

# The School-to-Prison Pipeline

**The school-to-prison pipeline is a term used to describe how children and youth of color are rerouted by systems and institutions, funneled away from educational success and towards the criminal justice system.**

## Scriptural Focus

*Thus says the Lord:*

*A voice is heard in Ramah,*

*lamentation and bitter weeping.*

*Rachel is weeping for her children;*

*she refuses to be comforted for her children,*

*because they are no more.*

*Thus says the Lord:*

*Keep your voice from weeping,*

*and your eyes from tears;*

*for there is a reward for your work,*

*says the Lord:*

*they shall come back from the land of the enemy;*

*there is hope for your future,*

*says the Lord:*

*your children shall come back to their own country.*

*(Jeremiah 31:15-17, see also Matthew 2:18)*

...but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matthew 19:14)

- African American students are three times more likely than white students to be suspended and expelled. 12 percent of African American girls are suspended, compared to 2 percent of white girls. Native American students are less than 1 percent of the student population, but comprise 3 percent of students experiencing expulsion and 2 percent of students suspended out of school.
- Native American youth are held in juvenile detention facilities at three times the rate of white youth.
- 31 percent of students experiencing school-based arrests are African American, though African American children and youth make up only 16 percent of total school enrollment.

The school-to-prison pipeline is not the result of any one single action, but of many factors coming together, including:

- **Implicit Racial and Gender Biases.** Many people wrongly assume that children and youth of color are more frequently disciplined and/or arrested because they commit more crimes than their white peers. In fact, children and youth of color do not misbehave more frequently; they are simply treated more harshly for similar or lesser offenses. Implicit bias skews the perception and judgment of adult decision makers. Often unintentional and unconscious, it causes people to perceive and respond to the same behavior differently, based on the race and gender of the child. It impacts teachers, principals, school resource officers, police, lawyers, judges and others making decisions about school discipline, arrests and sentencing.
- **Excessive Out-of-school Suspensions and Expulsions.** Even if a student is not directly arrested on school grounds or referred to the courts, excessive and unnecessary out-of-school suspensions and expulsions hurt students. They miss out on necessary classroom instruction and are far more likely to drop out or end up in the criminal justice system.

## Ashlynn's Story

*"In May 2013, Ashlynn Avery, a sixteen-year-old diabetic girl in Alabama, fell asleep while reading Huckleberry Finn during her in-school suspension. When she did not respond, the suspension supervisor allegedly threw a book at her and ordered her to leave the classroom. As she was leaving the room, a police officer allegedly slammed her face into a file cabinet and then arrested her."*

(From **Pushout**, by Monique Morris, a 2018 Reading Program selection.)

- **Zero Tolerance Policies.** Zero tolerance policies have expanded to include a wide array of less serious offenses, resulting in mandated suspensions, expulsions and arrests for minor misconduct. As part of zero tolerance, many schools now employ school resource officers—police stationed inside schools.
- **Status Offenses.** Children and youth can also be brought into the justice system for “status offense violations.” Status offenses are behaviors that would not be crimes if committed by adults. Common examples are running away from home, skipping school, missing curfew or underage drinking. This uniquely impacts girls, because of gender bias, heightened vulnerability to sexual and domestic abuse, and other factors.

### Together, United Methodist Women Can Interrupt the Pipeline

The situation is bleak. Gifted, cherished young people are disappeared into the school-to-prison pipeline. However, as women of faith we know that God has more in store for us. God promises “reward for your work” and “hope for your future.” Rachel will not have to weep forever.

As United Methodist Women, we will continue to grow our missional leadership skills working as school-to-prison pipeline interrupters to build a better future for children and youth.

- Educate yourself. Share what you learn with your family, your local unit and your church.
- Bring your gifts to the table and join an existing local effort. Many cities and towns already have active, community-based campaigns underway to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

- If there is not yet an effort in your local community, prayerfully consider whether God is calling you to be the spark that gets the fire going. Convene a team of leaders and thought partners in your area. Include other United Methodist Women and invite other mothers, educators and youth. Assess the dynamics and needs of your community. Talk to key decision makers, especially principals, school superintendents and boards of education. Teach them how the school-to-prison pipeline hurts children. Show them solutions and alternatives.
- Support youth leaders in your community. Too often, the voices of children and youth of color are dismissed and ignored. Seek to teach and learn from young people in your community. Ask good questions, listen and take their stories to heart.

**If you would like to learn more or get involved in mission as a school-to-prison pipeline interrupter, please contact Emily Jones, Executive for Racial Justice, [ejones@unitedmethodistwomen.org](mailto:ejones@unitedmethodistwomen.org), 212.870.3773.**



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