

The School-to-Prison Pipeline and Implications for South Carolina



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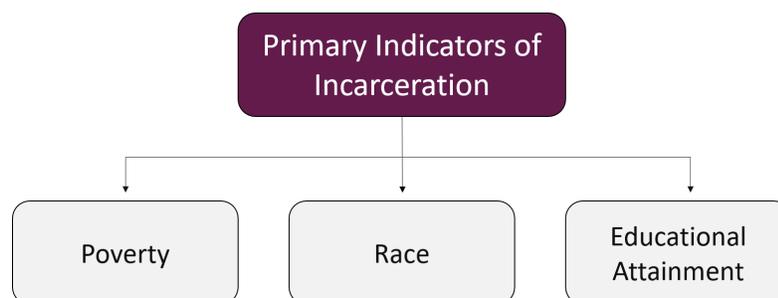
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Summary

When analyzing the broad set of data and research, there is insufficient evidence to determine the absence or existence of a school-to-prison pipeline in Greenville County. While schools play a major factor, research suggests other equally important factors contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon include poverty, race, and educational attainment. Greenville is among the most challenged communities in the United States in terms of economic mobility.¹ Further, high poverty rates and low educational attainment are disproportionately characteristic of non-white community members. When combined with data on implicit bias and exclusionary disciplinary practices such as suspension and expulsion (another risk factor correlated with incarceration), these data suggest that a school-to-prison pipeline *could* exist in Greenville County and in South Carolina at-large.

Overview of School-to-Prison Pipeline

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) defines the school-to-prison pipeline as “a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.”² There is inadequate reporting from private educational institutions to determine if a similar pipeline exists; however, the indicators of incarceration and primary causes are safely extrapolated across all children. When early education practices are referenced, we may use the term “preschool-to-prison pipeline.”



There are six primary causes of school-to-prison pipeline, all of which impact or are impacted by the aforementioned indicators of **incarceration**:³

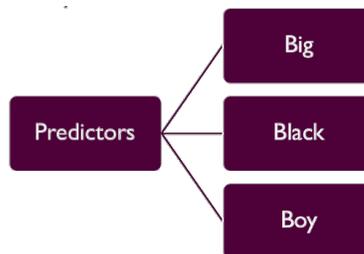
1) Failing public schools	Students living in poverty are more likely to attend failing public schools. The lack of resources in such schools often leads to struggling students feeling unsupported and, therefore, being more likely to dropout.
2) Disincentives to graduate	“Creaming” refers to the pressure to increase a school’s standardized test scores. Some students who do not meet standardized testing goals may be directly or indirectly encouraged to dropout. Others receive little support to continue their education.
3) Disciplinary and alternative schools	Often used in lieu of suspension, these schools may lack accountability standards resulting in students returning to their original schools academically ill-prepared and set up to fail out.
4) In-school policing	The use of School Resource Officers and other in-school policing tactics has led to school-based arrests even for non-violent offenders.
5) Exclusionary discipline	Zero-tolerance school policies and exclusionary disciplinary practices disproportionately impact Black children.
6) Court involvement and juvenile detention	Harsh discipline pushes students into the juvenile justice system.

A National Issue

The school-to-prison pipeline often impacts children as early as ages three and four via perhaps one of the most striking exclusionary discipline trends—that of preschool suspension and expulsion. An estimated 250 preschoolers enrolled in public programs are suspended or expelled each day.⁴ This number would likely increase greatly if private preschools were included.

One study revealed that the rate of expulsion in private preschool programs was approximately twice as high as that of public preschools and highest in faith-affiliated settings.⁵ Nationwide, Black boys receive two-thirds of all school

suspensions, starting in preschool.⁶ By age 18, 30 percent of Black boys have been arrested at least once—almost 50 percent by age 23.⁷ At the preschool level, the greatest predictors of the likelihood of suspension or expulsion are a child’s size, race, and gender. Young children who are larger than their peers, Black, and boys are most likely to be suspended or expelled from preschool. This trend is often referred to as the “3 B’s.”⁸



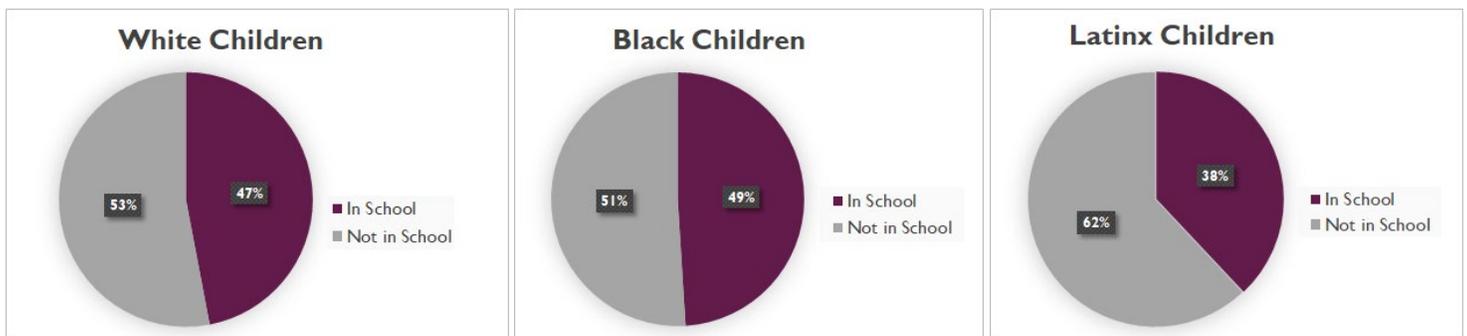
Black girls are at-risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline too. Due to adultification—“a social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children in the absence of knowledge of children’s behavior and verbalizations”—Black girls are oftentimes viewed as more adult-like than their peers and therefore in need of less nurturing, protection and support.⁹ These perceptions result in harsher discipline. Out of all school-aged girls, Black girls receive the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions; after Black boys, Black girls are most likely to be suspended or expelled.¹⁰

While Black students make up less than 20 percent of preschool students, they represent 50 percent of those suspended. Whereas white students are 43 percent of students enrolled, but less than 30 percent of suspensions.¹¹ Preschool suspension and expulsion undoubtedly disproportionately affect Black students, even at ages as young as three and four.

South Carolina Preschools: Participation and Practices

Between 2012 and 2016, nearly 50 percent of three and four-year-olds, on average, were enrolled in school.¹² Approximately half of all Black and white children and 40 percent of Latinx children in South Carolina attended preschool.

Enrollment of 3 to 4-Year-Olds by Race: 2012-2016



Similarly, by the 2018-2019 school year, 46 percent of three and four-year-olds were enrolled in nursery school or preschool.¹³ Focusing specifically and more locally on the availability of preschool, there are currently 30 elementary schools and six child development centers within Greenville County Public Schools that provide 4-year-old kindergarten or “4K.”¹⁴ As of March 2020, approximately 25 percent of four-year-olds in Greenville (1,474) were enrolled in public 4K.¹⁵

A 2018 study of 138 preschools across 35 South Carolina counties indicated that more than half of center-based preschool programs surveyed were using exclusionary disciplinary practices in response to challenging behaviors of children ages three to five. Children were picked up early, kept home, and asked not to return. One-third of center-based childcare programs used the same exclusionary disciplinary practices for children under the age of three.¹⁶

Implications for South Carolina

Considering the incarceration risk factors of poverty, race, and educational attainment in addition to disciplinary practices of most preschools sampled, there is cause for concern that a preschool-to-prison pipeline—an educational trend that disproportionately impacts Black children and other children of color—*may* exist in South Carolina. In 2019, more than 20 percent of Black, Latinx and Native American households were living in poverty in the state.¹⁷ In each case the poverty rate was more than twice that of white South Carolinians. Nationally, college graduation rates also reflect disproportionality by race. Twenty-six percent of Black people and 14 percent of Latinx people aged 25 and older had a bachelor's degree in 2019, much lower than the 40 percent graduation rate for their white peers.¹⁸

When a child is not welcome in the classroom, they are more likely to end up within the juvenile justice system on a path that too often leads to a lack of access to key opportunities and eventual incarceration as an adult. To counteract the school-to-prison pipeline at its most nascent stages, it is worth looking into the practices of preschools that do not use suspension and expulsion for behavior management. In addition, we must tackle the implicit bias inherent in suspensions and expulsions while also supporting policies that discourage exclusionary disciplinary practices for young children.

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