BEYOND EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING CONNECTICUT’S SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

JESSICA NELSON, ASSISTANT POLICY & RESEARCH FELLOW
LAUREN RUTH, PH.D., RESEARCH & POLICY DIRECTOR
ALEXANDRA RICKS, YALE LAW SCHOOL STUDENT AND FORMER ASSISTANT POLICY & RESEARCH FELLOW
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INTRODUCTION
Many advocates and scholars have connected school policies that lead to expulsion and detention and student involvement with the juvenile justice system, describing the link as the “the school to prison pipeline,” especially when discussing the experiences of students of color. Currently, much of the school to prison pipeline research focuses on school practices and policies, primarily the use of exclusionary discipline and in-school arrests. Larger issues such as income gaps between different communities and unconscious racial biases in the classroom are often left unconsidered. This report aims to uncover these larger issues, many of which are systemic problems that have been formed over time through the behavior of individuals, laws, and policies in the public education and the court system.

This literature review aims to expand the understanding of the school to prison pipeline and to call attention to the varied and complicated forces, largely outside of a child's or family's control, that can impact why a child may fail to graduate high school or have contact with the juvenile justice system. We begin the review with a brief historical look at how the school to prison pipeline metaphor came to be and the circumstances it typically describes. Then, we highlight negative outcomes that are typically associated with the school to prison pipeline. Next, we will cover a series of factors that can impact a child’s ability to succeed in school and risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system. These factors are broken down into three categories: discrimination, physical and mental well-being, and socioeconomic status. The discrimination section explains how students of color and LGBTQ+ students are impacted by negative biases that others hold. The physical and mental well-being section explains how a child’s health and access to behavioral and physical health care can affect their success and lead to justice system involvement. The socioeconomic status section goes over the ways that family and community resources can impact a child’s life. Each section additionally considers how racism and socioeconomic status can cause or exacerbate the problems a child and their family faces. Lastly, we consider a series of recommendations that can help improve a students’ experience in school, with the goal of reducing the risk of high school drop-out and corrections involvement. These recommendations were developed through data walks at the Connecticut College and Career Readiness Alliance Convening in February of this year, and with the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance’s Justice Advisors.

This report seeks to expand the narrative of the school to prison pipeline, and, through this expanded conceptual framework, we aim to generate new ideas for research and policy solutions that address the root causes of the school to prison pipeline. We recognize, however, that this report does not discuss the full breadth of circumstances that impact a child’s experience. Overall, we want to foster a deeper conversation that explores the ecological factors that impact a child’s experiences and outcomes. We hope that this report lays the groundwork for understanding the various risk factors that can lead to a student being pushed out of school and becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. The goal of this report is to help researchers and policymakers think differently about the school to prison pipeline so that researchers in Connecticut can collect data to understand students’ holistic experiences and policymakers can create novel solutions that transform students’ learning environments.
BACKGROUND
Pervasive racial bias has created significant disparities in United States’ prisons where Black, Latino, and Native Americans are disproportionately held. Black Americans have long been stereotyped as violent, aggressive, and criminal, leading to biased police stops and sentencing. Latino Americans face prejudices, which make it more likely for them to be searched by police than white Americans. While these racial biases have had a longstanding impact on the criminal justice system, policies established during the “War on Drugs” to limit illegal drug usage, especially led to high incarceration rates for Black and Latino Americans, despite the fact that there were not significant differences in the rates of drug usage.

In the early 1990’s the racial biases that exist in the criminal justice system were expanded as policymakers began to target youth of color. Lawmakers made it easier for courts to try and sentence youth as adults, and subjected youth to mandatory minimum and other harsh sentences for crimes related to drugs and violence that they believed to be perpetrated by “gang-related” youth. In 1994, congress and the Clinton Administration passed the Gun-Free Schools Act, which required school administrators to expel a student for a minimum of one year if that student brought a “weapon” to school. In practice this policy was interpreted loosely, and in some cases students were expelled for minor violations such as bringing nail clippers to school. Additionally, this law created the foundation for schools to adopt “zero-tolerance” policies, which require minimum disciplinary actions for certain offenses, and brought the prevailing attitude of penalization from the justice system into the school system.

As a result of these policies, suspension and school arrest rates increased, disproportionately impacting Black, Latino, and low-income youth. Advocates and educators began to describe this phenomenon using the metaphor of the “school to prison pipeline.”

The term “school to prison pipeline” was first noted by researchers at a conference at Northeastern University titled, “Reconstructing the School to Prison Pipeline: Charting Intervention Strategies of Prevention and Support for Minority Children.” A paper by authors Johanna Ward and Daniel Losen framed the work presented at the conference, noting that the terms “prison track” and “school to prison pipeline” had “gained currency in public discourse” and were used to “refer to a journey through school that is increasingly punitive and isolating for its travelers—many of whom will be placed in restrictive special education programs, repeatedly suspended, held back in grade, and banished to alternative, ‘outplacements’ before finally dropping or getting ‘pushed out’ of school altogether.”

As the experiences described by the “school to prison pipeline” began to receive more scrutiny, educators have made efforts to decrease the rates of school arrest and exclusionary discipline. In Connecticut, schools have worked with in-school police to limit the behaviors that students can be arrested for and have adopted the School-Based Diversion Initiative which is designed to shift school responses to certain behaviors from punishment to providing mental health treatment. But, while overall arrest rates have fallen, racial disparities remain.

From the 2010-2011 school year to the 2014-2015 school year, school arrest rates for white students decreased 47 percent. For Black students it decreased only 37 percent, and for Native American students it did not decrease at all. The persistence of these disparities suggest that while exclusionary discipline policy shifts in schools are somewhat effective, they are limited in their ability to fully address racial inequities.

Schools, districts, and policymakers must think beyond bandage solutions and consider structural and historical problems to make schools a true place of equal opportunity for students of color and white students and to reduce racial disparities in discipline and graduation rates. In this report, we
point to a variety of factors outside of school discipline procedures that directly or indirectly impact what has historically been thought of as the “school to prison pipeline.” In the next section, we discuss the primary drivers and outcomes of the “school to prison pipeline.”

Traditional Drivers and Outcomes of the “School to Prison Pipeline”

Throughout the report, we explain how discrimination, well-being, and socioeconomic status can make it harder for children to excel in school and puts them at an increased risk for involvement in the juvenile correctional system. We highlight school absenteeism, exclusionary discipline, not graduating high school, and justice system involvement as undesired experiences that are typically associated with the school to prison pipeline. Here, we explain each of these and their significance.

Exclusionary Discipline

Exclusionary discipline is a form of discipline where a student is removed from the classroom, and, as a result, misses vulnerable instruction time. Suspension and expulsion are common forms of exclusionary discipline. Researchers regard exclusionary discipline as an ineffective way to address classroom behavior and potentially harmful to students who experience it.¹⁹ In California, a statewide study on suspension and graduation found that being suspended made it less likely for a student to graduate high school, even after controlling for other factors that could contribute to both occurrences such as low grades and disruptive behavior.²⁰ In Texas, a study found that students who were suspended or expelled had a significantly higher chance of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system the next year.²¹

School Absenteeism

School absenteeism—when a student does not attend school—can be harmful for academic achievement and is even linked to dropping out of high school.²² When children are not in school, they are unable to receive the benefits of classroom instruction and can become separated from supportive adults and peers. The more school a student misses, the more severe the effects are. In Connecticut, when a student misses 10 percent or more of total school days, they are considered chronically absent, a cutoff used to signify a significant problem.²³ Notably, chronic absenteeism does not occur only as the result of a student skipping school for fun or having unexcused absences, but can also occur when a student is ill or is unable to go to school for reasons outside of their control.²⁴ If a student accumulates several unexcused absences, they may be considered truant. In some states, though not in Connecticut, truancy carries the risk of systems involvement, creating a direct link between absenteeism and the juvenile justice system.

High School Graduation

A high school diploma creates the opportunity for students to pursue further education, join the armed forces, and go into careers that are otherwise inaccessible. For many employers, a high school diploma is a symbol that a person is qualified for a job, although the diploma itself is not a marker of quality of education or actual job preparedness. Unfortunately, many of the jobs in the United States that do not require a high school diploma pay low wages that make it difficult for someone to afford basic necessities such as healthcare and rent. Over a year, high school graduates make about $35,000 on average compared to about $25,000 for non-graduates.²⁵ All jobs should pay a living wage, and lack of a high school diploma should not confine an individual to poverty. However, all students in the United States deserve to attend schools that inspire and encourage them to learn and provide an equal opportunity for high school graduation. Currently in the United
States, this is not the case. Nationally the graduation rate for Black and Hispanic students is about ten percent lower than that of white students. For Native American students, the graduation rate is 17 percentage points lower. High school graduation is notable because it marks the end of the United States’ universal public education system, and because it symbolizes the end of an important period of personal and academic growth for youth.

**Juvenile Justice System Involvement**

Formal juvenile justice systems were originally created in the United States with the belief that children and adolescents should have a more rehabilitative experience than the adult justice system could offer. However, evidence has shown that many of the children and adolescents who go through the juvenile justice system each year do not receive rehabilitative services or have their needs addressed. Instead, these youth are often harmed by their experiences in the juvenile system. Practices such as detention and incarceration can harm large numbers of youth. Confinement in a correctional facility can lead to new mental health challenges or worsened mental health challenges; an increased risk for future criminal behavior and more serious criminal behavior; an increased risk of homelessness and poverty; and an increased risk for low academic achievement and permanently leaving school. The use of confinement is particularly harmful to vulnerable youth including youth of color, youth with disabilities, youth from low-income backgrounds, and LGBTQ youth—all of whom are at an increased risk for justice system involvement.

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In the justice system, detention is a pre-trial detention in a correctional facility. Incarceration is detainment in a correctional facility after a youth has been sentenced. Sometimes the umbrella term ‘confinement’ is used to describe all situations when youth are held in a correctional facility.
STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC DRIVERS AND OUTCOMES OF THE “SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE”

In addition to the aforementioned traditional drivers and outcomes of the “school to prison pipeline,” this report specifically examines three structural and systemic drivers and outcomes: discrimination against individuals, physical and mental well-being, as well as socioeconomic inequality. This is by no means an exhaustive list of drivers and outcomes. However, they are key factors that can make it harder for children to excel in school and puts them at an increased risk for involvement in the juvenile correctional system.

Discrimination Against Individuals

Youth who are non-white or members of the LGBTQ+ community can face discrimination in the classroom that can impact their academic achievement, increase barriers to graduation, and make it more likely for them to be pushed into the justice system. As these individual characteristics are put into the context of a whole child (i.e. not just someone who is Black, but someone who is a Black, heterosexual girl) the dynamics of discrimination become more complicated.

Race and Ethnicity

In schools, racial bias affects the way Black, Latino, and Native American students are disciplined in the classroom and how they are seen by administrators, teachers, and school resource officers. Although this bias may be unintentional, it has significant impacts on a child’s experience in school.

Literature in the fields of education, psychology, and sociology has demonstrated that Black, Latino, and Native American students are disciplined at higher rates than white students.\(^31\) Nationally, in the 2011-2012 school year, 20 percent of Black boys, 13 percent of Native American boys, and nine percent of Latino boys were suspended compared to just six percent of white boys.\(^32\) In this same school year the suspension rate for Black girls was 12 percent, seven percent for Native American girls, and four percent for Latina girls compared to just two percent of white girls.\(^33\) Furthermore, these trends extend through other harmful discipline practices with students of color being more likely to be arrested by school resource officers or referred to outside law enforcement by school administrators than their white peers.\(^34\)

Reports from state boards of education and school districts have found that large numbers of these expulsions, suspensions, and school-based arrests are due to subjective offenses, meaning teacher perception and discretion determines whether or not the action deserves punishment.\(^35\) For example, a study in California demonstrated that 48 percent of suspensions were issued for “willful defiance,” a subjective offense that could range from failing to turn off a cellphone to wearing a hat in class.\(^36\) The state found the impact of disciplining for “willful defiance” to be so racially biased towards Black and Latino students that it banned “willful defiance” suspensions and expulsions from Kindergarten through third grade, and “willful defiance” expulsions in higher grades.\(^37\) A study on discipline in Arizona schools found that the suspensions received by Black and Native American students were more likely to be for “minor offenses” such as “disruptive behavior, disrespect… [and] verbal provocation” than they were for white students.\(^38\) In Connecticut, Black and Latino children were more likely than white students to receive suspension or expulsion as punishments for behavior including “playing cards” or “disruption.”\(^39\)
Despite the high rates of exclusionary discipline for Black, Latino, and Native American students, there is “virtually no support” for the notion that differences in children’s behaviors have caused these disparities in punishments, according to a literature review conducted by Indiana University researchers. Instead, the large number of the suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests for Black, Latino, and Native American students, particularly for subjective offenses, suggest that decisions by teachers, administrators, and school resource officers are motivated by implicit biases. Implicit bias is defined as the “stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.” Research on implicit bias in schools has frequently found that teachers, especially white teachers, view Black children as more disruptive than their white peers: a literature review conducted by the Kirwan Institute at Ohio University found that implicit bias was linked to high rates of discipline for Black and Latino students. One study conducted by the Yale University Child Study Center demonstrated how implicit bias can impact teacher behavior. When looking for “challenging” behavior in the classroom, white teachers spent more time observing Black students, especially boys, suggesting that they expected Black children to act out more than white children. The authors of this study reasoned that bias such as this contributed to the disparate rates of suspension and expulsion for Black students. Notably, this study was done with preschool-aged children, suggesting that implicit bias can affect children from a young age.

Colorism, or prejudice based on skin tone, adds another layer to the bias that Black, Latino, and Native American students experience. General studies on colorism have shown that Black people with darker skin and stereotypically “Black” features, such as textured hair, are more likely than Black people with lighter skin to experience prejudice that can lead to higher prison sentences, perceptions of lower intelligence, and bias in hiring. Similarly, Latino people who are non-white or have darker skin are less likely to be viewed as intelligent in comparison to white or light-skinned Latinos. In schools, one study demonstrated that Black students with darker skin tones were more likely to be suspended than their light-skinned counterparts. Black girls with darker skin tones were particularly susceptible to this bias, and were three times more likely to be suspended than those with the lightest reported skin tone. Another study conducted with national data found that students with darker skin tones had lower grade point averages (GPAs) than those with lighter skin tones; this relationship was especially true for Native American students. The study found that much of the difference in GPA could be explained by poor teacher-student relationships and increased discipline, suggesting that negative bias towards students with darker skin tones impacted the relationship these students had with their teachers and thus lead to lower academic achievement. Overall, colorism has been demonstrated to negatively impact students with darker skin, no matter the racial or ethnic group they belong to.
The effects of colorism extend to the correctional system as well. Darker skin tones and stereotypically black features have been shown to influence sentencing and arrests. A literature review on stereotypically black features found that people often unknowingly attributed stereotypes of aggression and criminality to males with stereotypical features. The authors of the literature review suggested that when done by police officers, judges, and juries this stereotyping could result in more negative consequences for those with Afrocentric features versus those with Eurocentric features. A study using longitudinal data on youth and young adults found that darker skin tones across all races were related to an increased risk for arrest. Skin tone remained a strong predictor for arrest even when controlling for race and prior offending. Furthermore, the study found that even within families, darker skinned boys were at a higher risk for arrest than their lighter skinned brothers. This means that even when two children are raised with similar backgrounds and are of the same race, the bias against darker skin tones has a significant effect.

Implicit bias against students of color, darker skin tones, and Afrocentric features can impede a student’s path to success, making it more likely for them to face expulsions and suspensions in the classroom and arrests and long sentences later on. Additionally, biases can distance a teacher from his/her/their students, causing lower levels of academic achievement and student disengagement in the classroom. While often unconscious on the part of educators and law enforcement, the bias that these students face has serious and significant implications.

Gender

Overall, boys are more likely than girls to be suspended or expelled. They are also more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system. In 2014, 72 percent of justice-involved youth were male, while only 28 percent were female. Research by Dr. Doris Entwisle and Karl Alexander, professors of sociology with expertise regarding education and long-term outcomes, has demonstrated that many of these disparities begin at young ages – in kindergarten and elementary school. One study found that the gender gap in discipline reached its widest in grades three and four, although teachers were more likely to suspend or expel boys throughout their school years. These early disadvantages can negatively impact boys’ entire school trajectory.

Psychologists and sociologists have attributed the discipline gap to both teacher bias and behavior from boys that is disruptive in the classroom, but encouraged outside of it. One study found that when viewing a classroom scene, both male and female observers were more likely to rate interactions between boys as aggressive, even when shown images of the same interactions between girls. In another study, teachers’ favoritism towards students was measured in how frequently they chose individual students to do helpful tasks around the classroom such as take a note to the office or hand out worksheets. In the elementary classrooms where teachers chose more girls to complete these tasks, girls gained more points on standardized tests than boys. On the other hand, in classrooms where teachers chose boys and girls to complete tasks at equal rates, the differences in test score gains were not significant. The researchers concluded that teachers’
preference for girl students was reflected in their penchant for assigning tasks to girls, and that this favoritism carried over into other behaviors such as providing encouragement, which in turn increased girls’ academic performance over boys.

Other studies show that teacher bias is only part of the picture; gender socialization also contributes to disparities in discipline and academic achievement. Socialization is the way that someone learns the behaviors that are accepted by and expected of society. Gender socialization refers to the way male children learn behaviors considered appropriate for boys and female children learn behaviors considered appropriate for girls. One study of students in preschool found that teachers more frequently encouraged girls to engage in behaviors such as “raising one’s hand” and “sitting ‘on your bottom’” than they did boys. This study also found that boys were less likely to be reprimanded for behaviors such as yelling and running in the classroom. The behaviors that girls are encouraged to uphold—sitting still, raising a hand to speak, and avoiding yelling—are useful for succeeding in school. Boys, in contrast, are more often allowed to yell and run around. If boys internalize these behaviors as allowable, they may be more likely to get in trouble in higher grades when these actions are not permissible.

In the juvenile justice system, boys make up the majority of arrests and detentions. However, as efforts to reduce juvenile detention and systems involvement have lowered the overall number of juveniles detained and charged, girls have become a higher proportion of offenders. In 1992, girls represented just two percent of juvenile arrests, yet in 2013, this had increased to 29 percent. Some legal researchers have attributed this to a changing proportion to the way strategies to reduce involvement in the juvenile justice system can be more helpful for boys, often unintentionally.

Boys and girls are often put into the juvenile justice system for different reasons. Girls in particular, are at a high risk for being arrested and punished for status offenses. A status offense is an offense that is only considered a legal violation due to the defendant’s status as a minor, such as truancy or running away. Status offenses are generally believed to be related to underlying traumas such as mental health or family issues. For example, a child may run away from home due to extreme fights with, or even abuse from, parents. While courts are expected to direct status offenders to services and not detention, some judges have used their discretion to harshly punish or detain status offenders—typically girls. One literature review of the history of gender and the juvenile justice system found that the differences in how girls and boys are treated in the justice system are related to historical gender roles, where discipline is often directed at “controlling the criminal behavior of boys and preventing the sexual immorality of girls.”

Race and Gender

Considering gender or race alone, while illuminating, is not enough to explain how either of these identity characteristics affect a child’s risk of being targeted by disciplinary actions. Black and Brown girls face particular stereotypes that shape the implicit biases that fuel unequal disciplinary action. The same is true for Black and Brown boys.

A study on high school discipline, race, and gender by sociologist Edward Morris demonstrates the ways race and gender interact to create specific stereotypes of students. Morris carefully observed students’ behavior and interactions with teachers to show how Black and Latino boys and girls are disciplined in specific ways based on the combination of their race and gender. Morris finds that teachers disciplined Black girls for not “acting like a lady” when they did things such as talk loudly, despite the fact that white, Latino, and Asian boys and girls and Black boys demonstrated similar behavior without being reprimanded. The undue discipline that Morris
observed is likely related to harmful stereotypes of Black girls as “aggressive” and “unfeminine.”

This kind of bias has contributed to the discipline gap between Black and white girls. One study found that for subjective offenses such as “disruptive behavior,” Black boys were one and a half times more to be disciplined than white boys while Black girls were three times more likely to be disciplined than white girls.

Native American and Latina girls face similarly disproportionate discipline outcomes. Black and Native American girls are 20 percent more likely to be formally charged than white girls, and Latina students have been shown to face high rates of discipline without demonstrated behavioral differences. Social science research has also shown that in general, Latina girls face stereotypes that are distinct from Latino boys, suggesting that like others, their classroom treatment is dependent on both their ethnicity and gender. While specific research on Native American status and gender is limited, the higher rates of discipline and implicit bias research on other races and ethnicities suggests that Native American girls face specific stereotypes in the same ways that Black and Latina girls do.

For boys of color, Morris paints a similar picture of specific stereotypes. In his study, Morris focuses on the way teachers and school administrators stereotype Black and Latino boys as “dangerous” and as a result, “subject them to constant surveillance.” He finds that teachers often view Latino and Black boys as “‘bad’ and occasionally threatening,” and frequently refer them to administration for punishment. Notably, even minor actions such as failing to tuck in a shirt or wearing certain colors were viewed as signs of opposition or gang relation and resulted in reprimands for Latino boys. Girls of all races and white and Asian boys were able to dress in these ways without the same reaction from teachers. Morris’ findings are in agreement with a large body of literature that has demonstrated that Latino and Black boys are stereotyped as aggressive and dangerous, which contribute to the discipline disparities between Black and Brown boys and white boys.

As with Native American girls, research on bias is less available for Native American boys. However, the disproportionate number of arrests for this group and the data on implicit bias suggests that harmful teacher perceptions may be at play.

While there are overarching biases that appear across races and across genders, specific demographics are affecting in unique ways. Examining the intersection of race and gender illuminates specific stereotypes which can impact how a child is perceived by, and often disciplined by, teachers and authority figures.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression

Like race and gender, gender expression and sexual orientation can impact the way a child is viewed and disciplined in the school system. In the classroom, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) youth face unique challenges that put them at a higher risk for experiencing exclusionary discipline than their straight or gender conforming peers. Bullying is a common problem for LGBTQ+ students. GLSEN’s 2015 school climate report found that 70 percent of LGBTQ+ students surveyed had experienced verbal harassment pertaining to their sexual orientation and 55 percent pertaining to their gender expression. Additionally, 35 percent of those surveyed had been the target of physical harassment due to their sexual orientation and 20 percent for their gender expression. Gender expression is the way a child or adolescent chooses to physically portray their internal gender identity. Gender can be expressed through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, and a variety of other things. Sexual orientation describes the gender someone is attracted to in relation to their own gender.
For many LGBTQ+ youth, being the victim of bullying can lead to expulsion or suspension. Qualitative studies on non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming students have detailed numerous stories in which LGBTQ+ youth are bullied for their identities, seek help from school administrators and teachers, do not receive the help they need, and then are eventually punished if they fight back to defend themselves after their school failed to address the bullying. On some occasions, these students resort to skipping school rather than being continually harassed by bullies, which can lead to punishment for truancy and lower levels of academic achievement. In one study that utilized a focus group method, several LGBTQ+ youth described being disciplined for defending themselves against a bully while the bully was not punished.

Some teachers and school staff also display bias against LGBTQ+ students through disproportionate disciplinary action. In one study, teachers and school staff were cited to have disciplined gender non-conforming students for wearing certain hairstyles or putting on makeup in class, while cisgender students engaging in the same activities or wearing the same hairstyles were not disciplined. For non-heterosexual youth, displays of affection in same-sex relationships, such as holding hands at school, have been shown to result in extreme punishments which are not given to students engaging in the same activities in heterosexual relationships. In some cases, LGBTQ+ students face additional danger if a school administrator calls a student’s home and “outs” them to potentially unsupportive parents.

Outside of school, an LGBTQ+ identity can make youth more likely to experience conflicts in the home which push them out of their houses, and at times into homelessness—a condition which can lead to juvenile justice involvement. One study found that around 26 percent of non-heterosexual youth leave their families due to conflict over their sexual orientation. We discuss specific ways that unaccompanied homelessness can lead to justice system involvement on page 19.

LGBTQ+ youth can also be stereotyped based on their race and gender expression. Masculine-presenting Black and Latino girls or Black and Latino transgender boys can be affected by the same stereotypes that harm cisgender Black and Latino boys. A national study on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in school found several examples of such bias. In one instance, a Latina girl who identified as lesbian noticed the school administration increasingly “watching” her after she began to dress more masculine. In another case, an adult who worked with LGBTQ+ youth described the ways that authority figures could be biased against non-heterosexual Black girls who wore masculine hairstyles and clothing. Like gender conforming and straight youth, specific racialized and gendered stereotypes can impact the way Black and Brown LGBTQ+ youth are disciplined in schools.

Bias from authority figures such as teachers and school staff can lead to LGBTQ students experiencing increased rates of exclusionary discipline, and eventually justice system involvement.

Physical and Mental Well-being

School success is dependent on a student’s ability to focus in class, complete homework and assignments and engage in behavior that is conducive to learning. Sometimes, physical and behavioral health concerns can impact a student’s ability to do these things. Access to proper medical care, supports for disabilities, and care for trauma can help improve student well-being.
and thus student success. Without appropriate care, a student may be more likely to leave school and have an increased risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system.

**Physical Health**

Health problems that are untreated or undertreated pose a significant impediment to school success. When chronic health problems are untreated, students are at an especially high risk for poor academic achievement and chronic absenteeism. Approximately 25 percent of children aged two to eight have a chronic illness in the United States, including diabetes, asthma, food allergies, and poor oral health. Children with these illnesses whose families have little access to quality healthcare often have lower academic achievement than students who are healthy or who have the same chronic illness but are being properly treated. This suggests that children whose families cannot access high-quality healthcare either due to cost, lack of insurance, or lack of transportation to a doctor, are more likely to suffer effects from their illnesses that impede their ability to succeed in school. As previously discussed, high levels of absenteeism and low academic achievement furthers a student’s risk of leaving school before graduating.

Asthma is a chronic illness that has a significant impact on low-income youth. An estimated 9 percent of all children under the age of 18 are living with asthma. For children living in poverty, this percentage doubles to 18 percent. This disparity is due, at least in part, to a lack of access to quality housing and nutrition for low-income families. Additionally, Black and Brown and low-income communities are more likely to be exposed to dangerous pollution that can create health problems such as asthma. Then, since many low-income families often lack access to healthcare, children in these families are not only more likely to contract asthma, but also less likely to get the treatment for the illness. Asthma that is untreated can then result in poor quality sleep, difficulty focusing in class, and missing school due to symptoms. While asthma is just one of many chronic illnesses, the disparities present in its occurrence and treatment illustrate how some students are subject to health inequalities that can in turn negatively impact their experience in school.

**Behavioral Health**

Psychological disorders, trauma, and substance abuse all play a role in a student’s risk of not graduating school and entering the justice system. Income level as well as race and ethnicity can all influence the way one is able to access treatment for behavioral health problems, further increasing the risk for poor performance and justice system involvement.

Psychological disorders such as trauma, anxiety, and depression can impact a student’s behavior, and thus their ability to succeed in school. Students who have depression and anxiety are more likely to be absent from school, receive lower grades and test scores, and disengage from school overall. Trauma is an experience that threatens life or physical integrity and overwhelms an individual’s capacity to cope. Students who experience trauma can express behavioral changes such as decreased concentration and memory abilities, angry outbursts, and a distrust of peers and adults, which can all impact school performance. Without proper behavioral health care, the academic performance of students with these concerns can decline. Furthermore, due to sustained stress hormone levels, children who have experienced trauma are prone to reacting to situations with heightened levels of aggression and irritability. This behavior can lead to discipline in the classroom.

Accessing appropriate treatment for behavioral health issues is difficult; insurance plans often offer less coverage for behavioral health treatment compared to physical illness, and there are
fewer available facilities to treat mental health concerns.\textsuperscript{118} Low-income families face particular difficulties receiving the care for behavioral health issues due to cost, inadequate insurance or lack of insurance, and lack of access to doctor’s offices or medical facilities.\textsuperscript{119} Black, Native American, Latino, and Asian children face additional challenges in receiving adequate mental health treatment. Evidence suggests that mental illnesses are underdiagnosed and misunderstood in these populations, partially because behavioral health research and treatment is biased toward experiences of white people and may not be culturally relevant to all races and ethnicities.\textsuperscript{120}

Substance use can also impact a student’s academic performance and lead to disciplinary actions. Substance \textit{use} is the consumption of any drugs or alcohol. Substance \textit{abuse} is the continued use of drugs or alcohol, even when it begins to cause problems in someone’s everyday life. Many students try alcohol or drugs during their teenage years. In a national survey, 45 percent of high school seniors said they used marijuana at least once and 69 percent said they used alcohol at least once.\textsuperscript{121} Interviews with students in California indicated that most alcohol or drug use was social and largely benign, and that students were often aware when drugs and alcohol started negatively affecting their own or their friends’ lives.\textsuperscript{122} However, many schools adopt policies that heavily punish drug possession and use—banning students from activities, expelling them, or even arresting them.\textsuperscript{123} These policies have not been shown to reduce drug use.\textsuperscript{124} Instead harsh drug policies can foster mistrust between students and administrators, and fail to offer addiction help to students who are actually struggling.\textsuperscript{125}

Substance \textit{abuse} has been connected with poor academic performance and the development or worsening of other behavioral health problems that can impact schooling.\textsuperscript{126} Frequently, substance abuse disorders are connected to other behavioral health concerns; a literature review on substance abuse and mental illnesses found that young adults who abuse substances such as drugs and alcohol are more likely to have psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder than those who abstain.\textsuperscript{127} As previously discussed, teenagers often know when their or their friends’ drug and alcohol usage becomes harmful. However, receiving help for drug abuse can be difficult, and students who are given punishments instead of treatment suffer both from any exclusionary discipline they may receive and continued drug abuse.\textsuperscript{128}

Sometimes, students with behavioral health needs that go unaddressed are arrested or referred to the juvenile justice system as a reaction to their behavior if school personnel and police officers resort to arrest when youth engage in aggressive behavior stemming from trauma or are seen using substances that are illegal.\textsuperscript{129} This may be one reason that youth in the juvenile system have higher levels of behavioral health needs compared to the general population.\textsuperscript{130} One study conducted from a nationally representative sample found that youth in the juvenile justice system were three times as likely to have a mental health disorder than the general youth population.\textsuperscript{131} Another found that 93 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system had experienced some type of traumatic event including abuse, community violence, and serious illness.\textsuperscript{132}

In the juvenile justice system, youth often do not receive treatment. According to one study, as many as 42 percent of juvenile facilities failed to evaluate all youth entering for behavioral health concerns.\textsuperscript{133} Even if diagnosed, youth in the juvenile system are often unable to receive treatment.\textsuperscript{134} Furthermore, many juvenile detention facilities negatively impact youth’s mental health due to overcrowding, separation from family and friends, and being placed in solitary confinement. The poor environment and lack of treatment can both worsen existing behavioral health issues and lead to the development of new ones. One study found that rates of behavioral health problems increased as youth had greater contact with the justice system, either through
being in more restrictive settings or recidivism, which is when someone re-enters the justice system after being released.\textsuperscript{135}

\textit{Special Education}

Youth with special education needs are significantly more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than youth who do not have special education needs. In U.S. public schools, special education is designated by the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA), which requires schools to provide appropriate educational services to students with disabilities. The act stipulates that these students cannot be punished for their disability. However, some behaviors—inattention caused by ADHD or emotional outburst caused by frustration—can seem like intentional acting out to educators.\textsuperscript{136} Additionally, teachers often lack adequate training to work with students with special needs, especially with those who are identified under IDEA as requiring specific supports while remaining in a traditional classroom setting.\textsuperscript{137}

The inadequacy of teacher training and support can contribute to the disparity in exclusionary discipline that students with disabilities experience. Students with disabilities are twice as likely to be suspended as students without disabilities.\textsuperscript{138} These students are also physically restrained at extremely high rates—national data has demonstrated that while students with disabilities are only 12 percent of the students enrolled in public schools, they are 75 percent of the students who are physically restrained.\textsuperscript{139} In addition to this, students who have an IDEA-eligible disability comprise 25 percent of all school-based arrests and 25 percent of all referrals to law enforcement.\textsuperscript{140} The high rates of school discipline and arrests translate into disparities within the juvenile justice system: while nine percent of all public school students have a disability, 33 percent of youth in juvenile detention facilities do.\textsuperscript{141} Furthermore, youth who have been diagnosed with a learning disability are twice as likely to not graduate high school as youth without one.\textsuperscript{142}

For non-white students, disability status can further exacerbate the disparities that already exist in exclusionary discipline rates. Black, Latino, and Native American students with disabilities experience higher suspension rates than white students.\textsuperscript{143} One reason for this is that some cognitive tests (e.g. the IQ test) that are used to diagnose disabilities are treated as objective, although they have been designed through the lens of a specific culture and language.\textsuperscript{144} This can limit their accuracy when used to assess children who do not share the same cultural background or primary language as the test creators.\textsuperscript{145} The effects of misdiagnosis for students of color can both result in overrepresentation for disabilities as well as underdiagnoses. One literature review on Black boys concluded that the overrepresentation of Black students—especially in disabilities that are commonly related to disruptive behavior—was related to stereotypes of Black boys as disobedient and aggressive.\textsuperscript{146} An unnecessary diagnosis can cause a student to be placed in an overly restrictive class setting with a curriculum that is not suited to his or her true academic needs.\textsuperscript{147} Other researchers have found that for specific disorders, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Black and Latino children are less likely to be identified, potentially leading to unmet educational needs that can cause low academic achievement and over-disciplining.\textsuperscript{148}

Overall, students with disabilities face unique barriers to success in the classroom, and are frequently the target of not only exclusionary discipline but also physical restraint within the classroom. Understanding the ways disabilities impact students is crucial to reducing discipline disparities and increasing the opportunity for students with disabilities to graduate high school.
Exposure to Crime and Violence

Neighborhood crime can directly impact a student’s academic performance. One study found that if a crime occurred on a student’s residential block within the week before a test, the student would perform poorly on the test, compared to students who did not experience violence during the same time period. Researchers have attributed this gap in test scores to the psychological stress and trauma that comes from witnessing violence and crime; and, it is considered by many researchers to have a significant negative impact on educational performance. The fear of being a victim of or witnessing crime can also impact academic performance and behavioral health. Additionally, youth who have been the victim of and/or witnessed violence are more likely to demonstrate aggressive behavior, anxiety, and depression, as well as have trouble focusing and connecting with peers and teachers. All of these reactions to violence are risk factors for both disengagement and poor performance in school and discipline from teachers. Thus, living in a neighborhood with a high crime rate may have the compounded effects of both direct exposure to crime and violence, and an increased fear of being the victim of violence—both of which can make it more difficult for a child to succeed in school.

Within the family, violence in the form of abuse, neglect, or domestic violence can have similar effects to witnessing or experiencing violence and crime in the neighborhood. Children who have been abused or have witnessed domestic violence are at a higher risk for a myriad of mental health issues such as depression, increased aggression, and difficulty connecting to others. As a result, these children are also at an increased risk for poor academic performance and involvement in the criminal justice system. One study found that being the victim of abuse can increase the likelihood of juvenile arrest by as much as 53 percent.

Socioeconomic Inequality

Socioeconomic status (SES) is often considered in both the context of the family who raised the child and the neighborhood in which the child was raised. Family SES is important because a child’s family is tasked with providing many of the supports and resources necessary for the child to develop and grow. Neighborhood SES is related to other resources that can impact a child’s development such as the quality of the school system, the availability of community services such as parks and libraries, and social connections outside of the family. A child’s socioeconomic background can affect both academic achievement and involvement in the justice system. Generally, a child from a high socioeconomic background will have greater access to resources that support high academic achievement and little risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system. On the contrary, a child from a low socioeconomic background will have less access to the resources that help children succeed.

Family SES

While the definition of family SES varies from researcher to researcher, it is typically related to income level, wealth (i.e. savings and property worth), parent education level, and parent occupation. Family SES is designed to describe both the monetary and cultural and social resources available to a family. In other words, family SES can help explain not only a family’s ability to afford medical care, but also how effectively family members can communicate with their doctors who may have years more of education.
A family’s SES can affect a child’s test scores, grades, and the level of education attained. Some research has shown that these effects accumulate over time; the gap between students from low SES backgrounds and students from high SES backgrounds increases as the students’ progress through school. Various studies have attempted to explain the complex relationship between family SES and a child’s experience in school. One literature review by psychologist and education expert Daniel T. Willingham suggests that the majority of research on family SES and academic achievement falls into two categories: one focused on toxic stress and the other on the ability for families to provide resources for their children.

Toxic stress explanations are centered on the idea that families living with few socioeconomic resources often suffer from high levels of chronic stress. This stress affects the children directly, and is thought to influence how parents interact with them. Parents who have a low income are exposed to not only the daily stresses of childrearing but also the additional stressors of long work hours and low wages. As a result, these parents can be less able to engage in activities that support their children in academic growth. For example, a parent who must work overtime to “make ends meet” might not have enough time or energy to read their child a bedtime story.

Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds can be affected by many of the stressors that impact their parents. For example, housing instability or not getting enough to eat are two potential causes of stress that are more likely to affect children from a family with a low income than children from a family with a high income. Children who are under constant stress are more likely to have behavioral problems that can impact learning, such as being inattentive in school. Some evidence even suggests that long-term stress can affect cognitive ability, making it more difficult for a child to remember academic information. This way, the chronic stress associated with low-income backgrounds can negatively impact a child’s success in school.

Families with a low SES do not always have the income needed to provide materials that fuel learning for children including books, computers, tutors, and even high-quality preschool. Furthermore, these families often have a harder time affording resources that can impact education indirectly like healthy food and adequate healthcare. These families have a harder time accessing educational activities during summer break. For example, summer camps are often unaffordable, and other activities such as museum visits can both be expensive and difficult for parents with inflexible work schedules. This can further exacerbate the academic achievement gap established during the school year as children are less likely to have opportunities to learn new skills or practice what they know.

SES can also impact how teachers and parents interact with each other. Parents and teachers with different levels of education and different life experiences may not be able to communicate as effectively as parents and teachers with similar levels of education and similar life experiences. In her book, *Home Advantage*, Annette Lareau describes the different ways parents with different income levels and educational backgrounds interacted with their child’s teacher. While almost all of the parents in the study were dedicated to helping their children succeed, parents with different backgrounds took different approaches to doing so. Parents who did not have a college degree were more likely to trust their children’s teacher expertise and had less access to the information and knowledge necessary to advocate for their children’s needs in the classroom. Parents who had college degrees and advanced degrees often felt empowered to intervene in their children’s classroom experience and were more able to address academic problems that came up. The different styles of interacting and communicating with teachers were exacerbated by a family’s
access to resources such as transportation and expensive tutors, giving a comparative advantage to students from high SES families where parents were highly paid and highly educated.\textsuperscript{172}

Families with a single-parent, often a single mother, are at a greater risk for having a low SES. Single parent households typically earn less than two-parent ones, due to the likelihood of having only one income earner versus two.\textsuperscript{173} The difference in the number of income earners is further exacerbated by the existing income inequalities between men and women; since women on average make less than men, two parent homes with a man and woman often make more than twice as much as single parent homes with a woman alone.\textsuperscript{174} In 2018, single mothers had a median income of $29,240, while single fathers had a median income of $45,793.\textsuperscript{175} Both of these are substantially lower than the two-parent median income of the same year which was $100,115.\textsuperscript{176} Since an estimated 77 percent of single parents are mothers, the lower income for women has a significant impact on many families.\textsuperscript{177} Along with a lower income, single parents are also more likely to suffer from stress and exhaustion, due to the responsibilities of being both the only breadwinner and caregiver for the family.\textsuperscript{178} As discussed earlier, toxic stress can negatively impact parents and children. In the case of single-parent homes, this stress contributes to disparities: children from single-parent homes were twice as likely to be suspended, expelled, or arrested as children from two-parent homes.\textsuperscript{179}

**Neighborhood SES**

Like family SES, neighborhood SES is meant to describe not only the physical and monetary resources of a neighborhood, but also the social and cultural ones.\textsuperscript{180} Measurements of neighborhood economic status include the percentage of families in an area that: own a home, are below and above the poverty line, or are in professional or working-class occupations.\textsuperscript{181} Neighborhood SES can signal what resources are available to families—quality grocery stores and parks—as well as social connections—college graduates available to help a high school apply to college.\textsuperscript{182} Neighborhood SES is often linked to one’s exposure to violence and crime, which we discuss earlier in this report.\textsuperscript{183} Additionally, neighborhood SES can impact school funding.

Nationally, school funding that comes from local governments (typically in the form of property taxes) makes up about half of school funding.\textsuperscript{184} This means that a significant portion of school funding comes from taxes that are based on socioeconomic status through the property worth of the businesses and houses in the area, both of which are a function of the income and wealth of residents.\textsuperscript{185} This leads to significant inequalities in school funding at the local level.\textsuperscript{186} States often attempt to fix these inequalities by providing additional funding to schools in impoverished neighborhoods, however these funds are not necessarily enough to address inequalities.\textsuperscript{187} Additionally, evidence suggests that students from low-income backgrounds may need additional funding at the school level to compensate for the unequal access to resources addressed in the previous section.\textsuperscript{188} Without adequate funding in schools, children from low-income neighborhoods have fewer resources available to them as they pursue academic success.

**Race and SES**

Wealth is a particular aspect of SES that has been strongly connected to race. Wealth is a family’s financial net worth including savings and homeownership. Families need wealth to establish economic security—wealth allows a family to have a safety net in case of an emergency and provide for things like retirement or a child’s college tuition.\textsuperscript{189} In 2016, the median household wealth for Black families was $13,460. For white families, this figure was over ten times higher: $142,180.\textsuperscript{190}
Wealth, unlike income, builds over generations, so the wealth gap between racial groups offers a poignant look at how historical factors have shaped today’s economic inequalities. Because Black families have historically been locked out of buying homes, receiving loans that could be used for investments, and accessing comprehensive retirement plans, they have not had the opportunity to build up wealth through savings and ownership of stocks and land. Today, even Black families with a college graduate have less wealth on average than white families with no college graduates. This gap demonstrates a particular way that the legacy of racism can influence a family’s SES and the resources that parents have available to support their children.

Racism not only impacts a family’s socioeconomic standing, but can also undermine the benefits children gain from a high socioeconomic background. A study conducted by economists from Harvard and Stanford found that white and Black boys from high SES neighborhoods and families have differing outcomes, despite the benefits they both receive from their high SES backgrounds. Black boys from high SES neighborhoods and families have a higher chance of being imprisoned, lower levels of employment, and lower incomes than their white counterparts. The researchers connect these differing outcomes to the racism Black boys experience while growing up. To quantify racism, the researchers looked at representations of people of color in the media and individual scores of implicit bias tests. The study found that the disparities between Black and white boys were larger in counties that had higher rates of racism when compared to counties that were economically similar but had lower rates of racism. They suggested that the experience of racism, which can impact a child’s school experience and interaction with law enforcement, was a significant factor in differing outcomes between boys of different races. The analysis demonstrates how the resources associated with having a high SES is not enough to counteract the negative effects of racism for many children.

**Housing Instability**

Family housing instability is primarily the result of unaffordable housing. When a family is unable to afford quality housing, they can be forced to live in apartments or houses that are overcrowded, inadequate, or unsafe. Additionally, families may have to spend large proportions of their income on housing, potentially leading to situations when a family has to choose between buying groceries, paying the electricity bill, or paying rent.

Housing instability can cause poor academic performance in a myriad of ways. Students from families with unstable housing are likely to have high residential mobility, and thus are at-risk for changing schools frequently. This can cause students to be disconnected from supportive teachers and peers or miss school entirely. Each of these can make it harder for students experiencing homelessness to perform at their best level in school.

Additionally, students housed in overcrowded, unsuitable environments may lack the space and quiet to do homework or get a sufficient amount of rest. The stress from the lack of an adequate living environment and constant moves can also present problems at school like distraction from school work, disconnection from teachers, and disruptive behavior. One study found that students who were currently experiencing homelessness earned lower test scores and grades than their stably housed peers. Notably, the gap closed within five years after the students became stably housed again, suggesting that homelessness presents immediate but not irreversible challenges.

Some youth become homeless and separated from their families. Commonly, youth become homeless and unaccompanied after getting forced out of their homes, running away from families
or guardians who were abusive or violent, or after exiting the juvenile justice or child welfare systems. One study found that 50 percent of youth aging out of foster care or exiting the juvenile justice system become homeless within six months. When homeless shelters are inaccessible or unavailable, these youth are forced to couch surf at friends’ and family’s homes or are even forced onto the street.

Like children who are homeless with their families, unaccompanied homeless youth are more likely to miss school than their stably housed peers. Since unaccompanied youth are often in their teenage years and do not have guardians to grant them an excused absence, missing school can not only interfere with academic performance, but also lead to charges of truancy and police involvement.

Additionally, unaccompanied homeless youth are at a particular risk of being involved in the juvenile justice system: an estimated 78 percent of the homeless youth in 11 U.S. cities have had at least one interaction with police. Sometimes street homelessness can directly lead to interaction with the justice system if youth are forced to commit “survival crimes” such as stealing food or money to eat, or trespassing to gain shelter. While youth who engage in these behaviors are in desperate need of help and social services, they are frequently arrested and criminalized instead. Once a youth has been arrested, it may be more difficult for them to access affordable housing or find a job in the future due to policies that discriminate against individuals with a criminal record; this can further exacerbate the issues that these youth face.

As mentioned on page 11, a disproportionate number of LGBTQ+ youth are forced into unaccompanied homelessness, primarily due to rejection from their families and homes. Additionally youth of color are also overrepresented in the unaccompanied youth homeless population. The discrimination that sexual and gender minority youth and youth of color experience can make it even harder for these youth to access services and more likely for them to come into contact with police.

**Policing**

Sociological research has demonstrated that police officers behave differently in different neighborhoods. A study examining police behavior in neighborhoods of different socioeconomic and racial distributions found significant differences in the way police act in different contexts. In neighborhoods with high proportions of young people and in neighborhoods with large populations of non-white residents, police are more likely to engage in investigative behavior or look for evidence in a crime. This means youth who live in non-white neighborhoods around other youth are at an increased risk for being investigated by police. The same study found that police made more frequent arrests in low SES neighborhoods. These findings remained significant regardless of an individual’s race, gender, demeanor, and actions. In other words, if there were two identical children exhibiting the same behavior in different neighborhoods, the child in the neighborhood with a lower SES or higher percentage of non-white residents is more likely to be arrested or investigated. This trend has also been demonstrated for police use of force: individuals in neighborhoods that are low SES or primarily non-white are at a greater risk of being the recipient of extreme force by police, regardless of individual characteristics. This research demonstrates how police treat residents of certain neighborhoods more harshly than others—increasing the risk of arrest or police involvement for some children based simply on where they live.
RECOMMENDATIONS
In the spring of 2020, CT Voices conducted a series of “data walks” to gather ideas on where improvements could be made in Connecticut to mitigate the effects of the school to prison pipeline. Data walks are an interactive method of community engagement that involve sharing research and data with community members to solicit feedback and help researchers understand the context of their work. In the data walks for this project, we shared what we found in the literature on the school to prison pipeline, as well as Connecticut specific data on absenteeism, graduation, and discipline. We conducted the data walks with school administrators, teachers, workforce leaders, and service providers at the Connecticut College and Career Readiness Alliance (CCCRA) Convening, and with a group of youth and young adults with the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance’s Justice Advisors. The participants at the CCCRA had experience working with youth in Connecticut through schools and non-profit organizations and the youth with the Justice Advisors have lived expertise on Connecticut’s Juvenile Justice system. In each of these data walks, we prompted participants to think deeply about issues affecting students, to provide background information on the problem of the school to prison pipeline, as well as to suggest strategies for developing equitable and goal-oriented solutions.

Out of the anecdotes, insights, and suggestions collected at the data walks, we have developed the following recommendations. This is not an exhaustive list of solutions to the barriers outlined throughout this report, and notably, many of these solutions do not provide for the systemic shifts necessary to permanently break down many of the named barriers. Instead, these recommendations are meant to provide a starting point for addressing the wide range of student needs, while educators, advocates, and families continue to fight for larger, structural change.

We recommend that Connecticut schools provide additional counselors, social workers, and therapists to support students and teachers.
This can be done by:

- Increasing the number of school counselors available to students to the recommended ratio of 250 students to one counselor, and
- Employing school social workers in every school to address the behavioral needs of students.

In our conversations, participants highlighted the desire for school staff to understand student mental health and guidance needs. They stressed the importance of having enough school social workers and guidance counselors to develop personal relationships with students, provide therapeutic services, and comprehensive counseling for career and secondary education pathways.

Participants believed that student behaviors that typically garnered disciplinary actions such as missing class and acting out, should instead be met with a desire to understand where a student was coming from and the root causes of their behavior, and to provide support instead of punishment. For example, if a student was chronically late to school, a guidance counselor may discover that the student was taking care of a younger sibling after a parent left for work; that guidance counselor could then strive to work out a solution with the student and their family, rather than punishing the student. Youth participants also emphasized the need for high school guidance counselors that were able to help students handle the stress and uncertainty that comes with high school graduation by offering advice and helping students create a clear post-graduation plan.
Participants additionally discussed the need for robust specialized services like the McKinney-Vento Liaisons appointed to address the needs of homeless students, highlighting the necessity of providing extensive support to students who had heightened needs. Lastly, participants believed that teachers should have access to mental health supports in their schools to improve their well-being and, as a result, the school climate overall.

Bridgeport Public Schools (BPS), in the city of Bridgeport, Connecticut, has led initiatives to focus on mental health in its schools since it began providing substance abuse in mental health services in 2002 through the Partnership for Kids Project. While this program has since been replaced, BPS currently emphasizes restorative practices and employs RULER, an emotional intelligence practice centered on understanding and appropriately expressing emotions, in its schools. Across the state, Connecticut schools have placed a greater emphasis on mental health since the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. State funding and local efforts have led to the establishment of mental and behavioral health programs for children including: Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Child and Family Traumatic Stress Intervention, Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools among others.

While these efforts have offered support to thousands of students across the state, many are still unable to access mental health care and guidance counseling in their schools. The American School Counselor Association advocates for schools to have a counselor to student ratio of 250:1 so that counselors are able to adequately meet the needs of students. In a ten-year overview of school counselor presence, Connecticut consistently had a ratio greater than 400:1. In the most recent reported figure from the 2014-2015 school year, Connecticut had a ratio of 466 students to one guidance counselor, suggesting that counselors in Connecticut are unable to meet the needs of their students.

The number of social workers able to support students is also inadequate. The National Association of Social Work recommends the same ratio of 250 students for every school social worker. According to a report by the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, the statewide ratio is approximately 530 students to one social worker, over twice as much as recommended. Furthermore, about 15 percent of Connecticut school districts do not employ a single social worker, meaning that many children are unable to access valuable mental and behavioral health services in their schools. We recommend that Connecticut school districts increase the number of social workers and guidance counselors to address the needs of students and teachers.

We recommend that Connecticut schools hire teachers and administrators who have backgrounds that are relatable to the students they serve.

This can be done by:

- Taking state action to provide affordable housing that allows teachers to live where they teach, and
- Establishing and supporting district-level efforts to hire and retain a diverse teacher workforce, including teachers of color, LGBTQ+ teachers, and teachers from low socioeconomic backgrounds.
Participants described the need to have teachers and school administrators that could relate to students and empathize with the problems they were having at school and in their lives. Specifically, participants identified the need to have educators that live in the same community they teach in, have grown up in similar socioeconomic backgrounds as their students, and/or share a racial or ethnic identity as their students. Education research has demonstrated a strong correlation between the success of students of color and having educators of the same racial or ethnic background.233

The Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) and local school districts have made efforts over the past several years to increase diversity in the teacher workforce. In 2016, the CGA created the Minority Teacher Recruitment Oversight Council that is tasked with advising the state Commissioner of Education on ways to increase the number of teachers of color in the state.234 Additionally, the State Board of Education has its own initiative to diversify the teacher workforce called EdKnowledge.235 This initiative encompasses a variety of strategies including energizing young students to pursue teaching and reforming hiring practices to remove bias and actively recruit teachers of color, and providing ways that schools can support and retain teachers of color.236 Most recently, in 2019, the state passed a bill requiring the state and local boards of education to work towards achieving the goal of hiring 250 minority teachers each year, at least 30 percent of whom are male.237 In the same year, teachers advocated for a bill that would provide affordable housing to teachers who wanted to live in the communities they taught in.238 This bill ultimately failed to pass.

Around the state, local and regional initiatives have also been created to diversify the teacher workforce. In the Hartford region, the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) recently began a program to train and hire teachers who attended CREC schools themselves.239 The program, CREC Teacher Residency, recruits Hartford Public Schools and CREC alumni and offers an alternative pathway to teacher certification. Residents spend a summer and one school year taking classes and completing a teacher apprenticeship.240 After passing certification assessments, program participants begin teaching full-time at CREC or Hartford Public Schools.241

The efforts to train and hire teachers from diverse backgrounds are relatively recent and desperately needed. In the 2018 - 2019 school year, around 13 percent of students were Black, around 26 percent of students were Hispanic or Latino, and around 5 percent were Asian statewide.242 In the same school year, only 3.8 percent of teachers were Black, only 3.8 percent of teachers were Hispanic or Latino, and only 1.1 percent were Asian. Students of color across the state lack access to teachers who share their backgrounds and who can identify with them as people of color. In addition to the lack of teachers of color, anecdotes at CT Voices’ data walks indicated that teachers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were also limited. We recommend that Connecticut act to provide affordable housing to allow teachers to live in the communities they teach in, and that districts work to recruit, train, and retain a diverse workforce of educators and administrators, including teachers of color, teachers from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, teachers, and LGBTQ+ teachers.
We recommend that Connecticut schools dramatically limit the use of exclusionary discipline to create an environment that is supportive, not punitive. This can be done by:

- Tracking the number of class removals of shorter time periods in addition to suspension and expulsion,
- Reducing the use of exclusionary discipline overall and eliminating it for behavior that does not harm the student or others (e.g. tardiness and dress code violations), and
- Providing teachers and school administrators with training on the best practices for school discipline and ongoing support to carry out these practices.

Data walk participants described a need to have schools that value providing students with support and security, and to have policies that represented these values. Youth participants talked about witnessing teachers send students out of class for relatively minor infractions, such as dress code violations. They discussed their own experiences with exclusionary discipline that was issued to punish behaviors such as tardiness or perceived defiance. Instead of being met with harsh discipline, the youth believed that teachers should be prepared to address student behaviors in other ways: finding the underlying cause for absenteeism; reminding them about the dress code without issuing a punishment, or de-escalating disruptive behavior. Participants also suggested that discipline changes should not only occur at the level of individual teachers, but throughout school policies and culture. In some cases, it was mentioned a teacher may be penalized themselves if they did not address a student who was breaking even a minor school rule in their class—for example, wearing a hat—if an administrator were to walk by and notice.

School discipline reform in Connecticut has gained a few successes in the past few years. Efforts are specifically focused on reducing the usage of exclusionary discipline and reducing the disparities between the rates of discipline for students of color and white students. In 2015, the state passed a law that prohibited the use of suspensions and expulsions for students in pre-kindergarten to second grade, except in the case of a transgression that is violent or sexual in nature. In 2018, the Connecticut School Discipline Collaborative was established to advise the Commissioner of the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and provide methods of reducing the usage and disproportionality of exclusionary discipline. At the local level, some school districts have integrated trauma-informed policies, as previously discussed.

Overall, the number of students receiving at least one out-of-school suspension, in-school suspension, or expulsion has dropped slightly over the past decade: in the 2009-2010 school year, an estimated 50,000 students, or 9 percent of the student body, received one of the above sanctions, while in the 2018-2019 school year an estimated 38,000, or 7 percent of the student body, did. Racial disparities in school discipline remain, and 14 percent of Black students and 9.2 percent of Hispanic or Latino students experienced exclusionary discipline compared to just 4.1 percent of white students. Furthermore 52 percent of all suspensions and expulsions are reported under the vague category of “school policy violations” that does not include fighting/battery, physical/verbal confrontations, drugs, physical threats, sexually related behaviors, theft, property damage, weapons, or violent crimes. Beyond expulsion or suspension, students can be sent out of the classroom for up to 90 minutes without it being recorded by the school as a suspension. This is the equivalent of two class periods in traditional scheduling, or one class period in block scheduling. Because removing a student from class is not included in statewide data collection,
many more students are likely missing class due to disciplinary measures than we have been made aware.

School districts and the state government should work to shift school discipline policies. The CSDE should track class removals in addition to longer periods of exclusionary discipline. Additionally, school districts should make it more difficult for teachers and administrators to issue suspensions, expulsions, and class removals, reduce or eliminate use of exclusionary discipline for behavior that does not harm other students (e.g. dress code violations, tardiness), and provide teachers with training and ongoing support for utilizing alternative methods of addressing student behavior that is disruptive to the class.

**We recommend that Connecticut schools provide teachers and administrators with ongoing training and support on anti-racism.**

*This can be done by:*

- Revising the state’s cultural competency standard to specifically include anti-racism practices, and
- Providing teachers and administrators with continuous support in implementing anti-racism practices through a coach or mentor.

Data walk participants discussed racism and implicit bias as pervasive issues that impact the experiences of students of color. They spoke about racial bias exacerbating other difficulties such as poverty, and contributing to discipline disparities and poor teacher-student relationships. Much of the conversation echoed the effects and mechanisms of racial discrimination discussed throughout this report.

In Connecticut, the state requires teachers to participate in cultural competency training as one of its eight Standards for Professional Learning. The cultural competency standard is centered on teachers developing an understanding of their own cultural backgrounds and prejudices, and integrating culturally responsive practices into teaching to effectively work with students from all backgrounds. While a positive first step to countering racism and implicit bias in the classroom, the directive in the cultural competency standard is limited to encouraging teachers to “examine” their biases and prejudices, and does not delve into methods of countering these biases.

Black and Latino students in Connecticut’s schools experience significant barriers to success in comparison to their white peers. They experience disparities in SAT score, rates of absenteeism, and exclusionary discipline. In 2018, the graduation rate was 80 percent for Black students, 79 percent for Latino students, and 93 percent for white students. In the 2017-2018 school year, 34.5 percent of Black students and 36.1 of Latino students met or exceeded expectations on the English/Language Arts portion of the SAT compared with 75.3 percent of white students. The anecdotes collected in our data walks, as well as in this literature review suggest that these disparities occur in part due to the racial bias and discrimination that students of color experience in schools.

Research suggests that high-quality, continuous professional development can help support teachers as they educate students to the best of their ability. Having a coach or mentor who is an expert in a particular area can be especially helpful. Therefore, we recommend that
Connecticut bolster its current cultural competency standard to include continuous and comprehensive anti-racism training for teachers and administrators, and provide teachers with a coach who is able to offer ongoing support in identifying and countering biases.

We recommend that Connecticut schools expand services and partner with other organizations to provide greater support to students and their families.

This can be done by:
- Embracing the community schools model and assessing the specific needs of a school’s population, and
- Increasing funding for wraparound services in schools, such as health and dental services.

Our conversations in the data walks and literature review revealed a variety of issues beyond the traditional education realm that can impact a child’s experience in school. These include health problems, homelessness, access to clean clothes, limited transportation, and food insecurity, among others. We suggest that schools leverage their historical place as community institutions to help provide services to students and offer students immediate relief to these problems.

The Connecticut state government currently funds 92 school-based health centers (SBHCs) in several districts across the state. These centers are staffed by medical professionals and located on school grounds. They provide primary care, mental health, and dental services to students who otherwise may have to go without these services due to lack of insurance, general financial barriers to care, or limited transportation. SBHCs are an example of a way that schools can work with systems typically outside of the educational sphere to provide necessary services to students.

Hartford Public Schools operates several community schools that strive to support families as well as students, and deepen the connection between schools, students, and their communities. Particularly, the community schools provide mental and physical health services, extended extracurricular programming and tutoring to meet the needs of students who need a safe place to stay beyond typical school hours, and strive to engage with community organization to provide additional resources to students and families. Each of the community schools has a partner service agency and a designated director for the community-related services.

School services outside of the standard educational realm and community partnerships have been demonstrated to improve outcomes for students. School districts around the country have found that providing washers and dryers, showers, and food to students who otherwise would not have access to these things increased attendance and academic outcomes. Additionally, a review of community schools that focused on providing a variety of student supports, expanded learning time opportunities, family and community engagement, as well as collaborative leadership that involved a wide variety of stakeholders and community members, found that these schools reduced disparities in academic outcomes.

We recommend that Connecticut schools embrace the community schools model and consider what services are needed to allow students in their community to reach their full potential. Additionally, we recommend that Connecticut increase funding for school-based health services by changing the state’s federal billing practice to take full advantage of the 2014 Free Care Rule.
reversal. This change expands schools’ access to Medicaid funding, and Connecticut has not taken the necessary steps to secure this increased funding. Increasing funding for health services in schools will help students as they face the varied problems and challenges in their lives. While these services do not fix systemic issues, they provide necessary and immediate support to students who are experiencing health concerns, homelessness, or poverty among others.
CONCLUSION
The traditional research on the school to prison pipeline does not consider the full range of a student’s experiences. By examining how discrimination, physical and mental well-being, and socioeconomic status impact a child, we hope to provide the foundation for expanding data collection and engaging in deeper research into how these ecological factors affect students. While many of the causes of justice involvement laid out within this report are not the fault of individual schools and communities, schools and state officials have a responsibility to create supportive learning environments where students feel loved and supported. In the short term, we recommend that school districts and state and local governments support marginalized students by providing wraparound services, addressing individual and systemic racism, hiring a diverse teacher workforce, and creating a supportive school environment by reforming discipline policies and providing mental health services. As researchers and policymakers work to understand the root causes of high school drop-out and justice system involvement, we will be better able to permanently dismantle the systems that harm marginalized students.
ADDENDUM: EDUCATION AND THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC
The ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated many of the inequalities described in this report. Students from poor families may lack access to the internet, a computer, or a quiet space to do work.265 According to a Pew Research study, around 15 percent of all students lack access to the internet. Students from families with a household annual income of less than $30,000 or who are Black or Hispanic are even less likely to have internet access: 35 percent of students from families who make less than $30,000, 25 percent of black students, and 23 percent of Hispanic students lack access to the internet.266 As physical distancing measures have required schools to move to online classes, these disparities in technology access have made it more difficult for all students to complete school work, and threaten to make it more difficult for students who already face barriers to succeed in school.

Black and Latino families are infected by and die of COVID-19 at higher rates than white families, due to years of systemic and structural racism that has created economic, environmental, and health disparities.267 Black and Latino people are more likely to have chronic illnesses that can make COVID-19 more lethal, and are more likely to work in industries deemed essential, which put them at a higher risk for acquiring the disease.268 Additionally, preliminary research suggests that health care officials may be less likely to test or treat Black people for COVID-19, likely due to implicit biases that have long been present in healthcare.269 While children are less likely than adults to have serious complications due to the coronavirus themselves, Black and Brown children are more likely than their white peers to have family members who became extremely ill, or even die, due to the disease.

There has also been a surge in hate crimes targeted at Asian Americans, likely related to xenophobic rhetoric related to COVID-19 from government officials and news outlets.270 Asian people across the country have reported being yelled at, sent threatening notes, and physically attacked.271 In one particularly horrifying case, an Asian man and his children were stabbed in a supermarket.272 Asian children are at a risk of being targeted by these attacks themselves, and having to deal with heightened anxiety and stress due to the threat of being a victim.

Overall, the pandemic has deepened the economic and racial disparities that have long affected the United States. Children of color are at an increased risk for experiencing the trauma of losing a loved one or being the victim of racial violence. Low-income families are less likely to hold jobs that allow for telecommuting, and thus more likely to risk their health to go into work, or lose work and income all together.273 Worries about health and economic well-being have skyrocketed, with nearly half of respondents in one survey from the Keiser Family Foundation stating that stress related to the pandemic has worsened their mental health. Of these respondents, women, Black people, and Hispanic people were the most likely to report negative mental health impacts.274 Together, the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have created an environment in which marginalized children face extreme barriers to performing their best in school. As the pandemic continues, educators and school administrators should strive to support children in whatever learning environment they may be in, while making room for grace and understanding when children are facing problems outside of school.
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