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**Document Title:** A Multiple Perspectives Analysis of the Influences on the School to Prison Pipeline in Virginia: Project Design and Implementation

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## Project Design and Implementation

The study supported by award #2015-CK-BX-0007 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice National Institutes of Justice grant consisted of both qualitative and quantitative investigation of the influences on the school to prison pipeline. The quantitative study brought together four large datasets maintained by the Virginia Department of Education (DOE; Discipline Crime and Violence [DCV]), Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS; School Safety Audits and School Climate Data), and Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ; Juvenile Referrals and Intakes). These datasets allowed us to compare what characteristics (individual or building level) either increase or decrease the odds that a student will become involved with the criminal justice system, as a result of school behaviors. The qualitative study involved in-depth individual interviews with 34 educational stakeholders across Virginia, who are involved in the discipline process in the schools (e.g. principals, administrators, counselors, School Resource Officers, etc.). The analysis of these interviews allowed us to find the themes in how school discipline is differentiated from law enforcement in the schools, and the efforts that schools communities are making to keep children in the classroom and out of the courtroom.

The Institutional Review Board for Virginia Tech approved the research plan for both the Quantitative and Qualitative components. Because there are both quantitative and qualitative components to this project, we have organized the project in two corresponding sections. The one point of crossover is that we determined which schools we would select for case studies, based upon the quantitative data. That process is defined in a document entitled, "Process of selecting schools for case study". Otherwise, the research questions and data sources are

reported separately below, and the analysis and findings are reported in greater depth in the respective reports.

### Project Design

#### *Quantitative research.*

1) What is the influence of school resource officers (SROs), and the related policies, on student referrals to law enforcement?

Hypothesis 1.A: We anticipate that schools with SROs will have higher numbers of referrals to law enforcement for non-violent offenses.

Hypothesis 1.B: We anticipate that schools without MOUs as a guiding policy for the involvement of the SRO in discipline issues will have higher numbers of referrals than those schools that have an MOU.

2) What is the influence of school safety factors on the use of exclusionary discipline and student referrals to law enforcement?

Hypothesis 2.A: We anticipate there will be no significant difference between safe schools and unsafe schools (as measured by the school safety audit), with regard to the use of exclusionary discipline.

Hypothesis 2.B: We anticipate there will be no significant difference between safe schools and unsafe schools (as measured by the school safety audit), with regard to referrals to law enforcement.

Hypothesis 2.C: We anticipate schools that utilize zero-tolerance policy will have a higher use of exclusionary discipline and referrals to law enforcement than schools that do not.

3) What is the relationship between school climate and the use of exclusionary discipline and student referrals to law enforcement?

Hypothesis 3A: We anticipate that there will be a strong negative relationship between positive school climate and the use of exclusionary discipline.

Hypothesis 3B: We anticipate there will be a strong negative relationship between positive school climate and referrals to law enforcement.

4) What are the influences of cultural factors on the STPP in Virginia?

Hypothesis 4: We anticipate that the incidents of exclusionary discipline and referrals to law enforcement will be higher among minority students and those with a disability.

5) To what extent do each of the influences of school climate, school safety, threat assessment, and cultural background, contribute to the STPP in Virginia?

Hypothesis 5: We anticipate that an ecological model of influences will show contributions from school climate, school safety, threat assessment, and cultural background.

As noted above, our partners with the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, have building-level data on threat assessment, secondary-school climate survey, and School Safety Audits. The Department of Education maintains the Discipline, Crime and Violence (DCV) data gathered from all K-12 public schools in Virginia. And the Department of Juvenile Justice maintains records of all law enforcement referrals involving juveniles. These datasets, along with publicly available building level data, make up the quantitative data for our research.

## *Data Sources*

The School Safety Audit contains building level data from across the Commonwealth about assortment of issues related to school safety. This audit includes the safety of the physical school building, broad policy issues such as whether or not a school has an emergency management plan, and minute detail issues such as school policy on cell phone use. Especially relevant to our research are data relating to threat assessment, gang-related activity, school resource officers, private security, disciplinary infractions and responses, and school climate related programs. The school climate survey prepared for the DCJS is designed to measure student and teacher perspectives on the climate in their school. The climate survey broadly measures structure, support, and engagement, and in particular we were interested in perceptions of school safety which were measured through perceptions of teasing and bullying, experiences of teasing and bullying, and perceptions of gang activity.

The Discipline, Crime, and Violence (DCV) dataset includes student level data on incidents that occurred in the schools that resulted in disciplinary action. This information is required by Virginia statute (Code of Virginia §22.1-279.3:1) and includes every disciplinary referral that receives an out-of-school sanction, and every incident of criminal behavior or violence on school property (including on school buses, or at school sponsored events). The data set includes school, age, grade, race/ethnicity, and disability status for every student who has received a disciplinary referral. In addition, it provides data on what the nature of the specific offense was (e.g. bullying, attendance violations, disrespectful behavior, fighting, weapons, etc.). The data also include the disposition of the disciplinary referral, including the length of time for short- or long-term suspensions (out of school) and expulsions, and whether

a referral was made to law enforcement. The DOE also makes publicly available standardized testing pass rates, school graduation rates, dropout rates, free and reduced lunch rates, etc. for each school in Virginia.

The Department of Juvenile Justice collects data directly from the juvenile court service units (CSUs) in each jurisdiction, as well as information on community crime rates. These data can help identify when a juvenile was referred to the court system, whether it proceeded to a juvenile criminal petition (criminal charges), whether it was diverted by the CSU, whether it proceeded to court, and what the disposition was.

### Qualitative research.

#### *Research Questions*

- 1) What factors inform decision-making about exclusionary discipline practices and law enforcement referrals in Virginia schools?
- 2) What policies, programs, and procedures direct students away from the STPP in Virginia schools?
- 3) What is the role of professional development and training in addressing the STPP in Virginia schools?
- 4) What role does data play in addressing the STPP in Virginia schools?

#### *Data Sources*

In addition to the quantitative analysis of the existing datasets and the juvenile justice data, we conducted a qualitative study with administrators, school resource officers, and school counselors who work in schools that have very high or very low referrals to the juvenile justice

system. Each district and school building of interest was assigned a pseudonym (derived from Star Wars or Buffy the Vampire Slayer) to protect the identity of participants. The phenomenon that we were most interested in with regard to the qualitative study is the intersection between school discipline policy and practices and the involvement of the court system. Based on the findings of the quantitative analysis, we identified schools in Virginia that had the highest percentage of referrals to law enforcement, and those which had the lowest percentage of referrals to law enforcement.

We conducted interviews with the principal, the designated disciplinary administrator, a school resource officer, and/or a school counselor from schools that are exemplars for preventing students' entry into the STPP, and schools that have very high referrals to the STPP. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, the interviews were designed to ask questions that are focused on the topic of interest, but broad enough to allow participants to share their perspectives and experiences. Our interview protocol allowed participants to reflect on their experiences with disciplinary and threat assessment policies, procedures, practices, and critical incidents; the role of law enforcement; and their perceptions of the best practices informing their school's climate. We interviewed a total of 34 participants, and they were Principals (n=17), Assistant Principals (n=11), School Resource Officers (n=4), and School Counselors (n=2). For 12 schools we were able to interview more than one stakeholder within the school, and in seven schools we interviewed only one stakeholder. Interviews ranged from 23 minutes to 79 minutes (M=47 minutes), which were audio recorded and transcribed. Those transcriptions were analyzed by a coding team to identify common themes. The themes regarding school

discipline decision making emerged as, Human Connection in Schools and Communities,  
Discipline Process, Complex Contributors to Students' Actions, and School Aspirations.