



# The Impacts of the Literacy Crisis on the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States faces a persistent literacy crisis that disproportionately impacts marginalized communities and contributes directly to the expansion of the school-to-prison pipeline. Low literacy skills are strongly correlated with poor academic performance, disengagement from school, and increased likelihood of incarceration. This brief will explore how illiteracy and limited educational opportunities entrap students, particularly Black, Latino, and low-income youth, into cycles of criminalization. It will then propose policy interventions to break the link between education failure and incarceration through early literacy investments and structural reforms in schools.

## II. OVERVIEW

Literacy is fundamental to individual and societal success, yet millions of American students—especially those from underserved communities—struggle to meet basic reading standards. According to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 33 percent of fourth-grade students performed at or above the “proficient” level in reading. Among Black and Hispanic students, the rates were even lower. This literacy crisis has far-reaching consequences: students who fall behind in reading by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school. Dropouts, in turn, are

significantly more likely to be incarcerated. Schools often respond to academic struggles with punitive disciplinary practices, exacerbating alienation and pushing students into the criminal justice system—a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Thus, the ability to read proficiently is not merely an academic concern; it is a civil rights and social justice issue.

### A. Relevance

Literacy serves as the foundation of educational achievement, civic engagement, and economic opportunity. When students are denied access to quality early literacy instruction, the consequences echo throughout their lives—affecting employment prospects, civic participation, and freedom itself. Studies show that up to 85 percent of juveniles involved in the court system are functionally illiterate. Moreover, incarcerated individuals often read below a fourth-grade level. These stark statistics demonstrate that the literacy crisis is not isolated—it directly fuels systemic inequities in incarceration rates. Addressing the literacy crisis is therefore essential for dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline and promoting a more equitable and just society.

## III. HISTORY

### *A. Current Stances*

Historically, education inequities in America have been shaped by racial segregation, funding disparities, and systemic neglect of marginalized communities.

Since the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, efforts to provide equal educational opportunities have been uneven. Schools serving predominantly minority and low-income students often face chronic underfunding, inexperienced teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to books and early literacy programs.

Although federal initiatives like the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) aimed to address achievement gaps, they largely emphasized standardized testing without adequately investing in early reading interventions.

Currently, education advocates call for greater focus on early childhood education, equitable school funding, culturally responsive teaching practices, and restorative discipline methods as alternatives to harsh, punitive measures.

## IV. POLICY PROBLEM

### *A. Stakeholders*

The primary stakeholders are students in underserved communities, particularly Black, Latino, Indigenous, and low-income youth. These students bear the brunt of inadequate literacy education and are more vulnerable to school pushout and incarceration. Educators and school administrators are also key stakeholders, as

they are responsible for implementing literacy instruction and discipline practices.

Parents, local governments, and communities at large have a vested interest in reducing incarceration rates and increasing student achievement. Policymakers and departments of education also play a crucial role in allocating funds, setting literacy benchmarks, and implementing interventions. Finally, the justice system itself is a stakeholder, as overburdened correctional institutions reflect broader societal failures in education.

### *B. Risks of Indifference*

Ignoring the literacy crisis perpetuates cycles of inequality and incarceration. Continued inaction will result in more students falling behind, dropping out, and entering the criminal justice system—costing society billions in lost productivity and incarceration expenses. It also deepens racial and economic divides, undermines public trust in educational institutions, and deprives communities of the social and economic benefits of an educated populace. The long-term risks include generational poverty, weakened civic participation, and a loss of human potential.

### *C. Nonpartisan Reasoning*

The literacy crisis is not a partisan issue—it is an American issue that affects our economy, public safety, and moral integrity.

- 1) **Economic productivity:** Individuals with low literacy are less likely to secure stable employment, limiting tax contributions and increasing reliance on public

assistance. Addressing this issue through early education is fiscally responsible and economically strategic.

- 2) Public safety: By reducing the risk factors associated with incarceration, such as academic disengagement and dropout rates, we can reduce crime and ease the burden on the justice system.
- 3) Human rights and equity: Every child deserves access to a quality education and a future free from the threat of systemic injustice. This is foundational to democratic principles and national well-being.

#### V. TRIED POLICY

A notable policy aimed at addressing literacy and school discipline is the Obama-era “Rethink School Discipline” initiative. It encouraged schools to move away from zero-tolerance policies and adopt restorative practices. While this marked a positive shift, its implementation was uneven across states and districts, and its impact was limited without sufficient investment in literacy support.

Additionally, Title I funding under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides targeted funds to schools serving low-income students. However, these funds are often insufficient and not specifically tied to early literacy development.

While these policies set important precedents, they lacked the scale, consistency, and specificity necessary to fully dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

#### VI. POLICY OPTIONS

- 1) Universal Early Literacy Screening and Intervention: Mandate annual early literacy screening for students in K-3, followed by evidence-based interventions for those at risk of falling behind. Programs like Reading Recovery and Success for All have shown promising results in improving literacy outcomes. Implementation should include training for educators and targeted funding for high-need schools.
- 2) Equitable School Funding Reform: Push for revisions in school funding formulas at both state and federal levels to ensure that low-income districts receive the resources needed to provide robust literacy programs. This includes access to certified reading specialists, classroom libraries, and professional development.
- 3) Restorative Justice and Literacy Integration: Encourage schools to implement restorative discipline frameworks that center student growth and literacy development rather than punishment. For example, conflict resolution circles can include reading and writing activities that promote communication, empathy, and academic skills.

#### VII. CONCLUSIONS

This brief has outlined how the literacy crisis perpetuates the school-to-prison pipeline, disproportionately impacting marginalized students and reinforcing systemic inequities. Of the policy solutions proposed, universal early literacy screening and intervention holds the most promise in both scalability and immediate impact.

To truly address this issue, policy efforts must combine structural funding reforms, culturally responsive instruction, and alternatives to punitive discipline. By viewing literacy not only as a basic educational need but as a public safety and human rights imperative, we can begin to dismantle one of the most persistent forms of injustice in America.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Institute for Youth in Policy wishes to acknowledge Asher Cohen, Alexis Kagen, Brinkley Bennet, Taylor Beljon-Regen, and other contributors for developing and maintaining the Fellowship Program within the Institute.

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