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INTRODUCTION

Our history of white supremacy extends further than the formation of what is now known as the “United States of America”. Although it is often glazed over, this country remains dependent on the racism it was built upon. The establishment of the school to prison pipeline (STPP) is only one example of the accumulation of legalized oppression, intergenerational trauma, and capitalizing of BIPOC bodies that is inexplicably American. Even an initial look at this systemic incarceration of Black youths reveals longstanding disregard for their lives and futures. Such disregard is held not only at the institutional level, but also on an individual basis.

Further research on an increasing number of scholarly works on the pipeline reveals that it is neither a recent development nor an unnoticed one. Many studies have long pinpointed various structures as the root of the issue. Naming conventions like stereotyping and unconscious bias as crucial in upholding this cycle, the same studies highlight the potential in steps like community action and legislation. In fact, many of these steps have already been taken and continue to gain more momentum. Why then does the STPP still exist? For the same reason every other racist construct continues: our discomfort in true accountability.

Dismantling this system requires a restructuring of perspective we have been taught to view as radical. The simultaneous supremacy and fragility of the Whiteness our society is centered around defines the very scholarship we look to in hopes of dismantling the systems of oppression it produces. How can we truly take on change when we are limited to the same ideology and tools that created the inequity we hope to disrupt? Thus, a general lack of intentionality and diversity in positions of power perpetuates a habit of approaching most issues in a paternalistic and condescending way. For real change, with the same fervor with which we present who is oppressed, we must recognize the manner in which we depend upon this oppression. This paper will argue that rather than reporting on how Black communities have suffered, we should be looking at who is benefiting from the school-to-prison pipeline.

PART I: Proof It Exists

The following figures are from the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights’ 2014 data snapshot on school discipline (CRDC, 2014).

Figure 1

Rates of suspension and expulsion, by race/ethnicity

Black students represent 16% of the student population, but 32-42% of students suspended or expelled. In comparison, white students also represent a similar range of between 31-40% of students suspended or expelled, but they are 51% of the student population.

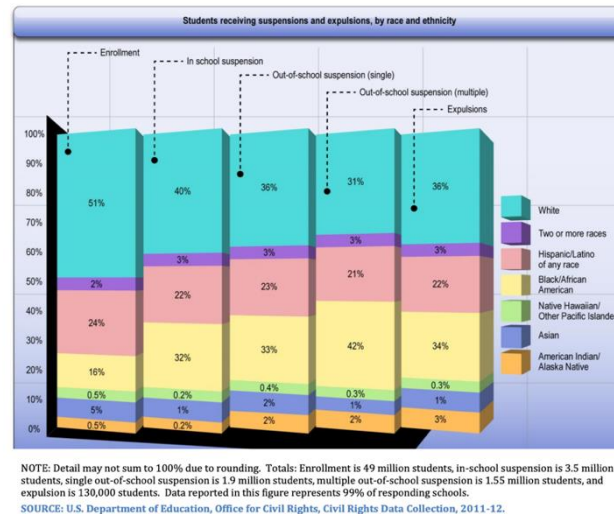
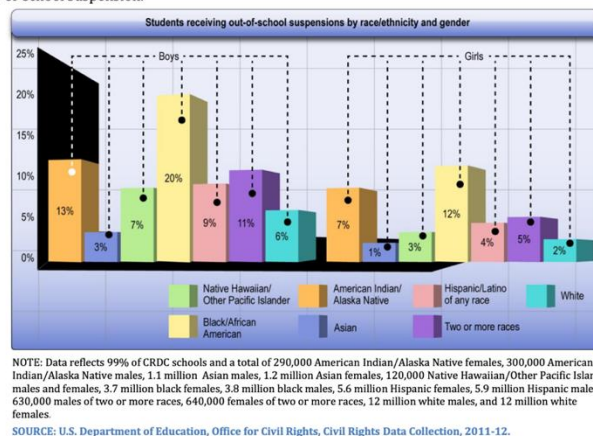


Figure 2

Out-of-school suspensions, by race/ethnicity and gender

Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students. On average, 4.6% of white students are suspended, compared to 16.4% of black students. Through CRDC data, we can also explore suspensions by race and gender. Black boys and girls have higher suspension rates than any of their peers. Twenty percent (20%) of black boys and more than 12% of black girls receive an out-of-school suspension.



These figures alone show Black and Indigenous students as the two most disproportionately impacted groups in the school to prison pipeline. To understand the significance of this overrepresentation, one must recognize the context in which such high numbers of school disciplinary action take place. Firstly, the enrollment data presented in the Figure 1 depicts the overall enrollment of students attending public schools in the country by race and/or ethnicity. Ideally, a rough projection of this initial bar would be seen across the graph, but this trend isn't present in either graph. Instead, Black students are suspended and expelled at three times the rate of white peers despite the fact that the white student population is roughly three times that of Black student enrollment. Another alarming statistic is that Indigenous students only make up 0.5% of overall enrollment but also make up 2% of suspended

students and 3% of those expelled (CRDC, 2014). Contrary to popular belief, what we see in these numbers is not an innate deviance in certain students and maturity in others.

Before anything else, what we see is inequity. The second component necessary to contextualize this data is an understanding of the schools in which it takes place. Disparity in public education is not a new concept, yet schools in this country remain both racially segregated and lacking equal access to resources (Meatto, 2019). The root of this issue goes beyond overpopulated schools, zero tolerance policies, and standardized testing. This issue remains because of a widespread belief that Black and Brown students are “uneducable” (Leonardo, 2007). In this racism exists an assumed inferiority of Black and Brown students and corresponding superiority of Whiteness that justifies the discrimination that has taken place and excuses the perpetuation of inequity that follows.

Those in power have decided that these students are not worthy of an education instead of tackling the racism that inhibits their success in school. “The problem is that [many] do not view racism as societal waste. Instead, in our color-blind era they are more inclined to see the victims of racism as a waste themselves, without talent, creativity, or intelligence to offer society... unworthy of the right to an education, and ultimately only useful for low wage labor or fueling the prison industrial complex” (Leonardo, 2007). The disparities in public education are so inherently racist that it triggers the internalized mechanism that protects the system itself: white fragility. We as a society are too uncomfortable in the conversations necessary and too comfortable with the benefits in devaluing generations of Black and Brown children. It is especially difficult to produce change when the people existing in the closest proximity to Whiteness, and to power, thrive via ignorance. An ignorance that reflects both a lack of information beyond each individual and the corresponding bliss of their ignorant state. Thus, the STPP is established and continued.

As lacking as their education is, suspension and expulsion place these Black and Brown children at an even greater risk of incarceration (Arcia, 1970). In urban areas especially, higher rates of poverty and policing expose the same children to homelessness, hunger, addiction, and violence. These factors only further inhibit a child’s education in a world where a college degree is essential in securing employment with livable wages and Black high school dropouts are fifty times more likely to be incarcerated (Jefferson, 2017). The odds are stacked against Black and Brown students even without such external factors. Just as said factors are results of previous racist policies, we cannot ignore the emotional toll that navigating an educational system created as a tool of their oppression takes on these students.

Again, the assumed inferiority of these children allows for the justification and inevitability of denying their right to an education. The specific disinterest in the ability of Black people especially is coupled with their vilification and manifests as implicit bias. The culmination of this presents as higher arrest rates, police brutality, harsher sentences, and a booming prison industry. However, amidst an analysis of disparities in education and incarceration, the STPP and any other racialized issue are only viewed as a BIPOC issue. I believe this is problematic.

PART II: Centering Whiteness

There would be no point in writing a paper simply reviewing the overwhelming number of studies proving the existence of the STPP. Summarizing any amount of statistics does not change the inherent limitations of research defined by Whiteness. By this I mean that the issue requires a reframing of perspective. There is a difference between intentionally centering Whiteness in scholarship and simply continuing the white-centered thinking we are taught. We

have always been socialized to view Whiteness as an unspoken norm. This can be seen in the media, in the school curriculum, and in our everyday language. The most important part of this internalization is that its power lies in its concealment.

When talking about the social construction of race, we ignore that White is a race too. While white supremacy is on the other side of the same coin, it is rarely brought up at all in conversation about racism. In all my research on the composition of the STPP, “[t]he focus of planners, scholars, and public discourse on the ‘dysfunctions’ of communities of color, notably poverty, high levels of segregation, and isolation, diverts attention from the structural systems that produce and reproduce the advantages of affluent and White neighborhoods” (Goetz, 2020). Just as I have presented it in the first part of this paper, work on the STPP is understood as a Black and Brown issue. Language around the topic sets a paternalistic tone and ingrains a sense of inevitability in the tragedy that is the denial of Black and Brown communities of their right to an education.

If we are really intending for change and not just passing through a trend of social justice, we must remember that revolutions begin with anger. The passivity in our current approach is protecting the intentionality of it all. What something like the STPP shows us is that the system is not failing anyone, it is only doing what it is meant to do: protect and advantage White people at all costs.

PART III: Defining Foundation

A quick but well-rounded review of history teaches us that something like the STPP is less a concentration of disadvantage and more of an accumulation of exploitation. To dismantle the pipeline, we must recognize that the disregard for BIPOC youths is as rooted in racism as it is white supremacy. The issue with this, however, is that both of these terms are arguably the most inflammatory. Regardless of whether it triggers anger as a defense mechanism or anxiety rooted in historical trauma, widespread ignorance on what either term means only amplifies any hostility. Before going any further, the following definitions from racialequitytools.org can be understood as the basis of any preceding and following analysis:

Racism = race prejudice + social and institutional power

Racism = a system of advantage based on race Racism = a system of oppression based on race Racism = a white supremacy system

Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of the society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices.

White Supremacy: The idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. While most people associate white supremacy with extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis, white supremacy is ever present in our institutional and cultural assumptions that assign value, morality, goodness, and humanity to the white group while casting people and communities of color as worthless (worth less), immoral, bad, and inhuman and "undeserving." Drawing from critical race theory, the term "white supremacy" also refers to a political or socio-economic system where white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both at a collective and an individual level.

Here we encounter the direct benefits of intentionally centering Whiteness in scholarship: suddenly we are equipped with the clarity necessary to navigate tricky conversations about race. Now we can consider the STPP in its contribution to white affluence.

PART IV: History Present

One cannot consider the workings of the STPP without this country's mass incarceration issue. It is too complicated a history to simply say the pipeline or mass incarceration to be a component of the other. Limiting either issue as a subset of the other consequently limits real conversation on the overarching exploitation at hand. For this reason and for convenience, we will look at both as a conjoined and cyclical convention that demonstrates how closely racialized enslavement is tied to American success.

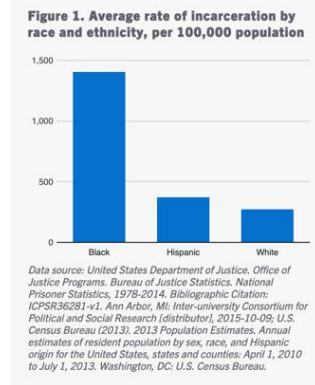
The issue with mass incarceration is more than just the fact that the number of Americans in prison is outpacing both population growth and rates of crime. Nor is it because "most of our prisons are at max capacity and have inhumane conditions, exploitation of labor, and absence of proper measures in place to respond adequately during states of emergency and national pandemics" despite its direct violation of the 13th amendment. The issue is that we must recognize mass incarceration for what it really is: modern day slavery (NAACP, 2020).

The state of our prisons makes clear that rehabilitation is not the end goal. The state of this system makes clear that it is the best interest of those in power to continue it. Who stands to lose the most if millions of Americans of color are suddenly no longer disenfranchised? Who is directly benefiting from the billions of dollars in the prison industry (NAACP, 2020)? Who is positioned to capitalize off of poor Black and Brown Americans who are either in prison, formerly incarcerated, or have family in the system? Who has the capital to continue supporting legislation that disproportionately affects Black Americans and keeps prisons filled (Van Gundy, 2016)? These are the questions that need to be asked to understand that these inequities are not passively occurring because of historical decisions, but rather that we enable them each day we fail to actively counter them.

PART V: Shortcomings

Just like with the prison system, investigating public education with a focus on white supremacy is going against all of the veiled messaging we have internalized thus far. The extra effort it takes to even consider this viewpoint is purposeful; its power is in its concealment. Naturally, the first step in dismantling the STPP is recognizing how white supremacy, and the fragility that protects it, is ingrained in our day-to-day. As important as all the work on the pipeline has been, in failing to center Whiteness when approaching the issue inhibits true consideration of the very real ways it actively and unconsciously perpetuates the institution.

Historically, urban planning has put in place various structures to exploit communities of color and bolster white affluence. Though these actions are generally understood to be inherently racist and deeply rooted in white supremacy, they are often viewed as stagnant and attributed to a preexisting era. Such ignorance on the continued influence and accumulating trauma of the past proves especially efficient in dismissing the truth: that the ideology behind something like redlining does not simply vanish with time. It is also helpful in denying the white privilege and affluence that remains today because of a *continued* exploitation of others.



What goes unnoticed is that the perpetuation of the STPP allows for an idealization of white communities by comparison. The creation and exclusion of Black poverty and criminality cements white neighborhoods as the direct opposite: a success worthy of legal and social sanctity (Goetz, 2020). In the inhibition of Black graduation is the preservation of an elite white class empowered by their education in a world their predecessors created for them. By impoverishing another generation of Black Americans, another age of cultural appropriation is ushered in and modern technology now enables white entrepreneurs to market Blackness on the global market.

Quick Note:

Before concluding this paper, I would like to acknowledge a few blatant shortcomings on my end. I find it necessary to explain that when researching I regularly encountered a dearth of scholarly material that aligned with my approach. This shortage is driven solely by our problematic determination of what is “scholarly” and the white-centered scholarship we engage in. I stand by my thesis that approaching an issue like the STPP necessitates an active recognition of the white supremacy it upholds. I only wish I had the ability to widen the scope of my paper to properly address the intersectionality of this issue (specifically in terms of gender and ability) and other groups affected (Indigenous and Hispanic/Latinx students). I do not think such an endeavor will ever be done justice so long as BIPOC scholarship and thought remains widely inaccessible and underrecognized.

CONCLUSION

More than anything, this paper is an exploration of an uncommon perspective. What became clear when writing it, however, is the potential it holds. Black lives don’t really matter to us. If they did years of research on the school to prison pipeline would at least reflect a positive trajectory. White supremacy (and the racism it allows) is protected by its concealment because it cannot be dismantled without admission by those in power. Besides, its many benefits only cost the lives of people easily exploited and considered to be of little value. Our current approach to these issues does not induce said admission — it is passive and paternalistic. Centering Whiteness in a manner that forces accountability, naming the white supremacy aloud, is necessary for change. Only then will we stop devaluing Blackness and actually imagine a world of equity.

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