The Effects of Autism on the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Who We Are

We are the first and only African American, minority, family focused Autism 501(c)(3) Nonprofit Organization in the Commonwealth of PA. We provide a variety of support services, and resources.
School-to-Prison Pipeline

The “school-to-prison pipeline” refers to the policies and practices that push our nation’s schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This pipeline reflects the prioritization of incarceration over education.
School-to-Prison Pipeline

• The ACLU states that the "school-to-prison pipeline is" 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.
School-to-Prison Pipeline

- According to the report, “Unlocking Futures” by the National Center for Learning Disabilities, as many as 70% of youths involved in the juvenile justice system have a disability.

- The report notes that “justice-involved youth with disabilities are likely to rotate in and out from school to prison and back again.”
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a neurodevelopmental disability characterized by social and communication deficits. These deficits may limit understanding of what others are saying, which may negatively affect the ability to communicate effectively.
Autism & Law Enforcement

- Individuals with ASD have up to seven times more contact with law enforcement over the course of their lifetime than their peers (Berryessa, 2014).

- 20% of these youth have been stopped and questioned by police due to their perceived oddities or inability to act and react in a socially appropriately manner (Cohen, Dickerson & Forbes, 2014).
In a study involving 2,525 caregivers in Pennsylvania, 7.9% of elementary to high school-aged youth with ASD experienced police contact, 7.8% experienced hospitalization, and 15% were recipients of school disciplinary action (Turcotte, Shea, & Mandell, 2017).
Autism and Criminal Conduct

- There is no direct link between autism spectrum disorder and criminal behavior.

- However, schools have embraced zero-tolerance policies that automatically impose severe punishment regardless of circumstances.

- Under these policies, students have been expelled for bringing items such as nail clippers or scissors to school.
Autism & The Education System

- Students diagnosed with autism and other disabilities can easily get lost in the classroom.
- At times, they might behave in ways their teachers and peers don’t understand.
- Including youth with ASDs, children with disabilities are two times more likely than their non-disabled peers to be suspended from school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).
Autism & The Education System

- As well as being black, male, and with a disability has been described as the “the trifecta pick for the highest suspension rates in American schools” (Anderson, 2018).

- Unfortunately, a student’s integration into the juvenile justice system often began with something as small as behaviors that are a misinterpretation of one with autism.
Autism & The Education System

- To untrained teachers and staff, behaviors that are associated with autism can appear, unruly or aggressive, even seen as evasive.

- In turn, the nature of the core deficits that define ASD can pose a risk for both being victimized as well as being funneled in the school-to-prison pipeline.
Solutions

- The symptoms of autism and how they may be differentiated from those of other disorders

- Greater sensitivity regarding ethnic differences in language used to describe child behavior

- Education and values clarification regarding their own beliefs about the prevalence of autism and its presentation by ethnicity
Thank you for your participation!!!

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