CONSERVATIVE AGENDAS AND CAMPAIGNS

YOUTH

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Right repeatedly characterized youth to be more violent and less remorseful than ever.1 Capitalizing on the fears of older, White Americans, the Right has escalated a campaign against youth, especially urban youth of color, as the cause for social unrest. This fear is translated into increased funding for control mechanisms for youth, both on the street and in schools. One of the most consistent arguments the Right used during the mid-1990s was that even though overall crime had been declining over the past three decades, violent crime among youth had been increasing, and that the crimes which were being committed were much more heinous in comparison.

The Right, bolstered by the media, falsely predicted a wave of killer kids and “stone-cold predators.”2 The Right attributes much of this to “moral poverty,” which they characterize as the combination of single-parent households, the prevalence of hard drugs or alcohol in the home, verbal or physical abuse, neglect, lack of positive role models such as parents, teachers, coaches, or clergy, and parents who simply do not teach their children right from wrong. Some on the Right even consider moral poverty a larger influence on juvenile crime than socioeconomic status. Citing high divorce rates and the increasing number of children born out of wedlock, some on the Right proclaimed that “America is a ticking crime bomb.”3

The Right further asserts that the criminal justice system does not target youth of color in a racist fashion. Rather youth of color are more prone to being morally impoverished.4

Not only are our streets supposedly more unsafe, but according to many on the Right, our schools have become virtual “war zones.” The highly publicized school shootings of the mid 1990s escalated fear among White middle-class Americans that their children were in grave danger. This was because the mass-shootings that took place occurred in predominantly-White areas: Moses Lake, Washington (1996); Pearl, Mississippi (1997); West Paducah, Kentucky (1997); Jonesboro, Arkansas (1998); Springfield, Oregon (1998); and of course Littleton, Colorado (1999). Even though the actual chance of a student dying in school during the 1998-1999 school year was slightly less than one in two million, 71% of the population thought that a school shooting was “likely” in their community.5

The overwhelming response from parents and educators post-Columbine was an across the board crackdown on all deviant behavior in schools. This was not just against firearms, but also against drug and alcohol possession, dress codes, and class disruptions. Though not born in response to Columbine, “zero tolerance” policies became favored by many school boards as parents and educators feared the worst.6

Despite the fear-mongering of the Right during the late 1990s, reality has disproved much of their initial theories. Overall juvenile violent crime dropped during the late 1990s, and the predicted wave of “super-predators” and “crack babies” never materialized. Columbine was the last major school shooting, and many school districts have now realized that zero tolerance policies further criminalize students.
The Right has made significant gains, however, as legislation making it easier for youth to be tried and incarcerated as adults passed during the wave of fear in the mid-90s. Fearing a backlash similar to what happened to Michael Dukakis after the infamous yet effective “Willie Horton” advertisement, many Democrats have also adopted “tough on crime” stances. Now in the post-9/11 era, there are new fears, and there is new legislation. The Bush Administration’s “No Child Left Behind” Act presents many new challenges, but it follows the same pattern of using punishment over rehabilitation. The Right continues to use fear to pass increasingly repressive legislation, and some critics have pointed out that schools have come to share several similarities with prisons. According to the Rev. Jesse Jackson, founder of Operation Push and former presidential candidate, “Schools have become a feeder system for the penal system.” Zero tolerance policies in schools have resulted in skyrocketing expulsions—3000% in Chicago in ten years.

The “war on youth” is not just aimed at an identified criminal element of teens. In the past twenty years, U.S. youth as a whole have lost some of their constitutional rights, remain unprotected by the United Nations children’s rights covenants, and have been the subject of campaigns to regulate their behavior in and out of school. This conservative trend to increase control of the activities of young people is the backdrop for legislation and social policy that criminalizes youth behavior that was once legal.

Mike Males, a sociologist at the University of California at Santa Cruz, has suggested that the war on youth in the United States renders American teenagers as “the most stigmatized, cruelly punished, and least free of any youth in the Western world.” Unlike adults, youth can be arrested for being in public or driving a car during certain hours, punished for purchasing alcohol or cigarettes, denied access to education or required to succumb to drug testing before being allowed to attend a dance or join a sports team. According to Males, youth have become the central location for the displacement of racial and class anxieties.

These forms of social control are widely accepted by both conservatives and liberals as restrictions on youth “for their own good.” Males suggest that several beliefs have contributed to a pattern of increased criminalization of youth behavior.

**Conservative Beliefs that Influence the Criminalization of Youth**

- America’s problems are caused not by unjust economic or social conditions, but by the deficient morals, cultures, and biologies of disfavored population groups;
- Poor people deserve their poverty and the rich deserve their wealth;
- “Family values” means protecting the besieged family, especially its children, from threats such as gay marriage, single parenthood, and divorce;
- Social policy is not a collective government responsibility, but the privatized marketing territory of interest groups.
Males describes how this conservative ideology is framed in such a way that it resonates for moderates and liberals as well. The central idea is that youth should be feared, and the evidence is that today’s adolescents are violent, oversexed, and irrational. This fear of violent youth, especially of the rising population of youth of color, persists despite regularly being disproven. Conservative pundits predicted the terror of youth superpredators in books like the 1996 *Body Count*. But youth homicide rates actually fell 70% from 1994 to 2002, despite a substantial growth in teen population. According to Males, such fear is actually displaced racism and sexism held by the older White population when challenged by youth. “Older, established America is profoundly frightened of the social, racial, and cultural changes that have intensified over the last three decades.” The United States is becoming more diverse, especially among its youth: “In 2002, 43% of the 4 million babies born and 85% of the 1 million immigrants settling in the U.S. (that is, the “new”) were nonwhite; meanwhile 81% of the 2.5 million Americans who died (the “old”) were white.... Demographic fear (fear of entire populations), whether race-, ethnic-, religious-, or age-based, is the Right Wing’s best friend.”

Males also points out the usefulness of youth as a diversion from the actual sources of crime. “Further aggravating America’s generational stresses are extraordinarily severe drug abuse, crime, incarceration, personal instability, and family disarray afflicting middle-aged, mostly white Baby Boomers. Today’s worst social crises are caused by society’s most privileged populations, ones politicians and interest groups find politically difficult to face.”

Special thanks to former PRA Intern Todd Ching for his contribution to this chapter.
ROLE OF THE RIGHT:
The Myth of Crack Babies, Super-Predators, and Gang Bangers

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Right successfully popularized misleading stereotypes of youth as “crack babies,” “super-predators,” and “gang-bangers.” Although the stereotypes have been repeatedly disproven, they remain influential. For example, 62% of Americans in 2001 believed youth violence was on the rise, even though youth crime was at its lowest level in decades and youth homicides had decreased by 68% between 1993 and 1998.10

In order to understand anti-youth sentiment and legislation, it is important to understand the Right’s specific role in constructing and manipulating public fear of young people. This section will discuss the evolution of these three stereotypes and how the Right created and exploited these stereotypes to advocate for a repressive anti-youth and tough on crime public policy agenda.

CRACK BABIES

As drug usage increased during the late 1970s and 1980s, the Right created fear about “crack-babies,” children born to mothers who used crack and other drugs during pregnancy. The so-called “crack babies” were children who were exposed to drugs while in the womb and therefore, according to these critics, suffered from physical handicaps and would grow up to be out-of-control children and adults who lacked any regard for morals. A 1990 New York Times article stated:

Parents and researchers say a majority of children exposed to significant amounts of drugs in the womb appear to have suffered brain damage that cuts into their ability to make friends, know right from wrong, understand cause and effect, control their impulses, gain insight, concentrate on tasks, and feel and return love…. Some seem to have suffered profound damage. They are already being removed from their kindergarten or first-grade classrooms. As adults, they may never be able to hold jobs or control anger.11

Crack babies were expected to be enormous problems for the juvenile justice, healthcare, social services, and public education systems. Social service agencies and schools began to prepare for the worst. According to Dr. Corinne Walentik, “We don’t just have a crack baby problem. We’ve got a 70-year problem ahead of us.”12 In one opinion piece George Will estimated that crack babies would cost New York City $2 billion during the 1990s.13 In another article, the New York Times said crack babies would cost the nation more than $500 million each year.14

In 2001 the Journal of the American Medical Association released two articles studying the effects of crack/cocaine exposure in-utero, and both reached similar conclusions: Exposure to crack/cocaine had no consistent negative effects on physical development, test scores for young children, and has not been proven to cause any detrimental effects independent of other factors.15

Ana Teresa Ortiz and Laura Briggs, two anthropologists, write:

The entire edifice of the moral panic about crack babies rested on two statistics, both of which ultimately proved to be wrong. The evidence for a growing “epidemic” of cocaine use, rooted in the newly available, cheap form of the drug crack, was a slight increase in a daily and weekly usage statistic provided by the
U.S. General Accounting Office. These statistics were notoriously unreliable because they relied on very small samples, and this one proved wrong: the percentage of the U.S. population using crack remained absolutely stable between 1988 and 1994.\textsuperscript{16} A second statistic showed a sharp rise in the mortality rate of African American infants in Washington, D.C., in the first half of 1989; officials later realized that a large number of these deaths had really occurred in 1988, and infant mortality rates had, in fact, stayed relatively stable.\textsuperscript{17}

It is striking how few people acknowledged that the case for the crack “epidemic” wreaking havoc in inner cities and blighting a generation of babies was extraordinarily shaky, despite the availability of countermanding evidence in the 1980s. Instead, crack babies were poster children for the War on Drugs and an allegory for debates about abortion, exhibit A for the mostly conservative policy makers and prosecutors who wanted to show why small-time drug users were a danger to the society as a whole and deserving of jail time.\textsuperscript{18}

Crack babies became one of the flagships for the Reagan/Bush War on Drugs. And as crack usage was affiliated (by the media) with inner-cities, the stereotype of crack babies most impacted youth of color, even though the highest group of crack users was White males.\textsuperscript{19} But instead of allotting funds to try and improve urban areas and offer programs of drug rehabilitation, Congress and Presidents Reagan and Bush spent money on fighting drug lords and investing in the drug war infrastructure.\textsuperscript{20}

The stereotype of crack babies also painted a racist picture of poor, Black, urban mothers having numerous children with no regard for social responsibility. From 1988 to 1990, 55 percent of women on network TV news stories about crack use were Black. And from 1991 to 1994, that figure rose to 84 percent. Ortiz and Briggs reflect: “The crack babies epidemic marked the apogee of the Reagan-Bush era’s criminalization of poverty through the War on Drugs.”\textsuperscript{21}

As a result of the fear of crack babies, “crack mothers” also suffered. Hospitals began to test women in labor for drugs—a practice later declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Not only were Black women disproportionately tested compared to White women, but Black women went to jail at a disproportionate rate for cocaine/crack usage. Additionally, tens of thousands of children were put in foster homes as a result of the “random” testing.\textsuperscript{22}

The stereotype of the “crack mother” helped Reagan, Bush, and the Right to cut back funding for numerous social services, especially welfare, as people began to fear that their tax dollars were going toward feeding drug addictions, and not children. Douglas Besharov of the conservative American Enterprise Institute declared that crack babies would become part of an inner-city “bio-underclass,” and therefore “not stuff that Head Start can fix.”\textsuperscript{23}

**SUPER-PREDATORS**

As horror stories about younger and younger kids committing dreadful crimes began to be widely publicized, many people gave in to the notion that there must also be a significant rise in youth crime. It was from this that John Dilulio, then a professor at Princeton University, gave birth to the idea of the “super-predator.”

The explanation Dilulio gave for this epidemic of youth violence was that youth were suffering from “moral poverty,” which is “the poverty of being without loving, capable responsible adults
[parents, relatives, friends, teachers, coaches, and clergy] who teach you right from wrong... who habituate you to feel joy at others’ joy, pain at others’ pain, happiness when you do right, remorse when you do wrong.”

UCLA Professor James Q. Wilson elaborated:

[At risk youth] tend to have criminal parents; to live in cold or discordant families (or pseudo-families); to have a low verbal intelligence quotient and to do poorly in school; to be emotionally cold and temperamentally impulsive; to abuse alcohol and drugs at the earliest opportunity; and to reside in poor, disorderly communities.

As divorce rates, the number of single-parent families, and the lack of regular church attendance by youth were publicized, the number of youth suffering from moral poverty became more apparent to adherents of the super-predator theory. And not only were youth becoming more threatening, but their numbers were increasing. Much of the reason that DiIulio and Wilson feared that the rise of the super-predator was imminent was due simply to population trends. DiIulio writes:

Between now and the year 2010, the number of juveniles in the population will increase substantially. Today, for example, America is home to roughly 7.5 million boys ages 14 to 17. UCLA Professor James Q. Wilson has estimated that by the year 2000, “there will be a million more people” in that age bracket than there were in 1995, half of them male. Based on well-replicated longitudinal studies, he predicts that 6 percent of these boys “will become high rate, repeat offenders—thirty thousand more young muggers, killers, and thieves than we have now. Get ready,” he warns.

Even though DiIulio now admits that he made mistakes with his “super-predator” theory, others continue to use the same incorrect methods to create fear. Rev. Eugene Rivers of the Boston Ten Point Coalition, in promoting the continuation of programs associated with the “Boston Miracle,” in a 1999 op-ed piece in the Boston Globe, stated that “Police and street workers are encountering a more violent group of younger males coming up between ages 8 and 13 in certain elementary and middle schools.” Rev. Rivers also further attributes the need for continuation of the “Boston Miracle” because, he writes:

[T]here will be more than 13 million teenagers between the ages of 15 and 17 by the year 2010.... for children between the ages of 10 and 14 there will be a 21 percent increase.... and a 26 percent increase in the number of black juveniles. We have a significant challenge before us.

The logic used here that expected increases in the juvenile population will inevitably lead to devastating increases in juvenile crime is eerily similar to that used by Dilulio. What this op-ed piece demonstrates is that even as the “super-

WHAT DEFINES A SUPER-PREDATOR?

Conservative authors William Bennett, John DiIulio and John Walters published Body Count in 1996, resurrecting the misleading stereotype of the super-predator. Their definition reveals an ideology that describes crime as the rational decision of people who choose to do “wrong.”

They write: “Super-predators—Radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more pre-teenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs, and create serious communal disorders. They do not fear the stigma of arrest, the pains of imprisonment, or the pangs of conscience. They perceive hardly any relationship between doing right (or wrong) now and being rewarded (or punished) for it later. To these mean-street youngsters, the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ have no fixed moral meaning.”
predator” theory has been discredited, the effects of it are still very much alive.

Vincent Schiraldi, President of the Justice Policy Institute, harshly criticized DiIulio in 2001 as the single person most “closely identified with unsound crime analysis and punitive imprisonment policies.”28 DiIulio’s 1996 report, “The State of Violent Crime in America,” influenced the passage of The Violent Youth Predator Act of 1997, which, among other policies, allows certain juveniles to be tried as adults.

GANGS: THE ULTIMATE SCAPEGOAT

Even when the “crack babies” and “super-predators” never materialized, politicians and the media still had gangs to turn against. With article names such as “Gang Fights Transform Hollywood Boulevard into a War Zone,” “Mean Streets: Wearing the Colors of the Big City Crips and Bloods,” “Gangs aren’t isolated threat: Staying in Denial Risks Letting them take Root,” and “Boy, 16, is Wounded in Shooting on way to School,” the media has played an important role in keeping people’s fears of gangs high.30 Although overall crime has dropped considerably, “experts” like conservative Northeastern University Professor James Alan Fox continue to tow similar lines to those of John DiIulio. Fox wrote in 2003:

[The] increase in gang violence has been consistent and steady, not something that can be passed off as a one-year blip or aberration. In fact, the latest tally of gang-related killings is nearly as high as it was during the peak years in the early 1990s amidst the epidemic of crack-related violence…. At the same time, many of the powerful gang leaders who were sent away to prison during the last antigang crusade are now returning back to their old neighborhoods and their old pals. They are stronger but no wiser from their incarceration experience.31

Fox’s comments demonstrate one of the most common themes the Right stresses with gangs: the best way to stop gang violence is by arresting gang members and incarcerating them for long periods of time. By putting gang members in prisons, the Right can lock up and disenfranchise youth of color that come from poor backgrounds. The Right gets to kill three birds with one stone.

The myth of “Drive-Bys”

Drive-by shootings did not begin in the 1980s; they were born in the era of Prohibition. And much like those of that time, many of the drive-by shootings that actually do occur are as a result of the trading of banned substances (alcohol/drugs) or the need to establish protective territorial boundaries. But comparing today’s gangs with the organized crime of the Prohibition era would be a mistake, as many of today’s gangs suffer from local fragmentation, the lack of established hierarchies, and less extensive influence.32

The issue of gangs is much more complex, however, than crack babies or super-predators, as gangs are very real, as is gang violence. What is similar among these stereotypes is the way in which a widely-held belief developed in the suburban (largely White) community that youth of color from urban areas would spread into the more “peaceful” suburbs and bring drugs, violence, and overall deviant behavior with them.

Youth are increasingly criminalized, with gangs becoming the ultimate scapegoat. Tom Hayden writes:

Sometimes liberal, progressive social activists and caring citizens understandably
try to distance themselves from the gang problem. They find the gang subculture politically indefensible and morally discomforting. They harbor a sense that the problem is truly insoluble, and that tough law enforcement and long prison terms, while unfortunate, are necessary to quell the mayhem. Their sense of pragmatism tells them that appearing “soft” on gangs will set back progress on other issues they care deeply about…. The war on gangs serves the political purpose of framing public dialogue around a law-and-order agenda, which leads to expanding police and prison budgets at the expense of everything else.33

The 1992 L.A. Riots and the “Crips” and “Bloods” Truce

On April 29, 1992, the not guilty verdict delivered to four White Los Angeles Police Department officers accused of using excessive force against Rodney King inspired riots that resulted in the deaths of 42 people, 5,000 arrests, and an estimated $1 billion in property damage.34

As the trial of the officers was moved to the White suburban community of Simi Valley, many Blacks instinctively knew well before the verdict, that the officers would be acquitted. Some that knew this were the Crips and the Bloods, L.A.’s two most notorious gangs. Before the verdict, a truce was reached between the two rival gangs, although it was not formally announced until after the riots.35 As gang members were able to put aside their historical differences, they came to realize that both had a common enemy in the status quo that was not offering urban youth opportunities to break out of the gang subculture. According to one Crip with the alias of Q. Bone, “Out of the rioting, something good came into the world.” In certain urban parts of Los Angeles, including Q. Bone’s neighborhood, unemployment among youth was more than 45%.36

In response to the L.A. riots of 1992, a commission formed to assess how L.A. should respond to the riots recommended that the private sector spend $6 billion in order to help rebuild parts of the inner-city. Years later, the investment never came, and instead of creating the 57,000 jobs promised, 50,000 were lost.37 And thus many gang members, who might have been able to escape the gang culture were instead doomed to stay within it. According to Columbia Professor and co-director of the Youth and Globalization Research Network, Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, “As welfare monies have become insufficient to meet even the basic needs of the urban poor, this alternate economic structure has become integral for the daily sustenance of [many] households.”38

The Effects of the “Gang Banger” Label

Gang members suffer from extreme labeling. The term “gang-banger” is a prime example. Self-referential slang for gang member, the phrase connotes group violence with a strong hint of sex. The FBI has called gangs “domestic terrorists,” and the Los Angeles police chief William Bratton calls them “homeland terrorists.”39

It is extremely difficult for gang members to integrate into the community, as they have difficulty getting jobs or entering into public life in any legitimate way. Poor urban youth of color have few choices to begin with. By labeling gangs as the root of all social evils, in the words of one political analyst, it “reduce[s] the likelihood that respectable people would perceive social disorder as a reminder of the ways in which the social and economic arrangements of their society were failing them.”40
National Gang Intelligence Center and Secret Databases

In early 2004, the U.S. House of Representatives nearly unanimously—by a vote of 397 to 18—approved the creation of a National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC), which would be run by the FBI. The purpose of the NGIC would be to integrate local, state, and federal law enforcement in efforts to advance the War on Gangs. This move, coupled with White House attempts to cut $100 million in gang prevention programs, demonstrates a resurging trend in “tough on crime” policies against youth in gangs. It appears that the warnings of James Alan Fox are being heard by politicians on Capitol Hill. Creating the NGIC would also dovetail with the Department of Homeland Security, which integrates law enforcement for the purpose of fighting a tougher war against “enemy combatants,” both foreign and domestic.

In California, a gang database existed before September 11, 2001. CAL/GANG, an information database that identifies gang members, tracks movements of gangs, forecasts trends, and helps to coordinate police responses, is a cooperative effort between the California Department of Justice, local law enforcement, and various scientific systems and data centers. According to the law enforcement officials that administer it, this database is not subject to public records regulations, and its contents are not open to the public. Beyond the issue of secrecy, a major problem is that many of the people in the database are not gang members. They are only associates or affiliates of gang members or former gang members. And as little is known about the criteria it takes to become part of the database—as that information is not disclosed to the public—some skeptics are critical of its constitutionality. As of this writing, information from the CAL/GANG database cannot be used in a court of law.

Being labeled a gang member can have disastrous consequences, especially for immigrant youth. Many of the youth that are targeted as part of a secret database like CAL/GANG are not U.S. citizens and are eventually deported to countries like Honduras, where they may be imprisoned for their gang associations or eventually even killed.

Conclusion

While widespread evidence exists to refute the claims that significant numbers of youth are a threat to our society, the myths of crack babies, superpredators and gang-bangers continue to circulate. They persist because they fit so well with the idea that we must get tough on crime. Scapegoating young people and heightening people’s fears of youth have added to a climate that promises safety through strict social controls.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Barry Glassner, author of the Culture of Fear, has chronicled how the media helps construct a frame that “any kid can be a victimizer.” He suggests that the more the media represents youth as associated with crime, the more the public believes it to be so. He cites a study that shows that between 40 and 50% of print and network newscasts about children concerned crime and violence.
ROLE OF THE STATE: Zero Tolerance In Schools

Similar to the concept of mandatory minimums, zero tolerance education policies refer to various disciplinary school practices that automatically suspend, expel or severely punish students for breaking laws, violating school rules or for committing offenses that are perceived as a threat to school safety, no matter what the circumstances or how minor the incident may be.

There is no single definition for what constitutes zero tolerance policies for schools. Some policies are limited to automatic expulsions for students who bring firearms to schools. Other, more controversial policies mandate involuntary transfers and suspensions for possession of other weapons, alcohol, drugs, or other related contraband. One of the concerns many have with the zero tolerance policy is that it mandates expulsion of students upon their first violation, regardless of their previous records. For opponents of zero tolerance the punishment does not fit the crime, and is “simply Draconian.”

Even though a few school boards have now condemned zero tolerance policies as failures, many continue to advocate for zero tolerance policies for two reasons: first, school officials claim federal funding regulations do not allow them to enforce zero tolerance flexibly, and second, zero tolerance is needed to “send the message” that disruptive behavior will not be tolerated. The Right continues to push for policies of harsh standards and unforgiving punishments for youth.

Origins of Zero Tolerance

The first recorded use of the term “zero tolerance” was in the 1980s as a response to the War on Drugs when it was applied to adults. The term first appeared in national newspapers in 1983 when the U.S. Navy reassigned 40 submarine crew members for suspected drug abuse. In 1986, a U.S. attorney in San Diego used Zero Tolerance as the title of a program developed to seize seacraft found with even a minor amount of drugs. The concept quickly received national attention, and then U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese expanded that program so that customs officials would be authorized to “seize the boats, automobiles, and passports of anyone crossing the border with even trace amounts of drugs and to charge those individuals in federal court.” From the beginning, many protested the harsh consequences of the zero tolerance drug policies. Individuals whose cars, boats, and even homes were impounded for even small amounts of the drugs criticized the policy. And by 1990, even the U.S. Customs Service quietly abandoned its support for zero tolerance after two of the agency’s own research vessels were seized when small amounts of marijuana were found onboard.

But even as the Drug War’s early zero tolerance programs were being questioned, zero tolerance was gaining steam in the public schools. As a result of stereotypes like Crack Babies, Super-predators, and Gang Bangers, many parents became convinced that youth violence was spreading and was threatening their kids. With the rise in media coverage over school shootings, many parents believed there was an epidemic of school shootings, and wanted to prevent these isolated incidents from occurring in their communities. As a response, parents, administrators, and school boards across the United States began to adopt zero tolerance policies, which provide harsh punishments for carrying guns, possessing drugs or alcohol, and other delinquent behavior in school. Zero tolerance operates on the assumption that deterrence works. By instituting unforgiving policies that offer serious consequences, many advocates of zero tolerance feel that school violence, drug and alcohol use, and overall bad behavior in school will decline.
In late 1989, school districts in Orange County, California, and Louisville, Kentucky drafted zero tolerance policies that would expel students for drug possession or participation in gang-related activity. In New York, zero tolerance was proposed as a way of taking action against students who caused school disruption.

By 1993, zero tolerance was being embraced by school districts around the country, but it wasn’t until the 1994 passage of the Gun-Free Schools Act (signed into law by President Clinton) that zero tolerance became a national phenomenon. This legislation mandated schools to expel students found with a weapon for at least one year, and it prompted many schools to refer students who violated the law to the criminal or juvenile justice system. In order to avoid losing federal aid, states were forced to comply with the law although there was much variation in the types of laws passed. Most states require expulsion not only for guns, but any kind of weapon or anything that can be perceived as a weapon, and school districts rarely consider the age of the student or the circumstances under which the incident occurred.48

Zero Tolerance Today

Today the same harsh and mandatory approach to discipline that exists in the criminal justice system is reflected in the U.S. educational system. In 2000, a major Harvard University report concluded that zero tolerance is “unfair, is contrary to the developmental needs of children, denies children educational opportunities, and often results in the criminalization of children.”49 It highlighted evidence of unfair practices for students of color who were suspended for subjective offenses such as “disturbing school.”50 A major predictor for arrest is having been suspended, expelled or held back in school.51 Zero tolerance has increasingly subjected students to criminal or delinquency charges as a result of their behavior in school. Forty-one states require schools to report students to law enforcement agencies for various conduct committed in school.52

What Is the ‘No Child Left Behind’ Policy On School Safety?

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) dramatically expanded the federal government’s role in education policy, setting in place requirements that reach into every U.S. public school. NCLB is the name of the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (first passed in 1965 and then again in 1994) which is the federal government’s main law concerning pre-collegiate education.

NCLB supporters claim that the legislation is aimed at increasing student achievement by creating and holding schools accountable to a set of standards. At its core, NCLB mandates annual reading and mathematics testing for grades 3-8, and it imposes sanctions on schools who fail to meet the federally dictated guidelines.

Although NCLB originated within the Right (it was a central component in President Bush’s 2000 election campaign), it did have overwhelming bipartisan support. NCLB passed 381-41 in the House and 87-10 in the Senate. In a 2003 opinion poll, however, almost half of school principals and superintendents revealed that they view NCLB as “either politically motivated
or aimed at undermining public schools.”

NCLB is a complex act with many disparate provisions. NCLB supports several issues of the conservative agenda, including encouraging school choice for families with children in underperforming schools, re-establishing military recruiter access to students, and codifying traditional values in some aspects of the curriculum.

The legislation also has several important guidelines regarding school safety. Title IV, Part A, entitled “Supporting Drug and Violence Prevention and Education for Students and Communities,” includes the following school-safety related measures. Teachers will be given increased control over their classrooms, and gain the right to “remove violent or persistently disruptive students from the classroom. In order to receive funds from this program, states must adopt a zero-tolerance policy for violent or persistently disruptive students.” Also, states must allow for students who attend “persistently dangerous schools,” or who become a victim of a violent crime at school, to transfer to a “safe school.”

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### Analysis of Zero Tolerance, School Safety, and NCLB

Policies like zero tolerance, heightened school security measures and the No Child Left Behind Act lead to what some call the “school-to-prison-pipeline.” Such a pipeline is defined as a strong relationship between school failure and incarceration.

Zero tolerance policies contribute to the pipeline because they lead to increased suspensions, expulsions, and grade repetition. Indirect zero tolerance factors, such as high stakes testing and lack of counseling and support services, also contribute to the pipeline. Since students who are enrolled in school are less likely to be arrested or incarcerated, these policies are leading to higher rates of youth incarceration. Keeping students in school is one of the best ways to keep youth and adults out of prison, as statistics show that in 1997, 68% of state prisoners had never completed high school.

The school safety movement has criminalized some student behaviors that were previously handled as violations of school rules. Because the school is required to report these behaviors to law enforcement authorities, more students enter the juvenile justice system.

According to the Harvard Civil Rights Project and the Northeastern University Institute on Race and Justice:

- States with higher rates of out-of-school suspension also have higher overall rates of juvenile incarceration;
- Racial disproportionality in out-of-school suspension is associated with similar disproportionality in juvenile incarceration; and
- Higher rates of out-of-school suspension are associated with lower rates of achievement in reading, mathematics, and writing.

By labeling schools as “persistently dangerous,” and students as “persistently disruptive,” critics argue that NCLB seemingly abandons those schools and dooms children to the school-to-prison pipeline. Furthermore, by forcing grade retention of students who do not pass the rigorous exams, those youth become more likely to drop out and end up in the juvenile justice system.
It is also not difficult to see how the rise in reporting of “persistently dangerous schools” could be politicized by the Right (and in particular the Bush Administration) to justify school voucher initiatives.

The Right’s successful arguments, from zero tolerance and other punitive school safety policies to provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act, are the latest in a long-term plan to incorporate conservative social theory into educational policy that began with their blueprint for school reform, “A Nation at Risk,” issued by Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983. Despite internal disagreements within the Right on the value of zero tolerance (Ed Fuelner, the President of the conservative Heritage Foundation, published “Zero Tolerance? Try Zero Wisdom” in 2001), the idea that improving schools requires getting tough on students has permeated public policy and public opinion in ways that transcend party lines. George Bush ran in 2000 on a platform supported by his record with Texas schools. But the Gun Free Schools Act passed, not under Bush but during President Clinton’s term, on a wave of harsh response to perceived levels of school violence.

The challenges to improving public schools are enormous, and the issues are complex. But despite substantial criticism of these policies from experts in the field of education, who link such policies with increased incarceration, the Right leads the charge of scapegoating and demonizing students as the source, not the victims, of what is for many a failing system.
Debunking Anti-Youth Claims

ANTI-YOUTH CLAIM: Youth Today Are More Violent Than Ever, With Some Youth Who Simply Cannot Be Helped and Will Always Be Criminals.61

Anti-Youth Solution #1: Establishing mandatory sentencing laws and trying youth in adult courts keeps the most dangerous youth off the street and deters other youth from committing crimes.62

The Right has been able to manipulate public fear into creating harsher punishments for a generation of youth using horror stories of random violent crime, school shootings, and other isolated incidents. In response to fears over rising youth crime, 47 states and Washington D.C. increased the punitiveness of their juvenile justice systems between 1992 and 1997—all of this even though 90% of the public supports a focus on youth crime prevention and rehabilitation over incarceration.63

The Right argues that in addition to incarcerating the most violent youth for longer periods of time, creating harsher mandatory sentencing will deter the next generation of potential youth criminals. Mandatory sentencing laws create lengthy periods of incarceration, whether they are in juvenile or adult facilities and reinforce the self image of a youth as a long term criminal.

There are major problems when youth are incarcerated in adult prisons. Youth in adult prisons are twice as likely to be beaten by staff, 7.7 times more likely to commit suicide, 5 times more likely to be sexually assaulted, and 50% more likely to be attacked with a weapon than youth in juvenile institutions.64

Furthermore, recidivism rates are actually higher among youth incarcerated in adult prisons (as opposed to juvenile institutions). One study showed that youths tried and convicted in adult courts “are more likely to re-offend, re-offend earlier, and to commit more serious subsequent offenses than those who remain in the juvenile system.”65

By incarcerating more and more youth—and for longer periods of time—resources are diverted from other areas, especially the particular education these young people require.

Anti-Youth Solution #2: Tough-love measures such as boot camps or “Scared Straight” programs are one of the best ways to rehabilitate at-risk youth.

Boot camps offer a paramilitary environment instead of a prison for at-risk youth. There is no evidence to suggest that boot camps produce lower recidivism rates. Part of this is due to the fact that the majority of boot camps were founded in the 1990s, and that there have only been limited studies on the matter. One study of boot camps in Florida found that recidivism rates of boot camp attendees was between 64-73%, which is not significantly different than recidivism rates for traditional juvenile prisons (63-71%). As for costs of boot camps, they are on average about $14,000 cheaper than traditional imprisonment per youth per year, which makes them appealing to many advocates.66 What boot camps do, however, is use military-style activities to control and teach youth.

“Scared Straight” programs are modeled on a 1970s crime prevention plan that took seventeen teenagers into a New Jersey prison where they were introduced to the “Lifers,” who told stories
of the de-humanization process that takes place in prison. Twenty years after the program, only one of the participants ended up in prison, demonstrating to many that it, and programs like it, can be effective deterrents. Yet the effectiveness of “Scared Straight” relies on fear of the irreparable effects of prison.

Boot camps and “Scared Straight” both offer non-incarceration solutions while being tough on crime, but neither addresses causes of youth crime. Furthermore, both assume that youth crime is a severe enough problem that unconventional means are needed to deal with it, and that youth cannot be reached by non-“tough love” measures.

Anti>Youth Solution #3: Curfew and anti-loitering laws keep youth and gangs off the streets, which prevents crimes.

This solution assumes that youth need constant supervision in order to avoid committing crimes. The traditional argument is that if youth are not on the streets, they cannot break the law. And even though such laws take away rights from youth, some argue that it is a necessary way to combat gang violence. According to LAPD Chief William Bratton, “Rights and liberties at times have to be restrained for the good of all the community.”

There is no evidence that suggests curfews reduce youth crime. Most curfews only apply to certain times of night, such as the Dallas curfew, which begins at 11pm (midnight on weekends) and ends at 6am. The majority of victimization for youth, however, occurs between 3pm and 9pm. The argument that curfews will prevent gang crime also fails, since curfews only target those under the age of 18. For example, in areas like St. Petersburg, Florida, police say that 76% of gang members are older than 18. According to the Justice Policy Institute:

In 1998, there were more juvenile arrests for curfew violations and for running away from home than for all violent index offenses combined. The increase in curfew arrests between 1994 and 1998 by itself accounts for the entire increase in juvenile arrests during that period....As serious crime rates have dropped, police have “formalized” more nonserious offenses, widening the net of social control. From 1994 to 1998, felony index offenses dropped by 18 percent but arrest rates rose.

For those that still claim that curfews have worked to curb youth crime, the argument remains that youth crime has been in decline across the nation, not just in areas where there are curfews.

Anti-loitering laws, like the one in Chicago, are controversial and contribute to youth criminalization. Over 45,000 arrests were made for loitering under the Gang Congregation Ordinance Law of 1992 until it was struck down as unconstitutional. While the law did remove youth from the streets, those arrested may not have committed any crime except violating the ordinance itself.

ANTI-YOUTH CLAIM: Schools Are War-Zones Where Youth Are In Constant Jeopardy of Falling Victim to a Massive School Shooting.

Anti>Youth Solution #4: Schools are much safer with metal detectors, security cameras, and law enforcement officers on campus.

The assumption here is that schools are “war zones” where youth are in jeopardy of falling victim to violence. The belief that schools were becoming war zones was based on fears derived from media sensationalism over school shootings and an overall tendency in society to distrust
youth. Therefore one quick fix solution to school violence became purchasing expensive metal detectors, security cameras, and having armed law enforcement officers on campus.

There is no evidence that expensive metal detectors, random searches, security cameras, or law enforcement officers will stop school shootings. Columbine High School had both an armed guard and security cameras, yet neither stopped the school shooting. In Georgia, an evaluation of a $20 million expenditure to improve school safety discovered that after two years of implementation, there was little evidence that the massive expenditure had improved school safety.\(^\text{73}\)

There is also legitimate reason to be concerned that having police officers on campus will increase the amount of racial profiling by law enforcement. Jane Bai of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence in New York City states: “School safety officers are being trained in racial profiling and observation techniques. They are being trained to meet the needs of the criminal justice system, not the educational system.”\(^\text{74}\)

**Anti-Youth Solution #5: There would be less crime if youth were more involved in their local faith communities.**\(^\text{75}\)

This solution rides on the analysis that the causes of crime involve a disintegration of traditional moral values and family structures, not poverty and its impact on youth. The biggest problem with the hypothesis that there would be less youth crime if youth were more involved in religion is that there have not been any reliable academic studies linking youth crime to a lack of religiousness (or regular church attendance with less delinquency).\(^\text{76}\) Furthermore, for studies that have attempted to address the issue, they measure religious involvement by regularity of church/temple/synagogue/mosque attendance, which is often not an indicator of personal values since many youth are required to attend by their parents.

Being part of a faith community has been shown to be a factor that supports youth resilience or the ability to handle adversity, but it is not the sole factor that can help a young person avoid criminal activity. There may be a hidden preference in this solution for the faith community to be a Christian one.

**Anti Youth Solution #6: States should review divorce laws in order to strengthen marriage and promote successful parenting.**

There are several problems with this idea. First of all, while it is true that many youth fall into poverty as a result of divorce, it is incorrect to assume that youth would be better off if the father were to stay in an unsuccessful marriage. A 1998 report by the Department of Health and Human Services states that “the great majority of children brought up in single-parent families do well. In particular, differences in well-being between children from divorced and those from intact families tend, on average, to be moderate to small.”\(^\text{77}\)

Such a solution supports the Right’s agenda to promote traditional family structures. Strengthening marriage by designing social service incentives to become or remain married places a high expectation on the value of the traditional structure of marriage alone.

Additionally, a major cause of fatherlessness in the United States is incarceration. In 1999, nearly 1.5 million youth under 18 had a parent in prison, representing over 2% of the nation’s youth and a 60% increase since 1991.\(^\text{78}\) And as youth who have a parent in prison are estimated to be nearly six times as likely to end up in prison themselves, the over-incarceration of adults has direct effects on America’s youth (in terms of criminality).\(^\text{79}\)
THE SAN FRANCISCO MIRACLE

According to the national media, crime’s down because cops cracked down. Once mean streets are now policed with “zero tolerance” vengeance, suspicious characters are cuffed on the slightest pretext, casual dopers are busted en masse, kids are banished from public, bad guys are packed off to prison for 25-to-life. In Boston, New York, Dallas, and San Jose, the press lauded police, conservative politicians, and crime authorities such as James Q. Wilson for “cleaning up the Big Apple,” the “Boston Miracle,” and “taming gangs” with curfews, sweeps, and injunctions. The evidence? Police said so. Establishment scholars said so.

But when the progressive Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (www.cjcj.org/jpi) sent the national media a careful, journal-quality report on what may be the biggest (and least reported) big-city crime miracle of all, the national press couldn’t get interested. Not a single Big Media reporter flocked to the Bay Area to report on why San Francisco’s violent crime rate, led by an 85% decline in juvenile homicide and gun murder, plummeted faster than anywhere else. “Since 1992, San Francisco achieved greater declines in violent crime than ten major cities,” the CJCJ reported, citing FBI figures. The cities CJCJ chose for comparison (Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Jacksonville, New Orleans, New York, North Little Rock, Phoenix, and Washington) were a tough lineup, ones singled out by the U.S. Department of Justice for model policies to fight youth crime.

Yet, no matter which sets of years were chosen, San Francisco’s crime decreases (down 42% overall, 52% for violent offenses, and 44% for property crime from 1992 to 2000, for example) topped those of all nine cities the feds had cited as exemplary. San Francisco also showed the biggest declines in all four major violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery, and felony assault) and two of the three major property crimes (theft and motor vehicle theft) chosen by the FBI as key “index” offenses. Of the 10 cities, San Francisco ranked first in violence decline and second in property crime decline.

Whether San Francisco’s crime plummet beats New York’s fabled record depends on which years or crimes are chosen to compare. Statistics for the year 2000 posted on police department websites for both cities show San Francisco’s and New York City’s murder rate declines from the 1990-94 average were identical (down 64%), while San Francisco’s violent crime drop (-52%) exceeded New York’s (-49%).

When it came to reductions in youth homicide, no other city even came close to San Francisco. Remember when police in Boston (where 40,000 teenage juveniles dwell) won national acclaim for having only two youth gun murders from July 1995 through July 1997? San Francisco (which has 200,000 more people, including 10,000 more kids) did even better: only two juvenile gun murders from July 1995 through December 1997. From their early 1990s levels to 1997-2000, juvenile gun homicides were down 85% and youth murder arrests dropped from an average of 20 per year to two.

How did San Francisco do it? By doing nothing right, according to 1990s get-tough anti-crime dogma. Resisting the national stampede, San Francisco has no juvenile curfew; police stopped enforcing it in 1992, and efforts to reinstate it were dumped by voters in a 1995 referendum after high school students vigorously campaigned against it. Contrary to James Q. Wilson’s “Broken Windows” religion urging immediate crackdown on tiny infractions (especially by kids), San Francisco’s policing has been, “don’t sweat the small stuff.” During the 1990s, arrests for simple marijuana possession and juvenile “status” offenses (such as curfew or truancy) declined sharply in San Francisco even as they skyrocketed in other cities.

Further, the city’s liberal prosecutors refer fewer adult felons for lengthy Three Strikes sentencings, and fewer juvenile felons to adult court, than those in any other major city or county, reserving big sentences only for the worst of the worst. As a result, San Francisco’s rate of packing youths and adults to prison dropped faster and now is at lower per-capita levels than for any other major urban county in California, saving taxpayers millions of dollars.

San Francisco’s story challenges conservative crime dogma at every turn. In a city that let its youths come and go at all hours as they and parents pleased, Lord of the Flies was hardly the result.

Q & A WITH INNERCITY STRUGGLE

For the past 10 years, InnerCity Struggle has organized students, parents, teachers, and allies in the four high schools of East Los Angeles to win concrete changes in the educational system. United Students (US), the youth organizing component, recently won two campaigns: the elimination of a high school tardy policy and the construction of a new high school to relieve overcrowding at Garfield High School. ICS primarily works in the communities of East Los Angeles which consist predominantly of Latino, immigrant, and working class community members.

PRA: What is the educational situation in East Los Angeles?
ICS: An alarming number—more than 65%—of East LA students disappear and do not graduate. We use the term “disappearance rate” because the official transfer and drop-out rates only account for 12% of the students who do not graduate. What happens to the rest of the students? The system offers no explanation for the disappeared students. The backdrop for our educational justice work is the poor economic situation that exists. The community of East L.A. has a 46% poverty rate, more than double the rate for the city of Los Angeles. There are few jobs that provide a living wage and health benefits, and over 50% of adults in East L.A. over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma.

PRA: Why do you address the public education system?
ICS: Because it fails to serve as an equalizer for providing sustainable economic opportunities for improving the quality of life of individuals and families. The lack of economic resources and the underfunding of social services exacerbate the impoverished conditions for young people attending depleted and overcrowded schools. For example, two local high schools are so overcrowded that students must attend school year-round, with three tracks of students attending at different times. This results in students losing approximately 17 school days, compared to a traditional school year, in order to accommodate all three tracks.

Current budget cuts in the Los Angeles Unified School District stand at over $400 million. The majority of young people disappearing from East LA high schools are entering low wage labor, joining the military, or becoming part of the increasing incarcerated population. These schools are tragic examples of a trend in California public education where young people of color are systematically tracked into the lowest level of society’s socio-economic hierarchy. InnerCity Struggle decided to make educational justice a focus of its youth development and organizing work as a direct response to this kind of institutional neglect.

InnerCity Struggle recognizes that the current educational crisis has its roots in the history of inter-locking systems of oppression (White supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and capitalism) that are reinforced in schools through standardized testing, tracking, inadequate funding, and teacher de-skilling. This has allowed corporations to run schools for profit and has allowed for a corporate model to set priorities and operate our educational system. We believe the dismantling of the public education system is directly perpetuated by the massive global accumulation of wealth by a privileged few that promotes the under-resourced conditions of communities of color in the United States and in the Third World.

PRA: How does your organization view the War on Youth?
ICS: The War on Youth is a problematic social phenomenon that views youth as enemies who must be controlled and punished, particularly in the institutions of education and the criminal injustice system. This view ignores the root causes of problems such as violence and low-academic achievement, and instead blames youth, particularly poor youth of color, for these problems. In schools, the War on Youth perpetuates the notion that the zero-tolerance approach is the only acceptable approach.

PRA: Can you give some examples of how schools are criminalizing students?
ICS: Many school officials and teachers depict our students (who are predominantly Latino) as disinterested in learning or being in school, and those characterizations are used to push students out of school. You can see this pattern clearly around the issues of tardiness and attendance. School administrators rely on the police to punish students for minor infractions, and students have been cited $250 for being on campus but not in class. Once cited, a student must appear in count. And once
you're going to court, you're caught up in the criminal justice system.

The main problem here is the assumption that students are doing something wrong when, in fact, there are valid reasons to explain why students are not in class. Some students may not have a class because the classes during the period for their particular track are too full. Other students have been scheduled for the same class twice because of scheduling problems, and they would rather not attend a class they already completed. Other students may be ditching or going late to class because they don't get along with the teachers or they find the class boring. We've heard of cases where the police have actually been called to break up fights and pick up students at the school. Rather than taking responsibility, the school punishes its students.

PRA: How does Zero Tolerance play out in East LA schools?
ICS: The tardy room at Roosevelt High School is a school-wide policy that holds students for an entire class period or school day if they are late (even less than one minute) to class. The effect of this policy was that if students knew they were going to be late, they would simply skip school. In a recent survey of over 2,000 East L.A. students, close to 73% of students said they would rather ditch school to avoid being sent to the tardy room. So, instead of encouraging students to get to school on time, it had the opposite effect: deterring students from coming to school.

If, instead of being punished, the students had been asked to explain their reasons for being late, the administration officials would have found that students were not late because they didn't care about school. They were late for reasons such as caring for younger siblings, dropping off younger siblings at school, lack of or late public transportation, and not being motivated to get to their first period (either they've taken the class already or the class is boring). This policy failed to address the root cause of the problem, and instead contributed to pushing students out of RHS. It was a one-size fits all policy that did not understand the students in the context of the community and their lives outside of school.

PRA: United Students fought this policy and won. How did you do it?
ICS: In April 2003, our organizing efforts at Roosevelt High School resulted in the elimination of the tardy room and the implementation of a policy United Students developed to replace it. The alternative policy allowed for students to come late once or twice. The consequences for repeated tardiness range from requiring the student to attend a time-management workshop and calling the parents to make sure they were aware of the situation. Using action-based research, United Students wrote a report supporting the proposed alternative policy and distributed it to students, school officials, and parents to build support for the alternative policy. Providing a concrete solution led to gaining mass student support, including support from teachers and administrators, specifically the principal and a school board representative. United Students representatives were active participants at school stakeholder policy meetings, the body in charge of developing the alternative policy. Our alternative to the tardy room challenged existing punitive measures used by the school to address discipline. Instead, it aimed to proactively improve attendance and achievement.

PRA: Why does Zero Tolerance, in the form of the tardy rule, the sole response?
ICS: Part of the reason is that extreme overcrowding has existed for more than 15 years at our schools. East LA’s Roosevelt High School is the largest public high-school in the country. If all 2,000 of the entering freshmen graduated, there would be no room, even with the track system, for all of the students. Instead only 500 students graduate from Roosevelt High School. There is an incentive, then, to push students out for minor infractions because the school simply cannot accommodate all the students. As a result, any infraction becomes a reason to push students out of school, and the more students that fall through the cracks, the easier it will be to maintain control. So, partly because of the lack of resources, the question from the administration’s perspective becomes one of “how do we control this school,” and the learning environment becomes less about instruction and more about containment.

PRA: Why do you think people are anti-youth? Why does the War on Youth succeed?
ICS: The War on Youth is dependent on adultism, classism, and racism. Youth, especially Black and Latino youth, are seen as people that cannot be decision makers. Generally speaking, school administrators in particular see poor students of color as empty vessels that have nothing to contribute, reflecting stereotypes about youth of color.
PRA: Who did you consider your opposition?
ICS: Those who attack the role of public education as a vehicle for upward class mobility. We see the opposition as those policy makers, conservative well-funded opposition groups, and members of the media who ideologically uphold the view that youth of color are criminals and unworthy of quality education. For example, the Sierra Club opposed our campaign for a new high school because it would be built next to a park, and they felt a high school would deteriorate the environment. Homeowners were also opposed because they claimed it would increase violence and gang rivalries.

PRA: How do you connect your work to larger ideologies of oppression?
ICS: We aim to develop an understanding of both the historical role that women of color have played in social and economic justice movements and the challenges they faced in previous movements because of sexism and homophobia. This strategy supports the empowerment of women members to view their current challenges within the larger legacy of struggle for equity and respect while encouraging young men to recognize the contributions of women of color. Staff intentionally builds youth capacities and skills to become effective decision-makers and problem-solvers around issues and conflicts resulting from sexism and/or homophobia. For example, within our Ethnic Studies campaign, United Students has pushed for Chicano Studies to be implemented in the curriculum as well as pushed for Women and Queer Studies. In organizing for policy changes, the lens for our work will be to challenge all forms of institutional, interpersonal, and internalized oppression.

PRA: What are you advocating for?
ICS: We recognize that access to an equitable and quality education is a human right. We believe education should be free from primary to post-secondary levels, and that society must ensure that all students have the opportunity to progress into higher education.

ICS aims to shift governmental priorities from prisons and police forces to the public education system. Public schools should be accountable to local communities, students, and teachers. The curriculum should be centered on providing students with the necessary skills and tools to become leaders who are healthy, functional, and critical thinkers. Schools should be community-centered and serve as a resource for the community. Each student must be provided with a relevant education through a comprehensive curriculum that teaches about the lives of people of color, working people, womyn, lesbians and gays, the physically disabled and all those who are systematically left out of history books. In addition, public schools should promote popular education methods that produce critical thinkers.

Our latest campaigns have demanded the elimination of punitive disciplinary policies, implementation of Ethnic Studies courses, and implementation of policies that ensure that all students are college-eligible by their senior year, including increasing the number of guidance counselors.

PRA: Can equitable access to education systematically reduce poverty?
ICS: Education is a mechanism that can maintain the status quo. What people internalize from the current system is clear—adapt as opposed to challenge society. Our current education system does not promote critical thinking or really build the consciousness of people to ask questions. So as part of our organizing, we are not just working to change policy but to build an understanding of systems of oppression. Nonetheless, it remains clear that in this particular conservative moment, we are only fighting for liberal social change to move us toward the fight for systemic social change, and then after that, radical social change.

PRA: Any words of advice for other activists challenging the War on Youth?
ICS: It is critical that young people are at the forefront of building power for systemic social change. We believe that in order for change the people most afflicted by oppression have to be in the leadership. InnerCity Struggle's vision for social change is the development of political spaces led by young people within youth movements of resistance that intentionally support the leadership of young women and challenge all forms of oppression, including patriarchy. The role of adult allies should be focused on: training youth in leadership, facilitation, public speaking, critical thinking, oral and written communication, strategic planning, and conflict resolution skills; building youth capacities and skills to become effective decision-makers and problem-solvers; building authentic youth leadership as part of the core staff and governing body.
**Building Blocks for Youth (BBY)**
Youth Law Center
1010 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Suite 310
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: 202-637-0377
http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org

The BBY initiative is an alliance of children and youth advocates, researchers, law enforcement professionals and community organizers that seeks to reduce overrepresentation and disparate treatment of youth of color in the justice system and promote fair, rational and effective juvenile justice policies.

**Center for Juvenile and Criminal Justice**
54 Dore St.
San Francisco, CA 94103
Phone: 415-621-5661
http://www.cjcj.org

CJCJ researches and advocates for improved treatment of juveniles in the criminal justice system. It maintains the Juvenile Justice Information Center with facts about California and the nation.

**Harvard Civil Rights Project (CRP)**
Graduate School of Education
125 Mount Auburn St., 3rd Floor
Cambridge, MA 02138
Phone: 617-496-6367
http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/criminal_justice.php

CRP researches, convenes academics and educators, and publishes reports on renewing the promise of the civil rights movement, especially as it applies to youth and schools. CRP hosts an initiative called the School to Prison Pipeline: Charting Intervention Strategies of Prevention and Support for Minority Children.

**NY Prison Moratorium Project**
388 Atlantic Avenue, 3rd Floor
Brooklyn, NY 11217
Phone: 718-260-8805
http://www.nomoreprisons.org

The Prison Moratorium Project works to dismantle the prison industrial complex through research, education and cultural work.

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**Websites**
http://endzerotolerance.com/

**Books/Reports**


We Interrupt this Message. 2001. “Soundbites and Cellblocks: Analysis of the Juvenile Justice Media Debate & Case Study of California’s Proposition 21.” San Francisco, CA: We Interrupt This Message.