

# Juvenile Justice Fact Sheet Series: School to Prison Pipeline

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Counsel

Girls

Crossover  
Youth

African-  
American  
Youth

Latino Youth

LGBTQ  
Youth

Mental  
Health/Substance  
Abuse

Specialty  
Courts

School to  
Prison  
Pipeline

## Overview:

The phrase “school to prison pipeline” describes an overemphasis on policies and practices in schools that push children out of school and into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. Such policies and practices include zero tolerance and harsh discipline like out of school suspensions and expulsions for even minor misbehavior, prison-like security procedures, overreliance on police or school resource officers to provide security, and increasing numbers of school-based arrests and referrals to juvenile court.

The school to prison pipeline operates *directly* through the criminalization of youth for school-based incidents and *indirectly* through practices that lead to students dropping out, making them far more likely to become involved in juvenile or adult court.

## National Statistics:

A history of prior suspensions from school is one of the strongest predictors of whether a student will ultimately drop out, thus increasing his likelihood of entering the juvenile or adult justice systems. In a study of 26,000 U.S. middle and high schools, researchers found that over two million students received out-of-school suspensions in 2009-10 school year. In the schools studied, one out of every nine secondary students was suspended at least once. A 2013 Chicago study found that 73% of children arrested as adolescents later dropped out of high school, compared with 51% of those not arrested. A single arrest raises the odds of dropping out of high school by 22%.

National data also show strong disparities in discipline rates based on race and disability. One out of every six Black K-12 students was suspended at least once and more than 13% of students with disabilities were suspended nationally – about twice the rate of their non-disabled peers. School-based arrests have also increased dramatically over the past 20 years, with Black students and students with disabilities being arrested at higher rates than White and non-disabled students.

## Research and Programming:

In 2011, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice formed the Supportive School Discipline Initiative (SSDI) to reduce the school to prison pipeline by supporting school discipline practices that foster safe, positive learning environments and keep children in school. In 2014, the SSDI followed up by releasing a school discipline guidance package designed to ensure that states, districts, and schools have the tools and resources they need to improve school climate and ensure that their discipline practices comply with federal law and reduce disparities. These developments at the federal level were supported by years of work in communities across the country to eliminate zero tolerance policies and reduce the use of suspension and expulsion for minor, non-violent student behavior.

## Ohio Data:

Ohio schools issued more than 210,000 out of school suspensions in 2012-13, and more than 3,400 expulsions. Suspensions and expulsions for “disobedient or disruptive” (non-violent) behavior accounted for 54% of all suspensions and 21% of all expulsions. Suspensions and expulsions were more prevalent for certain students. Black students made up 15.9% of student enrollment, but accounted for 52% of suspensions, 53% of expulsions, and were more than six times more likely to be suspended than White students. Similarly, students with disabilities comprised 14.8% of enrollment, but accounted for 27.5% of suspensions and were approximately two

times as likely to be suspended as students without disabilities. Putting race and disability together, a Black student with emotional disturbance was 25 times more likely to be suspended than a non-disabled White student.

Ohio schools and counties do not consistently or uniformly collect data on school-based arrests. One exception is the Lucas County Juvenile Court, which tracks arrests under Toledo's "Safe School Ordinance," a law that allows students to be arrested for disruptive behavior in school. During the 2009-10 school year, there were approximately 649 referrals to the juvenile court under the Safe School Ordinance. Black students comprised 86% of those referrals, despite the fact that Black students account for about 45% of the student population. In more recent years, there has been a marked decline in the number of arrests under the Safe School Ordinance: there were 397 arrests during the 2010-11 school year and 345 arrests during the 2011-12 school year. However, Black students still account for more than 80% of those arrests.

## Ohio's Approach:

Some Ohio school districts are taking action to change their school discipline policies and reduce school arrest rates. In Toledo Public Schools, for example, the district has begun a multi-year effort to implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a positive, preventive, tiered approach to discipline that focuses on teaching and modeling appropriate behavior.

The willingness of districts like Toledo to adopt new approaches helped prompt the Ohio State Board of Education to adopt a policy and regulations in early 2013 that formally adopted PBIS statewide and requires all schools to begin implementing the positive discipline approach. Progress is slow, and collecting data to effectively monitor and adjust implementation is crucial, but Ohio is beginning to move in the right direction. To reduce arrests, the Ohio Attorney General recently convened a small group of stakeholders to begin the process of creating a sample Memorandum of Understanding that will help focus the role of police officers in school buildings – also called school resource officers – on school safety and ensure that officers are not administering routine discipline for non-violent behavior that should be handled by school staff.

## Conclusion:

Ohio's children cannot grow up and become successful adults without a strong education that prepares them to succeed in and build Ohio's economy. Local communities must work together with parents, students, educators, and other stakeholders to develop new approaches to discipline and school safety that de-emphasize suspension and expulsions and reduce arrests of students in school.

Ohio has begun to address these issues, but should do more. The next steps include: (1) supporting community-based efforts to reform local school discipline policies and implement alternatives to out-of-school suspension and expulsion, (2) encouraging school districts and county juvenile courts to collect and report data on school-based arrests and referrals to juvenile courts, and (3) supporting the development of local policies to reduce arrests of students for non-violent behavior in schools.

## Resources:

*Ohio Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports*, Ohio Department of Education (January 2013) available at <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/School-Safety/Building-Better-Learning-Environments/PBIS-Resources>.

*School Climate and Discipline*, U.S. Department of Education (January 2014) available at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>.

*School Resource Officers: Recommendations for Maximizing School Safety and Minimizing Risks to Ohio Children*, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (August 2013) available at <http://www.cdfohio.org/research-library/documents/school-resource-officers.html>.

*Zero Tolerance and Exclusionary School Discipline Policies Harm Students and Contribute to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline*, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (November 2012) available at <http://www.cdfohio.org/assets/pdf-files/issue-brief-zero-tolerance.pdf>.

**This fact sheet was authored by Children's Defense Fund-Ohio and is one of a series about Ohio's juvenile justice system developed by members of the Ohio Juvenile Justice Alliance.**

**If you have any questions, please visit [OJJA's website] or contact Erin Davies with the Juvenile Justice Coalition at [edavies@jjohio.org](mailto:edavies@jjohio.org) or 614-400-5548.**