

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

**<https://www.vera.org/blog/how-did-bad-behavior-in-school-become-a-crime>**

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On August 10, the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division sent a letter of finding to Mississippi governor and attorney general, as well as to Lauderdale County officials and to the mayor of the city of Meridian, alleging based on an eight-month investigation that Meridian is operating a school-to-prison pipeline that incarcerates students for minor infractions of school rules such as dress code violations and profanity. According to a Department of Justice press release announcing the letter:

The department's findings show that children in Lauderdale County have been routinely and repeatedly incarcerated for allegedly committing school disciplinary infractions and are punished disproportionately, without constitutionally required procedural safeguards. Children have also been arrested at school for offenses as minor as defiance. Furthermore, children on probation are routinely arrested and incarcerated for allegedly violating their probation by committing minor school infractions, such as dress code violations, which result in suspensions. The department's investigation showed that students most affected by this system are African-American children and children with disabilities.

The Justice Department has warned local and state officials that it will take legal action if state and local officials fail to engage in meaningful negotiations within 60 days.

The events in Mississippi have implications for the national dialogue around the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon, drawing attention to the range of policies, practice, and decisions that feed into it. In recent years, much of the focus has been on disciplinary policies within schools in particular, zero-tolerance policies and the impact they can have on justice system involvement among students in the short and long term. Equally important, however, is the role of law enforcement and legal practices that are carried out once students receive a disciplinary response from the school.

To date, very little research has attempted to explore empirically how different school, individual, and justice system factors interact to create pathways to incarceration. To help begin to fill these gaps, the Vera Institute of Justice is conducting [a study](#) of the impact of school disciplinary policies and school climate factors on short-term delinquency and long-term criminal behavior using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

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