

Summary

School criminalization negatively impacts students and their families. Families experience fear and frustration being caught between schools and the criminal justice system. Safety and order is a legitimate concern for any school system. However, there are more effective ways to address minor student behavior issues while maintaining healthy relationships between schools and families.

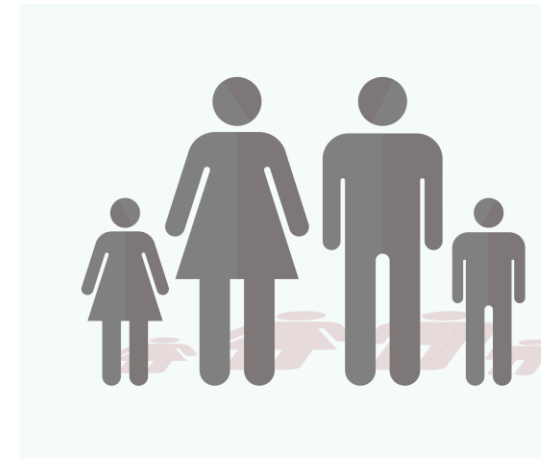
Implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) and Restorative Justice practices are trending in schools seeking positive resolutions for student behavior.

www.pbis.org
www.pbisworld.com
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How Families Experience School Criminalization

Investigating how families process and deal with having children criminalized at school for minor behavior issues.



An Exploratory Multi-Case Study M. Tate

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“I’m afraid of the courts... That’s why I hired a lawyer to put up some type of fight.”

“I never been through anything like this before... I just felt alone, at the time it felt like me and my son against the world.”

“So, emotionally it was frustrating going back and forth dealing with the court system.”

(Parent Quotes)

What is School Criminalization?

School criminalization is the continuance of the school-to-prison pipeline. Public schools across the United States have merged with criminal justice systems to enforce progressive policing and surveillance of student behavior through Zero Tolerance policies. As a consequence, minor student behaviors have become increasingly *illegal*, putting students at risk for severe punishments such as issuance of criminal citations, juvenile court referrals, and or school arrests.

The purpose of this study...

...was to investigate how families deal with having children criminalized at school for minor behavior issues. Overall research questions: (1) *How do families describe the process of school criminalization*, (2) *How are families personally affected when students are criminalized at school for minor behavior*, and (3) *What do families know about the issue of school criminalization*, were framed to explore evidence concerning school criminalization through families experiences.

From the Family Perspective

Research in this area is steep with statistical data concerning student discipline trends. However, little is known about how families are personally impacted when their children are criminalized for their behavior at school. The voice of the family is needed to learn more about this phenomenon from the perspective of those with firsthand experiences.

Three families were recruited from states located in the North East, South East, and Mid-West. Participants were in their 40’s from varying economic and ethnic backgrounds that had children who faced law enforcement and or court for minor behaviors such as fighting and truancy. Children in these cases (2 males, 1 female) ranged in age 14-16, two of which were diagnosed for special needs services. Parents shared school and court documents to confirm their cases. Dealing with school criminalization was a first time experience for all three families.

Caught Between Two Institutions

A significant finding in this study was the theme of *Caught Between Two Institutions*. Students in Cases 1 and 2 were involved in mutual fights with classmates that led to law enforcement involvement and court appearances for disorderly conduct. Parents were responsible for making sure their children adhered to court orders in addition to following school suspension measures their children received. Students in Cases 2 and 3 were summoned to court for truancy to be monitored for school attendance. The courts also required them to do community service. Parents loss time from work (one family had to pay attorney and court fees) and felt stressed trying to meet the demands of the courts in addition to dealing with their children’s ongoing school issues.

Breaking Bonds between Schools & Families

Study results revealed that parents were dissatisfied and frustrated with their school systems approach in criminalizing their children. Parents also shared similar views about schools not taking ownership for student discipline and relying too much on law enforcement and courts to punish students for minor behavior problems. Families in Cases 2 and 3 *took flight* and transferred to other schools.

Taking a Stand

Parents sought help outside of school to support them through the process of school criminalization. Parent in Case 1 challenged school officials with documentation from a community health center that her son was not getting the behavior support he needed. Parents in Case 2 hired lawyers for their son’s disorderly conduct case (which was dismissed) and truancy case. Parent in Case 3 relied on her knowledge as a member of a family advocacy group to help navigate through her daughters’ truancy case.