

Article

Navigating the School-Prison Nexus in Pursuit of Educational Attainment

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Abstract

Current school level practices and policies reproduce and reify carceral logics in schools through the disproportionate exclusion, removal, policing, and surveillance of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students from low-income backgrounds. Given the link between school-based discipline and youth incarceration, we sought to understand how young people experience and respond to inequitable discipline practices in educational settings. In this two-part study, we conceptually explore the mechanisms by which schools function as an extension of the carceral system through inequitable disciplinary practices and seek to empirically understand how students perceive and experience school-level carceral logics and the processes that lead students into the juvenile legal system. Study 1 consisted of three focus groups ($N = 24$) with high school students from historically marginalized backgrounds and explored youth perceptions of and experiences with discipline. Study 2 consisted of six focus groups ($N = 28$) with community college students who were incarcerated as youth, to understand their trajectories and educational experiences before, during, and following their incarceration. Taken together, the studies illuminate the intersection of schools and prisons as complex systems that historically marginalized students must navigate to access their education, leveraging skills and collective resilience to do so.

Keywords: school discipline; school–prison nexus; formerly incarcerated students; focus groups; carcerality

1. Introduction

Education systems across the United States (U.S.) utilize punitive and disproportionate disciplinary practices that adversely impact the educational and life outcomes of historically marginalized students (Annamma et al., 2019; Selman et al., 2019; Shedd, 2015). While efforts to both highlight and reduce youth criminalization in schools and communities have gained immense research and policy traction, disproportionate discipline continues to plague the lives of historically marginalized youth (Schlesinger & Schmits-Earley, 2021; Selman et al., 2019). Though places of learning (e.g., schools) and punishing (e.g., prisons) are perceived to serve their own respective intended functions, we conjecture that the carceral context of youth carceral facilities (e.g., juvenile halls, ranches, camps, secure youth treatment facilities) extends to educational institutions. Racialized punitive practices in schools ultimately prepare and push students into carceral systems (Goldman & Rodriguez, 2022).



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1.1. Discipline and Disability in Schools and Juvenile Legal Systems

Students who receive exclusionary discipline are both more likely to come from low-income backgrounds and qualify for special education services ([U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, n.d., 2023](#)). Moreover, students with disabilities make up 32% of youth in juvenile detention centers, yet only represent 8.6% of public-school children in the U.S. ([Ochoa et al., 2021](#)).

When students become incarcerated, juvenile detention centers are legally required to provide them an appropriate education as defined by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ([IDEA, 2004](#), 20 U.S.C. § 1400; [Lhamon & Gupta, 2014](#)). However, the quality of education across detention centers has shown to be inconsistent, with only 26% of states providing education in juvenile carceral settings that is equivalent in quality to the education available in public schools ([Agus-Kleinman et al., 2019](#)). In fact, studies have found that many incarcerated youth do not receive adequate education in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) required to earn a diploma or general education degree (GED; [Hunter et al., 2022](#)). This is in part due to the limited resources facilities have to adequately implement STEM education. But also, due to the transitory nature of students entering and leaving the facility, staff are not incentivized to implement a structured curriculum that builds upon itself.

The result of these instructional barriers is that not only are detained students missing out on specific content areas, but they are also lacking access to curricula promoting college and career readiness ([Hunter et al., 2022](#)). These inequities in access to education continue post-release—formerly incarcerated adults are half as likely as the general public to earn a high school diploma and eight times less likely to finish college ([Coulette, 2018](#)). Those who do finish college must persevere through a multitude of systemic barriers, including housing instability, job security, and behavioral health concerns. The role of disability in school discipline and youth incarceration systems should be considered in work exploring the intersection of these structures.

1.2. School–Prison Nexus

Evidence of racialized school-level carceral practices can be found in both youth incarceration and school disciplinary data. Black children make up 14% of the U.S. child population but represent approximately 41% of all children held in confinement; they are also three times more likely than their white peers to be suspended or expelled ([Sickmund, 2019](#); [U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2023](#)).

Over the past two decades, there has been increasing research into the school-to-prison pipeline ([Wald & Losen, 2003](#)) to understand how students are pushed out of schools and into prisons. Some of the contributing drivers identified in this pipeline include exclusionary discipline, school arrests, and school dropout, which all disproportionately affect students of color. However, a limitation of this pipeline scholarship is the emphasis it places on the individuals' behavior and schools' response to explain the link between school discipline and incarceration. One example of this is the assertion that students who drop out of school will be more likely to engage in criminalized behaviors that result in incarceration ([Mowen et al., 2020](#)). However, more recent findings have shed light on how legal decision-making is affected by school status in addition to individual behavior ([Goldman & Rodriguez, 2022](#)). Juvenile legal systems often take on parental roles and/or custody of youth not engaged in schooling, and these systems may enact harsher punishments on young people whom they learn are not enrolled in school, complicating the behavioral theory of the school-to-prison pipeline. Further, early works in the school-to-prison literature highlight disproportionate rates of discipline and carceral policies, but

were limited in exploring students' perspectives and experiences with discipline and the impact it has on them (Hemez et al., 2020; Skiba et al., 2014; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Efforts have been made in recent years, however, to highlight student experiences with discipline and incarceration and the impact of policy decisions across systems, leading to more meaningful theorization of the relationship between schools and prisons (Annamma, 2017; Bellinger et al., 2016; Fasching-Varner et al., 2014; Blomberg et al., 2011; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Shange, 2019). Terms such as "carcerality," "carceral logics" and the "carceral state," for example, are becoming more widely used within the education context and the school–prison nexus to describe the ways in which the carceral state and carceral practices, such as exclusion, punitive discipline, surveillance, criminalization of youth, racism, and ableism, shape educational policies and culture (Meiners & Winn, 2010; Shedd, 2015; Sojoyner, 2013). In addition to theorized existence of carcerality, the value and inclusion of youth voice as an influential factor in educational policy has become a more widely accepted conviction among researchers and policy makers.

Contemporary school–prison intersection research endorses a pivot from conceptualizing the relationship between schools and carceral settings as a pipeline to a theorized nexus that accounts for the ways that schools and prisons collaborate to control and punish youth of color (Annamma, 2017; Fasching-Varner et al., 2014). Annamma (2017) examined how schools criminalize dis/abled girls of color and theorized that rather than a linear process of school to prison, schools and prisons intersect in a myriad of ways to punish and incarcerate youth, particularly those who are Black, Brown, and disabled. Incarcerated youth are overrepresented in school discipline, special education, and child welfare systems; thus, in order to disrupt these intersections, we must understand who experiences these intersections and how the intersections unfold (Valencia-Ayala & Porche, 2025).

1.3. A Two-Part Qualitative Study

In the current two-part study, we sought to understand how high school and formerly incarcerated college students experience discipline within their respective education systems, and the ways in which they successfully navigate unjust disciplinary practices. As we hear their strategies to reject disciplinary injustice, we are taught lessons on how best to shift school discipline and juvenile legal system policy.

Study 1 explores the disciplinary experiences of historically marginalized high school students of color and the ways in which they navigate punitive and unjust disciplinary policies. Study 2 builds on the examination of youth experiences with discipline to explore the K-12 educational experiences of formerly incarcerated college students with learning challenges. While study 1 explores experiences from general education students, study 2 recruited college students who were incarcerated as youth. Taken together, we examine both collective and unique disciplinary experiences of two distinct populations, one that has experienced significant school discipline, increasing their systematic risk of incarceration, and one that has been incarcerated, to potentially examine the pathway from school to discipline to incarceration and the intersection of schools and prison systems. We conclude the paper by describing the strategies both student groups utilized to maneuver through carceral school experiences and gain access to education. Both studies were approved by the institutional review boards at University of California, Berkeley and University of California, San Francisco.

Analyzing the experiences of participants from both groups allows us to explore patterns of carceral practices utilized in community and prison schools. While the school–prison nexus has demonstrated that carceral practices are ever-present in schools, little is known about the educational experience of youth when they become incarcerated (Hunter et al., 2022). Further, no study has simultaneously examined the carceral educational

experiences among incarcerated and non-incarcerated students. Thus, the current two-part study sheds light on the educational experiences of incarcerated youth while exploring similarities between the educational experiences of youth in carceral facilities and in community schools. Reviewing both experiences, we examine potential pathways from school discipline to prison. We also explore student resistance to carcerality and strategies to increase educational attainment for the most marginalized students.

2. Conceptualization of Studies 1 and 2

The goal of study 1 was to explore the educational and disciplinary experiences of students of color in order to understand the systematic intersections of schools and prisons. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do youth perceive and experience the school–prison nexus in their schools?

Study 1 highlights the perspectives of a diverse set of students who are majority Black and Latinx, thus providing an opportunity to understand their strengths and challenges as they navigate carceral experiences. Focus groups allowed us to both gain insight into individual experiences in youth responses while learning from the collaborative discussions youth engaged in.

2. What are the skills and repertoires of practice that students utilize in order to navigate unsafe and inequitable spaces and experiences at school?

As young people navigate carceral spaces, they simultaneously develop skills to dodge and disrupt the school–prison nexus. In doing so, they are exhibiting their expertise as learners and as experts on inequitable school systems.

Study 2 Conceptualization and Research Questions

Education is a powerful tool for youth to reduce their likelihood of future system contact (i.e., chances of recidivism). Incarcerated students face educational issues such as loss of special education services, oversimplified curriculum, and the risk of violence (Annamma et al., 2013; Hunter et al., 2022). Formerly incarcerated students have navigated an array of challenges, similar to those faced by the participants of study 1. Despite an array of barriers, they have successfully accessed higher education after imprisonment. By gaining an understanding of their experiences, we can begin to better understand not only the pathway from school to prison but also the pathway from prison back to school and postsecondary success.

Studies have shown that educational achievement for young people in detention, such as attaining academic credits, is associated with higher rates of returning to school once released (Blomberg et al., 2009). Similarly, once back in their community schools, those who consistently attend school are less likely to be arrested again, and if they are rearrested, it is more likely to be for a less serious offense than their peers who did not return to school post-release (Blomberg et al., 2011). Investment in education is not only an enabling process for young people returning to school following detention, but also for adults who are exiting incarceration. Adults who are able to participate in higher education while incarcerated develop leadership skills, prosocial relationships with others, applied knowledge, and higher self-esteem, among other positive attributes (Colbert, 2025). Completing college after incarceration also shows positive associations with higher rates of employment, higher wages, and more hours worked. Given the positive outcomes associated with higher education access, we have conceptualized higher education as an act of resistance among overly disciplined and incarcerated youth.

Study 2 builds on the relevance of disciplinary experiences and collective resistance examined in study 1, which took place two years prior to study 2, to explore the primary,

secondary, and postsecondary experiences of formerly incarcerated college students with learning challenges and to examine the mechanisms that lead students from school to discipline to incarceration and later postsecondary success. Given the overrepresentation of students with disabilities in youth carceral facilities, we sought the perspectives of participants who navigated the special education system. Findings related specifically to their experiences with accommodations, knowledge of individualized education program (IEP) qualifications, and access to services are beyond the scope of the current manuscript. Methods included focus groups, interviews, and survey data; the current manuscript focuses on focus group results, paralleling methods from the study. The following research questions guided study 2:

3. What are the disciplinary and learning experiences of historically marginalized formerly incarcerated college students with disabilities in both community and prison schools?

We were interested to learn the K-12 trajectories of formerly incarcerated college students while capturing the differences and similarities among traditional and prison schools. We were also interested in understanding how carceral practices of prison schools differ from or share education practices with traditional community schools.

4. What strategies do formerly incarcerated students utilize to pursue higher education?

Despite the significant challenges posed by incarceration during adolescence and adulthood, our participants defied the odds and enrolled in college. We hoped to learn what skills and practices they utilized to get to and be successful in higher education. Their pursuit and practices should be noted as educators and policy makers attempt to support the educational attainment of this population.

3. Methods

3.1. Study 1 Methods

3.1.1. Participants

Participants included 24 high school students from an under-resourced public high school in California. Participants will be referred to as youth throughout.

Participating youth were recruited from a larger mixed-methods study through collaboration with two counselors employed at the school who shared recruitment emails with teachers, displayed flyers in their offices, and informed students during day-to-day interactions. The first author (C.V.) also provided a verbal presentation (along with a flyer) of the study to two 10th-grade homeroom classrooms. Youth were informed that they would require parental permission via signatures to participate in any form of the study if they were under the age of 18 and that their information would be confidential. Youth who participated in a one-time survey as part of the larger study indicated whether or not they were interested in the focus group, and one of the school counselors supported with coordination of the three focus groups.

The school from which students were recruited had a student population that was majority Black and Latinx, and most enrolled students (>75%) qualify for free and/or reduced. Free and reduced lunch is indicative of students from families that are considered working class or low-income. Disciplinary data from the school district suggest inequitable disciplinary practices, with Black and Latinx students suspended and expelled at higher rates than non-Black and non-Latinx students (California Department of Education, 2020). Participating youth identified as 45% ($n = 13$) Black, 37% ($n = 12$) Latinx, and 18% ($n = 5$) Arab/Middle Eastern. Youth were on average 16.3 years old ($SD = 1.2$); 55% percent of the sample identified as girls, and 45% identified as boys. A large majority (89%) qualified for free or reduced lunch.

3.1.2. Focus Groups

Three focus groups were conducted over two school days, each with 6–10 youth. Focus groups were 60–90 min in duration and held in a small multi-purpose room and a classroom at the school, and were both audio and video recorded. Focus groups were separated by gender identity at the guidance of school staff (two groups of girls, one group of boys) to promote comfort sharing gendered experiences. Students were excused from class by the school counselor to participate.

Focus groups were facilitated using a semi-structured interview format, and questions were designed to provide the opportunity for students to share emotional responses and discuss their opinions and experiences with one another. The focus group guide included questions about youths' experience getting in *trouble* or being disciplined at school, and their thoughts regarding disciplinary policies at school and whether or not they were fair or just. Questions included but were not limited to: Tell me about a time you got in trouble at school? Why do students get in trouble at your school? How did you feel immediately after you were disciplined? Ferguson (2020) utilized ethnographic and interview methods to conceptualize *trouble* among boys of color and found that in response to dismissal and labeling by teachers, students attempt to gain power through methods that allow them to make a name for themselves (i.e., class clowns) and present as physically powerful (i.e., fighting). We were therefore curious to learn how youth defined trouble when directly asked, and how they as young people conceptualize the term. Youth were also asked about their perceptions of school resource officers, how racial dynamics influence disciplinary experiences, and strategies to improve school experiences. Though guiding questions were followed, focus groups were utilized as the most effective method of inquiry, as youth discussion led to additional questions and concepts around areas of discipline that the authors may have missed.

3.1.3. Analysis

Focus groups were transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai Pro software (2.7.0) and were reviewed and edited to ensure the transcription accurately matched the audio. Video recordings were reviewed to ensure the appropriate speaker was labeled in the transcription, and thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was utilized to code focus groups and identify themes using an inductive approach. Once codes were developed by a single coder, they were identified as larger themes, or grandparent codes, or smaller themes that fit into the context of grandparent codes. For example, through inductive approaches, codes such as suspension, removal from the classroom, and expulsion were identified. In order to categorize these codes into larger themes, we created the grandparent code for *disciplinary actions*. Some codes, such as suspension, were linked to other codes, such as *talking back*, as a rationale for suspension. These codes were then identified as child codes, with *suspension* as a parent code, and disciplinary actions as a grandparent code.

Field notes were collected on recorded focus group interactions. Field notes included a summary of the observations, detailed notes regarding setting, conversations, interactions, additional or related questions regarding observed information, and observer comments. Memos were also developed around the topic of discipline and power/control, and social emotional wellness and development, as well as related literature references, theoretical underpinnings and a synthesis of observation findings.

Critical phenomenology was used as a framework when analyzing focus groups. Specifically, we drew from Annamma's (2017) analytical approach to her work exploring how incarcerated girls of color who were labeled as dis/abled experienced the school-prison nexus using critical phenomenology. Willen (2007) describes critical phenomenology as an approach that "sheds light on the subjective dimensions of a form of politically

and socially abject status” and describes the conditions of structural inequality that shape individuals’ status or position (p. 13). She further describes the impact of said factors on individual and collective experiences of “being-in-the-world.” The goal of critical phenomenology is to consider the underlying historical, cultural, and political factors that shape individuals’ experiences and the ways in which they navigate the world. Though Willen (2007) adapts critical phenomenology to explore migrant “illegality,” Annamma (2017) extends Willen’s utilization to include dis/abled girls of color. Though Annamma utilized a case study, an ethnographic approach, we shared a goal of understanding the lived experiences of youth who have been severely marginalized by carceral institutions and systems.

Building upon Annamma’s (2017) work, a critical phenomenological approach enabled us to investigate the shared and individualized experiences of marginalized youth as they navigate carceral practices in their schools and work to mitigate the challenges of this experience. Further, it allowed us to consider the cultural and political factors that have shaped their experiences as historically marginalized students. Phenomenological approaches to research uncover phenomena as they are described and experienced by participants and focus on the core of the human experience of participants (Creswell et al., 2007). As we studied the phenomenon of carceral logics in schools and the overarching school–prison nexus, this analytical approach was fitting in understanding how said processes are perceived by and experienced by participants. Annamma (2017) draws on Willen (2007) to describe the fit of critical phenomenology as an approach that pays attention to both conditions of structural inequality and violence and the impact of said conditions on individual and collective experiences. Critical phenomenology was therefore utilized as a mode of inquiry to help understand both the structures that produced carceral experiences for youth and the youths’ experiences and responses to said treatment.

3.2. Study 2 Methods

3.2.1. Participants

Participants were California community college students recruited primarily through local chapters of the Rising Scholars Network, a statewide program that supports students who are currently or formerly incarcerated. Research staff shared a brief description of the study and a recruitment flyer with 148 program coordinators representing Rising Scholars programs at 83 California community colleges. Eligible participants were between the ages of 18 and 40, currently enrolled in a California community college, had been formerly detained or incarcerated in a juvenile hall for at least 72 h, and either remembered receiving special education support (e.g., had an IEP or 504 plan, special education, or pull-out classes) or receiving a diagnosis that would qualify them for special education support (e.g., special learning disability, dyslexia, dyscalculia, intellectual disability, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, or a speech or language impairment). We initially strove to recruit participants who were young adults (age range of 18–25); however, it proved difficult to reach a sufficient sample for analysis. After consulting with staff and faculty from the Rising Scholars Network, we increased our eligibility to age 40. Given the increased risk for adult incarceration and the challenges of reentry and recidivism, formerly incarcerated college students tend to be older than the average college student. Further, participants of study 2 spoke of their experiences as K-12 students and provided a youth perspective. Though special education needs were pertinent in the recruitment process of study 2 and participants shared immense wisdom and experience in this area, the current work focuses on more general disciplinary K-12 experiences and the ways in which the findings align with study 1.

Twenty-eight students participated in the focus group discussions and filled out surveys. Participants were on average 31 years old ($SD = 6$; range 22–40 years), and 41% identified as women ($n = 11$) and 59% as men ($n = 16$). Participants self-identified as 41% Black or African American ($n = 11$), 22% Indigenous/Native ($n = 6$), 37% Latino/a/e ($n = 10$), 4% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ($n = 1$), and 48% white ($n = 13$); these categories are not mutually exclusive.

3.2.2. Focus Groups

Study 2 was designed as a mixed-methods investigation, gathering data via focus groups, interviews, and surveys; for the purposes of the current manuscript, we focus exclusively on qualitative focus group data. Six focus groups were held over the course of four months, each with 3–7 participants. One focus group was held in person, and the remaining five groups were held virtually on Zoom video conferencing. Focus groups were held at varying times and days to accommodate participants' scheduling needs.

Focus groups were facilitated by one or two (initials masked for submission) study team members and one notetaker using a semi-structured focus group guide that included questions about participants' educational experiences in both community schools and detention schools (e.g., "What was high school like for you?" and "Was the material taught in detention school different from when you were in school in the community?"). The questions were designed to provide the opportunity for students to share their opinions and experiences with one another. Emphasis was given to questions about discipline (e.g., "Can you tell us about the first and most memorable times you got in trouble?") and special education supports (e.g., "What academic supports did you receive while in school, if any?" and "How were students who were eligible for special education services served?") in both settings. Questions were also asked about participants' experiences transitioning to community college, what supports they receive in community college, and what supports or resources they wish they could receive now ("What supports do you need to be successful in college?").

3.2.3. Analysis

Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Atlas.ti software, Version 25. Transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti, reviewed for accuracy, and coded using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial codebook was created, guided by the focus of the study and the study research questions. Three coders (initials masked for submission) coded three randomly selected focus groups; each focus group was double-coded. The codebook was then iteratively finetuned by the three coders to include parent and subcodes commonly found in transcripts. The researchers reviewed and discussed results, codes, and discrepancies collectively and came to an agreement regarding which codes to review for further analysis. Atlas.ti's analysis function indicated how often codes related to carceral experiences at school, school-based discipline, and trajectories of education were identified within the data.

4. Study 1 Findings

4.1. Disciplinary Experiences

Youth experienced discipline and perceived *trouble* in both individual and collective ways. Each focus group was asked to describe situations in which they and/or others got in trouble as a means to identify communal versus individual experiences and to provide an opportunity for youth to share their perceptions. The term "trouble" was subjective and up for interpretation, but youth were able to collectively (co)construct a

uniform definition of the term. Often, youths' collective definition of trouble referenced the carceral system, highlighting the link youth make between school discipline and prison systems. Youth described a number of behaviors that led to disciplinary consequences, for example, fighting or having illicit substances on campus. Suspensions were among the most common forms of discipline that youth both witnessed and experienced, and they generally agreed that suspension was a fair consequence for such behavior. When describing experiences with in-school suspensions (ISS), youth linked the consequence to a carceral-like experience. Youth cited high levels of surveillance and exclusion when describing ISS and other exclusionary discipline as a prison-like experience.

4.2. Perceptions of Trouble and Experiences of Carcerality

The theme of carcerality came up consistently throughout the focus groups as the moderator attempted to understand youths' perceptions of trouble. When youth were asked to describe situations when they or others "got in trouble," references were made to policing and arrests. These examples were brought up regularly and often prior to referencing school-based consequences.

As mentioned above, institutional disciplinary practices such as ISS were compared to prisons. When providing her perspective on school police, one participant stated, "It's just gonna make school like a prison more than it already does." It should be noted that youth were not explicitly asked about police until the end of the focus group in order to reduce bias or connection towards anything explicitly carceral, as youth were asked about their experiences with discipline. Nonetheless, multiple youth brought up terms such as prison and lawyers independently when asked about their experiences with trouble, and their peers agreed with their perspectives. Their references to carcerality when describing school discipline are significant and speak to the emotional weight of disciplinary practices on non-dominant youth. As youth continued to openly share their observed and direct experiences with police, they (co)constructed *trouble* as more than a school-based infraction, but as an event that was carceral in nature and could lead to *legal* consequences. Carceral references were made at different points throughout focus group three, in particular as youth discussed the experience of ISS. For example, this interaction references a youth's experience with ISS. Pseudonyms are utilized to protect the privacy of participants.

Gerald: I ain't gon lie they do . . . that sh*t was like on some prisoner type sh*t if I think back on it bruh.

Moderator: Why do you say that?

Gerald: Because like, when I think back on it I think they used to like, they gotta walk you to the bathroom, walk to you to lunch? I'm like bruh what the.

John: They walk you to the bathroom?

Gerald: Yes! They used to walk you to the bathroom. "You gotta go to the bathroom? We'll walk you."

Luke: I used to hate that bruh.

Gerald: But in school bruh, it was like some prison sh*t, I think back on it now.

Mike: They gotta watch you at all times.

Gerald: They gotta watch you at all times bruh. I guess I'm gonna sneak off campus or whatever. And why would I do that?

The comparison of ISS to a prison indicates a clear association that youth make between school discipline and prison systems. These comparisons speak to youths' ability to understand the inequity in the treatment they receive and even reference the similarities between schools and other carceral institutions. In this interaction, youth described viewing

the ISS consequence as an example of their school treating students like prisoners. However, just moments prior, youth referred to ISS as a “blessing” in comparison to an out-of-school suspension. These seemingly contradictory perspectives speak to the complexity of youths’ perceptions and how discussions can shape their ability to make meaning of a circumstance. The excerpt also highlights the rich discussion that occurred during focus groups as youth affirmed one another’s experiences.

The final question of the focus group asked youth to share their thoughts about police presence on school campuses. Responses were mixed, with some youth stating that their presence may be helpful in the case of an emergency, while others were adamant that police should not be at schools. Gerald, a tall 11th grader who agreed with the latter sentiment, shared the following,

Because I feel like . . . in a way school is . . . in a way school is kind of like a prison, in a type of way, you just added police to it. It’s like . . . I feel like when you treat people like criminals, they’re gonna become criminals. So, if you have police watching and sh*t it’s gonna make them [students] rebel. You’re gonna make them rebel.

Gerald highlighted the ways students are influenced by punitive or carceral policies and how they may act in ways that align with punitive practices. His comment triggered multiple side discussions, and participants became more engaged and eager to share their perspectives. A school counselor who supported recruitment and was observing the group quieted the side conversations and asked students not to speak over one another. When youth stopped side conversations, they were given the opportunity to speak to the larger group one at a time. Mike, a 10th grader who was less vocal during other discussions, stated, “police officer with his gun on and all these kids around? An incident waiting to happen . . .” The group seemed to come to an agreement that police should not be on a school campus. Despite the potential negative influence of carceral school practices, participants engaged in a number of strategies to combat carceral practices and protect their well-being. In doing so, they resisted a carceral experience and negative labels to successfully navigate the institution.

4.3. Resisting a Carceral Experience

Despite the many challenges youth described in their stories, their accounts were also filled with examples of triumph, strategy, and institutional knowledge. Youth utilized a number of repertoires to resist carceral experiences and successfully navigate conflicts and injustice. Stories of tragedy and injustice were common across the focus groups, yet cultural–historical knowledge and references, humor and affirmations, and the rejection of labels were equally common as youth collectively built community to challenge punitive discipline.

Youth employed several strategies as they experienced discipline and shared their experiences with their peers. Across the three focus groups, three main strategies used to challenge carceral practices emerged across spaces: collective agency vis-a-vis community building through humor and affirmation, the individual and collective rejection of negative tropes and stereotypes, and demonstrated repertoires of resistance to highlight youths’ self-awareness and sociocultural knowledge of societal views of non-dominant youth.

Rosa described a situation in first grade where she broke the class pencil sharpener and had to “work” in the school office for a month, missing recess, to pay for a new pencil sharpener. As she shared her story with humor and deflection, her peers emphasized the severity of her punishment, responding with “wow,” and “that’s a long time for a child,” and “I can’t believe they did that to you.” Rosa began to acknowledge the injustice she

experienced, stating, “I guess that was messed up,” and provided additional details about her mental state as a young child receiving discipline for something she did accidentally.

Close relationships with teachers and administrators, rejection of labeling, and trust with parents were all utilized as strategies to resist punitive experiences. Youth referenced being “cool with admin,” who they would go to when they had a conflict with another staff member. When initially asked about getting in trouble, multiple youth stated, “I never really get in trouble,” however, they then proceeded to describe significant disciplinary experiences. In doing so, they rejected the label of a student who gets in trouble, contrarily considering themselves a good student, despite receiving significant or multiple disciplinary actions starting at a young age.

4.4. Study 1 Conclusions and Study 2 Conceptualization

Youth consistently brought up terms such as prison and lawyers independently when asked about their experiences with trouble and received agreement from their peers. Their references to carcerality when describing school discipline are significant and speak to the emotional weight of disciplinary practices on marginalized youth. Understanding that they were at a higher risk of getting in trouble, youth utilized tools, such as developing relationships with administrators and ensuring their parents trusted their word, to prevent and navigate disciplinary action. Further, they utilized their knowledge and discussed collectively and in real time to make sense of the injustice they received. Despite the many examples of injustice that were reviewed throughout the analysis of the data, examples of hope and resistance were equally common.

5. Study 2 Findings

5.1. Primary School Discipline

Inspired by the responses received in study 1, study 2 asked students to recall a time they got in trouble at school, specifically during their primary or secondary education. Despite the average age of participants ($M = 31$ years), they recounted early childhood experiences of exclusionary discipline. From detention as a first grader to suspension as a fifth grader, participants recounted a range of K-6 disciplinary experiences. Jesse, a veteran in his first semester of college, reported that he was suspended for fighting in the fifth grade.

Jesse: My grandma, she ain't had a lot of money, so my clothes would come from, like, Payless and stuff like that, my shoes. So going to school, they'd make fun of you, too much time, start fighting, and, so, I got kicked out.

Moderator: What grade were you in?

Jesse: Oh, I was probably 5th grade, I believe.

Based on the experiences shared, school systems did not address the reason for the behavior and instead resorted to punishment as a solution to stop an unwanted behavior, which, for many participants, was fighting as a means of physical or emotional defense. Fighting as a response to bullying was a common theme across the six focus groups, as many students related to living in poverty and being bullied for their clothing, shoes, and hygiene. Another participant, Andy, one of our youngest participants who attended college directly after being paroled, shared, “But I got bullied a lot in the 5th grade and the 4th grade, and that's why I had to stand up for myself in the higher grades.” Students utilized fighting as a means to protect themselves from their peers, which indicates a lack of response to bullying from their schools. One participant, Tyler, held multiple leadership positions on campus and was running for class president, reported being bullied for his race as his class read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and they were exposed to the N-word. He

shared that for his peers, “it just became a part of their daily vocabulary. So, I finally, just, I slapped somebody and their—I slapped somebody and their food fell all over the place and they were screaming. It was in 6th grade. I got suspended.” As one of the only Black students at his school, he described how much of the discipline he received was due to physical or verbal responses to discrimination and racism from other students.

Others shared experiencing detention and suspensions as early as first grade. “First detention was, like, in first grade. And that wasn’t my fault. That was not my fault”. It was common for students to recount experiences where they received unjust discipline and were punished for something someone else did or for a misunderstanding. Despite most having experienced unjust punishment, many internalized their experiences and referred to themselves as bad students. Lis shared as they recounted their disciplinary experiences, “So I was a good student until the little hiccups would come. And then I would be a bad student until I would—I don’t know. It was weird. It was, like, I’m good, bad, and then bad, good. This common narrative speaks to the confusion and identity shifts students may experience when receiving disciplinary action at school. If receiving discipline, they must be considered a bad student.

5.1.1. Carceral School Experiences

As focus groups discussed their experiences of discipline, the presence of carcerality in schools was unequivocal. Aside from receiving ISS, suspension, detention, and expulsion, all of which were common across the six focus groups, some students were sent directly to juvenile hall for behaviors that occurred at school. One participant, Martin, who was preparing to transfer to a four-year university shared this experience from his 10th-grade year,

I got kicked out, like, right before lunch because I got into it with this dude I didn’t like. And then instead of leaving campus, I went right to PE class.

Moderator: So was it like a physical altercation?

Martin Yeah. That’s the second time I went to juvi.

The student went on to share that they were incarcerated for the fight that took place on campus. His experience speaks to the direct link between schools and prisons and the ways in which the two systems intersect and impact student trajectories. Students who were not directly arrested on campus often experienced pushout from their schools. Multiple participants reported being suspended or expelled for truancy-related issues. Essentially, they were kicked out of school for not going to school. Many entered alternative schools in lieu of their traditional school.

So, I fought a lot of times in school, got suspended a lot. I also went to continuation school. Kind of felt like I knew what that label was—a bad kid hanging out with other bad kids. And that’s how it really was. It was, like, we’re going to take all these kids that weren’t able to kind of, like, make it in school, put them all in another school where drugs were easily accessible, fights were frequent, almost every day.

Participants like Alex who was working on transfer applications, reported being constantly surveilled, requiring permission for nearly every movement, and a general lack of learning when attending alternative schools. Though continuation schools’ class sizes were smaller, the environment was less welcoming than traditional schools, and students struggled to identify as learners. Focus group discussions described continuation and probation schools as preparation for prison and similar to the education they received while incarcerated as youth.

5.1.2. Education in Youth Carceral Facilities

Focus groups addressed K-12 experiences, which included time in a youth carceral facility for all participants. Participants overwhelmingly described their schooling in youth carceral facilities, such as camp or juvenile hall, as lacking in educational content and opportunities for learning.

Andy: A lot of people don't know, but they think that when a juvenile is incarcerated that they're getting, like, frickin' top-notch education, or that they're going to learn it because they're locked up and they have nothing else to do. But that's false because the teachers give you all the answers. So, what are you learning from getting the answers? You're not learning nothing. You're literally just there. That's it.

Moderator: What was the schoolwork like that you were getting the answers. Like, what were you. . .

Tyler: They will give you a worksheet, and then they'll put the answers on the board, and then you just copy it on the paper and, boom, you're done.

There was an agreement across the focus groups that schooling in youth carceral facilities was not conducive to learning. In addition to receiving answers, students were expected to independently fill out worksheets and packets. Engaging lessons and teachers were not referenced throughout the groups. Jen, a student parent, stated, "It was kind of, like, second grade learning . . . We never wrote any type of essays or anything like that." Students with disabilities reported not receiving services related to their IEP, while others reported not having received any schooling at all while incarcerated. In addition to the lack of adequate schooling, participants reported violence and a lack of safety during their time in schools within youth carceral facilities. Joaquin summarized their lack of schooling and exposure to violence during the time they were incarcerated.

But then the actual schooling was we would go in there and, like, watch documentaries on stuff, like nature documentaries. Or one of the probation officers, he would try to teach us about Jesus. As far as, like, curriculum like schools, no. If you wanted to get your GED, you could—they would give you a little booklet so you could get your GED. That's it. And then when you went up to the camps, the camps were like gladiator school. You worked, and you went back to the unit, and you learn how to politic on a prison level. That's it. [Ran fades] all the time, you know, learn how to, you know, run 10 fades back to back to back to back to back to back to back type shit.

Some students described that staff facilitated violence in schools, for example, being pressured to fight by staff as they placed bets on who would win. It was common for one person to share their experience and others to nod in agreement regarding the violence they witnessed and experienced. The lack of psychological safety was ever-present for participants during the time they were incarcerated, and this lack of safety persisted even in their detention classrooms. Fortunately, participants of the study were able to share said memories from a place of safety as they navigated higher education.

5.1.3. Accessing Higher Education

Despite the immense barriers to education each participant faced, they were able to access a postsecondary education and were in the process of completing their studies during the time of the focus groups. During the focus groups, we asked what motivated the group to pursue higher education after having so many academic challenges as K-12 students. Though many students were able to earn GEDs and high school diplomas while incarcerated, few were exposed to higher education while incarcerated as youth. The vast

majority of participants were also incarcerated as adults and were exposed to postsecondary education services while in jail or prison. They utilized the credits they earned and services while incarcerated to enroll in college and had overall positive experiences as college students. “But the college, it was definitely a refreshing setting, especially since being like incarcerated, it was, it felt good to be around like just people, everywhere, like regular life.” The transition from incarceration to college was a positive one for many, but not without challenges and barriers related to stigma, learning style, and access to services.

Though college was perceived by many as the ultimate goal, many were unable to escape the presence of carcerality and the labeling and stigma that accompany incarceration. Johnson and Dizon (2021) coined the *college–prison nexus* as a tool to examine the relationship between postsecondary education and the carceral system and how institutions “increase penalty and exacerbate racial and social inequality.” Participants reported accusations of aggression and intimidation without merit, complaints of discomfort by their peers due to their presence, being denied accommodations by professors, and a lack of access to supports and services.

Participants commonly referenced Rising Scholars and culturally based organizations as supportive systems, as well as services in the areas of basic needs, disabled students programming, financial aid, and tutoring services. Reference to how often students accessed higher education services was mixed. Some learned of the range of services offered during focus groups after hearing them referenced by others. Others reported heavy campus involvement, with one student running for a campus office position and leading multiple organizations. Participants shared an array of resources and suggestions with one another throughout the focus groups. One participant noted he was unaware of organizations such as Rising Scholars. Multiple participants provided context and explanations of these services and encouraged him to visit the office. A younger participant reported being *inspired* by older participants who were in the process of transferring to four-year universities. Many shared their contact information in the chat of the Zoom platform and thanked us for the opportunity to connect with others and share their stories. Despite the support offered, however, we were curious to know what gaps existed. We inquired what could be improved for formerly incarcerated students on their campus.

Like all the support stuff, like actually being here at the school, like, instead of referring you to Cal Fresh or giving you more points at the pantry, like maybe giving you a credit card that you can spend on groceries, like 200 a month on groceries.

Tyler referenced being outsourced for many of the necessary services and discussed the need for colleges to be community hubs with access to social services. Having these additional services on campus would reduce challenges related to scheduling, probation and parole barriers, and transportation. Finally, students identified heavily as being formerly incarcerated students and students with learning disabilities. As mentioned above, they referenced challenges with faculty who were aware of their backgrounds and refused to acknowledge their accommodations, as well as peers perceiving them as threatening. Rachel summarized her experience in a way that resonated with many others.

It helps you achieve to have something to come home with a certificate and actually be able to validate what you have. Because a lot of people, honestly, don’t get chances, even when you come back to society with all the things that you accomplished while gone, you still may not even get chances, right? You get out and they have you do a three-year probation, whatever.

Despite defying the odds to become college students, participants referenced a range of barriers related to their transition into the community and into higher education. Insti-

tutional and reentry challenges included, but were not limited to, substance use, mental health, housing instability, and job insecurity. Students carried the burden of their pasts with them but continued to pursue their academic and career-related dreams.

5.2. Study 2 Conclusions

Formerly incarcerated college students face an array of challenges both in their pursuit of higher education and while enrolled in college. For all study 2 participants, these challenges began during their K-12 education. Similar to the youth in study 1, participants in study 2 reported an array of carceral experiences in their community schools. Factors such as poverty, bullying, discrimination, social emotional and substance use issues created barriers to educational attainment. Participants reported receiving discipline that was unjust, spoke of being labeled, and witnessing and becoming victims of violence while incarcerated. Despite an array of laws that exist to ensure incarcerated youth receive a proper education, many reported a lack of any education while incarcerated, while remedial work, packets, and lack of intellectual content were common (Houchins et al., 2009). Study 2 findings illuminate the educational pathway from school to prison to college.

6. Discussion

Exploring the punitive and disciplinary experiences of students during their primary and secondary education allows us to examine the mechanisms that push youth from school discipline to youth carceral facilities, and the strategies students utilize to access postsecondary education post incarceration. By highlighting themes present across focus groups among both populations (high school students *and* formerly incarcerated college students), we interrogate the educational practices that push and mitigate carceral impact for marginalized students. This study illuminates an important empirical question to better understand how schools funnel students into the legal system and, in particular, how youth from varying backgrounds experience and navigate school-level carceral practices and should exist in conversation with previous studies that explore *how* the school–prison nexus influences students.

The results of the two studies demonstrate significant risks that youth, particularly youth from marginalized identities, experience while in school. While schooling is required for all youth in the United States and schools are meant to be places that can offer supports for learning, independent living, and mental health (IDEA, 2004), these studies illuminate a key theme: schools create environments that force youth to utilize skill and resourcefulness. Participants from both groups found success in challenging carceral education environments in their pursuit of educational attainment. While study 1 participants rejected negative labeling and sought support from trustworthy adults, study 2 participants demonstrated their ability to successfully access postsecondary education while incarcerated, utilized campus and organizational offerings to support their goals, fund their education, access academic supports, and attempt to rebuild their lives despite numerous challenges posed by educational institutions. Though great skill and resourcefulness were demonstrated, it should be emphasized that said qualities were *required* in order for marginalized youth to navigate unjust K-12 systems. Though carceral practices in schools have been established as harmful and reform efforts have been implemented, the studies indicate that reform efforts have yet to reach some students and speak to the need for more radical forms of educational reform that include abolition, organizing, and the acknowledgement of racist institutional structures (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014; Sojoyner, 2013).

In their pursuit of educational attainment, we found some differences across study populations. While formerly incarcerated students identified with labeling of being *bad* students as K-12 students, marginalized high school students collectively rejected educa-

tional injustice and found supportive adults to mitigate the carceral experience, indicating divergence across their collective experiences. This finding speaks to the impact of carceral-ity in schools, which convinces youth that they and their behavior are the issue instead of the policies in place or the environment the school creates. Schools engage in disciplinary practices and a culture of carcerality that set (some) youth up for future incarceration and failure to reach secondary and postsecondary education. Despite these challenges, young people interested in pursuing their education can be immensely resourceful, as demonstrated by the themes identified across the two studies. Taken together, we found that both marginalized high school students and formerly incarcerated students rejected disciplinary injustice by the education institutions. Given these strengths and resourcefulness, schools should identify the unique skillset and strengths of their students to support their futures across educational and vocational domains. The various skills utilized to successfully navigate oppressive school systems should be further explored as a means to transform education and pedagogy in ways that highlight the various talents of marginalized youth (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Annamma et al., 2019).

The current studies highlight the valuable, but often excluded, perspectives of young people impacted by carceral education practices. While there has been extensive research over the past few decades regarding young people who are in the legal system (De Francisco Lopes & Novak, 2024), a direct comparison of educational experiences among highly disciplined high school students and college students formerly incarcerated as youth has not been conducted. Simultaneously examining their educational and carceral experience highlights both the barriers placed by schools and the practices that should be expanded. Further, despite an increase in literature that amplifies student voice, education policy continues to overlook these perspectives. The lack of policy reform that is student-centered indicates a gap in the practice of research-to-policy pipeline. It is imperative to lift up young people's opinions and reflections to better understand how the educational and legal systems influence multiple aspects of their lives. It is just as imperative to create a policy that incorporates the experiences and suggestions of youth.

The focus group design allowed young people to share their unfiltered opinions and experiences with researchers and other participants in their own words and facilitated fruitful discussions across participants. The communal nature of these groups also allowed the participants to both connect with others who had similar experiences, and convey the ways in which their experiences were similar and different—both within the same schools (as in study 1) and across different schools and carceral facilities, both within California and across state borders (as in study 2).

Additionally, the current studies combat the tendency for researchers to frame legally involved young people from a deprivation perspective. While we seek to acknowledge the systemic harms perpetuated by both the educational and carceral systems, specifically toward minoritized students, we also seek to lift up their immense resilience and ability to survive and thrive. Despite the structural barriers that are set up to impede these students, the participants in these studies share how they are able to navigate bureaucratic processes, advocate for themselves and their needs, build community, and persist in obtaining an education against the odds.

We call on policy makers to include youth perspectives in their work to ensure their needs are considered and met, both at the secondary and postsecondary levels. We also call on researchers to utilize youth participatory action research methods and engage in interdisciplinary work, which includes academics, practitioners, and policy makers to ensure that research findings are integrated into policy reform. Findings demonstrate that students are aware of the faults in their education system and share many ideas on strategies to improve education systems. For instance, nearly all formerly incarcerated

participants cited funding and housing as a serious need. They discussed the idea of utilizing college systems as community schools with access to a range of services. They also cited programs like the Rising Scholars Network as having been successful in supporting incarcerated communities' access to higher education. Their ideas and perspectives should hold immense weight in shaping educational policy across the country.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to the current two-part study. The first is that the studies were conducted years apart. Conducting the studies concurrently could have led to an increase in the ways in which the studies align and how the participants share or differ in their experiences. Moreover, participants were all enrolled in school during data collection. Youth who had received suspension or were pushed out of a traditional high school would not have been at the school during recruitment. Further, formerly incarcerated individuals who had not yet enrolled in college were also not included. Thus, perspectives from youth and students who experienced the highest levels of discipline and pushout could have been missed.

In study 2, we learned that formerly incarcerated college students tend to be older than traditional college students, and many were incarcerated as adults. Identifying the specific factors that lead individuals to pursue higher education later in life, such as adult incarceration, lack of stable housing, and substance use issues, could help inform policy intended to support the educational attainment of formerly incarcerated students.

Additionally, the sample size of both studies is small. Due to timing and funding constraints, roughly 30 participants per study was the maximum amount of data that could be collected and analyzed. Perspectives from additional participants could have informed the findings of the study and improved the methodological rigor.

7. Conclusions and Next Steps

Despite extensive research within the school–prison nexus context, marginalized students of color continue to be pushed out of school and incarcerated at high rates (Annamma et al., 2019; Goldman & Rodriguez, 2022). This highlights a gap in the research-to-practice pipeline, as few studies directly ask youth about their experiences with discipline and their educational experiences while incarcerated. The purpose of the current paper was two-fold. First, we explored how marginalized students of color conceptualize and experience school discipline. Second, we explored the educational experiences of formerly incarcerated college students with learning challenges and their path to higher education. Taken together, we describe the carceral educational practices, which take place in both community school and youth carceral facility settings, shedding light on specific policies and processes that funnel youth into the prison system and hinder educational attainment. We simultaneously highlight the strengths and collective resilience of marginalized youth and their ability to navigate unjust carceral education systems to access their education. Through extensive discussion among both focus group populations, we identify collective strategies of support and identify shared injustice, all of which should be utilized to develop K-12 and higher education policies that are youth-centered. Through the collective resilience of our participants, we have learned how supportive adults at school, basic needs, funding, and peer support can serve as facilitators to educational attainment. We identified how students share the perspective that school disciplinary practices are carceral and how they are forced to reject negative labeling. We should look to students to utilize their relationships and skills to develop school practices that are fitting for their needs. For example, practices that prohibit youth interaction in class (no talking, individual assignments) directly reject the norms of adolescent development. Punishing these behaviors leads students to view schools as unjust and carceral in nature, rupturing their relationship with school. However,

by highlighting the strengths youth possess, such as encouraging group assignments and allowing interaction during class time, rather than problematizing them, we can begin to hone their strengths for educational success. Methodological practices such as Youth Participatory Action Research should be increasingly utilized in the literature related to youth experiences and needs. Both youth and experts in youth-centered research should be included in policy implementation and reform processes to ensure that policy is evidence-based and appropriate. Despite the immense challenges marginalized youth face in school, it is clear that they find innovative ways to succeed.

We utilize these findings to inform policy intended to serve incarcerated youth interested in pursuing higher education through academic, community, and policy partnerships. The lessons learned not only in our findings but also in our outreach and collaboration efforts continue to inform future work by these authors and collaborators. Inspired by the perspectives of our participants and the lack of adequate shifts in education policy, we are currently engaging in research practices that utilize participatory action research methods with formerly and currently incarcerated youth while partnering with government officials to encourage policy change. We are interested in learning what environments and factors encourage incarcerated youth to pursue higher education, and how colleges, probation departments, courts, and CBO professionals can support formerly incarcerated college students and help them succeed. We hope to continue to participate in research–practice partnerships that are developed in conjunction with policy makers and government officials and are informed by youth.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individualized Education Plan

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