


citymatch
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A Missing Piece of MCH

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The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Incarceration Replacing Education is a Public Health Issue

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In 2011-2012, U.S. schools referred 260,000 of their students to law enforcement; 92,000 students were arrested for school-related issues. These young people were disproportionately Black students and students with disabilities. They are part of what's known as the "school-to-prison pipeline," and include children who are chronically truant due to bullying at school, get into fights at school as a result of unmet mental health needs, are subject to harsher punishments based on their race, or who are pushed out of schools and into the justice system in countless other scenarios. Each of these students is a missed opportunity for schools and communities to help youth along the path to becoming productive adults.

School discipline policies—particularly "zero tolerance" or discriminatory policies that lead to suspension and expulsion—unsafe school environments, increasing police presence in schools, and lack of identification and services for youth with mental health needs all contribute to this problem. Its impact on students is dire: in addition to juvenile justice system involvement, discipline practices that exclude students from schools have been linked to behavior problems, substance abuse, and dropping out of school. Youth who do become involved with the juvenile justice system and are placed in juvenile detention systems are more likely to experience depression and suicidality, have poorer educational outcomes, and ultimately worse employment prospects. These youth also often lose Medicaid coverage when they enter juvenile detention facilities or other state care, and have difficulty re-enrolling later—leading to a lack of services which can exacerbate new or existing physical or mental health conditions.

We know that all of these things affect long-term mental and physical health, meaning that the school-to-prison pipeline

is a public health issue that MCH programs have a vested interest in addressing. As public entities who work with schools, justice systems and community health providers, MCH programs can play an important role in convening or collaborating with these different systems, as well as being a voice for change in their communities.

Specifically MCH programs can work with schools and communities by:

- Encouraging schools to train personnel on identification of mental and behavioral health issues and helping identify providers who can address them.
- Opposing "zero tolerance" or other overly harsh and/or discriminatory discipline policies and encouraging unbiased discipline practices that are age-appropriate, hold youth accountable, and include provision of needed services. (This includes identifying and eliminating disparate practices based on race, disability, gender, and sexual orientation.)
- Working with schools and other partners to increase school engagement and improve school climate, in part by looking at federal guidance, and promising practices and programs used across the country. ■



Lisa Pilnik, JD, MS

The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Additional Resources

- American Academy of Pediatrics, Policy Statement: Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion
- The Council of State Governments Justice Center. The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System
- U.S. Department of Education, Directory of Federal School Climate and Discipline Resources
- Coalition for Juvenile Justice, Zero Tolerance Policies and the Implications for Juvenile Justice
- The Dignity in Schools Campaign
- Ending the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track

Access links to resources by viewing CityLights online at www.citymatch.org.