

Messy, Butch, and Queer: LGBTQ Youth and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Abstract

Emerging evidence suggests that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth experience disparate treatment in schools that may result in criminal sanctions. In an effort to understand the pathways that push youth out of schools, we conducted focus groups with youth ($n = 31$) from Arizona, California, and Georgia, and we interviewed adult advocates from across the United States ($n = 19$). Independent coders used MAXQDA to organize and code data. We found that LGBTQ youth are punished for public displays of affection and violating gender norms. Youth often experience a hostile school climate, may fight to protect themselves, and are frequently blamed for their own victimization. Family rejection and homelessness facilitate entry in the school-to-prison pipeline. Narratives highlight new opportunities to challenge inequity in schools.

Keywords

LGBTQ youth, school-to-prison pipeline, school discipline, zero-tolerance, bullying, victimization, intersectionality

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In January 2014, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice released a historic federal discipline guidance package, which recognized how punitive discipline disproportionately affects underrepresented youth, outlined strategies to reduce punitive discipline, and encouraged positive approaches to keep students in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Automatic and punitive discipline policies and practices often result in student entrance into the juvenile justice system, a process referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” These steps by the federal government respond to consistent media attention on the ineffectiveness of zero-tolerance discipline and grassroots efforts aimed at altering school policies and practices that punish youth for minor and often vague infractions (e.g., willful deviance; Dignity in Schools Campaign, 2014). A solid and growing body of research supports these efforts and has provided substantial evidence regarding how the school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately affects youth of color, specifically African American and Latino males (e.g., Skiba, Shure, & Williams, 2011, for review; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008) and youth with disabilities (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). In addition to these disparities, new evidence has emerged that indicates how other *marginalized* youth, referred to as the *pipeline population* (Snapp & Licona, in press), are pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) and gender non-conforming youth¹ (Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011).

Far less is known about the school discipline experiences of LGBTQ youth as compared with other youth within the pipeline population. This missing component is likely due to the lack of federal data about LGBTQ youth’s school experiences (with the exception of bullying; Mitchum & Moodie-Mills, 2014). Only one study to date has documented that LGBTQ youth, particularly girls and youth of color, are more likely to be expelled from school than heterosexual youth for similar infractions (Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011). Evidence that LGBTQ youth constitute the pipeline population is supported by the over-representation of LGBTQ youth in juvenile detention facilities. For example, LGBTQ youth are twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to be detained for non-violent offenses such as running away, prostitution, and truancy (Garnette, Irvine, Reyes, & Wilber, 2011). This emerging evidence points to the necessity of understanding how the school experiences of LGBTQ students may lead to disparities in punitive punishment, exclusionary discipline, or representation in juvenile justice systems (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012; Snapp & Licona, in press).

It may be that the stigma and prejudice associated with homosexuality are at the root of differential treatment in school discipline: In some ways, the

processes associated with disparities for LGBTQ youth may be similar to processes experienced by marginalized racial/ethnic groups. For example, Fine's (1986, 1991) research with inner city youth troubled the way we view "dropouts," suggesting that the majority of youth rarely drop out of school but are pushed out due to a number of systemic barriers. Fine's work demonstrated through youth's stories that school policies, practices, and climates made it difficult for youth to learn and excel. Some youth, for instance, were disciplined for being truant when family needs demanded their attention; others were discharged despite their desire to stay in school. In short, poor school conditions offered little hope to youth that education was meaningful or necessary (Fine, 1991). Similar conclusions about failed school policies are drawn by critical educational theorists who point to policies such as zero-tolerance approaches to discipline that make youth "disposable" (Giroux, 2003) and encourage underperforming youth to find alternative routes to education (e.g., General Education Development [GED]; Tuck, 2012). Related systemic barriers such as familial and housing concerns likely challenge LGBTQ youth's ability to learn and successfully complete school as well, and may increase the likelihood that youth will be encouraged to seek out non-traditional educational pathways.

However, there may be additional processes that lead to disciplinary disparities for LGBTQ youth. In particular, several media stories about school discipline demonstrate that LGBTQ students who try to protect themselves against homophobic bullying may be punished and excluded from school in the process (e.g., Eng, 2012; Gologowski, 2014). One state-wide study revealed that LGBTQ youth were 3 times more likely to be injured or threatened with a weapon and 2 times more likely to get in a physical fight at school compared with their heterosexual peers (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MDESE], 2006). Furthermore, when students are bullied based on sexual orientation, teachers seldom intervene (Peters, 2003). In this context, studies show that students who are bullied due to actual or perceived sexual orientation are more likely to bring a weapon to school and skip school (MDESE, 2006; Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). These experiences of discriminatory harassment make LGBTQ youth more susceptible to truancy, assault, and disorderly conduct charges (Majd, Marksamer, & Reyes, 2009). Thus, higher rates of victimization from bullying for LGBTQ youth may lead to disparate rates of suspension or expulsion (Russell et al., 2006). In effect, LGBTQ youth may be blamed, ignored, or even punished for behaviors that should elicit support rather than punishment from school staff.

In an effort to better understand these disciplinary disparities and the pathways that may push LGBTQ youth out of school and into the juvenile

justice system or alternative education, we conducted an exploratory study with LGBTQ youth and adult advocates to document experiences of discipline at school, perceived reasons for LGBTQ discipline disparities, and pathways LGBTQ youth experience through the school-to-prison pipeline. While our particular focus for this research is on understanding the narratives and pathways of LGBTQ youth, we also pay close attention to the intersections of youths' identities to understand how youth with multiple underrepresented identities may experience exacerbated discipline disparities in school.

Method

In collaboration with the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) Network and local community-based organizations, we designed a study to address experiences and observations about LGBTQ youth and discipline in schools. Youth and adult advocates were recruited for the study and were consented or assented prior to participation. Participants could skip any question and end the focus group or interview at any time. The study protocol for both youth and adults was approved by our university's institutional review board.

Procedure and Participants

Our research team (including GSA Network and local collaborators) helped generate a list of adult advocates (educators, including school administrators, teachers, and counselors, policy makers, staff at youth-serving organizations, and activists) who have knowledge or direct experience with LGBTQ youth and school discipline. Adult advocates from across the United States, including Arizona, California, Colorado, D.C., Georgia, Illinois, and Louisiana ($n = 19$), participated in hour-long phone interviews. Participants answered eight open-ended questions about LGBTQ youth and school discipline (e.g., "What is your perspective on LGBTQ youth and their treatment in terms of school discipline?" "What are the trajectories for youth who are suspended, expelled, or 'pushed out'?" "Do you know if any LGBTQ youth or gender non-conforming youth considered transferring or 'dropping out' of school?"). Adult interviews were conducted between December 2012 and March 2013. Adults were not remunerated for their time but were offered a copy of research findings following the completion of the study.

Youth focus group participants were identified through an online or paper survey developed and administered through GSA Network and local community-based organizations (CBOs) from August 2012 to August 2013. GSA Network sent out the survey to their email listserv and also recruited youth at

the GSA Youth Empowerment Summit (YES). Over 300 youth ($n = 322$) completed the survey. The research team then selected youth from the survey to participate in focus groups based on the following criteria: (a) Youth had indicated they had experienced school discipline, (b) they agreed to be contacted and provided contact information (either phone or email), (c) they were LGBTQ identified, and (d) they were currently in Grades 9 to 12. Given that GSA Network has a large constituency of straight allies, several youth were ineligible for the study based on these criteria. However, an exception was made for the inclusion of straight youth based on their write-in responses on the survey. For example, while they themselves were not LGBTQ identified, their role as an ally had been related to their own discipline experience or they had witnessed discipline of their LGBTQ friends. Our aim was to recruit 40 youth to participate in the focus groups as well as to select youth from multiple underrepresented groups within the remaining eligible sample. All LGBTQ youth of color who remained were contacted in order to maximize our potential to speak to the experiences of youth with intersecting identities. In sum, 31 youth agreed to participate in follow-up focus groups. Youth identified their demographic characteristics on the survey by checking boxes that most accurately represented their race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Write-in options were also available. Youth participants were diverse, approximately 48% had underrepresented racial/ethnic identities, 19% identified as bisexual, 19% as gay, 16% as queer, 16% as straight, nearly 13% as questioning, 10% as lesbian, and 6% as pansexual. Nearly half identified as female (45.16%). Additional demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Focus groups were conducted between February and September, 2013, and participants received a \$20 gift card. Eight focus groups were conducted via phone or in person with youth ($n = 31$): Four were conducted in person in Arizona, two via phone in California, and two via phone in Georgia. Phone focus groups were conducted via teleconference. Youth dialed in to a toll-free number and were greeted by an interviewer from the research team who asked each youth to state their name and provide verbal consent. The focus group questions were the same for in-person and phone focus groups, although for phone focus groups, the interviewer provided several prompts to ensure that all participants on the call had a chance to respond to a question. Youth were asked a similar series of eight open-ended questions about the school discipline experiences of LGBTQ youth (e.g., “Are there differences in the ways students are disciplined because of their sexual orientation or gender identity?” “What happened to you or others after you were disciplined?” “Are there things that happened regularly that made you not want to go school?”).

Table 1. Demographic Information of Youth Participants (*N* = 31).

	California	Georgia	Arizona	Total	%
Race/ethnicity					
Caucasian	4	3	9	16	51.61
Hispanic	3	2	2	7	22.58
Multiracial	1	0	3	4	12.9
African American	1	1	0	2	6.45
Asian American	1	0	0	1	3.23
Native American	0	0	1	1	3.23
<i>n</i>	10	6	15	31	100
Sexual orientation					
Bisexual	1	1	4	6	19.35
Gay	3	0	3	6	19.35
Queer	0	2	3	5	16.13
Straight	2	1	2	5	16.13
Questioning	2	1	1	4	12.9
Lesbian	1	1	1	3	9.68
Pansexual	1	0	1	2	6.45
<i>n</i>	10	6	15	31	100
Gender					
Female	6	4	4	14	45.16
Male	3	2	4	9	29.03
Transgender	0	0	4	4	12.9
Gender queer	1	0	2	3	9.68
Two spirit	0	0	1	1	3.23
<i>n</i>	10	6	15	31	100

Coding Analysis

Prior to analysis, all focus groups and interviews were voice-recorded, transcribed, and then de-identified to protect participants' identities. Any names presented in this article are pseudonyms. Seven members of the research team representing a range of professional roles (e.g., co-principal investigators, professors, graduate students, and members of community-based organizations) and diverse racial/ethnic, sexual, and gender identities read the transcripts, met for a 2-day workshop, and generated a list of themes and narratives that represented the data (LeCompte, 2000). These themes were truncated as codes, which were used to classify and sort the data. The use of focused coding to sort larger sections of the data is rooted in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000). Transcripts were uploaded into MAXQDA, a qualitative coding system, which also allows codes to be inserted and applied to the text.

Three research assistants were trained on how to code the text, which they did independently. One research assistant (main) coded all of the adult interviews and youth focus groups. A second research assistant coded only the adult interviews, and a third coded the youth focus groups. The main research assistant met with the second and third to discuss and, when necessary, resolved any discrepancies in the coding.

Patterns of similarity were identified (LeCompte, 2000), which aided the creation of narrative archetypes (i.e., categories that consist of several codes; Charmaz, 2000) that represent LGBTQ youths' disciplinary experiences in school and their pathways through the school-to-prison pipeline. In what follows, the selected quotes represent predominant and consistent experiences regarding LGBTQ youth and school discipline. In few instances, unique perspectives emerged and are noted as such.

Results

The narratives that follow describe multiple pathways of the school-to-prison pipeline for LGBTQ youth as explained and/or experienced by participants in this study. We use the word "pathway" to describe any factor or experience that challenges or limits youths' opportunities to remain engaged in school. In some cases, this may include juvenile detention and homelessness, but, for many others, it means alternative schools and GED programs. While there is vested interest in understanding what happens to youth once they have been pushed out of school, the focus of this study remains on LGBTQ youths' school experiences; thus, the narratives more accurately reflect pathways to school push-out. Multiple examples emerged when youths' sexual and gender identities were assigned terms to reflect their otherness. Youth participants were punished in schools for self-expression and violations of gender norms, were frequent targets of victimization, and, when schools failed to intervene, were further punished for acts of self-protection. Multiple systems of support failed youth, which made it difficult to successfully complete school and excel. Taken together, these narratives reflect the lives of another group of youth in the pipeline population.

The "Problem" Youth Who Constitute the Pipeline Population

Narratives from youth and adults document the multiple ways in which youth are targeted for their identities. In several examples, participants identified terms that are assigned to "problem" youth that are part of the pipeline population. The use of these terms often serves as justification for punishment or victimization. An adult advocate from Louisiana provides an example:

A young man, who identified as gay and was gender non-conforming—down in New Orleans, they called him messy, which is typically what people would call a girl. And if teachers saw him in the midst of a bunch of girls, they would be like, “Oh, he’s being messy²; he must be starting some trouble. He’s going to have to stay after school.”

Often, school staff are the ones who ascribe terms to youth based on their sexual orientation or gender expression. A California youth said, “In my school, some of my security guards are coaches, so when they do see like a more feminine male, they do kind of tease them and they’re like, ‘oh, he’s a fairy.’” While slurs are often overt, other times, school staff may use covert words to describe LGBTQ youth. For example, a California youth noted, “In biology, I love the teacher, but there was a gay guy in our class and she would be like ‘Johnny stop being so sassy with me.’” On the surface, words such as “sassy” may seem benign, but participants recognize that these words label and stigmatize youth as different or problematic, in addition to playing on stereotypes regarding sexual orientation.

Further, these terms for “problem” youth can be used to justify bullying. A Louisiana adult stated, “Kids are like, ‘well, you know they’re punks.’ It’s what they call gay kids down here. ‘Oh, he’s a punk,’ like that explains it [bullying], and there’s no other explanation.” Youth who have been bullied for their sexual or gender identity also recount terms they were called in school by faculty and students alike: “The administration did say pretty homophobic slurs. They’re kind of like, ‘Oh, it wasn’t meant to be like that,’ and ‘you’re just being a princess’” (Youth, Arizona).

Adults and youth also identified moments when the name-calling escalated and youth were forced to respond, resulting, in some cases, in further negative attention from other students and staff. For instance,

I got bullied, so I, like, started dressing like a boy and got this thug mentality. They looked at me like I was the bad Chola, the Mexican lesbian bitch. So no one messed with me anymore at school, but the administration, they were always watching me. (Youth, Arizona)

For this youth, gender expression may have helped fend off additional attention from youth but not from the administration.

Participants named several terms that have been used to identify LGBTQ youth who disrupt gender and sexual identity norms. These words are used covertly and overtly by school administrators, teachers, security officers, and students. They problematize LGBTQ youth for behaviors that often go unpunished when enacted by straight or gender conforming youth. As one adult from Georgia explains,

LGBTQ youth are being either chastised or disciplined for their gender expression, for their appearance, for their behavior, for their mannerisms, or for some sort of affection towards same gender youth. We don't necessarily see that with students who are straight or are assumed to be straight.

Youth Are Punished for Public Displays of Affection (PDA) and Self-Expression

Several narratives from youth and adults illustrate that LGBTQ youth get into trouble for PDA. Punishment for PDA varies from disproportionate attention from school administrators to punitive discipline. An adult advocate from California said, "What you will definitely find is that there's gonna be a more rigorous, more shame-based response to same-sex coupling and sexualized behavior as there is with heterosexual kids." A Colorado adult shared a similar story: "Same-sex couples at one school were being punished for holding hands in the hallway when opposite sex couples were not." Policies against PDA are believed to be disproportionately enforced for queer youth:

Folks get in trouble because they kiss or express some kind of affection, and it goes against policy, but they don't enforce that for straight youth, and it'll happen for queer youth because that stands out to an administrator. That'll, you know, be something that catches someone's eye versus another heteronormative display. (Adult, California)

Youth participants also noticed this discrepancy: "It's kind of annoying that they tell my two [same sex] friends no PDA, and there's another couple who's full blown making out and it's okay because they're different sex" (Youth, California). Another youth describes the higher risk of punishment for LGBTQ youth:

I do believe that there is more of a chance for same-sex couples using PDA getting in more trouble. It's not that they do get in more trouble, it's just that there's the possibility for them to get in more trouble. (Youth, California)

Such a possibility became a reality according to this youth:

I have some friends, they're dating, two girls, and they were holding hands in the hallway after lunch period and I guess they kissed just once. It wasn't anything prolonged and in a place near a lot of heterosexual couples doing the same thing. Our school police officer specifically targeted them and gave them this lecture on how it's against school policy and student conduct and no public displays of affection and it was really terrible. (Youth, California)

According to participants, PDA by LGBTQ youth not only gets more attention from school staff but also often results in harsh forms of punishment that can be detrimental for youth in multiple ways:

One young woman was caught by campus security holding hands with her girlfriend at the edge of campus. They called the parents, and in this case she was out to her family already, but, had she not been, the system could have outed the student to her parents and that could have resulted in the whole process of coming out when the timing wasn't right, which could have resulted in getting kicked out of the house. (Adult, California)

Another example of disproportionate punishment for PDA did not end as well:

A principal rolled up on two girls who were holding hands, took them to the principal's office, and put labels on them. I don't know if the students identified as being lesbian, but he called them that and he threatened to suspend them. And he called both of their parents and outed the students. (Adult, Georgia)

One youth relayed a similar story about a bisexual couple in her school:

I befriended these two bisexual girls, and later in the year they got into a relationship and our vice principal was a little older than the other staff members, and I think he grew up in a time where homosexuality was really looked down upon. He would always see the straight kids holding hands and making out in the halls, and one day after school they were holding hands and the vice principal dragged them into his office and suspended my friend Elisabeth for a week and gave my friend Jenna detention for three days and later called their parents and outed them. (Youth, California)

In these cases, LGBTQ youth were punished for displays of affection witnessed by school administrators; however, some students may not be "caught in the act" but are punished based on false accusations or rumor. One student describes how an act of friendship was taken out of context and resulted in punishment:

A friend of mine that was a girl . . . it turned into this huge rumor where apparently I was in the bathroom making out with her. I had to go to the office and that had never happened. I hugged her in the hallway. It was just things like that. They were just accusing me of kissing her, and they gave me in-school suspension. (Youth, California)

Disparate punishment was documented not only for PDA but also for youth's self-expression and appearance. Several participants indicated that youth who do not conform to gender norms are treated differently in school:

I've seen a great deal of students who have been pushed out because they are perceived to be LGBT or are. I've noticed that [for] the gender non-conforming females who may want to dress in more male gender based clothing. The level of punishment may be much more severe than a gender conforming student who can have just as much of a strong temperament. But this [gender non-conforming] person makes other people uncomfortable, and level of suspension may come at a faster rate and at a higher rate. (Adult, District of Columbia)

Based on this quote, it appears that girls who do not conform to gender norms may be unfairly perceived as threatening and harshly punished as a result. Another participant explained why some youth are likely to experience disproportionate punishment:

I think it's specifically going to be the gender non-conforming kid because these types of biases, the assumptions about who is an aggressor in an altercation, for example, tends to be a gut instinct that is based off of what these people look like. (Adult, District of Columbia)

Even in circumstances in which an altercation is absent, gender non-conforming youth may be at risk of being labeled by administrators. One example from an Arizona youth illustrates this point:

The teachers . . . they thought we were selling weed in school, they thought that me and her were both selling weed 'cause like, the way we were dressing, 'cause we were the only girls at that middle school that dressed like boys. So it was like "now we're bad."

Other youth may not have been subject to the same level of search and seizure as the previous example but are not able to express themselves fully in school and feel safe. Administrators were often the ones to question youth's choice in clothing, for example, which places the burden on youth to change in order to be accepted. An adult advocate in Arizona stated,

I remember being in touch with trans youth that would express themselves in ways that were not their [assigned] gender and they would complain a lot, or the students would be told to not wear a dress you know from teachers, or [asked] "why are you dressed like a guy?" not understanding that it was insulting them directly.

Youth whose gender identity contrasts with their biological sex are often questioned about their gender expression, which may feel like an affront. A youth in Arizona confirms this observation:

I identify as gender-queer. So I wear gender-expressive clothes and sometimes I'd be uncomfortable to go in certain classes, because of the way students would treat me. I got talked to by the administrators and they were like, "So you don't want to go to class because of what you choose to wear, so why don't you just choose to wear different things?" I was like, "I should be able to wear whatever I want to wear, you know, and feel comfortable."

When youth try to express themselves, they run the risk of being unfairly interpreted or punished, and, again, the onus to change is placed on the youth. One participant articulates the rationale concerning "choice" that may arise when youth are blamed for their own mistreatment:

I'm thinking of a young Black woman who identifies as gay, but has a really short haircut, like people would see on a boy, what you would call a fade. That's in people's face, and I think it's almost okay to discriminate or talk about or relegate to a different status because it's like "well she chose to put that in my face," you know and "she didn't have to." So if there's a woman who identifies as gay or bisexual and you know she has long hair and she looks feminine, then it doesn't challenge anyone's beliefs. (Adult, Louisiana)

In this case, when young people choose to express themselves, particularly if it confronts gender norms, mistreatment or discrimination becomes "okay"; in essence, it becomes normalized. Youth have been punished for their self-expression when it challenges others' beliefs and social codes. One Georgia adult recounts a story that made headlines:

A student named Nathaniel Williams out of Louisiana was suspended for a week for wearing hair extensions . . . lots of the girls have colorful hair extensions, and it's disproportionate because none of the other girls are getting suspended for having hair weaves.

In this example, discipline in the form of suspension was disproportionate not only to the "offense" (wearing hair extensions) but also because it reflected a double standard. Another youth tells a story about the threats of punishment he received for applying makeup in school:

I put on makeup during class, and I'm not supposed to do that in class, and I do have huge gestures. It's my way of expressing myself. One of the teachers was like, "if you're going to do all this in my class then I'm going to have to put your desk outside for the rest of the year" and I was like, "oh, where did this come from?" He just told me this two weeks ago. I'm like "school's about to end, so what's the point?" I mean everyone does it [puts makeup on], but I guess I'm the only one who's not supposed to. (Youth, California)

Because the threat of ridicule, victim blame, and punishment is real, some students purposely avoid self-expression that may generate attention. One Arizona youth said,

Just seeing the type of attention that people put on anybody who didn't seem like they were the same as anybody else . . . that made me want to avoid expressing myself in any way, because I didn't want the same attention they were receiving.

Another Arizona youth echoed this concern and tried to mask self-expression that might reveal his sexual orientation: "I guess I just avoid that whole situation in general, like I really just focus on how I dress, just so that I wouldn't give off that idea that you know, I was gay." These youth attempt to secure safety by managing their image and identity and, while effective, may have implications for their overall wellness (Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012).

The stories shared by participants illustrate that youth who violated gender norms (regardless of their sexual identity) experienced differential treatment in school. Often, as highlighted by some of the previous quotes, youth were read as aggressive or problematic. Additionally, stories about youths' resistance to victimization highlight another pathway that pushes youth out of school and may lead them into the juvenile justice system.

Youth Who Protect Themselves Are Punished

When LGBTQ youth respond to bullying by fighting back, they are often blamed and punished for their own victimization. The narratives from our study indicate the ineffectiveness of school policies and practices meant to protect youth and prevent violence. Failure to support youth and create hospitable school climates is an additional pathway toward school push-out. Some youth respond with defensive violence, while others use preemptive violence. One adult from Arizona reported the following regarding a particular youth:

She told me "yes I do beat people up when people piss me off," and after talking to her it's like, ok, "you're being provoked constantly, and people are constantly calling you names, constantly trying to fight you and so you're fighting back," or you're like, "I know this person's gonna come at me so you try to get to them first."

It appears that fighting back or picking fights with others is a defense mechanism that can be useful to fend off threat from other students; however, this behavior is likely to result in punishment. In another narrative, fighting

became a collective strategy: “We even had our own LGBT gang who was beating up other kids . . . the LGBTQ youth were grouping together to provide support for each other the same way other gangs do” (Adult, District of Columbia). When victimization is not addressed in school policy or practice or by the adults who enforce those policies, youth may take singular or collective measures to protect themselves.

Zero-tolerance policies mean that, for many youth, acts of self-protection were met with harsh discipline, leading to suspensions, detentions, and expulsions as a pathway out of school. In some cases, students who did not react with violence were suspended anyway:

He said he wasn’t trying to fight back or anything. It didn’t get to that point. He was literally just putting his hands up over his head to keep the guy from—and when the teacher saw the incident, she basically took both of them to the principal’s office, and they both got suspended for fighting. (Adult, California)

Another student was also suspended for fighting, but, in this example, as in others, the fighting was a result of continued harassment:

When she finally blew up, she got the most severe [punishment] because this has been months and months of harassment, and she blew up and really hurt another student. And you know, she ended up getting extended suspension, so she just dropped out. She was 16 at the time and just didn’t see the point of being out of school for 45 days and then coming back . . . And she just felt like she wasn’t going to be supported in the school. (Adult, District of Columbia)

One Arizona adult explains a *possible chain of events* for some LGBTQ youth who are regularly harassed in school:

It’s pushing them to this point where “you’re not protecting me,” “you’re not listening to me,” and so “I have to fight back on my own.” And when they fight back, “boom, now you did something so we can kick you out.”

These quotes illustrate the point that some youth seek support when harassed, but when school staff fail to intervene, youth may feel they “have to fight back.” Further, failure to support students can be viewed as a “setup” of sorts in which “problem youth” are positioned to fail. A similar pathway plays out very clearly for one young person who is transgender and presents as male at school but identifies as female:

We have one classic kind of story of like a trans, young person . . . She was having difficulty with, with just not even like a lot of kids, but just a handful of

young people who were bullying her and it went on and on. She reported it every single time that it happened, but for whatever reason, the report site—what I guess is supposed to happen, with their anti-bullying policy, is that you make a report and then whoever you report to, that person is supposed to write up some piece of paper that is supposed to then go directly to the social worker. And she reported it, every single day. This piece of paper, that's supposed to be generated, never made it to the social worker. She told people at school that she was going to bring a knife to school the next day, and they still didn't do anything. And then she brought a knife. Now, granted, it was a butter knife. She was arrested at school for that, and she went to juvenile bureau here and was released later that day, but then was put automatically in expulsion proceedings, and she's also special ed. . . . she has an IEP . . . she's ADHD. So it's just stuff like where the admin weren't in the mood to ask what was going on. I mean, she ended up being bounced around from one house to another because of juvenile court proceedings and family rejection. (Adult, Louisiana)

Despite numerous attempts to get help from adults in her school, this student was left with few options, and although she was the one regularly harassed, she was punished for an act of self-protection. Another youth who experienced push-out recounted,

I fought a boy because he was calling me names . . . I got in trouble for hitting him because he was a good kid at the school, but he was a jerk. He was all popular in a different area than I was. So yeah, obviously I was already the bad kid. We got in a fight and he didn't get in trouble. (Youth, Arizona)

This youth highlights the injustice when “good” youth escape punishment for victimization but “bad” (perhaps code for non-dominant) youth are punished. These inequities result in frustration with school administration:

I'm always getting kicked out of school like, and I would tell them, “She hit me first because she called me a dyke.” I mean, “that's self-defense and you're kicking me out?” They don't kick her out. I got expelled . . . because I was fighting with the girl. They thought it was a lesbian moment . . . they thought I was hitting on her. (Youth, Arizona)

This student's story reveals the bias in some school administrators toward heterosexual youth, as well as a refusal to consider the background and experiences of LGBTQ youth. Stories of victim blame and punishment were so common that one youth wondered, “Why would you punish the victim for fighting back?” (Youth, California). This young person raises an important question that adults have trouble articulating, as evidenced by the following quote:

When I was in middle school . . . I did not go to school very often, or I was always late. I was bullied a lot. Some of it was because people thought I was a lesbian, and everyone found out that I had issues with self-harm and anorexia, and I got targeted for that too. When I went to the administration . . . my parents had to go several times . . . they kinda said a lot of things like “oh well that’s just how kids are” or . . . “boys will be boys” or they would say “oh girls are mean” or . . . they would tell me “if you didn’t dress the way you did, they wouldn’t bother you.” (Youth, Georgia)

Platitudes such as “boys will be boys,” coupled with victim blame, are ineffective solutions that breed mistrust and confusion. Another youth shares a conceptually distinct story about how her mistrust of school administrators was cause for punishment:

They started telling me that they were going to expel me or suspend me just because I didn’t want to tell them any of the information. They wanted to find out if I was gay, and I told them, “I don’t trust you guys” and they were like, “we don’t care if you don’t trust us, you gotta tell us.” I was going to get suspended because I wouldn’t tell them who was bullying me. (Youth, California)

In this example, it appeared as though the school administrators were concerned about the youth’s safety. However, threatening a young person with suspension and disrespecting this student’s boundary hardly warrant trust.

In addition to being disciplined, youth who fight back may be sent to alternative schools or leave school altogether. One youth from Georgia explained that options were limited when youth fight: “You get like two instances of bullying, [then] you get sent to an alternative school.” In this case, being sent to an alternative school may operate similarly as zero-tolerance. There are a set number of “offenses,” and then youth are sent away. Some youth made the decision to leave: “I felt like I just wanted to leave, like I didn’t—I couldn’t even imagine finishing high school. So, I transferred” (Youth, Arizona). Another youth describes a similar situation in which victimization led to truancy and eventually a move:

She had to move away because some of the kids at our school was making fun of her because she was a lesbian . . . and there were some people who were making fun of her and calling her names, and she went to the administrator and talked with them. So they got suspended for three days . . . but when they came back they kept it up, and so she went to tell her mom . . . and she [mom] said “ok we won’t let you go to school for a couple of days.” So she comes back, but it’s still happening. So the mom is like “ok, well let’s move” “cause I don’t want to see my daughter getting yelled at because of who she is.” (Youth, Arizona)

This story reveals the range of solutions (from staying home from school to moving) that young people and their parents may take to address biased-based victimization. It also reveals the failure of exclusionary discipline to prevent future victimization. Taken together with other narratives, it creates a clear portrait of the ways that school policies and the adults that enforce them often fail to protect students. The onus to intervene fell on the shoulders of youth, and, when fought to protect themselves, they were punished and pushed out of school. Youth may also be forced to transfer, drop out, or attend an alternative school when their current school fails to support them.

Multiple Factors That Propel Push-Out

While participants indicate that school-based victimization leads to push-out, their stories also reflect a number of intersecting factors that sometimes contribute to their pathways out of school: compromised mental health (sometimes as a result of school experiences), learning challenges, and family problems or homelessness. First, for some youth, emotional trauma is a result of feeling unwelcome in school. One youth reports, “One girl she got bullied really bad . . . and she ended up having like a really bad nervous breakdown and like attempted suicide at school . . . she didn’t come to school anymore after that” (Youth, Georgia). Push-out may also lead to encounters with the justice system:

So I think that both the emotional and mental effect of being excluded from school and being criminalized for minor misbehavior . . . makes you fall behind in school. You may either drop out or you may be put on some sort of academic probation . . . where it’s easier for schools to push you out or expel you. Or you may be spending some time at home while you’re expelled or on the streets, which may be getting you into other like illicit activities . . . that end you up in jail. (Adult, Colorado)

One adult in Louisiana illustrates how the pipeline works:

The more you’re out of school, very specifically if you’re a young, Black male with special education . . . the more disengaged you get in school, the more disenfranchised you get about your opportunities in schools, and so then you drop out. While you are out, you get picked up ’cause you’re standing outside or your friends who don’t go to school say “come on let’s go somewhere,” and you know all manner of bad decisions happen.

Once youth have been detained, the school-to-prison pipeline becomes more of a reality, especially when probation requirements conflict with

students' ability to attend school. One adult from California explained the dilemma of probation: Probation requires youth to go to school, but, if it is not safe, they end up violating their probation in order to protect themselves.

This cycle disproportionately affects youth with multiple underrepresented identities:

I think that when you're talking about the school-to-jail push-out, you do need to consider every piece of someone's identity. So if you're a youth of color and you're also LGBT, you are at a higher risk of being pushed out of school because of your identities and because of the racism . . . and homophobia within our school system. (Adult, Colorado)

Another adult describes how systemic oppression multiplies for youth: "For gender non-conforming youth and LGBT youth of color, [it] is really a multiplying effect of the different types of institutional barriers that are impacting their ability to succeed" (Adult, California).

In addition to school, many youth face rejection at home. This rejection can have profound implications for youth who do encounter the police. One California adult explains,

So then if they do end up getting citations or ending up in the police department . . . and if they're queer and have issues with . . . their parents and they don't get claimed, then they end up staying one or two nights in jail just because they don't have a supportive parent. Once they do engage with law enforcement as juveniles, the parents and their relationships to their guardian plays a much more impactful role than if they were straight.

When neither schools nor families claim youth, they may be held for longer than necessary and end up in detention centers:

A lot of LGBTQ youth that I work with have been placed in detention centers for non-violent crimes or status offenses, so for truancy, being put out of home, being held in contempt for court, for not going to meetings for families in need of services . . . a lot of them end up in jail for pretty much not even committing a crime. (Adult, Colorado)

Another adult notes that just being homeless could be grounds for arrest:

They were on the streets because they'd been kicked out of their homes . . . they were getting picked up for hustling, but more often than not they were just getting picked up because they were homeless youth on the street. (Adult, District of Columbia)

Homelessness is considered the “crux of the pipeline” and, according to one participant, “the number one indicator of whether a young person will get connected to the juvenile justice system” (Adult, District of Columbia). Homelessness is critical for LGBTQ youth because, once youth are on the street, they must find ways to survive and prioritize survival over school.

A lot of our trans youth are homeless, so when they drop out of school, it’s not necessarily just due to discrimination at school, it’s also to survive so as a trans youth . . . they’re not able to work to support themselves, so they engage in alternative ways of getting income. (Adult, Louisiana)

One adult advocate describes a youth who dropped out of a GED program: “She actually was straight up, like, ‘I’m homeless’ and ‘I can’t satisfy school and my education right now, it’s just so far from, that’s just not my top my concern at all’” (Adult, Louisiana). Many LGBTQ youth would rather stay on the streets than return to families that are “. . . not affirming.”

These narratives from youth and adults identify the multiple barriers that make it difficult to impossible for youth to complete their education. While some youth are sent to alternative schools, others may find themselves on the streets due to school push-out, family rejection, or both. When schools “out” youth to unsupportive families, those youth often end up homeless because their families have either kicked them out or it becomes too traumatic to live with rejecting families. Time on the street and homelessness place immeasurable burdens on youth to fend for themselves to survive; they are vulnerable to arrest whether or not they are engaged in illicit activities. The lack of family support and financial means may result in more time spent in detention than is warranted. These factors, along with a lack of support for LGBTQ youth’s self-expression and self-protection, work individually and collectively to create multiple pathways that lead youth through the school-to-prison pipeline.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study adds to the limited research on LGBTQ youth and the school-to-prison pipeline by using narratives to identify several pathways that push LGBTQ youth out of school. While participants spanned several states across the United States, all representing different sociopolitical and cultural contexts, similar stories emerged from both youth and adults. Based on participant knowledge and experience, our findings indicate that actual or perceived sexual and/or gender identity affects discipline experiences in school. The narratives reveal that LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth are under

particular scrutiny in schools; their presence and actions, especially when not conforming to gender norms, often result in punishment and victimization, which may be ignored or even encouraged by educators and administrators.

Educators and administrators also tend to enforce school policies unequally in the case of LGBTQ youth. For instance, the threat of punitive punishment for PDA is real for LGBTQ youth. Sometimes, youth in the study had expressed affection toward their partner; other times, they were considered guilty despite the evidence. Rumors regarding LGBTQ youth may be disproportionately attended to and believed by school administration. Similarly, youth who did not follow traditional gender norms were punished for dress code violations. Youth in these situations were often viewed as or targeted for being problematic or aggressive. Within this study, multiple examples were given to document the use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspension, expulsion) for PDA and self-expression that was clearly biased toward LGBTQ youth. Surveillance, “shame-based” responses, and punitive punishment facilitate push-out and entry into the pipeline.

While youth reported frequent school-based victimization, they also expressed a lack of support from teachers, staff, and administration. In effect, LGBTQ youth who are mistreated learn to mistrust school administration and staff, leading some youth to keep their backgrounds and experiences to themselves even when requested to tell their side of the story. Without this support, youth reported fighting back to protect themselves and/or becoming truant to escape victimization, making them susceptible to exclusionary punishment. Disparate treatment in school can also create problems for youth at home, especially if students are outed by school administrators. The failure of school policies and practices (and the adults who enforce them) to support LGBTQ youth and the problematizing of LGBTQ youth in schools mimic Fine’s (1986, 1991) framework of school push-out and Giroux’s (2003) characterization of disposable youth. Youth who are viewed as problems and not “worth saving” become disposable. Once disposable, it is likely that youth will transfer (typically to alternative schools), drop out, get their GED, or end up involved in the justice system. These pathways are similar to that of urban youth who may be encouraged to drop out and obtain their GEDs, a process that is often misrepresented as an easier track than high school completion (Fine, 1991; Tuck, 2012).

In this process, some youth get caught in the juvenile justice system. Although few of these narratives emerged in this study, in part due to the focus on youths’ school experiences, other studies have found that while LGBTQ youth represent only 5% to 7% of the youth population, they represent 13% to 15% of the juvenile justice population (Majd et al., 2009). Disproportionate rates such as these require further investigation into how

the school system facilitates entry to prison (Mitchum & Moodie-Mills, 2014) in spite of “good intentions” by school administrators and teachers to provide equal access to education (Fine, 1991). While it is clear that discipline varies for LGBTQ youth, it is also clear that when school discipline is exclusionary, youth are vulnerable to the pipeline. This vulnerability is exacerbated by family rejection, homelessness, and other forms of discrimination youth may encounter. Because LGBTQ youth experience discipline disparities (Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011) and are overrepresented in the homeless population (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002) as well as the juvenile justice system (Majd et al., 2009), a strong case is made for the need of coalitional efforts to reduce disparities and intervene in the production of the pipeline (Snapp & Licona, in press). We argue, however, that schools can serve as a “firewall” that stops the flow of the pipeline for youth who may face multiple forms of oppression and marginalization. This does not mean all school discipline is treated equally, but it does draw attention to the harm done by exclusionary and punitive discipline, particularly for non-majority youth. It also highlights the need for additional research regarding other forms of discipline that may not exclude but still punish youth. For instance, detention, suspension, and expulsion (all forms of exclusionary discipline) likely have varying effects on young people’s ability to learn and succeed in school. However, other forms of discipline may be less obvious but still have lasting effects, such as being regularly sent out of class for self-expression. It is clear that while this form of punishment is less severe, it also constrains youth’s ability to learn. Future research is needed to disentangle how varying forms of discipline may be differentially associated with pathways through the pipeline.

This study is one of the first to illustrate how LGBTQ youth experience discipline disparities, establishing that LGBTQ youth are part of the *pipeline population*. Our article recounts the ways in which LGBTQ youth experience differential treatment that can lead to school push-out. A major limitation is the study’s sample size, which included LGBTQ youth from three states that were connected to GSAs or other youth-serving organizations, and adults from seven states with diverse knowledge about the school-to-prison pipeline. Having participants from markedly different locations gave us a range of responses in which to understand the school-to-prison pipeline. For instance, youth and adults represented diverse contexts and settings (e.g., urban vs. rural) in which school discipline policies and practices vary widely. However, given we did not have a nationally representative sample, we are limited in our capability to generalize these findings to youth across the United States. Further, critiques have been made regarding sampling of LGBTQ people from GSAs such that these organizations may attract youth with more severe

experiences of discrimination (Savin-Williams, 2001). Upon concluding our research on this topic, we suspect that students in GSAs may actually fend better than their non-GSA peers as GSAs provide strong sources of support and advocacy, particularly around school discipline (GSA Network, 2013). Given the multiple pathways of the school-to-prison pipeline, we acknowledge that our scope of the harshness students may experience is limited by the narratives we drew regarding youth's in-school experiences. Had we recruited youth who were already in juvenile detention or homeless, it is likely the complexities to these pathways would have emerged. Future research could broaden the sample by recruiting youth from the general public (see McCormack, 2014). Relatedly, youth have intersecting and fluid identities and contexts influence the variety of their experiences. The focus of this study was on LGBTQ youth, but it is important to remember that other youth also constitute the pipeline, such as pregnant and parenting teens (Fine & McClelland, 2006) and undocumented youth (Snapp & Licona, in press).

Others have noted the importance of adding sexuality and gender to research on the school-to-prison pipeline (Mitchum & Moodie-Mills, 2014), as it remains underground in work on educational justice (Meiners, 2011) and absent from the Department of Education's data collection on school discipline (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012). Narratives that delineate the experiences of LGBTQ youth help further this goal, illuminating disciplinary disparities that are often undocumented and highlighting new opportunities to challenge inequity in schools. Future work could include a broader range of youths' narratives and link those to specific discipline policies and practices in specific schools/regions, as culture and context most certainly have varied implications for youth. This would allow for a greater understanding of the critical moments in which youth may enter various pathways through the school-to-prison pipeline.

Narratives arising from our interviews and focus groups support the claim that LGBTQ youth are vulnerable to disproportionate punishment in schools. Frequently targeted for their actual or perceived identities, LGBTQ youth often experience hostile school climates and biased treatment. Further investigation of the discipline experiences of LGBTQ youth is necessary to understand ways schools can disrupt inequitable educational outcomes, move beyond "good intentions" of schools (Fine, 1991), and prevent youth from ever entering the pipeline.

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Notes

1. Some research has suggested that gender non-conforming youth, who may not necessarily identify as L, G, B, T, or Q, are also part of the pipeline population; however, most research has focused on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth. In the article, we highlight the experiences of gender non-conforming youth when distinguished by participants.
2. As noted by the informant, the term *messy* is typically used for girls. To use the term toward a boy is to indicate he has violated a gender norm. Upon presenting this research at a conference, one audience member from the south helped us further understand this term. She noted that girls are given this term for being “trouble makers.”

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