

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

UTC Scholar

Honors Theses

Student Research, Creative Works, and
Publications

5-2021

Mental health and its impact on the school-to-prison pipeline: A look at Tennessee schools

Briana Brady

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, brianacbrady@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/honors-theses>



Part of the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#), and the [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brady, Briana, "Mental health and its impact on the school-to-prison pipeline: A look at Tennessee schools" (2021). *Honors Theses*.

This Theses is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research, Creative Works, and Publications at UTC Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UTC Scholar. For more information, please contact scholar@utc.edu.

Mental Health and Its Impact on the School-to-Prison Pipeline:
A Look at Tennessee Schools

Briana Brady

Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Political Science and Public Service

April 2021

Dr. Michelle D. Deardorff
Professor and Department Chair, Political Science
Thesis Director

Dr. Christopher Horne
Professor of Political Science
Department Examiner

Dr. Marcus Mauldin
Professor of Political Science
Department Examiner

Dr. Jeremy Strickler
Professor of Political Science
Department Examiner

Introduction

In late January 2021, news emerged of a 16-year-old Floridian girl being body slammed to the floor and then handcuffed by an SRO while at school. Notwithstanding the trauma this has undeniably caused for this young woman, according to the family, she never physically touched anyone, but was instead engaged in a verbal altercation. While this account is disputed and has not been verified, the young woman's lawyer, Ben Crump, said that "this [situation] is an issue especially in the African-American community because oftentimes we see them using this excessive use of force with our children" (Gutierrez). Instances like the aforementioned one may contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, which despite continual innovation in educational disciplinary approaches, has endured.

Nancy A. Heitzeg describes the school-to-prison pipeline as a "growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via 'zero tolerance' policies, and, directly or indirectly, into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems" (Heitzeg 1). Advocacy organizations such as the ACLU define the school-to-prison pipeline as "a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect, and would benefit from additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished, and pushed out." According to the ACLU, resource straining, classroom overcrowding, zero-tolerance policies, increases in school resource officers, and other factors all contribute to students—disproportionately black students—getting sucked down the pipeline. As students are increasingly criminalized, mass incarceration increases too. The NAACP Legal

Defense Fund notes that “Historical inequalities in the education system—segregated education, concentrated poverty, and longstanding stereotypes—influence how school officials and law enforcement both label children and treat students who present challenging behavior” (LDF). Predominantly affected by this injustice are “the poor, students with disabilities, and youth of color, especially African Americans” (Heitzeg 1-2). In this paper, I examine the relationship between the provision of school-based mental health services and the likelihood of future interactions with the criminal justice system in individual school districts in the state of Tennessee.

In 2017, the Tennessee Dept. of Education (TDE) published the Tennessee Comprehensive School Counseling Model Implementation Guide to clarify the expectations for school counseling programs in the state. The guide notes that through the Tennessee Basic Education Program Funding Formula, elementary school students experience a 1:500 counselor-to-student ratio and a 1:350 ratio in middle and high schools. While the American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 1:250, T.C.A. code 49-6-303, a 2010 Tennessee Code regarding elementary and middle school counselors, does not mandate a required student-to-counselor ratio, only that each school have a program. The reported 2018-19 overall ratio in Tennessee of counselors to students is 1:314 and thus, the burden falls on overloaded educators to bridge the gaps in student support (American School Counselor Association). This means that teachers often need to play the role of both instructor, mentor, and sometimes, counselor, which adds work to their plates and could result in misguiding students needing support. If students need additional support and cannot find it, they might turn to other avenues which could lead to adverse behaviors or interactions with the law. This reality is especially apparent in Tennessee;

despite having the second highest rate of police presence in schools nationally, 52% of Tennessee schools report police, but no social worker, nurse, psychologist, and/or counselor (ACLU Cops and No Counselors).

That being said, through my research, I seek to test the relationship between the number of counselors per school district and short-term disciplinary measures (such as suspensions and expulsions) and interactions with the criminal justice system (including referrals and arrests), which will serve as proxies for long-term interactions. To examine this relationship, the research question I am seeking to answer is the following: Can greater access to school-based mental health service lower long-term incarceration rates, significantly reducing the number of students taking the first step in the school-to-prison pipeline?

Ultimately, the school-to-prison pipeline serves as a kind of analogy denoting that stages exist within the process of getting from one point to another, and I am looking at two of the stages involved in that process through my research. I intend to do so by examining the percentage of juvenile court referrals and the percentage of out of school suspensions as proxies for future justice system involvement as a result of educational circumstances and outcomes. The relationship between these variables is important to understand because it represents the first step in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Literature Review

The concepts below discuss key topics relating to the research question and the school-to-prison pipeline itself. It is important to understand exclusionary discipline, defined for this study as the

act of specifically suspending or expelling a student, in tandem with the criminal justice system because they both describe the disciplinary alternatives to an emphasis on mental health service support. Corporal punishment, too, helps to explain a more punitive type of exclusionary discipline currently being re-housed under new terminology. Moreover, SROs are commonly the executors of the disciplinary responses, yet they are not teachers or school personnel but members of law enforcement. Understanding their roles in the process of school discipline sheds light on the reactionary emphasis put on punishment over guidance in disciplining students. Finally, understanding more clinical perspectives on the role of counseling and other mental health services in the development of a child is crucial to linking the potential of increased mental health services with a reduction in the likelihood of future interactions with the criminal justice system. This literature review will specifically examine these topics in the context of students in grades K-12 because I am interested in the impacts of these disciplinary measures on lower-level students who are less far along in their cognitive development.

Exclusionary Discipline, Juvenile Criminal Justice, and Negative Consequential Outcomes

Russell Skiba et al. examine the correlation between exclusionary school discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline and propose a model through which correlations between the two can be traced over time. Importantly, their findings suggest that “regardless of demographic, achievement, or system status, out-of-school suspension and expulsion are in and of themselves risk factors for a range of negative developmental outcomes” (Skiba et al. 2014). Richard Arum’s research indicates that “when discipline was perceived as both fair and relatively strict, schools were successful in promoting educational achievement and youth socialization. Students in such schools were more likely to demonstrate commitment to the educational process, and had

better grades and higher test scores. Conversely, they were less likely to assert that it was acceptable to disobey rules or to report being arrested as adolescents” (Arum 2005, 34). This information shows that not only is the discipline itself important, but how it is perceived by students is equally important. Arum suggests that the problem facing many schools lies in the ineffectiveness of their disciplinary structures by cause of an erosion of their legitimacy and/or moral authority. Conducting a meta-analysis of peer-reviewed research, Skiba et al. found that exclusionary discipline, defined in this context as punishment for action that includes suspension and expulsion (therefore removing students from their learning environment), appears to be increasing substantially over time; furthermore, suspension has not been typically restricted as a response to solely serious or safety-threatening behaviors.

In examining the connection between the exclusionary discipline disparities and the short- and long-term outcomes possibly resulting from them, Skiba et al.’s data suggest that

it seems unlikely that increased suspension and expulsion are in and of themselves a strong direct link to juvenile justice outcomes, since only a certain percentage of students who are suspended ultimately become involved with juvenile justice. Rather, the effects of exclusion are probably mediated by a number of short-term negative outcomes that are presumably increasing the risk of more severe outcomes (Skiba et al. 2014).

These data findings go to show that removing students from their educational environments only puts them at higher risk for negative outcomes whether in the short-term or the longer-term; finding solutions that address disciplinary issues within schools better serves the needs of children. Because “sixty-one percent of youth found in juvenile justice detention facilities reported being expelled or suspended from school the year prior to entering juvenile justice

custody,” these measures should not be relied upon if educators are truly looking for their students’ best interests (Skiba et al. 2014). Although Skiba et al. could not find a causality between school exclusion and negative outcomes through their review of the literature, they propose that

a reasonable alternative hypothesis would be that poverty status would be causative of both higher suspension rates and a higher likelihood of dropout, or that low-achieving students are at increased risk for a wide range of negative outcomes, including suspension and expulsion, academic disengagement, dropout, and even incarceration” (Skiba et al. 2014).

These additional conclusions drawn about poverty raise questions about whether demographic factors or accessibility of resources is the primary predictor of negative educational and overall outcomes. These multi-factor correlations, even if not causalities, are mentioned throughout literature regarding exclusionary discipline.

Jalise Burt expands on the impact that the school-to-prison pipeline has on girls, specifically, noting that the experiences of physical and sexual abuse typically catalyze their involvement in the system. Because “girls of color and girls who live in areas of concentrated poverty are disproportionately victims of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse” they are disproportionately likely to face disciplinary challenges as a result of the inevitability that they “bring their experiences and coping mechanisms with them [to school]” (Burt 2014, 97). Homing in on the impact of Zero-Tolerance policies have on youth of color, Burt notes that they, in combination with disciplining of discretionary offenses (i.e. “defiance of authority” and “disrespect of authority”), “has resulted in a disproportionate impact on students of color” (Burt 2014, 99). For

girls, gender stereotypes play into the discretionary offenses subjected on them, such as accusations of being “insubordinate” or “uncooperative” which too often results in exclusionary discipline. Burt advocates for the recognition of trauma in attending to the girls’ misbehaviors, which is discussed further below.

In suggesting solutions, Arum writes that while

African-American youth are by and large not the population benefiting from the expansion of due process rights to students in public schools...[they] have suffered disparate impact associated with both the collapse of moral authority and related ineffectiveness of school discipline...More African-American students were in schools where the discipline was perceived as unfair and either too lenient or too authoritative (Arum 2005, 211).

Furthermore, Skiba et al. found that while neither poverty status nor differential rates of disruptive students behavior were found to be sufficient as an explanation of African American disciplinary disparities, Black students, specifically Black girls, have been determined to disproportionately fall victim to exclusionary disciplinary sanctions (Skiba et al. 2014).

Overall, the findings by Alum and Skiba et al., primary scholars in the field that also largely represent the general findings of other scholars, indicate a relationship between exclusionary discipline and various serious negative outcomes which are distributed in unequal and disparate ways towards many varying minority groups, specifically Black students. While this does not directly explain the potential relationship between the availability of mental health services and the likelihood of future interactions with the criminal justice system, the possibility of

demographic factors pulling equal or greater weight than access to resources exposes the need to control for these variables in research. These findings will be examined further by comparing factors of discipline, poverty, and race in the research below.

Corporal Punishment

While Kaitlin Anderson relies on the DC Public Schools definition of corporal punishment, the “intentional use of physical force upon a student as punishment for any alleged offense or behavior,” she also offers an alternative definition offered by the Council of Europe, that corporal punishment can be defined to be “any action taken to punish a child which, if directed at an adult, would constitute an unlawful assault” (Anderson 2017, 107). As of the publishing of her article in 2017, 19 states still legalize the use of corporal punishment. Some of the reasons that corporal punishment has been under attack include bodily harm, isolation, social control, and disparate impacts on disadvantaged students, but the interpretation specific to states and school districts varies largely along party lines. Based on that definition, factors of isolation and social control, not to mention the possibility of bodily harm, could most certainly be categorized under modern exclusionary discipline practices, which begs the question: could modern discipline practices of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and juvenile court referrals be considered forms of corporal punishment? Existing research does not clearly answer that question. This is important to consider in this study, because if the state is taking part in corporal punishment by referring students to the criminal justice system, they are not truly serving the students they oversee. However, challenges to corporal punishment and other authoritarian disciplinary practices were derived largely from the work of John Dewey, “who argued that traditional authoritarian disciplinary practices alienated students from educational institutions...[and] that

students would develop productive internal self-discipline only when schools changed their curriculum to engage individuals' interests as active learners" (Arum 32). Further, Arum notes that

empirical research has suggested that use of strict disciplinary practices, such as corporal punishment, could lead to lower educational achievement and higher rates of delinquency...[further,] in racially mixed school settings nonwhite students might both perceive the use of school discipline as particularly unfair and resist school authority in ways that would lower their educational achievement (Arum 2005, 33).

The influence of politics on school disciplinary policy leads to the gray area that remains between the two sectors of policy and public service. Arum found that through the evolution of the ending of corporal punishment in some states,

These differences in state use of corporal punishment were closely associated with our measures of court climate. Public schools in states with more hostile court climates (that is, with higher rates of pro-student decisions in courts with direct jurisdiction over school practices) had lower rates of corporal punishment generally and more of them quickly discontinued the use of the practice (Arum 2005, 29).

This information illuminates the reality that political motivations most certainly factor into policy decisions, and harsh punishments can lead to higher rates of negative behavior. Thus, the implementation of alternatives to authoritarian-like disciplinary practices could theoretically lower negative behaviors and outcomes in schools, which would logically correlate with a reduction in the need for negative school disciplinary action altogether.

SROs and Attitudes Towards School Safety

Matthew Theriot's research on the relationship between School Resource Officers (SRO) presence in schools and the subsequent criminalization of student behavior highlights the seriousness of school disciplinary policies on student outcomes. Through a study comparing arrests at thirteen schools with SRO presence to fifteen schools without an SRO presence within the same school district, Theriot concluded that while SRO presence did not directly predict more overall arrests, their presence did predict more arrests for disorderly conduct (Theriot 2009, 280). This information is key to understanding the impact of SROs because disorderly conduct arrests can be highly subjective and therefore possibly prone to bias. Specifically, Theriot found that "Having an SRO at school significantly increased the rate of arrests for this charge by over 100 percent even when controlling for school poverty" (Theriot 2009, 285). He proposes that SROs should approach discretionary situations differently and using them more as teachable opportunities rather than punitive moments. This suggestion adds validity to the research question by posing that guidance and supportive direction could lead to less negative interactions with law enforcement. Additionally noteworthy are Theriot's findings on the significance that school poverty has on the prediction of number of arrests, especially when considering the correlation of school poverty with ethnicity (Theriot 2009, 285).

Johanna Lacoë contributes to this discussion through her empirical study that estimates gaps in feelings of school safety amongst racial demographic groups of students in New York City Schools. By examining school and neighborhood student contexts that could contribute to safety, she finds that Black students reportedly feel less safe at school than their White and Asian peers (Lacoë 2015, 155). Black students are less likely to report feeling safe in the classroom, but in

areas with potentially less oversight and supervision, Black and Hispanic students were more likely to report feeling safe as compared to their White and Asian peers. Not only does this finding speak to the impact of authority figures on particular racial demographics in the classroom, but it also speaks to racialized undertones amongst students within schools. She notes that these differences of feelings within school safety have the potential to speak to achievement gaps and social outcomes, but her research did not address these questions.

Overall, Theriot's study showed that while SRO intervention regarding weapons and assault charges largely yielded positive outcomes, those that could involve bias (like disorderly conduct) correlate with a troubling number of arrests and unjustifiably remove them from the school system for some amount of time, which as noted by Skiba et al. above, leads more often than not to negative outcomes (Theriot 2009).

In a separate study conducted by Theriot examining the relationship between feelings of school safety based upon the presence or absence of SROs through the available literature, he hypothesized that "students' interactions with SROs would affect their feelings of safety" and found no significant relationship between the two studied variables (Theriot 2016, 140). He did find, however, that student perceptions of school safety appear to be significantly impacted by their experiences with school violence (Theriot 2016). Building upon his own 2009 findings that show positive attitudes and experiences with SROs lead to greater feelings of school safety, he suggests that if the number of opportunities students have for positive interactions with SROs in their school settings are increased, feelings regarding school safety will be positively affected. However, he does not discuss alternative options to policing for increasing feelings of school

safety amongst students, especially the minority students disproportionately impacted by their presence. Because Theriot notes that SROs (who usually come in contact with students outside the classroom) lead to Black students feeling less safe, and Lacoé adds that Black and Hispanic students feel less safe in the classroom than their peers, based on this research it can be deduced that Black students feel overall less safe in all aspects of school when SROs are present.

Because it has been demonstrated through the research documented above that attitudes towards disciplinary policies are equally important to the policies themselves, this additional information about the impact that SRO presence has on students' feelings of school safety shows that alternative disciplinary approaches, including mental-health nurturing ones, could positively impact interactions with the law and subsequently the criminal justice system.

Mental Health's Effect on School Discipline, Culture, and Subsequent Outcomes

Beginning in preschool, data suggests that Black students face exclusionary discipline responses at higher rates than their non-Black peers. Citing W.S. Gilliam's 2005 study, Kizzy Albritton et al. notes that "Black/African American preschool-age students were being expelled and suspended at alarmingly high rates even though they represented a small percentage of the preschool-age population...[and] early childhood mental health or behavioral consultation could potentially address issues regarding preschool discipline disparities" (Albritton et al. 2018, 444). Their study investigated the literature to expose the impact early childhood mental health accessibility had on disproportionate discipline in preschools as well as to examine the types of early childhood mental health service implantation at present.

Looking past early childhood education and towards standard K-12 schooling, Alicia Darensbourg et al.'s research on the impact on school-based mental health services as it works towards dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline is the only research available right now that directly addresses the research question I seek to answer. Their study's purpose is to provide school mental health providers with recommendations for reducing experiences that correlate with those associated with the school-to-prison pipeline. As noted,

less punitive and more proactive alternatives to are suggested as strategies to decrease the contribution of exclusionary discipline in the School to Prison Pipeline. These include, but are not limited to, the implementation of interventions such as social skills training and anger management programs...Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) offers a more comprehensive approach to minimize school disruption by incorporating proactive alternatives, such as positive discipline, school management, and a tiered approach to addressing the needs to students...While PBIS evidences proactive change for students of all races, researchers have proposed that these strategies may have a significant effect on reducing the disproportionate rate of exclusionary discipline in African American males (Darensbourg et al. 2010, 200-201).

This provides key information in relation to the research question at hand, which asks in part if divestment from exclusionary discipline and SROs alongside an investment in supplements like PBIS will yield better educational outcomes for disadvantaged students who would otherwise have a higher probability of getting sucked into the school-to-prison pipeline. However, the research also notes that "Despite the advantages PBIS affords schools in managing student behavior, PBIS appears to be a school-wide initiative in which the decision to adopt may be

rarely made by school based mental health professionals, but instead by educational administrators at the district and school level” and therefore Darensbourg et al. recommend that mental health professionals utilize specific PBIS strategies to counteract disproportionate school discipline practices (Darensbourg et al. 2010, 201).

Pediatricians Stanley Kutcher and Ainslie McDougall contribute to this discussion as well in their medical article that details the connection between a mental health condition and involvement with the criminal justice system. They note that fifteen to twenty percent of young people experience “substantial mental health problems,” and the “substantial gap between need and treatment availability exists in spite of a well-established evidence of treatment efficacy and in contravention of a young person’s right to health care” (Kutcher et al. 2009, 15).

Additionally, it is noted in the piece that “According to the Criminal Justice/Mental Health Consensus Project, detention facilities have become the largest providers of mental health services for young people, and are often considered the last resort for mentally ill youth and their families” (Kutcher et al. 2009, 16). They cite the suspected exacerbation that incarceration conditions have on mental health struggles for a variety of reasons and suggest that community mental health program provision can lessen risk of recidivism. Overall, the availability of mental health services falls short of the need for them, and this reality has significant consequences for incarceration rates.

Gilliam’s study notes that teacher access to consultation services and classroom-based behavior consultation (aiming to increase the child’s skillset and knowledge to deal with a similar problem in the future) decreased expulsion from preschool settings significantly (Albritton et al. 2018,

449). Of all thirteen studies examined in the literature review, Albritton et al. noted that implementation of such strategies resulted in positive reported results for students (Albritton et al. 2018, 456). Results from their literature review also found that white students more commonly receive these services in contrast to their non-white peers (Albritton et al. 2018, 464). The recommendation derived from this study is that non-white students be provided greater access to mental health and behavioral health services to address disproportionate disciplinary practices in early education settings (to which black students already have decreased access to) (Albritton et al. 2018, 464).

School-based mental health professionals offer more than just counseling to school environments; with proper training, they can mediate differing cultural communication strategies, analyze exclusionary discipline disparities, advise teachers on social and cultural biases or stereotypes they are adversely contributing to, encourage the school community to acknowledge black contribution in school beyond stereotypes and negativity, educate teachers on classroom management strategies when disciplinary issues arise, foster school feelings of belonging and inclusiveness amongst varying racial and cultural groups, and highlighting opportunities to positively recognize those who would otherwise only receive negative attention (Darensburg et al. 2015, 201-205).

While no conclusive literature exists to correlate these strategies to a reduction in the school to prison pipeline, feelings of safety, belonging, and a lessened reliance on exclusionary discipline have been evidenced to result in better outcomes for students, both academic and otherwise. These feelings of safety and belonging are crucial to student success, as shown by Theriot and

Lacoe. As Burt noted, underlying issues that school-based mental health providers can address such as residual trauma, educator bias, and cultural stereotyping can positively impact a child's ability to remain in the classroom successfully and without causing disruption. She claims adamantly that

Schools are uniquely positioned...to address...needs in an alternative, sustainable, and mutually beneficial way, by providing comprehensive mental health services in schools...schools must face the reality that their institutions and counselors might be the only viable option available to address the needs of students and help them get more out of their education” (Burt 2014, 103).

Because students will have a greater likelihood of receiving mental health services in a school-based setting as opposed to other locations in the community, they offer access to students who may not otherwise have it and also offer a way for schools to track their students' issues and subsequent development (Burt 2015, 104). This dialogue Burt provokes is a unique and important one, for schools are not typically seen as health service providers. However, their centrality and accessibility enable them to serve as a bridge between mental health and education, two spheres which are typically thought to be housed in separate public and private spheres.

Any mental health services offered through schools cannot be enough to meet the bare minimum state requirement, as they are largely now, though; “Not only must schools offer mental health services, but the services provided must be expanded...Focusing on crisis and short-term intervention, as advocated by the American School Counselor Association, is an insufficient means for destroying the barriers to student success and building a healthy school climate for

students of color,” especially those trying to deal with long-term trauma (Burt 2015, 104). Burt notes that in combination with a reduction of exclusionary discipline policies, re-evaluate zero-tolerance policies, and work with the goal being to keep students in school whenever possible. She suggests three tiers of effective mental health provisions for schools: 1) prevention: namely increasing social and coping skills of students and making community values known, 2) early intervention and targeted services to those who have shown a need or have been placed in traumatic situations, and 3) the offering of intensive and individualized treatment to those students whose mental health and/or behavioral problems negatively impact their ability to function inside and outside of the classroom. All of these tiers should include consideration for the communities they serve and the involvement of outside actors in these services (Burt 2015, 105-107). In examining the results of this study, this information will help guide the next steps forward from a policy perspective.

It is clear through the limited available scholarship on mental health’s relationship with schooling that services can be tailored to individual student needs, and the potential of schools to be a central administrator of these services is not only existent, but necessary. As the research question considers the impact that more comprehensive and integral mental-health service access could have on short-term discipline and likelihood of future interactions with the criminal justice system, understanding the components of mental health service provision and its importance to youth development is essential.

Conclusion

Overall, the literature does not largely speak to the direct relationship between the availability of school-based mental health service providers and the long-term effects on risk for incarceration, but the literature does address the statistically positive correlation between exclusionary discipline and risk for negative future student outcomes as well as the relationship between SROs, disproportionate discretionary discipline impacts, and feelings of school safety. More research is needed on the impact that a lower students-per-counselor ratio has or would have on school climate and cultural competency, but overall, increasing mental health providers in schools in a variety of capacities has only been shown to positively impact school culture, climate, performance, and student outcomes. Not enough data is available to connect these aspects of student experience with future criminal justice system interactions, so in conducting this study, proxy data will need to be used.

Methodology

The available literature makes clear the positive impact of mental health service provision on child and young adult well-being, and school-based mental health services are important because oftentimes, especially in under-resourced communities who may often be those most in need of the services, schools are the only places the students to which have consistent and unobstructed access. Taking into account the scholarly work that has been done on these topics before, the following research question emerged in seeking to connect the two realms to one another: Can greater access to school-based mental health service lower long-term incarceration rates, significantly reducing the number of students taking the first step in the school-to-prison pipeline?

H1: As school guidance counselors per student increase, out-of-school rates will decrease.

H2: As school guidance counselors per student increase, juvenile court referrals will decrease.

Because the literature explains that mental health treatment has been demonstrated to be effective in counteracting childhood traumas and mediating school-based disciplinary situations, I hypothesize that as school-based mental health services increase, long-term incarceration rates will decrease. In this hypothesis, school-based mental health services are defined to be any psychological, psychiatric, or counseling service based within the school and provided free of charge to students, but due to the data availability, school counselors will be used to represent school-based mental health service providers while recognizing that sometimes more specialized service providers are made available to students. School counselors are not optimal representatives of mental health service providers in schools, but they fall closest to that role for the majority of students in need of advice or a listening ear. However, school counselors are expected to fulfill many roles within a school, and additionally, they are not always trained in mental health provision. While they are not perfect representatives, due to their consistency of presence in schools and the availability of data on them, they will be used in this study.

Moreover, long-term incarceration rates will be defined for these research purposes as any incarcerations occurring after eighteen years of age for at least twenty years. Once again, due to the available data and the fact that tracking student outcomes for twenty years is not possible within the scope of this research project, juvenile court referral rates and out-of-school suspension rates will serve as two proxies for long-term incarceration rates because juvenile

referrals to court while in school often correlate with likelihood of arrests later in life, and out-of-school suspensions have been identified as indicators for “a range of negative developmental outcomes” (Skiba et al. 2014). This data is certainly not optimal because not only is it relative to students’ present interactions with the criminal justice system, but it also includes non-school related cases such as domestic abuse in the home and neglect. However, with the available data at this time for the purpose of this study, it will provide a point of reference for supposed future interactions with the criminal justice system.

Data will be surveyed within 85 different Tennessee school districts to compare and contrast the relationship between the variables of interest. These districts were chosen out of a total 137 districts in the state due to their availability of the data necessary to complete this analysis. There is no evidence that these data are atypical of the total 137 school districts.

The key independent variable employed to evaluate the research question is the average ratio of school-based mental health service providers (in this case, school counselors) to students in any given school district grades K-12. Additionally, in employing that ratio as the primary independent variable, the regression analysis controls for the percentage of nonwhite students in any given county, which is the best data available to determine the population of students of color in the overall school district, and it also controls for the percentage of students in any given county on free or reduced lunch, which denotes general levels of poverty within in a school district. Both of these variables are important to control for because as demonstrated in the literature review, both factors of poverty and race alone can impact suspension and disciplinary rates as well as resource accessibility, including mental health.

Based on the review of the literature, it is clear that significant research has been done on the negative outcomes linked to exclusionary discipline practices as well as feelings of school safety relative to SRO presence, and on the psychological side, it is clear that mental health services offer positive benefits to recipients. This understanding suggests that the primary finding surrounding SROs is that while their presence did not correlate directly to an increase in number of arrests, it did increase the probability of arrest for “disorderly conduct,” which has a very open interpretation. It is important for this study that it is understood how SRO presence affects disorderly conduct arrests, because unruly behavior and disorderly conduct combined accounted for over 500 students referred to juvenile court by Tennessee schools in 2014 (Tennessee Courts). Therefore, security guard and SRO presence per 1000 students will be used as an additional control variable in this regression analysis because schools in Tennessee receive state funding via TN Safe Schools Act to use for services including school safety personnel or behavioral health services, and thus investing in SROs could consequently mean divesting from behavioral health service providers.

The dependent variables being tested against the counselor-to-student ratio as well as the control variables include 1) the percentage of all students in any given district referred to juvenile court and 2) the percentage of all students in any given district out-of-school suspended. While 85 observations were available for the out-of-school suspensions by district, only 55 districts provided data on their percentage of students referred to juvenile court, so only 55 observations are accounted for in that regression. I also compiled 85 available data points for the likelihood of African-American expulsion in any given district versus white expulsion as well as for the

number of security personnel/SROs per 1000 students, and those data points were used accordingly but ultimately not included in the regression analysis because they overlapped too greatly with the data points accounting for percentage of nonwhite students in districts.

Juvenile court referrals by race were taken into account to further examine the role that race plays in incarceration of youth, and data points were gathered on these statistics in Tennessee school districts. However, after testing these data points, using these independent variables did not work with the control variable of percent non-white because the variables are too closely related and overlap in counting the black student population as well.

H1: As school guidance counselors per student increase, out-of-school suspensions will decrease.

H0: As school guidance counselors per student increase, out-of-school suspensions would not be affected.

H2: As school guidance counselors per student increase, juvenile court referrals will decrease.

H0: As school guidance counselors per student increase, juvenile court referrals would not be affected.

Therefore, in testing the independent and dependent variables described above, if my hypothesis were supported, school districts with a smaller number of students per one counselor would have lower rates of out-of-school suspensions, and they would also have lower percentages of students

referred to the criminal justice system. If my hypothesis were nullified, no significant relationship would exist between the number of students per one counselor in school districts and out-of-school suspensions/percentages of students referred to the criminal justice system. Finally, if my hypothesis were negated, school districts with a smaller number of students per one counselor would have higher rates of out-of-school suspensions and higher percentages of students referred to the criminal justice system.

My data will be sourced primarily from Propublica, which has compiled through a project titled “Miseducation” several data relevant points relating to individual school districts across the country. The data they have acquired comes from the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, Stanford University's Center for Education Policy Analysis, EDData, and the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data. Additionally, court-related data was sourced from the State of Tennessee’s 2014 Annual Juvenile Court Statistical Report, which offered the most recent data available for youth interactions with the criminal justice system, and the students-per-counselor data comes from the National Center for Education Statistics. In order to test this data, regressions will be run with the identified variables, and the r square values will be examined along with significance F values and relevant coefficients to determine if any meaningful relationship exists between the variables.

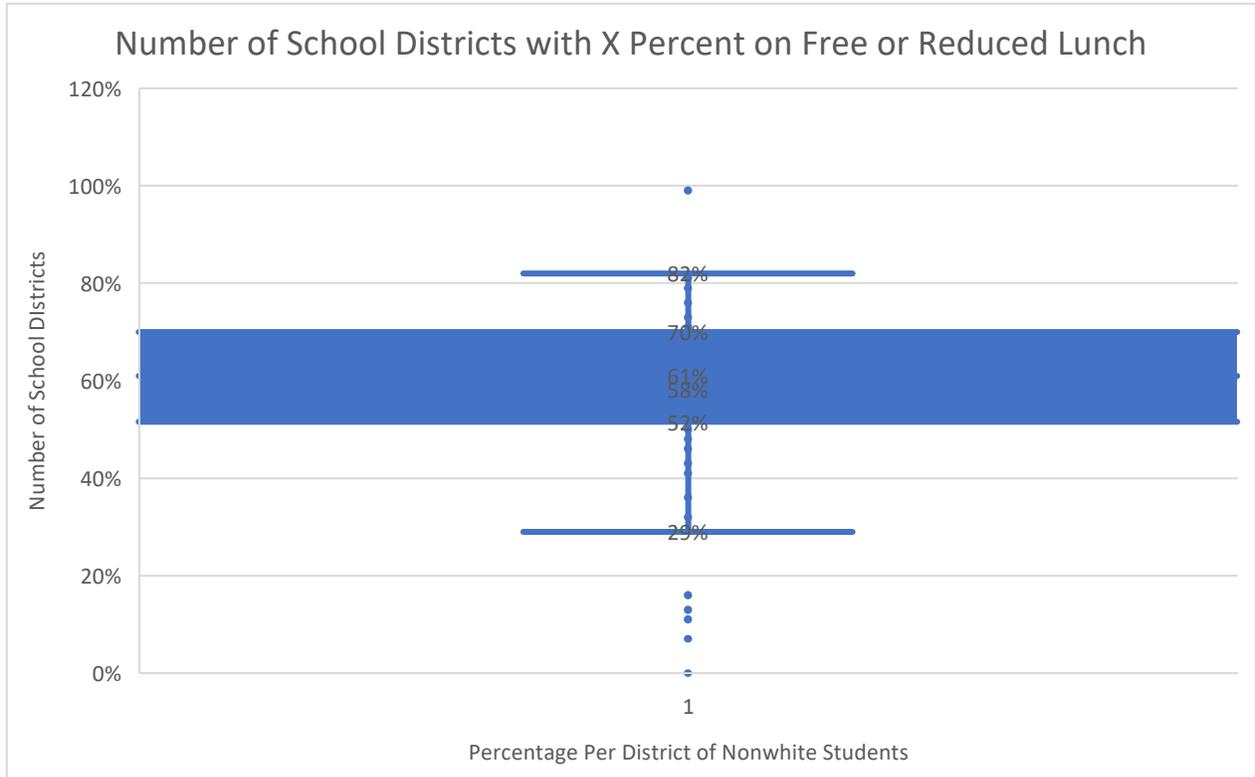
Data and Analysis

In a state with a population that is 23% Black and 64% white, 57% of out-of-school suspensions in Tennessee are mandated for Black students as opposed to 33% for White students; moreover 49% of expulsions are mandated for Black students whereas White students make up 41% of expulsions. Tennessee is in the top 10% of the country for its total number of expelled students and for the total number of students who received corporal punishment (Miseducation).

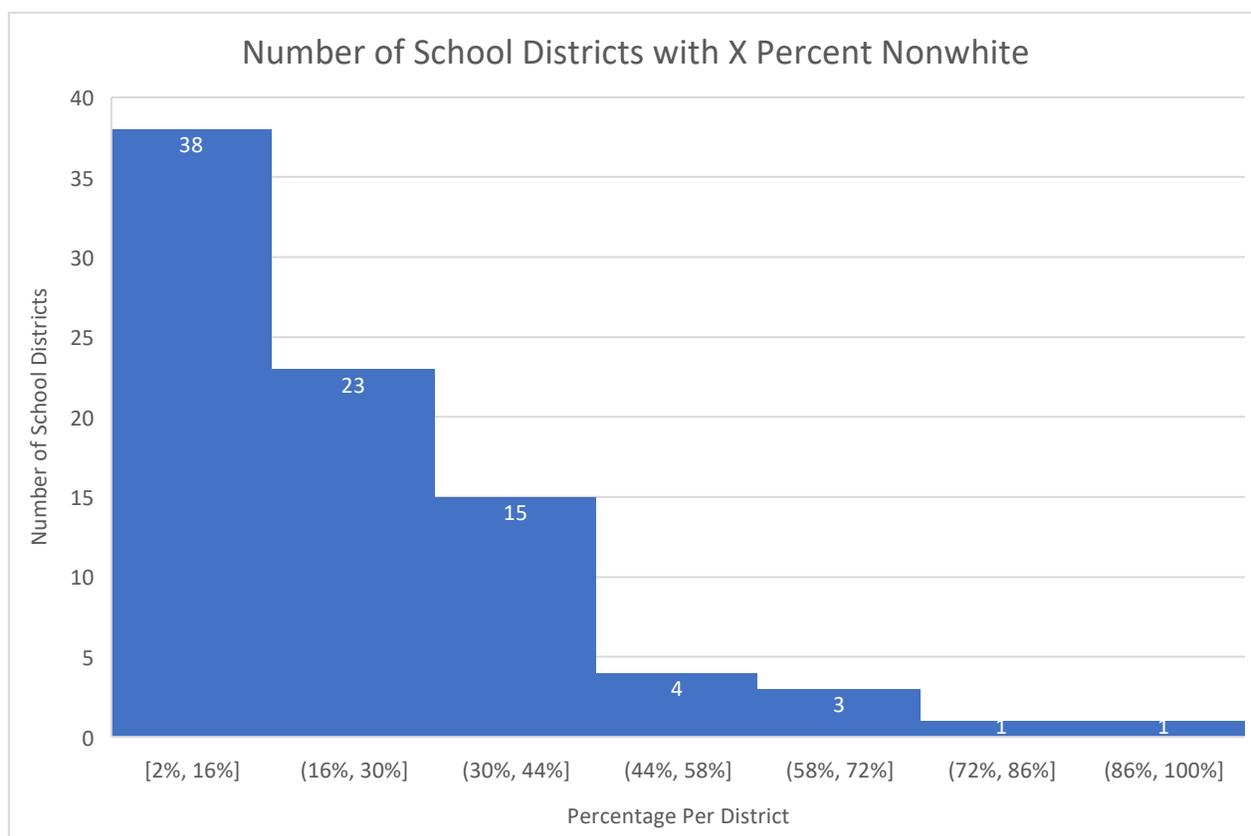
State of TN Population	23% Black	64% White
TN Out-of-School Suspensions	57% Black	33% White
TN School Expulsions	49% Black	41% White

The American School Counselors Association recommends no more than 250 students per counselor, yet in the 2015-16 school year from which their data was collected, only two states met that ratio for their students (ASCA). Using 2018-19 data, in Tennessee, of the 85 districts surveyed, only 4 school districts fell at or below that ratio.

Of the 85 districts examined, only 16 districts had less than 50% of their student population on free or reduced lunch. The standard deviation for this variable is 19%. Because the number of students on free or reduced lunch is linked to any given district's overall level of poverty, and poverty relates to resource accessibility, this statistic is important for understanding the plight that many Tennessee schools are in related to money allotment versus mental-health resource needs.



Additionally, only seven of the 85 surveyed districts are composed of over 50% nonwhite students, meaning that in the other 78 districts, nonwhite students are in the minority of students in their school district. The standard deviation for this variable is 18%. These factors are important because research shows that oftentimes disciplinary biases exist against students of color, and in this study the percentage of nonwhite students in a school district is controlled for.



Finally, the third control variable in this study includes the number of security personnel or law enforcement officers per 1000 students in a school district. As can be seen in the graph above, the average in the state of Tennessee is approximately 1.1 per 1000 students, which is actually slightly below the national average of 1.2, but 32 districts rise above that average. The standard deviation for this variable is .76. This variable is significant because according to the Tennessee Safe Schools Act, allocated funding can be used for either security personnel or behavior health (amongst a few other options), so money going towards these security guards could be detracting from behavior health offerings.

After running multiple regressions with the independent and dependent variables identified in the methodology, the only statistically significant relationship that exists does so between the

independent variable, control variables, and the dependent variable being the percentage of all students out-of-school suspended within a district.

Table 1, Predicting Percentage of Students Out of School Suspended

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>L 95%</i>	<i>U 95%</i>
Constant	-0.02	-1.65	0.10	-0.05	0
% Nonwhite	0.13	8.26	< .001	0.10	0.16
% on Free/Reduced Lunch	0.06	3.90	< .001	0.03	0.09
Security Guards per 1,000 Students	0.01	1.88	0.06	0	0.01
Students per One Counselor	< .001	0.02	0.99	< .001	< .001

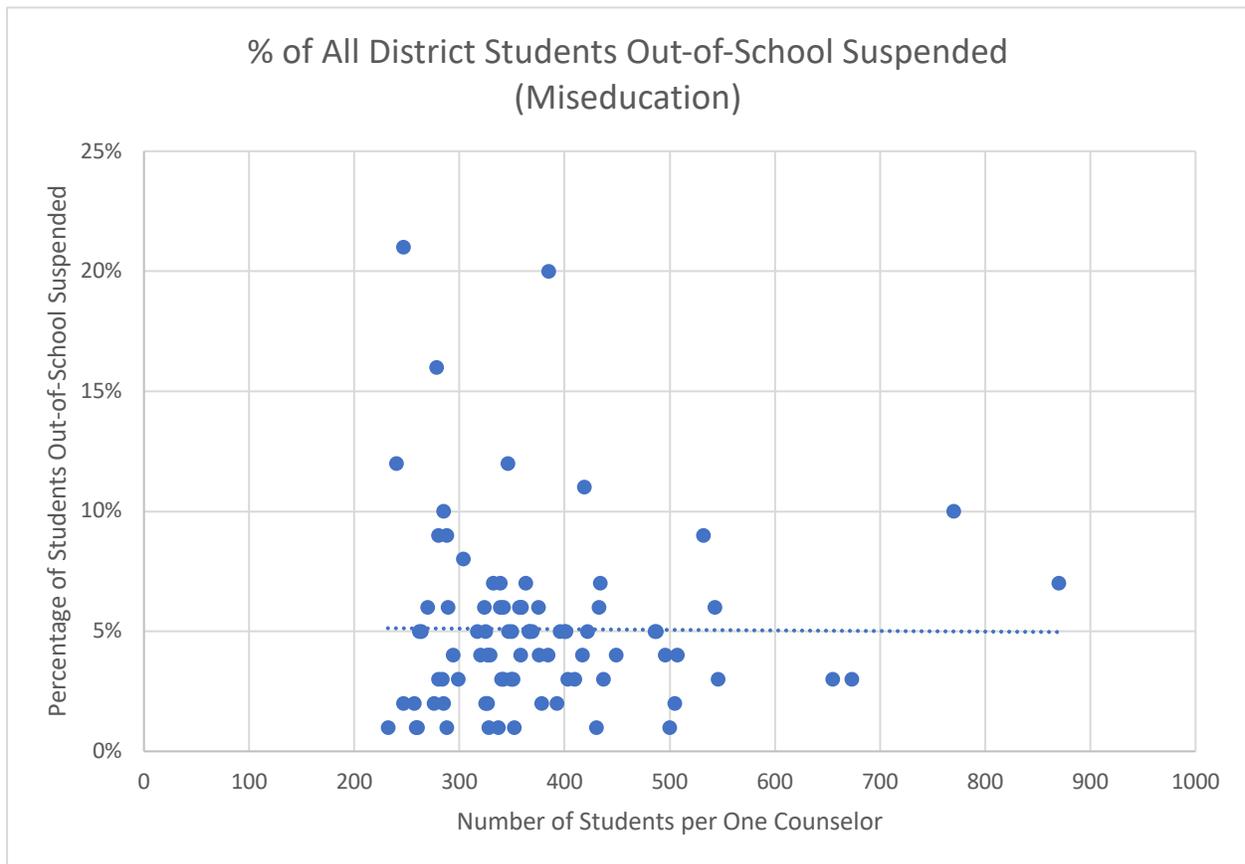
Note. $R^2 = .56$, Adjusted $R^2 = .54$, Model Fit F Value = 25.85, Significance F = 0. 9.11 E-14, Sample Size = 55

While the relationship between the independent variables and the percentage of juvenile court referrals only produced an insignificant and inconclusive r square value of approximately .0445, the relationship between the independent variables and percentage of out-of-school suspended students produced an r square value of .5638. This r square value is quite high, and the relationship indicates that over half of the observed variation in out-of-school suspension percentages can be explained by students-per-counselor, controlling for percentage of nonwhite students, percentage of students on free and reduced lunch, and security personnel/law enforcement per 1000 students. Additionally, with a significance F of 9.11E-14, it can be stated almost certainly that this relationship is not coincidental. This data reveals that a statistically-significant relationship exists between the independent variable and the dependent variable when controlling for factors of race and poverty, but those factors of race and poverty are accounting for practically all of the significance in that relationship.

The coefficients in this relationship are indicative, too. No one independent variable drastically affects the percentage of students out-of-school suspended within a given district, but each coefficient impacts the dependent variable somewhat. Namely, while the constant in this relational equation is $-.02$, or -2% , for every additional counselor (students per counselor, not counselor per 1,000 students), the percentage of students out-of-school suspended is 0, for every 1-point increase in percentage of nonwhite student population, the percentage of students out-of-school suspended will likely yield a 0.12-point increase, for every additional percentage of students on free/reduced lunch, a 1-point increase in percentage of students on free and reduced lunch predicts a 0.06-point increase in percentage of students out of school suspended, for every additional security guard, the percentage of out-of-school students suspended increases by approximately 0.01-percentage points. The fact that the percentage of students out-of-school suspended essentially remains the same with the addition of each counselor nullifies the stated hypothesis, but the 0.12-point increase is significant in that a 30% difference in nonwhite population would have predicted an out-of-school suspension rate with a difference of 3.6 percentage points which means that race plays a significant role in schools.

This insignificant relationship between students-per-counselor and the percentage of students out-of-school suspended can be seen in another regression too. When the key independent variable, students-per-counselor, is run solely against the percentage of students out-of-school suspended (excluding the control variables), the r square value itself is practically 0, conveying a non-existent relationship between the two variables. However, when the additional variables of percent nonwhite, percent on free/reduced lunch, and SRO/security guard presence are controlled

for, this relationship becomes much more significant as shown above. The graph below depicts the difference in the r square value without controlling for percent nonwhite, percent on free and reduced lunch, or the number of security personnel/law enforcement per 1000 students.



Overall, the data shows that only when controlling for percentage of nonwhite students, percentage of students on free and reduced lunch, and number of security personnel/law enforcement per 1000 students, the relationship between number the of students per counselor and percentage of students out-of-school suspended is significantly related. Even then, the coefficients of the regression analysis show that perhaps the percentage of non-white students has the biggest impact on percentage of students out-of-school suspended overall, supporting research that has concluded that race plays a primary factor in school disciplinary practices.

Withstanding this research and the inconclusive results emerging from it, the lack of available data specific to the research question complicates the conclusions that can be drawn from the study. While these results suggest that a plausible relationship exists between school counselors and suspensions, this proxy data doesn't explain enough about the direct correlation between school-based mental health services and the likelihood of future criminal justice interactions to draw any justifiable answer to the original research question.

Conclusion

Through the presented data and subsequent analysis, no clear evidence exists to support the stated hypotheses, but the results are not completely inconclusive. Because proxies of out-of-school suspensions and juvenile court referrals had to be used as measures for long-term incarceration rates, the predictability of mental health service providers' impact on future interactions with the criminal justice system cannot be fully measured. Additionally, while the relationship between the ratio of students-per-counselor and percentage of students out-of-school suspended is statistically significant, when taking out the control variables, the relationship is largely less significant. However, the relationships explored to point to evidence that race plays an important role in school environments, and that role needs to be studied further.

Therefore, while I have established that race singlehandedly is the most predominant indicator of the percentage of students out-of-school suspended, when combined with students-per-counselor, percentage of students on free and reduced lunch, and the number of security personnel/law

enforcement per 1000 students, the relationship became much stronger. With more available long-term data student disciplinary tracking as well as direct mental health intervention student tracking, the relationships between these variables could certainly yield to different conclusions. Additionally, performing this study on a national scale or in a state with more diversity by school district could also yield interesting and differing results, as the key independent variable in this study was indeed limited in variation. However, the knowledge gained from this study will hopefully propel further research into the relationship between exclusionary discipline practices in schools that have undeniably negative consequences for students as well as the likelihood of resulting current and future interactions with the criminal justice system that continues to haunt far too many lives.

In reflecting upon this study, I hope that the remaining questions encourage further data gathering regarding school-based mental health service providers, specifically certified professionals including psychiatrists and psychologists. Additionally, if better data was available from school districts pertaining to long-term trajectories of students based upon their disciplinary record while in school, perhaps stronger conclusions could be drawn from the regressions that were run. Hopefully, the inconclusive results from this study will encourage social scientists to record a wider variety of nonstandard data sets so that new and innovative relationships can be explored in the future, both in the realm of education and criminal justice.

Data Access

To view the data used and the regressions computed for this project, simply click on the link below:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/13ne6eaCYNtzyGCKc7CvtuxArpMdzHQb/view?usp=sharing>

Works Cited

- “2010 Tennessee Code :: Title 49 - Education :: Chapter 6 - Elementary and Secondary Education :: Part 3 - Elementary and Middle Schools Generally :: 49-6-303 - School Counselors.” Justia Law. Accessed February 26, 2021.
[https://law.justia.com/codes/tennessee/2010/title-49/chapter-6/part-3/49-6-303/#:~:text=%2D6%2D303.-,School%20counselors.,pre%2DK%2D12\).&text=\(c\)%20The%20minimum%20requirement%20to,the%20state%20board%20of%20education.](https://law.justia.com/codes/tennessee/2010/title-49/chapter-6/part-3/49-6-303/#:~:text=%2D6%2D303.-,School%20counselors.,pre%2DK%2D12).&text=(c)%20The%20minimum%20requirement%20to,the%20state%20board%20of%20education.)
- ACLU. “School to Prison Pipeline.” *American Civil Liberties Union*. Accessed February 10, 2021. <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline>
- Arum, Richard. *Judging School Discipline: the Crisis of Moral Authority*. Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Anderson, Kaitlin P. “The Politics of School Discipline: A Quantitative Analysis of Legalization and Use of Corporal Punishment in the United States,” *Journal of Public Management and Social Policy* 24/25, no. 2/1 (Fall 2017-Spring 2018): 107-121.
- Albritton, Kizzy, Rachel E. Mathews & Karla Anhalt. “Systematic Review of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: Implications for Improving Preschool Discipline Disproportionality,” *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 29, no. 4 (2018): 444-472.
- Burt, Jalise. "From Zero-Tolerance to Compassion: Addressing the Needs of Girls Caught in the School-to-Prison Pipeline through School-Based Mental Health Services," *Georgetown Journal of Law & Modern Critical Race Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 97-116.

“Case: School to Prison Pipeline.” *Legal Defense Fund*, School to Prison Pipeline. 2018.

Accessed November 9th, 2020. <https://www.naacpldf.org/case-issue/school-prison-pipeline/>

“Compare Elementary and Secondary School Suspension Rates by District.” *The Civil Rights*

Project, The Center for Civil Rights Remedies. 2011-12. Accessed October 24th, 2020.

http://www.schooldisciplinedata.org/ccrr/resultscomp.php?us_state=TN&district_id=4703810&searchtype=raceonly&numDist=1

“Cops and No Counselors.” American Civil Liberties Union. Accessed April 7, 2020.

<https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>.

Darensbourg, Alicia & Erica Perez. “Overrepresentation of African American Males in

Exclusionary Discipline: The Role of School-Based Mental Health Professionals in

Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline,” *Journal of African American Males in*

Education 1, no. 3 (2010).

Gilliam, W. S. “Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems

[Policy brief].” *Foundation for Child Development*.

González, Thalia. “Socializing Schools: Addressing Racial Disparities in Discipline Through

Restorative Justice,” *Closing the School Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive*

Exclusion (Daniel J. Losen ed., 2014).

Gutierrez, Gabe. “Family of Florida Teen Body-Slammed by School Officer Demands His

Firing.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, January 30, 2021.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/family-florida-teen-body-slammed-school-officer-demands-his-firing-n1256233>.

Heitzeg, Nancy A. "Education Or Incarceration: Zero Tolerance Policies And The School To Prison Pipeline," *Institute of Education Sciences* (2009).

Kutcher, Stanley & Ainslie McDougall. "Problems with access to adolescent mental health care can lead to dealings with the criminal justice system," *Paediatrics & Child Health* 14, no. 1 (January 2009): 15-18.

Lacoe, Johanna R. "Unequally Safe: The Race Gap in School Safety," *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 13, no. 2 (April 2015): 143–68.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204014532659>.

"Miseducation: Tennessee: All School Districts in Tennessee." *Propublica*, Miseducation.

Accessed October 24th, 2020. <https://projects.propublica.org/miseducation/state/TN/table>

National Center for Education Statistics. "Total Guidance Counselors and Total Students, All Grades (Excludes AE)." *National Center for Education Statistics*. Accessed February 25th, 2021.

Patel, Pooja and Melissa Clinedinst. "State-by-State Student-to-Counselor Ratio Maps." *National Association for College Admission Counseling*. Accessed October 24th, 2020.

<https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/researchstateratiosreport.pdf>

"School Counselor Roles & Ratios." School Counselor Roles & Ratios - American School Counselor Association (ASCA). Accessed February 26, 2021.

<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/School-Counselor-Roles-Ratios>.

Skiba, Russell J., Mariella I. Arredondo & Natasha T. Williams. “More Than a Metaphor: The Contribution of Exclusionary Discipline to a School-to-Prison Pipeline,” *Equity and Excellence in Education* 47, no. 4 (November 2014): 546-564. DOI: 10.1080/10665684.2014.958965

State of Tennessee. “Annual Juvenile Court Statistical Report.” *Tennessee Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges*, 2014. Accessed October 24th, 2020.

http://www.tncourts.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2014_annual_juvenile_court_statistical_report.pdf

“Tennessee (Counselor Ratio).” *National Association for College Admission Counseling*.

Accessed October 24th, 2020.

<https://public.tableau.com/profile/nacac.research#!/vizhome/Tennessee/Sheet1>

Tennessee Department of Education. *Tennessee Comprehensive School Counseling Model:*

Implementation Guide (2017).

https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/ccte/counseling/ccte_counseling_implementation_guide.pdf

Theriot, Matthew T. “School resource officers and the criminalization of student behavior,”

Journal of Criminal Science 37 (2009): 280-287.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2009.04.008>

Theriot, Matthew T., and John G. Orme. “School Resource Officers and Students’ Feelings of Safety at School,” *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 14, no. 2 (April 2016): 130–46.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204014564472>.

United States Department of Education. 2011-12. “Percentage of All Students who Have

Received One or More Out of School Suspensions by District (2011-12).” Accessed

October 24th, 2020. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/data.html>

“Which Students Are Arrested the Most?” *Education Week: Polling America’s Schools*.

Accessed October 24th, 2020. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/2017/policing-americas-schools/student-arrests.html#/state/TN>