their peers for similar offenses. For example, they are 1.23 times more likely to be suspended than their heteronormative peers (Snapp, Day, and Russell 2022). Overall, “90% of LGBTQ+ youth in detention have been suspended or expelled from school at least once” (Stammen and Ghandnoosh 2022, 5). Because of other circumstances such as being unhoused, they are also truant more often than their heteronormative, housed peers.

Disproportionality is highest for Black female students. Black girls are six times more likely to get suspended than white girls, and Black boys are three times more likely to be suspended than white boys (Greenlee, Alabi, and Zinzi 2021, 43-44). In the 2018 school year, Black and Indigenous girls were most likely to be suspended, expelled, or referred to law enforcement. Black girls and those identifying as two or more races were most likely to be transferred to alternative schools or

physically restrained. The disproportionality is significantly higher than that between Black and white boys (Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality 2020).

Bad Pedagogy

Approaches to teaching, or pedagogy, heavily contribute to a student's experience of school. Bad pedagogy decreases student academic success. A lack of academic success and frustration in school has long been a predictor of students being pushed out or dropping out of school. This academic struggle can have a racial component. For example, a 2023 Hechinger report found that struggling Black and Latinx readers in Boston had significantly less access to qualified reading specialists than their white peers: The report notes that 82 percent of white students had access to a reading specialist whereas 70 percent of Latino students and 61 percent of Black students had that same access (Carr 2022). After many years of not being able to close the racial gap between white students and students of color, local and national education authorities are moving to an evidence-based model for teaching reading. For example, the 2020s saw a growing acknowledgement that the “whole language approach” does not teach children how to read. In fact, relying on it has exacerbated the racial gap in reading. This literacy and reading gap has been increasingly recognized as a significant problem. In 2022, the NAACP raised poor reading instruction as a civil rights issue (Carr 2022).

Overcrowded Classrooms

Research shows us that overcrowded classrooms lead to further concerns. In fact, overcrowded classrooms can create carceral and detention conduct in the classroom. Students are less engaged and more distracted in larger classes. Teachers have less flexibility to address individual needs. A 2022 literature review by Chalkbeat found that academic achievement improved in smaller classes, as did attendance (Barnum 2022). Restraints and seclusion are used more often by teachers in classrooms with high student-to-staff ratios or who lack access to specialists and when students have unmet educational or emotional needs. The reciprocal is

also true: When students' needs are met the use of restraints and seclusion decreases (Munson et al. 2023).

SPECIAL EDUCATION FAILURES

Students with disabilities must be provided with reasonable accommodation for their disabilities. These accommodations require a doctor's certification of the disability or diagnosis. The federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects against discrimination based on disability. Section 504 of the act requires reasonable accommodation in a variety of settings, including schools. Schools are required to create and implement a formal plan detailing how schools will remove barriers for students with disabilities. School personnel, a parent or guardian, and sometimes the student meet to create the 504 Plan. Common examples include seating at the front of the classroom for someone with ADHD, getting medication at school, and extra time on tests. Disabled students who need more supports are entitled to them under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA gives every student with disabilities the right to a "free appropriate public education" in the "least restrictive environment." This process requires evaluations by the school, classification of the student into one of thirteen disability categories and the development of an IEP, mentioned earlier. The services available range from speech and physical therapy to counseling, applied behavior analysis, Behavior Intervention Plans, and more. Both the 504 Plan and the IEP are legally binding contracts between the school and the family. When these plans are not followed, students with disabilities do not have a level playing field to participate in school and learn. This section looks at how failures in the 504 Plan and IEP processes, such as lack of services, denial of access to due process, and the illegal use of exclusionary discipline, contribute to the incarceration of children and the criminalization of school discipline.

Lack of Access to Appropriate Services

There is a link between youth arrests and a lack of access to appropriate services. According to the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, arrests for status

offenses are often the result of unaddressed disabilities and unmet special education needs. It is estimated that 70 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system have a mental health, sensory, or learning disability, yet only 28 to 43 percent of those students have previously been identified as having special education needs (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, n.d.). Lack of needed special education services can lead to frustration and truancy, while untreated mental health issues can lead to conflicts and running away from home. The Coalition for Juvenile Justice cites the lack of special education services, particularly for Black and Indigenous youth, as a contributing factor to higher incarceration rates (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, n.d.). The U.S. Department of Education suggests that the absence of special education services, particularly for students of color with learning disabilities, likely contributes to their higher incarceration rates (Rotherham, Foster, and Corral 2023).

Like many of the issues discussed in this book, children of color are even more impacted. And it starts early. Babies and toddlers up to their third birthday who have disabilities are eligible to receive special education services through Part C of IDEA.

Black and Latinx students are five times less likely than white children to receive early intervention services. Additionally, when these children do get early intervention services, they have worse experiences than their white peers. For example, there are longer delays in finding therapists. According to a 2023 report from the Heckscher Foundation for Children, therapists are less willing to go into Black neighborhoods than white neighborhoods. “By the time they turned two, Black toddlers with developmental delays are five times less likely than similar white children to receive ‘early intervention’ services” (Carr 2023). This disparity may contribute to the overrepresentation of Black and Latinx students in some special education service categories. There are thirteen special education categories, and a student must be assigned to one of them in order to receive special education services.

Once students have been incarcerated, the overall “teaching and learning in juvenile facilities are widely limited and notoriously subpar” (Snydman 2022, 18). Additionally, IDEA violations in juvenile facilities are “blatant and often egregious” (Snydman 2022, 19), including the following:

EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES

Early intervention services help a child with disabilities or developmental delays increase success in learning and life. Common services include the following:

- assistive technology devices and services
- audiology
- family education and counseling, home visits, and parent support groups
- nursing services
- nutrition services
- occupational therapy
- physical therapy
- psychological services
- service coordination
- social work services
- special instruction
- speech pathology
- vision services

- failure to evaluate students' needs, especially for mental health needs
- not providing IEP services in a timely manner
- failure to provide education in the least restrictive environment
- changing the IEP to reflect the services that are available, not the services the students need
- not providing eligible 18–22-year-olds with their services (Snydman 2022)

These types of failures prevent the student both from getting an education and from getting the help they need for their disability-related issues.

Lack of Manifestation Hearings

Students with disabilities may not legally be punished for behavior resulting from their disability. To ensure that this is the case, manifestation

determination reviews are supposed to happen when a student with an IEP is suspended. The goal is to establish whether the student's behavior is related to their disability or to the failure of the school to implement the IEP. If it is, they cannot be legally suspended. These reviews are supposed to happen in a timely manner. Yet they often do not even happen until after the suspension is over.

Criminalization of Mental Health and Trauma

The criminalization of mental health and trauma starts with defining normal adolescent behaviors as status offenses. These types of behaviors are typical of many adolescents and can be part of normal adolescent development. Sometimes these types of behaviors by children can be strategies employed to deal with traumatic situations such as abuse and neglect. A 2025 white paper from the National Education Policy Center found that “[t]he pandemic affected the mental health of everyone involved in schooling and shaped not only student behavior but also the perception and response to misbehavior. ... [S]tates are hardening their approach to managing student behavior by accelerating various forms of exclusionary discipline” (Welsh 2025, 4).

Children charged with status offenses come to the attention of the law enforcement system via referrals from school, being detained for truancy, and parents involving the courts when they feel their child is out of control. In 2014, one in eleven juvenile court cases were status offenses (Jafarian and Ananthakrishnan 2017). This process doubly penalizes youth, first, by criminalizing them and, second, by not addressing the underlying environmental and mental health issues. Black girls are particularly vulnerable to this type of discrimination. Necessary survival skills, which might be called by others *being ghetto*, can be a coping mechanism to discrimination related to poverty, race, and gender. Challenging authority, being loud, and acting unladylike can result in being sent away to group homes, trainings schools, and detention centers to fit these young women into the good-girl mold (Morris 2016).

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