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End of the Line: Tracing Racial Inequality from School to Prison

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Building on an interpretive case study of a public school at a prison in New Orleans, this paper examines the punitive culture of public education and points to its role in extending both the minority achievement gap and mass minority incarceration. The work documents how racial minorities, and African American males in particular, are criminalized by school disciplinary policies and shows how these policies foreshorten educational careers and increase risk for incarceration. The paper concludes by turning to a school site in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans where a grassroots student organization has resisted the correctional school disciplinary model and has advocated for more positive educational investments.

Introduction

Though the criminal justice system and the public education system are commonly perceived to be in opposition—we might think of political slogans such as "schools not prisons" or "education not incarceration"—these institutions actually have very close and extensive ties. Increasingly, the criminal justice system operates within the public education system and with greater degrees of power (Devine 1996; Hirschfield 2008). Police presence in public schools has broadened, with policed zones surrounding schools and with on-campus security, including uniformed and armed guards (Devine 1996; Hirschfield 2008; Kupchik and Monahan 2006). School policing is, in fact, outpacing all other fields of law enforcement in terms of growth (Hirschfield 2008). The use of carceral technologies at school has expanded, too, and surveillance cameras are becoming regular additions to the educational landscape (Monahan 2006). Between 2000 and 2004, government reports indicate that video surveillance more than doubled in U.S. schools from 14

percent to nearly 32 percent (National Center for Education Statistics 2007; National Center for Education Statistics 2002). Of new schools built in 2002, 75 percent were equipped with surveillance systems (Kupchik and Monahan 2006; Monahan 2006). Disciplinary policies at school are increasingly modeled after those of the criminal justice system, and zero tolerance measures, which originated in the correctional system as "tough-on-crime" policies, are now common in the education system (Skiba and Peterson 1999). This proliferation of the prison model in educational settings has led Enora Brown to argue that "Lockdown is becoming the pervasive reality," in which schools "resemble prisons or military camps rather than sites for learning and critical thought" (Brown 2003).

In this environment, Brown argues, students "are being subjected to increasing levels of physical and psychological surveillance, confinement and regimentation" (Brown 2003). Even students who have not committed a crime, or who have committed a disciplinary offence that only remotely resembles a crime, may find themselves forced to reckon with the correctional system at an early age. In Louisiana, an adolescent boy who was diagnosed as hyperactive was suspended from school for saying, during a lunchtime conversation, "I am going to get you," to peers whom he believed were eating potatoes meant for him. He was disciplined under a zero tolerance policy, taken to the local police station, charged with "terrorist threats," and incarcerated until his trial two weeks later (Martin 2001).

It is a common perception, cast in part by the media's portrayal of youth in the dichotomies of victimization and predation, that schools are dangerous places and that school security has been accelerated in response to real increases in crime (Simon 2007). Data from the U.S. Department of Education shows, however, that schools are not only safe, when compared to spaces outside of school, but may also be getting safer (Noguera 2008; United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2007a).[1] Nonfatal crime in public schools declined 62 percent between 1992 and 2004 (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2007a).[2] It might be argued that school crime diminished in relation to tightening school security, but the precipitous drop in crime actually began in 1993 before tough-on-crime security measures in schools, such as zero tolerance policies, were solidly in place (Skiba and Peterson 1999; Gordon, Della Piana, and Keleher 2001a).[3] Also, the drop in crime against youth in school matches the drop in crime against youth out of school, which indicates an overall decline not limited to spaces where youth were contained and institutionally "secured" by tough-on-crime policies (United States Department of Education 2007a). Franklin Zimring has documented a downward trend in adult crime that mimics this declining crime trend for juve-

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niles. Punitive treatment and incarceration for adults expanded in the 1990s and early 2000s while adult crime diminished 75 percent, correlating with the advancement of punitive school policies in spite of youth-related declines in crime (Zimring 2007; Simon 2007; Western 2006).

As school security technologies and motivations have developed over the last two decades, urban schools serving minority students have instituted more punitive disciplinary measures than suburban schools serving primarily white students (Planty et al. 2008). In the early 1990s, stringent school security was visible primarily in urban schools, yet these schools did have the highest rates of crime and homicide (National School Boards Association 1994). After Columbine and other suburban high school shootings in 1997–1998, the demand for high-tech school security and security officers grew (Packaged Facts 2000).[4] As high-tech security became more widely installed and security forces increased ranks across public schools serving urban and nonurban populations, the punitive measures grew more intense in urban schools specifically, even though urban schools experienced none of the "rampage" homicides that had plagued suburban campuses (Hirschfield 2008). Therefore, when school shootings in the late nineties were statistically less of an urban issue and more of a suburban one, in which perpetrators were primarily white males in suburban schools, minority youth in urban schools were still targeted most frequently as the "problem students" (Noguera 2008).

The rhetorical framing of young minorities as problematic, delinquent, or even dangerous has proceeded on material levels, and is clearly expressed in the punitive arrangements that minority students are forced to navigate at school (Ferguson 2000; Noguera 2008; Casella 2004). By 2005, black students reported almost 6 percent more surveillance, 24 percent more guards, and five times more metal detectors in their schools than white students reported (National Center for Education Statistics 2005). Urban schools that serve high percentages of low-income minority students also conduct twice as many drug sweeps as suburban schools, where more privileged white students are typically in attendance (United States Department of Education 2007b). The result is that minority students are more harshly treated in school spaces than they have ever been, and this acts to reify patterns of educational disparity along the lines of race and class (Planty et al. 2008; Ferguson 2000; Noguera 2008; Gordon, Della Piana, and Keleher 2001a, 2001b). Punitive policies, such as zero tolerance measures, which have been instituted on some level in at least 95 percent of American schools, build upon carceral technologies to criminalize minority students (Small et al. 2001).

One of the primary arguments for the adoption of zero tolerance policies in schools was its potential to lead to objective

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disciplinary policies with equitable results, since under zero tolerance all students, regardless of their background, would be evaluated by the same unyielding code (Ayers, Dohrn, and Ayers 2001). Despite intention, however, there are numerous ways which zero tolerance codes are subject to interpretation and discretion. Even if all students are subject to zero tolerance discipline, and all like disruptions are treated similarly, the definition of a reasonable disruption is unclear. Under zero tolerance codes, for example, minority students may be deemed disruptive or delinquent by virtue of their racial difference. Casella (2004) observes in his ethnographic study of discipline at two high schools, that student detention, alternative placement, court referral, and arrest proceed "even for students who had not acted violently" (Casella 2004). These students are, he explains, assessed as "dangerous or potentially dangerous" based on a variety of judgments, including those which refer to student character, including their perceived degree of "self-restraint, sexuality, and reputation" and their associations, including "their friends and their way of dressing and walking." Casella (2004) claims more broadly that the students are evaluated by their "baggage." The arguable effect of a disciplinary instrument that judges youth on their social and cultural capital is discrimination.

Studies have, in fact, shown that minority students suffer more under zero tolerance policies (Skiba 2001; Skiba and Leone 2001; Skiba et al. 2002; Ayers, Dohrn, and Ayers 2001). These policies extend the disenfranchisement of minority students by taking students out of the classroom (sometimes for negligible offences), diminishing their academic opportunities, and threatening their ability to graduate with a high school degree (Advancement Project/Civil Rights Project 2000). In this way, zero tolerance disrupts the educational path and consequently catalyzes the path of incarceration. When zero tolerance policies have the effect of excluding students from classroom instruction, they also diminish students' opportunities to learn skills that could possibly lead to employment. Students without a high school degree are not highly marketable, and many youths who have been pushed out of school also feel pushed into illegitimate and punishable labor markets, such as drug dealing.[5] Punitive policies, such as zero tolerance, also suggest to youth that they embody troublesome identities that require criminalization, and this suggestion could act as a self-fulfilling prophesy.

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Nationally, the ratcheting up of discipline has made a large impact by raising suspension and expulsion rates, especially in urban schools. In 1974, 1.7 million or 3.7 percent of students were suspended, and by 1998, the number rose to 3.2 million suspensions or 6.9 percent of students (Losen and Edley 2001; Johnston 2000). Well over 100,000 students were expelled from

school in 2004 (National Center for Education Statistics 2004). Minority students and males, in particular, bear the greatest burden of increased levels of school suspension and expulsion (Ferguson 2000; Noguera 2008; Casella 2004; Ayers, Dohrn and Ayers 2001). In 1998–1999, African American students comprised 17 percent of all students but 33 percent of those suspended (Losen and Edley 2001; Johnston 2000).[6] Nationally, males are twice as likely as females to be suspended from school, and black students are over three times more likely than white students to be suspended and expelled (National Center for Education Statistics 2004).

Perhaps the most punitive schools in the country are in Louisiana. The state has the nation's highest suspension rates, and in 2004, the expulsion rate in Louisiana was 5.5 times the national average (National Center for Education Statistics 2004).[7] The New Orleans Public Schools mete out particularly harsh punishments: the local suspension rate is 7 times the national average and the expulsion rate is 6.4 times the national average (Louisiana Department of Education 2007). In some New Orleans schools, more than 30 percent of the student body may be suspended in a given academic year (Louisiana Department of Education 2003). In New Orleans in 2002, a local white sheriff, Charles C. Foti, substantially extended the school district's reputation for punitive student treatment when he opened a public school at the Orleans Parish Prison.[8] The students assigned to the prison were African American males who were not considered delinquent but rather "at risk" for delinquency. They had become unwelcome in their school district because they had broken strict school disciplinary codes and had been suspended or expelled under zero tolerance policies. All of their disciplinary offenses were nonviolent in nature: the students had been fractionally tardy to class, had been truant, or had behaved disrespectfully to an adult.

In what follows, I explore the racialized dynamics of punitive school discipline and suggest their broader consequences by building on an examination of the prison school and its ideological underpinnings. The prison school represents a crossroads of punitive education policy and racial discrimination, demarking the political terrain for the expansion of the prison industrial complex, which builds upon the vulnerabilities of race and class marginalization. Through the case of the prison school, I show how racial minorities, and African American males in particular, experience the criminal justice system by way of their public education and suggest that this experience expands their risk of incarceration. By extension, I argue that criminalizing disciplinary arrangements in school helps to sponsor the racialized expansion of the prison industry. In doing so, I link the major avenues of inquiry in the sociology of education and the sociology of punishment by connecting the phenomena of the minority achievement gap and mass minority incarceration. Though I take New Orleans as my case study, I claim that New Orleans reflects, in many ways, the

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plight of urban African Americans nationally since minority under-education and over-incarceration are American phenomena. Finally, I ask how we might interrupt the related dynamics of the achievement gap and mass minority incarceration by supporting social movements that shift educational debates away from school punishment and toward educational opportunity, and I turn to a school site in post-Katrina New Orleans where grassroots organizing has made a difference.

A Public School at a Prison

In an editorial placed in the local *Times-Picayune,* Sheriff Charles Foti announced the opening of the school at the Orleans Parish Prison. With rhetoric that was reminiscent of the child-saving movement of the nineteenth century, Foti touted the new prison school as the best program in the city to "save the children." He explained in his editorial that many local youth are "without positive adult guidance or role models ... without an education, no job skills, [and] no personal skills." Foti implored his readers to "help young people before they take the wrong turn" (Foti 2001). He cited his personal experience in law enforcement as grounds for evidence that these youth were in a situation that would breed resentment, hopelessness, and criminal behavior. "As we all know," he stated, "this is a recipe for disaster, not only for the individuals involved but also for anyone who happens to cross their path." In warning about a "recipe for disaster," Foti offers a deterministic lens for viewing potential criminality, and in this construction, there is little if any room for a more positive outcome.

By confidently pointing to an imminent danger in physical proximity to these youth, Foti also conjured up a phobia of integration and used it as a base to build a rationale for preemptive youth criminalization and incarceration. What is first acknowledged as a matter of social justice, then, is reframed by Foti as a concern of criminal justice. In his formulation, the need for criminal justice intervention is based on youth socioeconomic marginalization rather than proven crime or delinquency. In this way, the criminalization of young low-income minority males, euphemistically categorized as youth populations who are "without," is enabled by the rhetoric of fear, threat, and risk.

Using interpretive methods over two years, I researched Sheriff Foti's school at the prison and studied its meaning in the context of local race relations and racialized educational disparity. Significantly, Foti denied my research access to the school site itself. In keeping with the primary concern of the sheriff's office, his associate explained to me that this was for "[my] safety and the safety of the children." To learn about the school

and its place in the community, I therefore extended my focus, relying on ethnographic methods without the advantage of a clearly defined site (Simmons 2007). I observed the movements around the school, watching students moving through its surveillance network and navigating the exterior fortifications of the physical site; I witnessed and documented local debates between program administrators and a grassroots protest organization that was determined to close the school; and I interviewed participants with varied perspectives on the school itself, including the sheriff and his associates, the protestors, teachers, students, and parents. In learning about the school at the prison through them, I also learned about the larger New Orleans public school system and its failures. There was consensus among my research participants that the local public school system was dysfunctional and inadequate—even if there was not consensus about what to do about the system or how to help kids who were resigned to it.

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When the public school opened at the Orleans Parish Prison, fifteen African American boys, ranging in age from twelve to seventeen, were sent there.. The students were collected each morning at their homes in a van and driven to the school where they spent twelve-hour days before being returned. The school was housed in an empty prison building, which had earlier been the site of a school for blacks in the era of formal segregation. The program site was located within a large carceral complex known by insiders as the sheriff's "city within a city." The complex spread roughly twenty square city blocks and contained detention centers, a county jail facility, and prison facilities, which held over 6,500 municipal, state, and federal inmates, making it one of the largest correctional sites in the country.[9] The school operated inside this complex, and the fortifications that surrounded its exterior visibly tied it to the carceral architectural arrangements of the larger institution. Among the defenses were a tall fence and surveillance cameras mounted on the upper corners of the building. The windows were covered with bars, bulky enough to minimize the passage of natural light and diminish fenestration.

I learned about the interior spaces of the prison school in interviews I conducted of administrators who governed the program and two local professors who served as program consultants. Through my contacts in the local community and a great deal of inquiry and investigation in public schools and neighborhoods across the city, I found students who attended the prison school and interviewed them and their parents at home and in various other places in the New Orleans area. I also interviewed two local reporters who similarly identified as con-

cerned parents and youth advocates. They, too, had requested official permission from the sheriff's office to visit the prison school, and took umbrage when their request was denied. Believing that access to a public school—even one housed at a prison—was well within their rights as local citizens, and sens-

Believing that access to a public school—even one housed at a prison—was well within their rights as local citizens, and sensing a dire set of correctional circumstances, the two reporters at one point broke into the prison. Before being ushered out by deputies on site, the reporters noted the carceral configurations of the interior.

ing a dire set of correctional circumstances, the two reporters at one point broke into the prison. Before being ushered out by deputies on site, the reporters noted the carceral configurations of the interior. Particularly revealing were their observations, ultimately printed in a local newspaper editorial, that deputies guarding the youth were armed. The reporters also documented the deputies' supervision of an extensive surveillance network, which extended into the bathroom where it captured base details of the students' activities without obstruction, as the space was equipped with metal latrines and offered no stalls for privacy. The sheriff and his associates refuted the reporters' claims in a newspaper editorial printed the next week, saying that arms were not present in the school and that students entered the nonsurveilled bathroom individually, thus avoiding any compromise of privacy. The students I interviewed were not aware of either editorial, but confirmed the reporters' account, saying the deputies "had on their uniforms, their boots, their gun, and their handcuffs," and that they watched the surveillance cameras when "all of us went in [to the bathroom] at the same time."

The deputies, known by the students as "Sarg," extended the authority vested in their titles, uniforms, and surveillance capacities by threatening youth with corporal punishment and some degree of solitary confinement and sensory deprivation. One student described an incident in which a deputy took a youth and forcibly "hanged him up against the wall," exerting pressure on his neck and shoulders and nearly "choked a child [sic]" while upbraiding him. The same student described the solitary confinement room in the prison school as a "blank room . . . in the dark with just a chair" where "there were cages running around like [sic]." According to him, students could be punished with several hours in the room for misbehaviors "like if you don't have no pencil or else if you are going to sleep, or else if you talk bad, like if you be fussing with one of the teachers." Minor infractions, then, like misplacing a writing utensil, could have the same harsh punitive consequences as arguing with staff, though the two infractions seem to indicate different orders of student disruption. Combined, the presence of armed threat and the use of surveillance, violence, and isolation contributed to a distinct criminal justice culture at the school and served to reinscribe the significance of the school's carceral location and leadership. The effect, as one student put it, was a

school that by all intents and purposes was "a jailhouse." "That is what it was," he said; "it was like a little jailhouse."

The students I interviewed hoped that in the midst of this harsh criminal-justice environment, they could advance their studies, but the strict disciplinary approach of the prison school was not matched by academic rigor. One student explained, "we didn't really study," and another said "they really didn't teach," and when they did, he said, "it was stuff I knew already." Like the deputies, he believed that the instructional staff was functioning with the lowest common denominator in mind. A professor who served as a consultant to the program lent credence to the students' accounts and brought a new criticism upon the school for misleading students in their studies. The professor explained that on one of his site visits, he noticed that a teacher was instructing the youth to find the area of a rectangle by adding up the lengths of the sides, which is actually the proper way to determine perimeter. Aghast, the professor exclaimed, "I don't have any blooming idea what their perception of the world was. . . . I think we just set some people back a little bit. . . . It didn't get any better from there." The inadequacy of the instruction was, in part, a function of an untrained teaching staff. According to the sheriff's assistant, the classroom teachers at the prison school were not experienced or credentialed. The teachers also had very few resources to aid them, as there were no textbooks and no established curriculum. Consequently, the instruction did not meet traditional standards and did not lead to high school graduation. As a result, the students who attended the school gained no educational credits and struggled to envision a scenario in which they could eventually graduate from high school.

When Sheriff Foti opened the prison school with the collaboration of the school board and the superintendent of schools, he touted it as a school reform initiative that would respond to the inadequacies of the New Orleans Public Schools and interrupt the trajectory that leads from academic failure to incarceration, which is otherwise theorized as the school-to-prison pipeline. In an interview, Foti explained that school failure was linked to correctional consequences; he argued that "the basic problem [is that these youth] are not getting sufficient education. They become problem makers. Then they drop out and then become a prime candidate for anything going through the system." In the larger Orleans Parish Prison, Sheriff Foti had instituted a Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) program, and in an interview, one of his associates cited the success of this program as evidence that the "sheriff knows how to educate." The sheriff suggested in a local radio address that he saw the prison school as a way to extend this success. He in-

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dicated that it was his intention to use the criminal justice resources at his disposal to do something positive for the youth in the community.

The local data on educational performance supports Foti's negative assessment of the parish schools with manifold statistical descriptions of a highly dysfunctional and underperforming system. In 2002, the New Orleans schools were the second worst in all of Louisiana (Louisiana Department of Education 2002), a state with the second worst school system in the nation (Morgan Quitno Press 2003). In this context of institutional inadequacy, a majority of students failed. In 2000, over 60 percent of students who reached high school graduation failed the exit exam in science and math; over 55 percent failed the exam in social science, and over 41 percent failed in English (Louisiana Department of Education 2001–2002).

Student failure in New Orleans is especially troublesome because it is experienced by a very particular segment of the New Orleans youth population. While 70 percent of parish residents in 2002 were African American, this population constituted 93 percent of the students in the public schools, and only 3 percent of New Orleans Public School students were white (Louisiana Schools 2002; United States Bureau of the Census 2000).[10] The result is a public school system segregated de facto. The public school student population in New Orleans, now and in the early part of this decade, has also been overwhelmingly low-income: nearly 80 percent of the Orleans Parish public school students in the 2002–2003 school year received a free or reduced lunch (Bohrer 2008; Liu and Plyer 2008; Louisiana Schools 2002). This state subsidy arose from real fears that without assistance, impoverished students would go through the entire school day without food. While economically challenged families struggled to get their basic needs met in the public system, families with both the resources and the inclination left the scarcities of the public sector altogether. The result of this flight was a denuded skeletal system, recognizable not primarily by what it offered, but by what it lacked. Against this backdrop of depleted resources and limited educational opportunity, the sheriff posed the school at the prison as an educational investment that would provide a partial solution to broad-scale academic failure and would additionally serve as a deterrent to juvenile misbehavior, delinquency, and crime. In asking the public to help him "save the children," he also fashioned his initiative as an act of deliverance.

In truth, the students matriculated at the prison school did need some kind of educational and disciplinary intervention. One student described himself as a "knucklehead" who had skipped classes to roam school corridors with friends. His school records revealed that he had fallen behind academically as early as first grade and had performed poorly in school ever since. In an interview, his mother explained that when he was a young boy, he came home in tears because he did not understand the academic instruction and could find no adult willing

to help him. Another student, a self-proclaimed mama's boy, was sent to the prison school for failing on many occasions to arrive on time to his homeroom period. His school records had been lost by the district, but his achievement test scores post-prison school indicate a long history with academic failure. He had never mastered basic academic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Even though these boys were struggling in school, they could hardly have been the most problematic students in the parish. Nonetheless, it was precisely these students that Foti believed he could save. These youth were nonviolent but had academic and disciplinary problems that required intervention. Foti perceived the students' disciplinary issues to be primary, and he aimed to bring his criminal justice resources to bear on this concern. Foti brought his plan to the Orleans Parish school superintendent, Colonel Al Davis, a career military man, who fully supported an aggressive approach to school discipline. The sheriff's contract was approved by the school board in the fall of 2001.

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Student selection proceeded quickly, and the school opened in January 2002. Those chosen for the program were told that as a consequence of their misbehavior, they were no longer welcome in their traditional schools. One eighth grade student who was consistently absent from class had been expelled from his traditional school for such behavior, though the punishment of expulsion for absenteeism is counterproductive as it institutionalizes the absence it is intended to punish. His mother said that her son sat at home for most of the semester with no educational services and finally appeared before the school district's hearing commission, where he was offered a singular educational opportunity, which was the prison school. No other educational plan was presented for the present or the future, and she and her son felt resigned to accept this vexed opportunity. In an interview, the mother explained, "In order for him to get back into regular school, he [first] had to go to the prison school. . . . I think he had no choice." Her son added that he could "sit at home and do nothing" or "go to the prison school." In many ways, it was a devil's bargain.

There were a few parents who accepted the prison school as a good option for their undisciplined children. One mother wrote a letter of support for the school, claiming that it was "a chance for a student to get a second lease, not only on education but on life itself" and that "as minority [*sic*] we need all we can get, especially for these children." This mother explained that she too "had to receive my [*sic*] education in prison," and she blamed herself as someone who "fell short" and had "been neglectful." The sheriff's plan to "save the children" resonated with her, and she deemed it necessary. Significantly, she recognized the marginal position of racial minorities and, like the sheriff, supported criminal justice responses to symptoms of

larger socioeconomic problems. Given her own history with the criminal justice system, it may be that she could imagine no other possibility.

Albert "Chui" Clark, an activist in the local African American community, was similarly educated in prison, but his twenty years of incarceration at Angola Prison led him to be wary of collaborations between public schools and offices of justice. Clark believed, as many locals did, that the New Orleans Public Schools were a vast failure, but he rejected the notion that the sheriff was a savior or a viable school reformer, and he led a very small but active group of activists in fighting the project. Clark organized daily local protests, distributed numerous handbills, and attempted several filibusters at local school board meetings. He gained news coverage in one radio program and in the local African American weekly paper, but the *Times-Picayune*, the mainstream local paper, did not cover the story of his protests.

Clark and his associates had concerns about the prison school and its leadership that ran the gamut from penal impropriety to pedagogical irresponsibility. In one of many fliers that Clark distributed at prison school protests, he claimed "it is inappropriate for the Sheriff's department to be involved in our public education system." Clark was critical of a program that served noncriminal youth at a carceral site, under carceral leadership, with uncertified and unskilled teachers, and without standard school resources like textbooks and courses leading to high school graduation. He argued that a prison education was necessarily criminalizing and inferior to the education offered in traditional public schools (even the worst traditional school would be better than prison). Furthermore, the prison school as an intervention in the school-to-prison pipeline struck Chui and his fellow protestors as an oxymoron. As one of Clark's associates put it in an interview, "[They] are telling us [they] are putting [the children] in a prison to show them how to stay out of prison. What kind of logic is that?"

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Furthermore, a prison education catering almost exclusively to African American boys could only be understood in terms of racialized neglect. "It is racism," Clark said; "it is genocide." He added, "[It is] so typical for white people to have some kind of 'savior' complex," thereby suggesting that Sheriff Foti's effort to save African American schoolchildren was guided more by racial paternalism than neutral altruism (Furness 2002). With these criticisms leading his charge, Clark aimed to fight what, in his mind, amounted to a discriminatory incarceration of fifteen innocent African American boys. Foti, however, stridently rejected the charge of racism, arguing in a interview on the local *Exodus Live* radio program that, "It has nothing to do with black and white. It has to do with kids."

Foti's defense begs the question of whether racial disparity is tantamount to racism. The charge of racism raises defenses

among whites and has particular resonance in the American South, where the history of slavery and Jim Crow-era racism may make contemporary iterations of racial discrimination seem less significant in comparison (Wilson 1987). As Bonilla-Silva argues, racism is not a popular political banner, and the recent trend has been to espouse, as Foti does, a theory of color-blindness, in which race is argued to be of no consequence even as racial inequality is rampant (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Bonilla-Silva explains that "regardless of whites' 'sincere fictions,' racial considerations shade almost everything in America. Black and dark-skinned racial minorities lag well behind whites in virtually every area of social life," and he cites discrepancies in housing, employment, education, and criminal justice as evidence (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

In a society in which "most whites claim that race is no longer relevant," Bonilla-Silva asserts that "whites have developed powerful explanations—which have ultimately become justifications—for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color" (Bonilla-Silva 2006). In the case of Sheriff Foti, this exoneration is accomplished under the code of colorblindness and a less than critical stance on the social reality in which it is claimed that "things are what they are and it is not because of racism." On the other hand, Foti's response to "things are as they are" is to secure and protect, along racialized lines, the haves from the threat of the have-nots. Despite the fact that a secure-and-protect motto is engendered by the office of a sheriff, Foti's response remains suggestive of a particular understanding of the racial order. It is an order in which fifteen African American boys who have been fractionally tardy to class or disrespectful to a teacher pose enough of a threat, in Foti's view, that they require an intervention by the criminal justice system.

The judgment that socially disadvantaged youth are "at risk" of delinquency and are potentially a danger to others, criminalizes youth by virtue of their socioeconomic status, which can be understood as structured along the axes of race, class, and gender, among other categories of difference. The struggle over socioeconomic marginalization, and thereby race, is, in this case, parried by criminalization. While the sheriff brought attention to his educational program and its necessity by highlighting the difficult realities of inadequate schools and limited youth job skills in the context of a deindustrialized urban center where unemployment is rampant, his effort to respond to these structural constraints was to galvanize public support for criminal justice engagement under the pretences of protection rather than to engage the public in a real discussion of disparity and its root causes.

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Under Foti's leadership, the school at the Orleans Parish Prison operated from January through August 2002, when the

local school board, under pressure mounted by Albert "Chui" Clark and other protestors, cancelled the contract. The school board suggested that "the law enforcement environment of the school was not the direction the board [wanted] to take" (Thevenot 2002). Even so, the school board held $51 million dollars of the local public school budget aside for a new disciplinary school for one thousand students to be run by Community Education Partners (Lewis 2002). This company has extensive correctional ties and operates education programs that critics have called "soft jails" for disruptive students (Fuentes 2005; Simmons 2007).

The school at the Orleans Parish Prison documents the way in which socioeconomic problems, which are concentrated in minority communities, catalyze racialized social fears and trigger criminal justice responses that have disproportionate effects on minority populations. The case further highlights the common rhetoric of benevolence that supports criminal justice involvement in the lives of "at risk" youth and traces the disciplinary mechanisms through which that rhetoric is engaged. An examination of the prison school also enables a new perspective on punitive culture in public schools and its correctional significance. While the school itself was only open for eight months, the ideology underpinning the arrangement that made the prison school possible was not undone by the simple act of closing the school. In fact, punitive educational ideologies were even more embedded in New Orleans Public Schools than this extreme case would indicate.

Race and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

It is necessary to situate punitive educational cultures within a larger context of law and order and to establish nationally the significance of minority school failure for minority incarceration. The achievement gap expands with limited educational opportunities that result from both inadequate academic resources and harsh disciplinary treatments. Furthermore, an emphasis on discipline has been shown to be a distraction for school administrators who consequently deprioritize academic learning (Noguera 2008). Increased police presence, advanced mechanisms of detection, and hypervigilant disciplinary policies such as zero tolerance also create greater opportunity for student regulation and control, and under these punitive conditions, harsh punishments are on the rise with steep consequences. Suspension and expulsion measures rely on techniques of isolationism and are the primary modes of school punishment in the tough-on-crime era. These measures effectively exclude students from the classroom and diminish exposure to academic curricula (Brown 2003; Losen and Edley 2001; Wald and Losen 2004a, 2004b). The risk of academic failure rises as educational exposure drops and punishment proceeds. In New Orleans, for example, the students have the lowest achievement levels in the state, the most punitive disciplinary arrangements,

and the highest dropout rates. Students drop out of grades seven through twelve in New Orleans at levels that are twice the state average (Louisiana Department of Education 2003).

School dropouts are vulnerable to incarceration regardless of race. In 1997, almost 75 percent of state inmates lacked a high school diploma (Harlow 2003). African American male dropouts, however, are significantly more vulnerable than white male dropouts. In 1999, 7.2 percent of young white high school dropouts were in prison, compared to 41.2 percent of young African American high school dropouts (Western, Pettit and Guetzkow 2002). By the time high school dropouts reach age thirty-four, 12 percent of white men and 52 percent of black men have prison records (Harlow 2003). The statistics also show a racial imbalance in the educational attainment of prisoners, such that incarcerated African Americans have less education than their incarcerated white peers. While 27 percent of white inmates had less than a high school diploma, 44 percent of black inmates lacked high school diplomas among the total state prison population in 1997 (Harlow 2003). All of these statistics suggest that incarcerated populations are consistently undereducated, and that minority status strongly correlates with a lack of education and an excess of incarceration.

In the academic literature, scholars have referred to the relationship between education and incarceration as the "school-to-prison pipeline." The pipeline is so named because it appears actively to collect school-aged youth and funnel them toward a future in prison. The school-to-prison pipeline implicates the educational system in the structuring of a path that leads to incarceration. It attempts to account for the fact that for pupils who are given few opportunities in school, prison is the likely terminus. Minority students, who benefit from fewer educational opportunities and are exposed to harsher school punishments, are particularly vulnerable to the force of the school-to-prison pipeline (Ferguson 2000; Gordon, Della Piana, and Keleher, 2001a, 2001b; Johnson, Boyden, and Pittz 2001; Losen and Edley 2001; Skiba and Leone, 2001; Skiba et al. 2002; Vavrus and Cole 2002).

The pipeline is so named because it appears actively to collect school-aged youth and funnel them toward a future in prison. The school-to-prison pipeline implicates the educational system in the structuring of a path that leads to incarceration.

The case of the New Orleans prison school provides further evidence of this. It shows how underperforming and overly punitive schools pave the student path from school to prison, especially for minority males. The case also suggests how this culture of failure and punishment paves the way for the prison to enter the school. At times, there is no pipeline whatsoever; the prison school is the quintessential example of a collapsing distinction between the two institutions. Schools and prisons have, in critical ways, emerged as coordinated institutions, and this emergence has many deleterious ramifications. For youth who, by virtue of their minority status, are introduced to the criminal justice system in school prior to any criminal offense

and are denied academic opportunities as a result, this coordination can be a matter upon which both education and freedom itself are hinged.

School Reform beyond the Pipeline

An outstanding question with regard to the school-to-prison pipeline concerns possible sites of change. How can public schools be shielded from the punitive culture of the tough-on-crime era? I return to New Orleans and consider my post-Hurricane Katrina research in the city to think through some alternatives to punitive school culture and to highlight the potential for intervention. The public schools of New Orleans have been forced into an era of reform in the aftermath of the hurricane, and the educational recovery effort has become the largest school reform project in the history of the country. Even before Katrina, the New Orleans Public Schools were struggling to educate students, and the prison school was situated in this context of failure. Since the storm, the challenge to educate local youth has been exceedingly more daunting. The schools were reduced to rubble and were faced with the challenge of serving an underperforming population that was now traumatized by a natural disaster. At least 54 percent of students in New Orleans post-Katrina were showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Tuzzolo 2007).

While the structure for the post-Katrina school system was being hammered out by officials at the state level, local parents, youth, and youth advocates in New Orleans joined the Downtown Neighborhood Improvement Association (DNIA) to push for better schools from the ground up. With great hope and ambition they gathered at the empty shells of their neighborhood schools to consider the community's most pressing educational needs and to shape their platform for school change. First and foremost, the community wanted schools to provide quality education for local children. To achieve that, they sought fundamental curricular resources, accountability structures, transparency in governance, and multiple arena for public participation. Many parents and youth advocates were concerned that these ideals would be unfulfilled in the Recovery School District (RSD) plan that emerged from the state educational board and outlined state control of most New Orleans Public Schools (New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools 2008). This proposal represented a controversial shift of educational power away from its traditional locus in the community and toward the state. Critics argued that local constituents would not have a voice in a state orchestration of the schools, and that state-level officials could not advocate for local school youth, as they would be so distanced from the concerns and needs of the local New Orleans community.

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The RSD plan also assigned schools to a large number of charter school organizations, and this proposal had many local detractors (New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools 2008). A primary concern of critics, including those from the Downtown Neighborhood Improvement Association (DNIA), was that the charter plan, which decentralizes the power structure, would diminish both institutional oversight and accountability, leaving students' educational experiences largely unchecked and their fates potentially imperiled. Additionally, the charter school plan was criticized as a pseudo-privatization of public education that siphoned off public resources and left the public system depleted. Since charter schools are allowed to use a selective admissions policy, there might also be an unfortunate collateral effect to the charter plan in which students with special needs would be relegated to the city's few overburdened noncharter schools. Those schools were quickly gaining a reputation as the system's "dumping grounds" (Tuzzolo and Hewitt 2006–2007). Emerging from this context was John McDonogh High School, a nonchartered RSD school named after a New Orleans slave owner, that serves some of the lowest-performing students in the district. Its students are 99 percent African American and have been subject to a highly punitive set of disciplinary policies (K12 Guides 2004–2005). The emphasis at John McDonogh High School on law and order suggests that the criminalizing culture of the New Orleans Public Schools did not fade after the closure of the prison school, nor did it recede with the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina.

According to a report by the Fyre Youth Squad, a local student-led organization that developed out of the Downtown Neighborhood Improvement Association (DNIA), John McDonogh, like many nonchartered schools within the Recovery School District (RSD), exuded a "prison-like atmosphere." The youth explained that at John McDonogh, police officers and security guards outnumbered teachers by 50 percent, and with so many law-and-order officials flanking the school's entrance, a parent said it looked like a crime scene without the yellow tape (Tuzzolo 2007; Tuzzolo and Hewitt 2006–2007). Daily, the security staff scanned and searched students when they came into school, escorted students to bathrooms, administered mandatory drug testing, and conducted "sweeps" of students who arrived late to class by a fraction of a minute, and "round[ed] them up" in the auditorium for automatic school suspension. On some days, according to one school principal, as many as fifty students were suspended for fractional tardiness (Tuzzolo and Hewitt 2006–2007). One local student who was suspended returned to school to pick up a homework assignment and was arrested by the on-site New Orleans Police Department for trespassing (Tuzzolo and Hewitt 2006–2007).

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The Fyre Youth Squad began to focus on the harsh conditions at John McDonogh High School. Building on the DNIA's school-change efforts, the Fyre Youth Squad formally complained about their education at the state level (the seat of educational power in the RSD). With the support of the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, the students traveled by bus in January 2007 from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, the state capital, and met with the members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to share petitions for new school policies. At the meeting, the students attested to the deplorable conditions in the city's schools and made demands for improving educational opportunities and diminishing school security. They asked the BESE board to create and support more learning opportunities by reducing class sizes to 20:1, hiring more counselors and social workers, and creating a positive environment for education by diminishing the number of security guards and training the officers who remained in youth development and mediation strategies (Downtown Neighborhood Improvement Association and Fyre Youth Squad Position Papers 2007).

In protest letters to the school board, the Fyre Youth Squad students detailed their complaints and contextualized their demands. One student explained that in post-Katrina New Orleans she had expected a grand and positive transformation of public schools but had found these hopes unfulfilled:

> I evacuated thinking that I would come back to a better-run school. Instead, I came back to an even worse environment. My teachers were gone . . . and I felt like I was in a prison at school. . . . I used to not mind going to school, but now I dread the fact of waking up and having to go to school in the morning. . . . When school started there were at least 95 kids in a class, there were few teachers and at least 30 security guards. . . . [Now] in my largest class, there are 37 kids with only one teacher, that is not even certified. . . . I am doing everything in my power to keep from dropping out of school, but it is hard to do when I have non-certified teachers and some teachers that just don't care. . . . With your help, I will be able to graduate high school and move on to college (Downtown Neighborhood Improvement Association and Fyre Youth Squad Position Papers 2007).

With this protest against John McDonogh's overcrowded classrooms and excessive security, the student stakes a claim for her future promise while pointing to the ways in which the school climate threatens to compromise her potential.

Another member of the Fyre Youth Squad protested the security forces at John McDonogh with a seering critique of the racial ideologies that underlie displays of criminal justice force on urban school campuses. He writes of the way in which he, as an African American male, is criminalized and undermined by these arrangements:

> I understand the need for some security, but the current number of security guards present in RSD [Recovery School District]

schools is ridiculous. When John McDonogh Senior High School reopened after Hurricane Katrina, . . . I felt like I was visiting one of my relatives in prison. Let's be honest. When you look at me what do you see? You see a young, black male who lives in the projects, who doesn't care about his education, who goes to school only to cause problems, who robs and kills people, who doesn't respect himself or others, who sells drugs, and who is involved in all kinds of criminal activities. BUT I'm just a person who wants to go to school to better his future. I think you should reduce the number of security guards and replace them with social workers and counselors.

I understand the need for some security, but the current number of security guards present in RSD [Recovery School District] schools is ridiculous. When John Mc-Donogh Senior High School reopened after Hurricane Katrina, . . . I felt like I was visiting one of my relatives in prison.

(Downtown Neighborhood Improvement Association and Fyre Youth Squad Position Papers 2007).

For this African American male student, the security at John McDonogh resembles that of the prisons where his relatives are incarcerated. This familiarity with the prison model of social control suggests the common experience of carceral custody within the African American community. The student's letter also demonstrates a consciousness about the vulnerability of African American males to criminalization at school and indicates a struggle to shape a positive identity that is in opposition to the popular perception of the black male as delinquent. In asking the BESE board for fewer security guards and more social workers and counselors, he asks for a reconfiguration of the school staff that would aid him in this effort.

With these and other student letters in hand, the BESE board adjourned and set another meeting for the following month in which the students would propose solutions to the problems they had outlined. When the students returned to BESE, however, they had gained notoriety, and their story was running in the local and national press. The media highlighted both the students' bold efforts and the very complicated context of New Orleans public education post-Katrina. The BESE board, perhaps feeling the pressure of this attention or recognizing the need to prove the state's ability to respond to local concerns, voted to shift some of their educational strategies in accordance with the students' recommendations. They agreed to reduce security forces at nonchartered RSD high schools by one-third and those at elementary schools by half (Tuzzolo 2007).

Central to the activism of the Fyre Youth Squad was an expectation of educational change. The context of this youth movement was a school system in such shambles that progress seemed inevitable. The notion of change was also taking shape among members of the Downtown Neighborhood Improvement Association, who supported the youth squad's initial formation. In this group of young and old activists, there was a palpable belief in a kind of educational resurrection; there was a vision that a new school system could emerge from the ruins of the past. When the school system did begin to reestablish

itself, however, the community's grand notions were scarcely represented at all. This set the stage for protest. While it seemed like an impossibility, given the derelict state of the school system before the storm, many students felt that their New Orleans schools post-Katrina were worse than they had ever been. Classes were severely overcrowded, teachers were uncertified, and security forces were ubiquitous.

Under these conditions, the Fyre Youth Squad gained momentum, and their resistance effort significantly altered the disciplinary landscape of schooling in New Orleans. In fighting for this shift, the members of the Fyre Youth Squad learned how to advocate for their rights and were able to push for change within the educational system. I offer the example of the John McDonogh Fyre Youth Squad as an organization responsible for an incipient shift away from punitive education in New Orleans. It is an outstanding question whether the Fyre Youth Squad's model of resistance can be exported beyond Orleans Parish to school districts with similar concerns about inadequate educational opportunities and punitive policies. Certainly, the conditions under which the Fyre Youth Squad formed were particular, but is it necessary to rebuild our school systems from scratch as New Orleans was forced to do in order to begin an imaginative process in which our expectations for public schools expand? It may be that resistance strategies depend first and foremost on a shared vision for change and a dogged determination to achieve social justice. There is reason to believe that catastrophic failure is not the sole catalyst for educational change. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Albert "Chui" Clark fought the prison school with such tenacity that it was no longer politically expedient for the school board to keep it open, even though this capitulation to Clark was to the detriment of powerful leaders like Sheriff Foti and Colonel Al Davis, the school superintendent. In fact, the school board cancelled its contract with Davis on the day that the prison school was closed.

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There is, of course, no stable ground for these social justice movements. Chui Clark's effort to steer public schools away from punitive investments was thwarted in post-Katrina New Orleans by the BESE board and their security agenda at schools like John McDonogh. The triumph of the Fyre Youth Squad was also limited. In reducing security investments in the RSD, the BESE board was only somewhat responsive to the students' concerns. It failed to recognize the need to divert those investments toward educational resources and a reduction in class sizes. There is, however, hope that the students' demands could be revisited, and new educational research may aid the Fyre Youth Squad's efforts to reduce class sizes. In a recent study, Arum and LaFree have turned to census data to reveal decisively what has long been surmised by edu-

cation advocates, which is that "states and schools with higher teacher–student ratios produce adults who face lower risks of incarceration" (Arum and LaFree 2008).[11] The authors suggest further that general investments in education could have a similar result (Arum and LaFree 2008). These might include investments in teacher quality, teacher salary, educational technology, and extracurricular activities, among others.

Significantly, the Fyre Youth Squad recognized the qualities of positive learning environments, which depend on access to educational resources and protection from harsh security treatments. Raising student teacher ratios to 20:1, as they proposed, though, is an expensive proposition in any school district, especially one in recovery (Arum and LaFree 2008). It demands a larger investment in teacher salaries and classroom space, and also investments in teacher education programs statewide to develop a pool of qualified teacher candidates. The cost of school security expenditures, however, is also high; in fact, the RSD spent almost $1 million at each of its twenty-two schools for private security contractors post-Katrina (Tuzzolo 2007).[12] These expenditures were approved for security measures despite the fact that there is, according to a Rand report, "little or no data on their potential effectiveness" (Juvonen 2001). There is evidence that prison-like security measures may make certain educational problems worse. Noguera suggests that criminalizing gestures at school may actually produce the kinds of antagonisms, disruptions, and violence that they are intended to prevent (Noguera 1995).

Conclusion

Iterations of "tough-on-crime" school discipline in pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans, such as the correctional culture of the New Orleans prison school and the lockdown security at John McDonogh, project a pedagogy of protection that ultimately closes more doors for minority youth than it opens. It is, perhaps, difficult to prioritize long-term investments in building educational resources, when there are perceived immediate dangers threatening school safety. In New Orleans, where the murder rate in 2006 (the year after the hurricane) was the nation's highest, there is grounding for these perceptions (McCarthy 2007). There have been only two homicides in New Orleans Public Schools, however, in the last fifteen years; one was at John McDonogh High School (National School Safety Center 2008). The question is whether we can afford to react to these rare incidents by investing heavily in fortifications, surveillance, and policing experiments, even if it means taking resources away from our educational assets, which—if they were well-funded and committed to student care and engagement—could address root problems in the community that frame extant violence, such as unemployment, racialized poverty, and mass incarceration. In Louisiana and nationally we have often provided minority communities, who struggle

with these issues the most, with the fewest alternatives, educational and otherwise.

The obsession with law and order in the tough-on-crime era has, in many ways, become our weakness, as the focus on the symptoms of socioeconomic problems has obscured the larger democratic goals of equity and opportunity. The notions of social justice, and not those of criminal justice, have the greatest potential to break the cycle of racialized school failure and correctional vulnerability specifically and could potentially do much more to bring vitality and promise back to urban underserved communities like New Orleans.

The obsession with law and order in the tough-on-crime era has, in many ways, become our weakness, as the focus on the symptoms of socioeconomic problems has obscured the larger democratic goals of equity and opportunity.

Endnotes

1. Schools are relatively safe and not absolutely safe, which, as Pedro Noguera notes, may be of little solace to parents, who judge the safety of school spaces by different standards than those they use to assess other public or even private spaces. The expectation that schools should be absolutely safe is grounded in the social contract between schools and the larger society, in which schools serve as a democratic cornerstone upon which all other investments are made. Significantly, though, schools do not operate in a vacuum and are susceptible to the destructive forces that are pervasive in the larger society (Noguera 2003, 2008).

2. Nonfatal crime includes theft and all violent crime such as rape, robbery, and simple and aggravated assault. The data on crime committed "at school" include crime committed against youth on school grounds or on students' way to and from school. In 1992 there were 144 incidents of non-fatal crime, and in 2004, 55 incidents were reported (United States Department of Education 2007a).

3. Some school boards were adopting zero tolerance policies by 1993, but these policies pertained primarily to drugs and weapons, and were later expanded to respond to tobacco related offences and disruptive behavior. The federal Gun-Free School Act (GFSA) of 1994 was a significant catalyst for the expansion of zero tolerance policies, as it required each state receiving federal monies for education to enforce a mandatory expulsion sentence of one year for students caught bringing weapons to school. Some degree of discretion was built into the law, which allowed for subjective analysis of each disciplinary case. The law also did not cover items that could be construed as weapons, such as water guns. The GFSA was not, then, a zero tolerance policy, but many states used the law as a foundation for establishing zero tolerance policies that would penalize students for any version of a weapon. Accordingly, student possession of pocket knives, butter knives, studded bracelets, sticks, and pipes became grounds for expulsion (Skiba and Peterson 1999; Gordon, Della Piana, and Keleher 2001a).

4. Security technologies in schools also expanded significantly after terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001 through the Safe Schools/Healthy Students program (United States Department of Education 2001).

5. We might parenthetically acknowledge that in the context of the neoliberal state, such individuals serve a productive role, whether

they are useful as laborers in legitimate low-skilled production or useful as individuals to hold in custody for their illegitimate labor in criminal markets (Wacquant 2005).

6. In 1998–1999, White students constituted 63 percent of total students and 50 percent of suspensions. Latino students were suspended in proportion to their population. In 1998–1999, they accounted for 15 percent of all students and 14 percent of suspensions (Losen and Edley 2001; Johnston 2000).

7. Racial disparity in suspension and expulsion in Louisiana corresponds to the national rates.

8. In New Orleans, the criminal and civil duties of the sheriff's office were separated in the Reconstruction era and have not been reintegrated. New Orleans is the only city in the United States with this office. The criminal sheriff's office is responsible for the custody and supervision of all inmates in Orleans Parish with municipal, traffic, state, and federal charges who, together, comprise the seventh largest inmate population in the country (Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff 2003).

9. The Orleans Parish Prison is, despite its name, primarily a county jail facility (Gerharz and Hong 2006).

10. The majority of white students in New Orleans could afford private or parochial schools, as could a small percentage of African American students (United States Census 2000).

11. Arum and LaFree also found that states with lower teacher–student ratios are the same states that invest more in social welfare initiatives, and these factors covary and are both significant for incarceration risk (Arum and LaFree 2008).

12. The Recovery School District replaced the pre-Katrina school security forces and spent 82 percent more to secure 100 fewer schools (Tuzzolo 2007).

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