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*toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .*

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## Baltimore's School-to-Prison Pipeline and the New Youth Jail

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Jerrell is a good guy. Smart and funny, he generally helped lighten the spirit of class. I taught Jerrell for two years, as a High School Junior and then again as a Senior. He was on my roster the next year, too. But only until he turned 21, and the school district's automated system dropped him from our roll when he “aged out” of the public school system.

Why would anyone get as far as senior year and then drop out? Why would he let all those years of hard work go to waste?

The simplest answer I can give you is bullying, but it's really more complicated than that. Jerrell's bully was a Baltimore City Schools Police Officer.

One day, towards the middle of Jerrell's last year in my class, he came in to my room almost panting. I quickly asked the other teacher I was meeting with to give us a moment, and asked him what had happened. He had been leaving the building mid-day, because he was finished with his classes. (Seniors who have met all of their graduation requirements may have partial-day schedules). He had gotten his things from his locker, put on his hat and coat, and was on his way out the door when a School Resource Officer (SRO) called out from behind him, "Son, take that hat off!"

Jerrell did not turn around, but responded in frustration, "I'm a Senior, leave me alone."

After a few more lines of back and forth, during which Jerrell did not curse or raise his voice, but also did not remove his hat, the officer called him a "yellow bastard" (referring to Jerrell's light skin).

Jerrell was taken aback. The SRO turned away, and walked back into the school at that point.

Jerrell followed him, asking repeatedly "what did you call me?" Within a minute, the officer had physically assaulted Jerrell, slamming him onto the ground and putting handcuffs on him.

The incident was never reported, because the officer was obviously wrong and the young man wanted to put it behind him. But that officer remained at the school. Jerrell's attendance went from less-than-perfect to terrible after this, and he eventually dropped out.

This is not an isolated incident. The proliferation of police in schools is part of what the American Civil Liberties Union [refers to \[2\]](#) as the "School-to Prison Pipeline," which they describe as "a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems." Employing armed Police Officers in schools is [part of this trend \[3\]](#), along with increased use of student surveillance.

Datwain is a current high school Senior in Baltimore City. A brilliant but restless young man, he laments that if "I feel like I need a short break they do not allow us to step outside [to] cool off. They have police walking around the school armed with guns, mace, sticks, and cuffs...treating [us] like criminals."

When I asked former and current students about their experiences of surveillance and policing in schools, some felt that the increased security presence was necessary for their safety. However, a [report \[4\]](#) released last year by the Justice Policy Institute finds that "While reported incidents of violence and crime in schools are at the lowest level since the early 1990s, arrests and referrals of students to the juvenile justice system by SROs are increasing." This proves that the increased number of SROs is not simply a response to increased levels of violence in schools, but rather that SROs target certain students, like Jerrell, for punishment.

It is also the case that students who are doing what they are supposed to often catch the brunt of these policies. For example, forty middle and high schools in Baltimore had [metal detectors installed \[5\]](#) at the student entrances in 2008. Of course, school buildings are required to have multiple entrances and exits to comply with fire codes. This means that students who get to school on time and use the proper entrance are subjected to scanning, while those who get to school late, or enter through other doors, are not.

As Aaron Kupchik points out in his 2010 book, *Homeroom Security: School Discipline in an Age of Fear [6]*, Zero Tolerance policies mean that "a student who forgot that he left a pocket knife in his backpack...may be given the same punishment as a student who brings a gun to school." On the flip side, according to [an article \[7\]](#) in *The Baltimore Sun*, "a student in a Washington, D.C., high school with a metal detector was fatally shot by a classmate inside the building. Last year in Red Lake, Minn., a shooting occurred in a school with a metal scanner, perimeter fencing and guards at the front door."

In Baltimore, the attacks on young people don't end at the schoolhouse door. Despite major [community outcry \[8\]](#), Governor Martin O'Malley has been [pushing relentlessly \[9\]](#) to have a 120 bed, multi-million dollar "youth detention facility" for youth *awaiting trial* for crimes which automatically carry adult charges.

Allow me to emphasize that point: this facility is for youth who have not yet been convicted of anything. They are suspected criminals, innocent, under United States law, until proven guilty.

There are at least 20 crimes that carry mandatory adult charges, which include murder and rape,

but also assault and robbery. Because the latter two are far more common, and carry shorter sentences, most of these youth come of age in adult prisons, and are then released into their communities, where they are 34% more likely [10] to be arrested for another violent crime than youth jailed with their peers.

In a recent [press conference](#) [11], O'Malley focused on "the horrific nature of the charges" the youth face, rather than on the fact that these are charges, not convictions. It is also important to note that, after sitting in the adult facility pre-trial, "almost 70 percent of [these youth] will have their cases either dismissed outright or sent to the juvenile court system, which suggest that their cases did not belong in an adult criminal court in the first place," says Monique Dixon of the [Open Society Institute](#). [12]

According to a May 2001 [report](#) [13] from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, no new youth jail would be needed if the State adopted practical and affordable new policies and practices, such as ending the automatic prosecution of youth as adults or detaining youth pre-trial in juvenile justice facilities."

Baltimore Pastor and activist Heber Brown, III is part of a large movement to [block the state](#) [14] from building this jail. (Disclosure: the author is part of that movement, and was arrested this January at the proposed site of the jail in a direct action to halt it's construction. He told the Real News Network that "there is so much money that is devoted toward incarceration [of African-American Youth], that's devoted toward their punishment... So for me that's one of the issues, that if a budget is a moral document, that it is highly immoral for the state of Maryland and the City of Baltimore to spend millions of dollars on the incarceration of African youth here in the city." Although the original figure of \$100 million to build the jail has been abandoned, a [recent hearing](#) [15] in Annapolis discussed a \$70 million budget. Much of this money would go to [private contractors](#) [16].

Intensive surveillance and policing is not what schools need. A youth jail is not what Baltimore needs. What do we need?

According to Renard, a Freshman at the University of Baltimore who graduated from the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) this spring, Baltimore's students deserve a broad, well rounded education which would effectively prepare them for college, employment and life. High school, he said, focused too narrowly on "basic reading, writing, [and] math" skills. When asked what he felt he should have learned and didn't, his impressive list included sociology, technology, human sexuality, cooking, handwriting, and fine dining.

Nicole, a BCPSS graduate and proud mother, adds, "they teach some things but don't teach how to apply those things in the real word." This sentiment was echoed by Derrick, another recent grad now studying at The Community College of Baltimore County in Catonsville, who was frequently reprimanded in high school for asking too many questions. In my eyes, this embodies the horror of the school to prison pipeline: a seventeen year old genius should be encouraged to [ask questions](#) [17], to debate, to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the world. But schools that serve Black youth are pushed to focus so much on discipline and behavior, that even natural by-products of learning are tightly controlled.

Jerrell is now a grown man without a High School Diploma. In another age, he could have gotten a job in manufacturing, construction, or mechanics. Now, those jobs are few and far between in

Baltimore. Even his options for service sector jobs are limited by his lack of a diploma, let alone the emotional scars from having his school turn a blind eye to an incident of racial discrimination by a school official. Despite having a safe home, a loving family, and a very involved father, his chances for incarceration are extremely high. Baltimore could have benefited from a well educated, employed Jerrell. Now, unfortunately, we may end up paying \$38,383 [18] annually to lock him up.

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**Links:**

[1] <https://indyreader.org/contributor/iris-kirsch>

[2] <http://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/school-prison-pipeline>

[3] <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2012/01/08-0>

[4] <http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/3177>

[5]

[http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/news/education/blog/2008/02/is\\_your\\_school\\_getting\\_a\\_metal.html](http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/news/education/blog/2008/02/is_your_school_getting_a_metal.html)

[6]

[http://books.google.com/books?id=BzacO6V1tQC&pg=PA13&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&cad=3#v](http://books.google.com/books?id=BzacO6V1tQC&pg=PA13&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v)

[7]

[http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/news/education/blog/2007/12/do\\_you\\_want\\_metal\\_detectors\\_in.html](http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/news/education/blog/2007/12/do_you_want_metal_detectors_in.html)

[8] <http://stopbaltimoreyouthjail.org/>

[9] <http://www.baltimorefishbowl.com/stories/omalley-continues-to-push-for-baltimore-youth-jail-for-some-reason/>

[10] <http://static.nicic.gov/Library/025555.pdf>

[11] <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/breaking/bs-md-ci-youth-jail-governor-20121001,0,2745713.story>

[12] <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/4-reasons-why-baltimore-doesnt-need-another-jail>

[13] <http://www.nccdglobal.org/news/does-charging-youth-as-adults-make-baltimore-safer>

[14] <http://www.indyreader.org/content/face-our-future-states-plan-build-new-youth-jail-and-campaign-defeat-it>

[15] <http://indyreader.org/content/activists-opposing-youth-jail-bring-fight-marylands-senate>

[16] <http://www.bdcnetwork.com/print/20490>

[17] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIPYub-gTjE>

[18] <http://www.vera.org/files/price-of-prisons-maryland-fact-sheet.pdf>